

Tagore's Views on Nature: Some Reflections

Poulami Chakraborty

Senior Research Fellow, Assam University, Dptt. Of Philosophy, Silchar

1. Introduction: Tagore's Concept of Nature: Influences of Ancient Indian Philosophy

Every culture has its own unique contribution towards the formation, development and progress of civilisations. Culture not only helps in the process of knowing oneself, but shapes individual sensibility and in turn, societal sensibility and provides vitality to life. However, culture is not a static concept. There is a need for continuous scrutiny, reflections and, if necessary, amendments keeping its pace with the changing times. Across the passage of time, cultures have been subjected to scholarly treatments, evaluations and interpretations by various scholars who reflected and re-evaluated the traditions and thereby, contributed to the richness of the former. Among the scholars who contributed to the development of Indian culture, Rabindranath Tagore had undoubtedly been a distinguished personality.

Having been in constant contact with nature, India champions the cause of all-pervadingness of nature since the dawn of her civilization. Therefore, ṛṣis were chosen to be the ideal men who discovered their essential unity with the Supra-Consciousness residing in each particle of the universe and therefore, can dedicate their lives for the service of the entire world¹. According to the Upaniṣadic philosophy, the entire world is created, regulated and maintained by the Universal Consciousness who is both immanent and transcendent to it, and It is the material as well as the efficient cause of the universe, i.e., “Abhinnanimittaupādānakāraṇa Brahma.” Inspired by this idea, Tagore holds that the perfection of man is attained through the enlargement of personality that leads him to find out an empathy with the entire universe and that is applicable to the entire society. This is not a mere knowledge that leads to power but a knowledge that gives us joy-----the perfect bliss-----since it binds the soul with the soul as explained by Tagore himself in Sadhana. Tagore thinks that the unity of man and nature share a common origin in the One or the Absolute. The Spirit and Nature are twin aspects of the Absolute. It seeks for a realization of a deeper unity with nature, and with the Supreme person. Being the part of one of the most prominent families that adhered to the principles of the Brahmo Samaj, it is evident that Tagore's life and works will have a tremendous influence of the Upaniṣadic teachings. However, to consider Tagore's thoughts to be a total deduction from Upaniṣadic philosophy might be an over-simplification.

With the help of intellect, Tagore could grasp the idea of the One All-Pervading Ultimate Reality which lies as the immanent regulatory power of the Universe and as such, indistinguishable from the Universe itself. This is the manifestation of the working principle of the Universe; Tagore named this principle Vishwadevata. However, Tagore, being a person of aesthetic sensibility, could not remain satisfied with the idea of the eternal consciousness as an abstract idea; his

emotional faculty helped him to establish the relation between the Realty and the Jivas on the basis of love. Out of that love, Tagore took refuge to the monotheistic philosophy and conceived the idea of God as the Ultimate Father or the guiding principle of the universe as well as lives. But he felt that still there remained some hierarchical divisions between the devoted and the devotee; he, rather, wanted a relation of egalitarianism; where he could see the Ultimate Reality as not apart from, but integral to, or an extension to his own self. Tagore developed a personal relationship with the Universal Consciousness, and thus, came to the concept of Jivandevata. Thus, along with the pantheism of the Upaniṣads, Tagore got influenced by the monotheistic philosophy too. Jivandevata is the resultant synthesis. The concept of Jivandevata seems to be a coherence of the pantheism of the Upaniṣads along with the dualism of the Vaishnava Bhakti tradition². However, the concept of Jivandevata cannot be said to be wholly based on the Bhakti tradition. The concept of Jivandevata has certain points of differences from the Bhakti cult. On the first place, the devoted seems to be having a higher position than that of the devotee. But in Tagore's view, the devoted also longs for his devotee. Thus, the relationship is an egalitarian one. Secondly, Bhakti tradition highlights the importance of love and karma and service takes a backseat. But Tagore transforms this love to service to the entire world of beings.

As pointed out by Kalyan Sengupta, Tagore often uses "world", "universe" or "earth" in a synonymous tune with "Nature". It is the serene beauty and grandeur of nature that he longs for a spiritual companionship with nature itself, for a more complete sense of identity with it. "Oh my heart gets wide opened to the

unmixed pleasure that surrounds the nature;

I feel the warmth of love that

The entire universe bestows upon me..."³

Thus, we come to the concept of a being who has the share of his soul in the World-Soul. And thus, we come to Tagore's concept of man-in-the-universe.

1. Tagore's Concept of man-in-The-Universe

Tagore's idea of universal man is the highest form of realization of human existence that is not Supra-Human. Man exists for two needs—ordinary or material needs and higher or human needs. The highest state of life is to be recognized as human salvation through unity, since he realizes that truth is all-comprehensive and does not lie in isolation.

But man is not satisfied with what he is. He has a desire to transcend his own boundaries and limitations and ultimately wants to reach a point where one is identical with oneself (I=I); and it is nature that helps man to realize this goal. Man carries within himself the beauty of nature and an urge to transcend one's facticity and reaches the infinite. The perfection of man is attained through the enlargement of personality that leads him to find out an empathy with the entire universe and that is applicable to the entire society.

This is not a mere knowledge that leads to power but a knowledge that gives us joy----the perfect bliss-----since it binds the soul with the soul as explained by Tagore himself in Sadhana. Tagore thinks that the unity of man and nature share a common origin in the One or the Absolute.

The Spirit and Nature are twin aspects of the Absolute. It seeks for a realization of a deeper unity with nature, and with the Supreme person.

2. “Namo Yantra”----- A Civilization of Machines

“Hail the mechanism of machines!!
The sound of gigantic wheels constitute your music,
You are worshipped by the thunder and fire,
You, the lord of machines,
The ultimate destiny of the destruction,
We bow to you.”⁴

When man uses the world to fulfill merely biological or material needs, he uses only a part of it and therefore disintegrates himself from the whole; he gets confined into the prison of his narrow desires and can never discover the essence of his self. In the haunt of satisfying his appetite, he forgets his direction and the more he consumes, the more his appetites grow and ultimately, the means become ends in themselves and he falls into the vicious cycle of consumerism. Thus, the modern civilization is a mechanical one.

Scientific knowledge of nature is indeed a considerable achievement of the human mind. Undoubtedly, there are such laws to be discovered, not only in nature but also in the social and cultural spheres. But the discovery of laws, Tagore holds, cannot be a final aim. “It is like a railway station; but the station platform is not home.”⁵ Science is but one stage on the journey from law to love, from necessity to freedom and expansion. The advancement and expansion of science and technology leads to huge destruction as a corollary to the benefits that it offers to the society. This destruction grabs the environment, destroys the ancient culture transforming it to a technological one and ultimately, extends its dreadful hands towards human relations....a wonderful picture of this techno-culture is depicted in the movie ‘Modern Times’; and besides, Mahashweta Devi has portrayed a heart-touching picture of the effects of technological advancement that leads to the destruction of environment that ultimately leads to a devastating consequence mainly in the lives of the ancient tribes who live for the centuries on the loving lap of nature:

“The Indian Railways starts its journey in the year 1853, from Bombay to Thane. Within 1867, Howrah-Delhi and Howrah-Bombay routes also got started. It is to be remembered that in North-India, the Bhaba region which is situated at the base of the Himalayas, has suffered tremendous deforestation because of cutting down of trees in order to run steam engines. Even during the construction of rails, the forests existing both sides have suffered tremendous losses. During the construction of Howrah-Bombay railways, the teak-woods were cut down continuously; as a result, the inhabitants of that region lost their shelter and gradually they started to lose their existence. Although they were physically alive, but somehow or other they lost their distinct cultural heritage that constituted their living. The teak-wood plants were considered to be their

deity that played an important role in their marriage and other ceremonies. Those plants were transformed into hard and fat slippers.....The non-existent teak-woods enter deep into the core of the existence of the Korkus (the tribes living in that region).....Gradually the Korkus become a myth, they ultimately start to renounce their right to live.”⁶

Ultimately an entire clan gets extinct by refusing to take any food. They reject, in a non-violent way, to take any type of food or nutritional food supplements offered by the government. As they had the habit of taking the seeds of a particular grass named Reori, forest tubers, fruits, deer, birds, rabbits, iguana etc., and all these things were found in the teak-wood forests. Along with the destruction of the forests, those species also became extinct. And this was a silent protest lodged by all the Korkus against the techno-culture that destroys the Mother Nature. They deliberately committed an indirect suicide to protest against the government, the technologies and the so-called ‘modernity’.

Thus, the modern techno-culture alienates us from the eternal bosom of Mother Nature and thus, makes us rootless and the commodification of every aspect of life leads to a consumerist outlook that judges the value of everything in terms of the economic benefit that it can yield to us. The environmental ethical critique of consumerism argues that modern capitalism is governed by consumption rather than production; it makes us aware of the inherent relationship between the greedy market economy, social system of domination and the exploitative system of nature, it shows that the environmental crisis is a result of the hierarchical organization of power and the authoritarian mentality rooted in the structures of society. The domination of nature by men stems from the very real domination of human by human. Moreover, the critique of consumerism shows us the links between consumerism and the attitude of the domination of nature racism with sexism, third world exploitation.

Heidegger directs our attention to the homelessness which is ‘coming to be the destiny of the world.’ This homelessness is the product of a science and technology which reveals nature as, simply, ‘a standing reserve’ to be utilized by human beings. The technological interpretation of nature involves an imposition, the imperialist consideration to exploit nature for the satisfaction of human needs alone. Thus, ‘the earth now reveals itself as a mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit’. For Heidegger, as for Tagore, it is not that technological way of revealing is false. But it is nonetheless ‘monstrous’; for it ‘drives out every other possibility of revealing’.

3. The Uniqueness of Tagore’s Thoughts: Aesthetic Sensibility as a Stepping Stone to the Pathway of Ethics

The R̥sis of the Upaniṣads enquired into the nature of the Ultimate Reality with the faculty of intellect; However, Tagore, besides his intellectual sensibility, could not ignore the emotional faculty and therefore, his quest was not limited only to the knowledge of the Reality, but to establish a personal and more intimate relationship with the latter. Like the Upaniṣads, Tagore also recognized the passage from knowledge to love and ultimately to selflessness; But, Tagore

added the feeling of joy or ānanda in that; and thereby supplemented the philosophy with his own sensitisation. In this respect, his famous saying can be referred,

“There had been an inadequacy in our sādhanā. When we emphasized on the factor of knowledge during our quest of the Brahman, we made knowledge all in all.”⁷

This feeling of inadequacy might be the driving factor from the Brahmayāda of the Upaniṣads to the monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj. The Brahmo Samaj conceived the Ultimate Reality as the Father; who regulates, as well as loves. Thus, a very important hymn of Brahmo prayer that Tagore repeatedly mentions in his Shantiniketan series of writings is: “Pitā Nohasī”⁸. Tagore said, “There is Vishwadevata residing in each and all. Jivan devata resides at the centre of our heart; he is the basis of all feelings and experiences. This is the ‘Moner Mānuṣ’ of the Bauls”⁹.

Tagore recognized the importance of human aesthetic sensibility to acknowledge the beauty of nature which represents not only the manifestation of the Ultimate Reality but represents an extension of our own self as embedded in the universe. However, unlike the idealists, he did not deny the mind-independent existence of Reality, but he recognized the role of human minds for the expression of the Reality. Thus, the urge to express and the aesthetic sensibility captures an important place in Tagorean paradigm of thought. Aesthetic expression takes the form of art which brings ānanda or pure Bliss which is one with the Truth. The term ‘beauty’ is having a wider connotation in Tagorean sophistication. ‘Beauty’ not only contains that which is pretty, but whatever is sublime. The creation represents integrity, a harmonious whole incorporating both birth and death, happiness and sorrows and that is the Ultimate Truth. Thus, salvation consists in the recognition and unification with this integral whole.

4. Concluding Notes

In his Shantiniketan series, the article titled ‘Beauty’ reads thus, “The Ultimate Power manifests Itself in two ways: One is the manifestation of work, the other is of bliss. In nature, He manifests himself as the truth, while in beauty, He manifests Himself as bliss.”

What is distinctively characteristic of Tagorean perspective is man’s emotional relation to the world. Tagore opines that the emotional energy of man does not get exhausted merely by his instinctive urge for self-preservation, the surplus of that in him creates a place for art as an outlet of expression. In experiencing the deeper roots of his existence lying ingrained in nature, the inner essence of his self gets an expression. Such a stance liberates his thought from being confined within the factual aspects of world where the nature is valued on the basis of utilitarian considerations. Man can feel his oneness with the external world or more precisely, with nature by a sort of transcendence, the element of which is again immanent in him. Thus, even accepting the facts of the world, man can transcend the factual boundaries and can rise higher to the level of the ultimate truth.

In Tagore’s philosophy aesthetic sensibility plays a vital role in uniting truth, beauty and goodness. To know beauty in its true spirit is possible only by surpassing our sensual desires. From this concept of beauty, Tagore passes on to the concept of ethics as an essential derivative

from the former. “The beauty of goodness goes far, beyond what the eye can see or the mind know, it invests everything with a little of God. It is because of its nearness that we often fail to see goodness as a form of beauty.”(*Sense of Beauty*, 1936) Man as an artist, as a member of human society, can never avoid his responsibilities towards the society; and thus, art gets essentially linked up with ethics.

Writing explicitly on the issue of mixing up of aesthetics with ethics, Tagore contends:

“The Good is beautiful not because of its utility or because of what it does to us. There is more in it than that. The Good, we say, is at-one with the whole of existence and it finds a ready response in the heart of man, and whenever the Good and the True are in accord, Beauty stands revealed.” (*Sense of Beauty*, 1907)

Tagore visualizes human perfection to be obtained in a plane where the Good, the Truth and the Beautiful come together. The moral sense of human helps him to extend the horizon of beauty grasped by the physical organs. For Tagore the question of the attainment of the ideal of Truth, Beauty and Goodness is ultimately a human one. Tagore’s humanism finds its base in the aesthetic sensibility of human. The superiority assigned to human by nature has found its justification in human ability for aesthetic experience and communication. Actualization of human freedom is thus proportionate to this realization.

¹Sadhana, p. 3

² The idea has a double stand. There is the Vaishnava dualism--- always keeping the separateness of the self----and there is the Upanšadic monism. God is within each individual; and God is also the ground reality of all as in the Vedant. *Rabindranath*, Edward Thompson, JvanDebate; p.105.

³ Rabindranath Tagore: Sanchayita, (Prabhat Utsav), p.32.

⁴ GĪtavitān, Rabindranath Tagore, p.

⁵ Sādhana, p.317.

⁶ Śreṣṭha Golpo, Mahāshweta Devi, pp.295-296.

⁷ Shantiniketan, Sāmarjasya.

⁸ Śukla Yajurveda 4.37.20.

⁹ Mānuṣer Dharma (Sāmyojan).