CHAPTER I : INTRODUCTION

THE LACK OF ANY SYSTEMATIC PICTURE OF RABINDRANATH'S IDEAS

Rabindranath Tagore was born in the year 1861, which according to authors like Sachin Sen was a period of stress and strain\(^1\), as well as a period of transition according to Sasadhar Sinha\(^2\) and others. There are various pictures which scholars have drawn about this post-mutiny decade. But it is undoubtedly true that Rabindranath was born at the threshold of an era of upsurge for the Bengali middle class, which had gone through a period of economic depression in the 1840s. The stimulus of Western trade failed to work in Bengal but not so the stimulus of Western Culture.

The system of English education had commenced in a simple way two decades before Macaulay's Minute of 1835. The building of temples and bathing ghats, the founding of dharmasalas, pujas on a lavish scale, expensive sradhas and marriage ceremonies used to dominate consciousness in Bengal. In 1815-16, the Hindu College became a public question, possibly the first of its kind in India. There was public subscription for higher education. Public life and public spirit perhaps started from this point. The

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literary education which was imparted in new institutions of learning suited the tone and temper of Bengali society. It also subserved Government interest for some time.

There had been members of some castes with surnames like Seth, Mullick, Saha, Basak, Auddy, Burral and Pyne, who specialized in Banking and trading but in the special circumstances prevailing in Bengal they showed no aptitude for overseas traffic and did not engage in overland trade with distant regions. The Bengali trading castes had restricted their activity to inland trade in the eastern sector — Bengal, Assam, Orissa and Bihar. They were sharp clever people in business, they had thorough local knowledge, but they had very limited ideas and outlook. In Calcutta those Indians who became partners in Indo-British commercial ventures were exposed after 1813 to the full blast of British free traders’ enterprise. They were also witnesses of commercial instability to its fullest extent. Indigenous bankers, Bengali trading castes, even the Marwari merchants and bankers became very cautious. But those Bengali businessmen, who had some awareness of new values in the field of economic adventure, showed some dynamism for some years, yet no great urge was developed from within as in the eager quest for the knowledge of Western literature, history, religion and philosophy. There was also no accelerated economic tempo. An intensely earnest minority could have perhaps worked wonders. But there were many hurdles on the

path of their adventure — a traditional society, the new very attractive system of land holding, a new judicial system, European Commercial immorality and the peculiar British system of free trade. The British attitude was best expressed in the words of Sir Henry Maine — though these words were uttered in 1876 — "We had a right to expect from India an open market for our goods as a compensation for the serious liability which her possession and defence has laid upon our foreign policy".

Government attitude encouraged concentration of investment on land. The peasant agriculture and artisan crafts had flourished before the advent of British rule in Bengal and for about four decades under the British. By the middle of the 19th century only peasant agriculture remained. Western enterprise had started commercial agriculture in the form of indigo cultivation and this was responsible for what has been described as indigo slavery. India's growing dependence upon imported manufacture was a new development. Government policy was to foster agriculture. It did not know how to do it. Government wanted to encourage British shipping and British business enterprise. Its correspondence with Calcutta Chamber of Commerce shows that it knew how to do it. But the British traders' command of capital and credit was as yet very insecure.

There is a long hiatus between the decay of handicrafts and the beginning of modern industry in Bengal. The absence of industrial enterprise was perhaps more conspicuous in Bengal.
than in any other part of India. The homely atmosphere of the middle class joint family did not encourage the spirit of enterprise. The line of thinking was so very different in Bengal. Labour was cheap and very easily available particularly after the disappearance of handicrafts and the growth of population. New skills, new inventions, even new attitudes could not develop in such an atmosphere of superfluity of labour and everything naturally tended to be labour-intensive. Calcutta, Chinsura, Chandernagore and their environs excepted, the predominant feeling was the security of hereditary occupations. Protection and accumulation of fortune was not a Bengali obsession.

In Bengal of the 19th century—urban and rural—there was a sense of obligation according to which the reproductive growth of industry and initiative could not develop. There was an atrophy of individualism. Attitudes, traditions fears and aspirations were all against modern entrepreneurship. Life was generally lived on an easy middle class level by those people who might be expected to be enterprising.

The role of the Bengali in the business world of Calcutta in the second half of the 19th century was confined to barren clerkdom, petty speculation, short opportunism, peddling and merchandising. Later developments proved that there was scope for great expansion of British business in India and such expansion required "more capital than could be

4. Ibid, pp. 103–33.
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4. Ibid, pp. 100-33.
obtained by them in India to any extent". The migration of British capital to India began. This was a new phase and there was a new technique of extraction of wealth. "The energy inherent in British Commercial interest" found full scope in the second half of the 19th century.

The Carr-Tagore Company which grew up in Bengal because of the initiative of Dwarakanath Tagore was the first instance of Bengali Capitalist venture and British cooperation, according to the words of Dwarakanath Tagore.

In Eastern India, Dwarakanath Tagore and a handful of like-minded contemporaries of both races, provided the entrepreneurship. One of Tagore's goals was to carry over the commercial partnerships and other organizational forms of the mercantile age into the industrial age. A second goal was to import the industrial revolution into India and to adapt the steam engine to commercial use. Tagore organized the first coal-mining company and the first steam tug and river steam boat companies, and was among his country's pioneer railway promoters. To facilitate these enterprises, he launched a commercial bank, insurance companies and commercial newspapers. He engaged in ocean shipping under both steam and sail, and tried his hand at applying modern technology and organization to tea-planting, salt-manufacturing and sugar-refining. In all of these undertakings he associated with British partners.

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5. Ibid, p.196.
As an aspect of agrarian economy, commercial agriculture is not entirely an innovation brought out by British rule. But the British rule did have a marked impact on the volume, variety and organisation of production of commercial crops. The trade in commercial crops was now being more and more influenced by new issues, closely associated with the new regime and the consequent growing ties between the economy of Bengal and that of England.

The Tagore family itself was the cradle of multiple ideas which gave enough food for thought to the young Rabindranath. Religion, philosophy, patriotism, the enterprise of economic rationalism and aesthetics created a deep impact on Rabindranath's mind from his very childhood.

Throughout his life, we find that Rabindranath had to face the constant conflict of two different ideas in his mind. This often gave ample scope to many critics to misjudge him. On the one hand, he had deep respect for Vedic philosophy and science. Again, he was interested in rebuilding the ancient Hindu tradition, on the other hand he was a great advocate of modern democracy and humanism. According to Tagore, men were parasites, not only when they were lifeless hangers on, drawing nutriment from others, but also when they surrendered themselves to the ebb-tides of the given condition.

Tagore wanted freedom for his countrymen from fears which were shaped by their own distorted dreams, freedom

from the burden of ages which "blind their eyes to the beckoning call of future" freedom from the insult of dwelling in a dolls' world "where movements are started through brainless wires", and "freedom from the anarchy of destiny, whose sails are weakly yielded to blind uncertain winds". So, this impact of environment was great on Rabindranath and he, who was a scion of a new aristocratic family of the British Indian metropolis succumbed to the aristocratic environment to a certain extent.

The family in which Tagore was born was essentially a Bhadralok family and this Bhadralok complex stood as a major barrier in the fulfilment of Tagore's desire of becoming a humanist. At the beginning of the 20th century Bengali rural and urban society differed in many fundamental respects, yet they shared at least one feature — a common dominant elite. In city, town and village there was one group of Bengalis who claimed and were accorded recognition as superior in social status to the mass of their fellows. These were Bhadralok, literally the respectable people, the gentlemen. They were distinguished by many aspects of their behaviour — their deportment, their speech, their dress, their style of housing, their eating habits, their occupation and their associations and quite fundamentally by their cultural values and their sense of social propriety. The basic and most rigidly maintained distinction between Bhadra and Abhadra, between high and low, the respectable and others, was the Bhadralok's
abstention from manual labour and their pernicious social ideology about the inferiority of manual occupations people practising which or their struggling descendants were called chotolok. This stigma attaching to physical labour was a long enduring proscription of the three upper castes of Bengali Hindu society, Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha, from which so many of the Bhadralok were drawn, that the term Bhadralok was frequently used in the late 19th century as a synonym for upper caste. Rabindranath was caught in this elite conflict. All his writings have a direct bearing on the pathos of the common men. But in his actual life he was far away from the common men. His family lived in pomp and style and he himself could not remain immune to it, at least in his early years. It was in Rabindranath's marriage that above 3,000 rupees were spent. This was very much in those days of little expenditure. Quite a large number of diamond pieces were bought for his marriage. So, he could not totally neglect his elitist background and mix with the common people with an open mind.

All along his life, Rabindranath suffered from the complex that he could not whole heartedly place his appeal before the common man. This was a contradiction of being a part of the elite and yet feeling for the subordinates.

We must not also forget about the social changes which were taking place in the later half of the 19th and

and the early half of the 20th century to which Rabindranath was a direct witness; James Mill and his fellow Benthamites played an important role in the Indian reform movement. As Eric Stokes has pointed out in his study of the English Utilitarians and India, they gave it a coherent body of doctrine and directed attention to the practical problems of law and land-revenue administration. But the movement was more than just an attempt to remodel India in the image of Jeremy Bentham. By mid century both Benthamism and evangelicalism had lost much of their earlier crusading zeal. Their influence was no longer so deep. The 1857 Revolt of course did not completely destroy the vision of an India remodelled along Western-Christian lines, free of superstition and idolatry. Few Englishmen could be brought to renounce an ideal which had become so deeply embedded in the whole concept of their mission in India. But they had now of necessity to rely for its realization on the slow growth of education and enlightenment within Indian society. The laissez-faire view of social change contrasts sharply with the heady exuberance of the pre-mutiny reformers and is of course in large measure a response to the harsh experiences of 1857.

Most of the educated Indians responded to this atmosphere of progress and enlightenment. Orthodox fanaticism, they realized, posed a direct challenge to the new learning.

for Bengal. But at the same time most Indian reformers were reluctant to see the British Government play too prominent a part in the promotion of reform, because they thought it would tear the fabric of Indian traditions, which the British Orientalists were teaching them to recognize from the Vedas and the Puranas. Among the Hindu reformers, willing to see the Government take an active part in reform were the dedicated Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the fiery Keshub Chandra Sen and Raja Ram Mohan Roy. An indigenous crusade for the total abolition of all practices opposed to logic or reason began. The removal of caste distinctions, the emancipation of women, the prohibition of child-marriage and the encouragement of widow remarriage were the most vital reforms undertaken in this period.

On the other hand, the laissez-faire doctrine was also reflected in the agrarian economy of India. It contributed largely to the success of the revival of landlordism. The theory gained further reinforcement from aristocratic sections of society. We should remember when we are studying Rabindranath, that the poet was a direct offshoot of this Bengal Renaissance of 19th century. The class to which Rabindranath belonged was the particular class which was linking the regional elite with the dynamic civilization of contemporary Europe. It contributed to the formation of a new Indian middle class and assisted in the professionalization of the Bengali intelligentsia. The impact was urban and secular. Its members were neither static.
classicists nor averse to the idea of progress; they both historicized the Indian past and stimulated a consciousness of history in the Indian intellectual. It was they who transmitted a new sense of identity to Bengalis that enlarged what Robert Bellah has called 'the capacity for rational goal setting an instrumental process in the development of a modern outlook'. The Bengal Renaissance was the child of 18th century European cosmopolitanism and pragmatic British policy built around the need for an acculturated civil service class. Calcutta, made the capital of British India through what might be termed historical accident, provided the environment\textsuperscript{16}.

Rabindranath was also a social reformer and a true child of the Bengal Renaissance. His programme of social reform had not been much similar to that of Ram Mohan, Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra or Vivekananda. During his years of precious adolescence, Rabindranath was absorbing the basic ideas about Hinduism and India, and about East and West which he later elaborated in his lectures in many lands. The three related ideas - that India and the East were synonymous, that Eastern civilization was distinguished by spiritual profoundness, and that the East and the West complemented each other perfectly - did not originate with Rabindranath. In one sense they were the natural expression in an idealized form of the symbiosis between upper caste Hindus and their British rulers in 19th century Bengal, and accordingly were articulated, either singly or jointly, by intellectuals on both sides of

the partnership. As early as 1802, one of the young Englishmen at the company's Orientalist College in Calcutta, W.B. Martin, had equated India with Asia and claimed that "literature, taste and science originated in Asia and by a general diffusion, in the course of time, spread themselves over Greece and Italy". In 1823, Ram Mohan Roy had sought to deflate a Christian critic of Hinduism by arguing - "If by the 'Ray of Intelligence' for which the Christian says we are indebted to the English, he means the introduction of useful mechanical arts, I am ready to express my assent and also my gratitude; but with respect to Science, Literature or Religion, I do not acknowledge that we are placed under any obligation. For, by a reference to history it may be proved that the world was indebted to our ancestors for the first dawn of knowledge which sprang up in the East".

The same ideas were frequently voiced by the magnetic Orator Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-84) who was first Rabindranath's father, Debendranath's assistant, and then his successor as the leader of the Brahmo Samaj. "And was not Jesus Christ an Asiatic?" he asked in his 1860 lecture, "Jesus Christ, Europe and Asia". "To us Asiatics, therefore Christ is doubly interesting, and his religion is entitled to our peculiar regard as an altogether Oriental affair".

In "Asia's Message to Europe", delivered in Calcutta in 1883, Keshub wove together the four themes of India as the essence of Asia, of Asia as spiritually incarnate, of himself as Asia's representative, and of the complementarity of Asian

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17. "Ram Mohan Roy, Letter to the Editor - Bengal Hurkara (May 23, 1823)."
and European civilization — the exact themes which Rabindranath Tagore was to propound in his own lectures in the 1890s and 1920s, also in English.\textsuperscript{18}

How deeply Keshub Chandra Sen's ideas influenced Rabindranath's thinking is difficult to say, but the virtual identity of their idea that Asia had a message for the West can scarcely be a coincidence. Keshub was living in the Tagore home, when Rabindranath was born, and the poet later wrote, "I was fortunate enough to receive his affectionate caresses at the moment when he was cherishing his dream of a great future of spiritual illumination". Keshub was lecturing in Calcutta throughout the formative years of Rabindranath's life, and the audience at his enthusiastic lecture on 'Asia's Message to Europe' may have included the sensitive 23 years lad, Rabindranath.

The idea of Indian spiritual greatness seems to have remained popular, and even to have increased its hold on the imaginations of Indian and Western intellectuals alike in the last quarter of the 19th century. The Russian lady Madame Blavatsky and the American Colonel Olcott, who founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875, made much of reincarnation of Hindu and Buddhist ideas. They came to India in 1879 and made enough converts among educated Indians and British officials.

what can it teach us?" was much appreciated by his friend Keshub Chandra Sen.

India's most successful missionary to the West in the 19th century, Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902) was also a Bengali Hindu, but his interpretation of Hinduism was based on its mediaeval form, which embraced worship before idols, as well as the ancient Upanishadic ideas which had been stressed by Ram Mohan and Debendranath.

Like Ram Mohan or Vidyasagar, Tagore did not directly plunge in the social field or call on the Government to write down a particular edict, his sympathy was always with the lot of the deprived. His numerous short stories in the Galpaquchha tell us that he was also a genuine supporter of women's liberation or abolition of child marriage. The short stories like 'Strir Patra', 'Megh-O-Roudra', his novel 'Chokher Bali' are some instances. His zealous efforts of village rehabilitation scheme at Sriniketan and his Visvabharati scheme of education give us ample scope for awe and admiration. Although he came from a zamindar family, he was always critically aware of the attitude of the zamindar clan. Among his numerous articles on this subject, one very mentionable one is 'Ryoter Katha' and the other one is the poem 'Dui Bigha Jami', where the zamindari attitude is quite explicitly expressed.

So it seems that Rabindranath was a social reformer, but not in the true sense of the term. But his feeling for reforming society had been too explicit in the pages of 'Samuha', 'Raja-Praja', 'Path O Patheya'. His social thought had often been overlapped by political ideas and political ideas by aesthetic feelings. So, he does not stand in the same channel with that of Vivekananda, Ram Mohan and Vidyasagar. On the other hand, although he got much impetus from the laissez-faire doctrine, he had a definite stand for himself. He was an aristocrat, but his aristocracy had room for proletariats also. Again, the Upanishads had a deep impact on his outlook. According to writers like Rabindra Gupta, the mysticism of the Upanishads had been the genesis of Rabindra philosophy. This kind of philosophy was probably the strongest weapon against working class, which even capitalists could not invent. Rabindranath was definitely free from the bias of feudal ideas; he belonged to the bourgeois class. But he was not also totally free from religious norms.

It is an interesting point to discuss that being a social thinker whether Rabindranath was totally free from religious nepotism? Rabindranath's God sometimes stands alone as a religious symbol, sometimes the God is embedded into an individual soul, specially a dear soul. Two examples will suffice the purpose. "He mor Devata bharla e deha pran" and "Pratidino ami he Jivanaswami darhabo tomaro sammukhe".

We can definitely have two images here. His description of Almighty is not identical with that of Ram Mohan who sought for the unification of Atman and Brahman.

Rabindranath was a lone searcher of peace, but in his quest for peace and future fortune of the country, was he sometimes showing his leaning towards God and in that respect was he totally a rational social thinker? In the pages of 'Santiniketan' we find him saying — "the God is serving the whole world just like a mother nurses her child or like a love torn lady who takes care of her beloved. He is the server Himself and so He has given so much gravity to servitude". This type of attitude of Rabindranath cannot always be judged as very rational or systematic.

Rabindranath's political involvement began in a very youthful form in the days of the Hindumela (1875-76). This early zeal for patriotism took a mature turn in the hectic days of the 1880s. The educated Indians at this time began to take more and more interest in the political affairs of the day. In the years from 1876 to 1880 Gladstone was putting forward the principles that the rights of men were not limited by boundaries of Christian civilization that the feelings and desires of Oriental people, should be given consideration and that Britain had a duty in India. These principles had become the policy of the Liberal Party and formed the mandate for Ripon.

23. Rabindranath Tagore, Santiniketan (1356 B.S.), p.35.
Rabindranath came in touch with this liberal air of the Gladstonian era in his days of youth. The Indian National Congress had its inception in the year 1885 and not only Tagore, but his class of people responded to it heartily. "The Congress stand against the Government on economic problems in the beginning of the century, derived its strength and support in a large measure from the economic discontent of the educated middle class of the country. The rise in prices and wages, the enormous increase in the output of colleges and schools and the capital made out of the 'drain theory' were factors and circumstances which produced the discontent of this class." Rabindranath also could not remain immune from the happenings within the class represented by the Congress.

But Rabindranath's political attachment was not too real. Primarily he was a poet and a philosopher, so in politics also he was seeking social solutions. In the late half of the 19th century, he was on the one hand pleading for East-West harmony, on the other hand he was trying to revive the ancient Hindu tradition.

The very eventful career of Rabindranath shows that he was never aloof from international politics. His attitude towards India and the World changed from time to time. But this flexibility of his attitude shows that he never wanted to cling to rigid values, rather he wanted to keep pace with the dynamic spirit of the current century and he also kept

his mind open for criticism. He had often become restive, rather tired of World politics, but he never lost his faith in human values. It is true that the poet could not accept Marxist-Leninist philosophy of politics, but he always took active interest in the struggle for liberation of the exploited countries. He saw in agony the melancholic future of Abysinia, Spain, Czechoslovakia and China, but still he believed that one day human values would triumph over animal lust and he preached this gospel from his peaceful abode of Santiniketan\textsuperscript{26}. However, at the end of his life, Tagore's internationalism was no longer a vague cosmopolitanism, but a profound conviction born of a true appreciation of the issues involved. His internationalism never degenerated into a particular racial concept.

It might appear that Rabindranath's entire life and work presents a bundle of contradictions. But, all these contradictions, he tried to resolve by an idealist and harmonistic outlook; this was possible to a certain extent because of his recourse to the Upanishads from his very childhood days. The Tagore family had deep reverence for ancient Indian Philosophy; particularly Rabindranath was very much influenced by his father Maharshi Devendranath's philosophical outlook. In Rabindranath's childhood, readings from the Upanishads were a daily feature of the Tagore household. Later, the poet made an independent study of some of the Upanishads, especially \textit{Isha, Chandogya} and \textit{Shvetashewatara}. In his sermons and discourses, passages from the Upanishads were frequently quoted.

Upanishadic episodes provided themes for some of his most important poems. The inclination became more vocal in the days of the composition of *Chaitali-Kalpana-Naivedya*. It was in the same period that some of his essays of 'Swadesh', 'Dharma' and 'Santiniketan' were also written. In the early half of 20th century the educational centre of Santiniketan was also established. According to Professor Kshudiram Das, the main reason for Rabindranath's love for ancient philosophy was his romantic temperament. He wanted to get rid of the hackneyed way of living or his fatigued soul wanted some kind of lease, and this he found in an imaginary world of peace, the source of which had been the days of the Upanishads. Though he had a deep reverence for the Upanishads, he always expressed the versions of the Upanishads in his own modern way. The highly metaphysical words like 'Amrita', 'Bhuma' or 'Tapasya' were used by Rabindranath in the more realistic meanings of human suffering, struggle, the path for victory etc. It is a question of controversy how a progressive and rational thinker like Rabindranath would have such deep clinging for the Upanishads? In his own words, "Like all truths realized through life", Tagore says, "the truths of the Upanishads are concrete". Many tendencies of thought have been reconciled in them, because life itself is a great reconciler. While this may have been a case of circular logic, it satisfied the poet's idealism.

The Upanishads have received less than justice from their interpreters. Adherents of orthodox darshans approached them in a dogmatic manner, picking out passages from them to buttress their own doctrines. Many European scholars saw in them only the negative ideas of illusion, sorrow and denial. But there is indeed a positive element in the Upanishads. This positive element, Tagore points out, is seen in the idea of joy — anandam of eternal blissful life, of universal rhythm. It is also seen in the idea of personal realization and in the constant search for the Imperishable.

Rabindranath believed that the age of the Upanishads had been free from all social evils and sometimes being fed up with the mechanical living of the present century, he yearned for the days of the Vedas and the Upanishads. He says — "Give us back the forests, and take back your urban set up". But Tagore never dreamt of eternal peace or bliss prevailing in the world. Here again, we find a contradiction in his thought. He always believed that peace should be earned out of agony and distrust. In this aspect he had certain similarities with the philosophical insight of Hegel. "Tagore can be said to have justified war and induced men to fight and conquer. The fighting civilization and the civilization realising fundamental unity in the depth of existence cannot but be reconciled as complementary to each other. The poet only wants the two civilizations to join hands so that human nature can discover a true balance..."

in course of time. He cannot totally enforce facts by imaginations.\(^30\).

Throughout his life, it was Rabindranath's goal to assimilate the ideas of the East and the West. He never discarded the good values of the West, at the same time he was very much reverent towards Upanishadic values. He came to believe that the root cause of disunity in India in the present century was her disregard towards the Upanishadic values. His earnest effort was to bring about harmony in the society which would give shape to a progressive civilization in the morrow. He dreamt for the day when all the nations of the World would come and get united on this Indian soil.\(^31\).

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"Hetha ekdin biram bihin maha Onkardhani
Hriday tantre eker mantre uthechilo ranarani,
Tapasya bale eker anala bahure ahuti diva
Bibhed bhulila, jagaye tulila ekti birat biya
Sei sadhanar se aradhanar jagyasalar khola aii dwar
Hethay sabare habe milibare anata sire
Ei Bharater mahamanaber saaara tire".