CHAPTER VI : CONCLUSION

Rabindranath Tagore's personality was such that he could never fully reconcile his ideas either with those of learned intellectuals of the past like Raja Rammohan Roy or Vidyasagar or with contemporary intellectuals like Mahatma Gandhi, Vivekananda or Jawaharlal Nehru. For example, he repeatedly acknowledged his debt to the inspiration he received from the life and teachings of the Raja, but religious dogma as such never interested him, as a person who was essentially a poet and a lover of humanity. The range of his natural sympathies was so universal that he shrank from any rigid dogma that might limit its all embracing sweep. With his poet's intuition, Rabindranath perceived an inner affinity between all the great Faiths of mankind and between the spiritual traditions and disciplines of his own country. He was never tired of quoting the famous verse of Chandidas - 'Man is the highest truth, there is no truth above it!'

Again, unlike Mahatma Gandhi and most moralists, he trusted the natural instincts and vital impulses, and believed that a person whose natural instincts were suppressed and the vital urges atrophied was an incomplete and distorted individual, who in nine cases out of ten, would do more harm than good. Hence, he emphasised the education of the whole man, of his senses as much as of his mind. Man, according to Rabindranath

should be vitally savage and mentally civilized. It was Tagore's firm conviction that the human personality develops in an environment of freedom. For him, as for Gandhiji, freedom had meaning only when it led to full opportunities of development to every individual in the State. Since, the majority of our countrymen live in villages, a free India according to Tagore would be a co-operative commonwealth of self-governing village communities in which every village has all the amenities of education, industrial development and civilized living as are available in the cities. Tagore, like Gandhiji, believed profoundly in a decentralized economy with the village as its unit and the individuals' well being and development as its objective. He differed from Gandhiji in two vital matters. He did not believe that the machine was the enemy of men. On the contrary, he believed that any mechanical aid that reduced man's drudgery was man's friend and helpmate. The other vital point of difference between the outlooks of Tagore and Gandhiji was that while Gandhiji stressed austerity and self-control as a guiding principle, Tagore stressed joy and self-expression. That is why Tagore attached great importance to the significance of play and the arts as an essential part of any second system of education, for they help the child to express the subconscious, which disciplined learning and conduct tend to suppress.2

Let us see what Romain Rolland thought of Gandhi and how he explained his opinion about Gandhi in his letter to Rabindranath.

2. Ibid, pp. 42-43, 44.
I have just finished a fairly long essay on Mahatma Gandhi, based on the Young India Volume of articles. I shall bring it out in the review *Europe*, as well as several other German and Russian reviews. Without sharing all Gandhi's ideas, which seem to me a little mediaeval (particularly in his disciples, such as Professor Kalelkar, whose Gospel of Swadeshi would seem to enclose India in the Wall of a monastery), I have conceived an infinite love and veneration for Gandhi's person, for his great heart burning with love. In one chapter of my essay I have taken the liberty, starting from your admirable published articles, of recalling the stance you took against Gandhi and the noble debate of ideas between you. The highest human ideals are present there; it could be compared to an argument between St. Paul and Plato. But when carried into an Indian context, the horizons are broadened. They embrace the whole earth, and all humanity shares in this August 'Dispute' (in the serene sense given to the word by the famous Raphael fresco in the Vatican Stanze). In my conclusion I show you united in the awareness of the beauty - and even the fruitful necessity - of self sacrifice by love.

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Extract from Romain Rolland's Diary: April 1923 (London) - "Visited by Andrews, the friend of Tagore and Gandhi. He has lived in India for twenty years ..... He is the link between Tagore and Gandhi and he teaches at Santiniketan ... Andrews was the only witness at the discussion between Tagore and Gandhi, shortly after Tagore's return to India. He describes them as two types of two opposing Indian races; Gandhi from Western India, is of an unimaginative and practical race; Tagore is quite the opposite. The first subject of discussion

was idols; Gandhi defended them, believing the masses incapable of raising themselves immediately to abstract ideas. Tagore cannot bear to see people eternally treated as a child. Gandhi quoted the great things achieved in Europe by the flag as an idol; Tagore found it easy to object, but Gandhi held his ground, contrasting European flags bearing eagles etc., with his own on which he has put a spinning wheel. The second point of discussion, was nationalism, which Gandhi defended. He said that one must go through war to reach peace. This is why he has so often worked to recruit for the English armies. Andrews wrote him letter after letter to dissuade him, but Gandhi never gave in. Andrews approves of my comparison of Gandhi with St. Paul and Tagore with Plato. He says smilingly that Gandhi is very much St. Paul! 4

The opening decades of the 20th century brought major political changes to the Hindu-British relationship in Bengal, and therefore to Tagore's position in his own province. One extremist leader in Bengal not only shared Tagore's ideal of India as the leader of Asian spiritual civilization, but articulated this ideal even more forcefully than Tagore himself in this period. Aurobindo Ghose, like Tagore, a member of the Westernized Brahmo Samaj family, was an ardent lover of the country's ancient culture. India as the mother of Asia, Indo-Asian spirituality, as the cure for the world's ills: these cardinal points in Tagore's Asia doctrine were also voiced in Aurobindo's 1908 editorial, 'The Asiatic Role'. It was self-evident, he believed that India was the home of Asian civilization. "In former ages India was a sort of hermitage of thought and peace apart from the world....Her thoughts flashed

over Asia and created civilizations, her sons were the bearers of light to the peoples; philosophies based themselves upon stray fragments of her infinite wisdom; sciences arose from the waste of her intellectual production.\(^5\)

The second stage in Bengal's shift from religious to political Asianism is marked by the emergence of Chittaranjan Das, one of India's Chief nationalist leaders from 1917 to his death in 1925. Das and others attacked Tagore's literary ideas as overly influenced by Western models, and exalted in their stead the Hindu devotionalism of mediaeval Bengali poetry. An eloquent speaker and a sincere patriot, he quickly gained all India stature after his entry into politics in 1917. Even in his maiden political speech, he criticized Tagore, saying: "the whole of this anti-nation idea is unsubstantial - based upon a vague and nebulous conception of universal humanity. Each nation must develop its latest manhood as a nation, even it is possible to rouse within them the sense of true amity and brotherliness ....You cannot create universal humanity out of a vacuum". Das nevertheless agreed with Tagore that India must champion "the ideal of the East". Like the proponents of Eastern spirit and Western technique in Japan and China, he declared: "We must accept only what is consonant with the genius of our being and we must reject and utterly cast aside what is foreign to our soul."\(^6\)

6. C. R. Das, Bengal and the Bengalees - Presidential Address to the Bengal Provincial Conference, April, 1917.
While Tagore returned to Calcutta from his 1924 tour of China and Japan, Das seized the occasion to elaborate on his proposal to give political form to Pan-Asian sentiment. "We have all along urged in these columns the need for Asiatic Federation", he declared in an editorial in Forward, a popular daily newspaper. "There was always and has been a community of culture and civilization amongst the Asiatics. We look at life from the same point of view. We have supplied the religious teachers of the world". More important than the ties of ancient culture was the menace which threatens all alike, Western domination and racism, Tagore had declared the day he landed, "Asia must find her new voice". Two days later, Das echoed his call, and recommended giving it practical shape. "Let the blacks, browns and yellows of Asia meet together from time to time. Let them begin to share one another’s aspirations and sufferings. Let them unite in the search for the voice which Asia has lost. Asia must find her new voice".

Bengal’s Muslim intellectuals appear to have taken no special notice of Tagore’s East-Asian travels. This attitude seems clear enough from the writings of their greatest modern poet, Nazrul Islam. His career alone illustrates the economic and social difficulties holding back Muslims from the life of the mind more accessible to the wealthier Hindu Community. Nazrul acknowledged the greatness of Tagore, calling him his Guru and comparing himself to a Comet shooting away from the radiance of the sun (rabi, for Rabindranath), but he continued to rebel against the great Hindu leaders of his day. Nazrul

7. Forward, Asia must find her new voice, July 19, 1924.
accordingly did not see India's role in Asia as Tagore saw it, but as a Muslim would naturally see it, in terms of the Islamic world as a whole.  

The opposition between Eastern spirituality and modern Western secular and materialistic civilization, Tagore's constant refrain, was also Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's favourite themes. On the one hand, he wrote, "Western civilization is more mechanical than spiritual, more political than religious, more mindful of power than peace." On the other hand, "the peoples of the East do not organize themselves for power, but for perfection. They do not hate and kill, suspect and envy, but live and adore, love and worship". Therefore, he concluded, paraphrasing Tagore, "If Europe can reach the Eastern ideal of a people she will have a future more glorious than her past.... The chance for Europe after the war lies in her adoption of the ideals of the East, namely spiritual love, beauty and freedom, which are not diminished by sharing."

Unlike the British-Hindu symbiosis already established in the Bengali middle class, the cultural synthesis represented by the Nehru family was entirely secular. So, naturally was the form of nationalism which they embraced and propagated as leaders in the Indian National Congress of which Motilal was elected President in 1919 and 1928, and Jawaharlal in 1929, 1936 and 1937.

Nehru's life-long pursuit of political ties with other Asian countries, and particularly with China, so closely parallel seem a secular and political extension of the Bengali poet's hope for the revival of Eastern civilization.

Conversations with Tagore in the 1930s helped to deepen Nehru's attachment to the cause of Sino-Indian friendship. Nehru visited Santiniketan twice in the 1920s and in 1934 and decided to send his daughter Indira there for her secondary school education, liking specially Tagore's freedom from the influence of Orthodox British - directed in India. When Tagore inaugurated his Hall of Chinese Studies (Cheena Bhavan) in 1937, Nehru promised to come, but he fell ill and his daughter read out for him his message of warm support for the project. When Tagore died in 1941, at the age of 80, Nehru wrote from his prison cell a tribute to his memory, once again the idea of China came to his mind: "I have met many big people in various parts of the world. But I have no doubt in my mind the two biggest ... have been Gandhi and Tagore. It amazes me that India in spite of her present condition should produce these two mighty men in the course of one generation. And that also convinces me of the deep vitality of India and I am filled with hope, and the petty troubles and conflicts of the day seem very trivial and unimportant before this astonishing fact the continuity of the idea that is India from long ages past to the present day. China affects me in the same way. India and China - how can they perish?" 10

The Hindu thinker with whom Iqbal deserves the closest comparison is his equally great contemporary, Tagore. Both were poets of the first rank, who also wrote and lectured on religious and political philosophy. Both were deeply concerned with identifying and revitalizing the essential core of the cultural heritages for which they acted re-interpreters and spokesmen. Each believed in the possibility of a fruitful synthesis between Indian and modern European ideas and each opposed both the Xenophobic anti-Westernism and the superficial Westernization manifested by many of their countrymen and co-religionists. Tagore's poems were sung by all Bengali speakers whether Hindu or Muslim; Iqbal's were recited by Urdu and Persian speakers of both religions.

Quite apart from these similarities in the form or structure of their careers, is a close resemblance in the content of Tagore's and Iqbal's image of the West and its civilization. For Iqbal, as for Tagore, soulless materialism had corrupted Europe and rendered it unworthy.

"I tasted wine from the tavern of the West
Upon my life, I brought a headache". 11

In an image remarkably similar to that in Tagore's 1900 "Sunset of the Century", Iqbal wrote of World War I: "That is not the rosy dawn of a new age on the horizon of the West, but a torrent of blood. 12

It should not be surprising to learn that Iqbal made no published comment on Tagore's 'Message of the East' or on any of Tagore's ideas; for those two poet-philosophers, even though they seemed to see the same West, were inspired by radically different Easts - one Islamic, the other Hindu-Buddhist. This divergence in outlook was accentuated by the physical distance between their two provinces, which had differed greatly in their political and cultural development. On hearing of the Urdu poet's death in 1938, Tagore sent a generous message of appreciation. "The death of Sir Muhammad Iqbal creates a void in our literature, that like a mortal wound will take a very long time to heal. India, whose place today in the world is too narrow, can ill-afford to miss a poet whose poetry had such universal value".\(^{13}\)

Once, the Japanese intellectual Okakura visited India in order to know India and her people. He met Rabindranath and wanted his advice regarding his mission. Rabindranath told him, "If you want to know India, study Vivekananda. There is in him everything positive, nothing negative". In the book called 'Rolland and Tagore' written by Alexander Aronson, Rabindranath's opinion about Vivekananda's role can be found. According to the poet, Vivekananda's idea was practical. India was in such a condition, because she was in want of a healthy outlook. Vivekananda's philosophy of atheism, according to Rabindranath would be definitely beneficial for India.

\(^{13}\) Hay, Op. Cit., pp. 301-2, Quoted from an unidentified Original source in Bengali.
Not only his ideas, but his fluent prose style also impressed Tagore. He advised Dineshchandra Sen to go through Vivekananda's books called 'Farivrajak' and 'Prachya O Paschyata'.

What Rabindranath said about the evolution of Indian history, Vivekananda has repeated the same thing in his 'Historical evolution of India'. The latter said that not politics, but spiritualism was the motto of ancient India. Rabindranath said the same thing in his numerous articles as mentioned earlier.

Both of them identified men with God and both of them had given emphasis on the future role of the Sudras. Rabindranath, told about Sudra triumph in his 'Rather Rasi'. The message of 'Ebar Phirao More', which was written in 1910 by Tagore was echoed by Vivekananda in 'Bartaman Bharat'. What Vivekananda said in 'Prachya O Paschyata' was expressed by Rabindranath in some of his poems of Naivedya. (Poems 47, 48, 60, 63, 93, 94, 95, 96). Both of them thought that the only service to be

14. Udbodhan, Suvarnajayanti issue, Magh, 1354 B.S.
17. Ibid, 'E durdhya desh hote he mangalmoy', p. 49.
19. Ibid, 'Patita Bharate tumi Kon jagarane jagtile he Mahesh', p. 64.
22. Ibid, 'He Bharat, taba sikshya diyeche is dhan', p. 96.
done for the lower classes of India would be to give them education. But unfortunately, these two personalities never coincided with each other and never could they openly admire each others' qualities. The prime difference was that while Rabindranath was a poet and a philosopher, Vivekananda was a philosopher and a worker.

Let us now examine the criticisms that were raised against Rabindranath by the critics of his own time and of the later days. The first charge against Rabindra Literature was that of vagueness and vulgarity, which was first raised by Dwijendra Lal Roy. This phase of criticism continued from 1906 to 1912. Many other critics followed the footsteps of Dwijendra Lal Roy. We can make a list of these criticisms:


11. Devalaye Upadrav, Jatindramohan Bagchi, Baisakh 1317 B.S., Devalaya.
15. Sahitye Suruchi, Phanincranath Roy, Bhadra 1317 B.S., Archana.
17. Sahitya Chabuk, Pramatha Choudhury, Magh 1319 B.S., Sahitya.

This list has been collected from Gayatri Sengupta's 'Rabindranath O Dwijendra Lal Roy'.

The second aspect of dispute was of surrealism in Rabindra-Literature. It was from 1911 to 1916. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhaya has drawn a list of the writings regarding this dispute:

4. Loksikhak ba Jananayak, Radhakamal Mukhopadhaya, Jaistha, 1312 B.S., Prabasi.

At this time, men like Bipin Chandra Pal, Chittaranjan Das and others began to think that Bengali literature was being more and more westernized by the instigation of Rabindranath. They opined that Bengali literature should have its origin from Bengal only. Rabindranath used to call them 'Sanatana'. He thought that Western contact would benefit Bengali literature.26

The third dispute regarding Rabindra literature was of aristocracy and youthfulness. Sajanikanta Das and the group of writers belonging to 'Sanibarer Chithi' criticised Rabindranath from these two angles. Rabindranath gave his sharp reply in the following articles:

1. Sahitya Dharma - Sravan 1334 B.S.
2. Sahitye Navatwa - 23rd August, 1927.
4. Sahityasamalochana - 6th Chaitra, 1334.27

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27. Ibič, p. 7.
Rabindranath has been sometimes described as a bourgeois poet. Rabindranath himself was quite unaware of the way this foreign word was used. Once he wrote to Nandagopal Sen Gupta after reading his 'Bangla Sahityer Bhumika' "I am afraid to read your writings these days. A word has been used these days - bourgeois - the very things which are in discord with you or which are not up to your taste are called bourgeois by you..." 28

It was from 1935 that this attack of being bourgeois was launched upon Rabindranath. Deviprasad Chattopadhaya, Buddhadev Basu and some students including Sajjad Zaheer a leading exponent in the progressive Indian writers' Association began this attack. Ralph Fox, a British Communist who came from London at this time, objected to it and said that it would be a distortion of Marxist theory to describe Rabindranath as a bourgeois poet. Bhupendranath Dutta, who had met Lenin in the USSR regrets that Rabindranath was not enough bourgeois. According to him Rabindranath was too feudal. On the other hand, Buddhadev Basu said that Rabindranath was the highest symbol of the bourgeois. It is very surprising that Rabindranath was also attacked for his love for Upanishad as a symbol of bourgeoisie by Binoy Ghosh. It was after the death of Rabindranath, that Amal Hom charged back these Marxist attacks in his article 'Kerani Rabindranath'. "These critics are pronouncing some Marxist dictums and are totally confused between Illusion and Reality, they have declared that Rabindranath is bourgeois, so..." 28. Ibid, p. 15.
he is back number...". He has cited examples from 'Ebar chirao more' and from stories of Galpaguchha that how he had sympathised with the ordinary clerks and the lower middle class people.29

It was from the late 1940s that some Marxist historians began to feel the urge of analysing the Bengal Renaissance from a new point of view. "Rabindra Gupta" a pseudonym for an eminent communist leader, wrote in 1949 that the historical process which had been enlivened by Ram Mohan - Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath was not a progressive process; rather it was the reverse process. He also says that they had invited Western elitist intrusion.30 But almost all other Marxist historians discarded this theory of Rabindra Gupta. Others emphasised that it was not a proper Marxist analysis, rather it was a distortion of Marxian ideas. So, the theory of Rabindra Gupta was nipped in the bud.31

But some of the revolutionary Marxists32 and even C. P. (M-L) followers cherish the idea of Rabindra Gupta even to this day.33

According to Susobhan Sarkar the Bengal Renaissance had two streams - the Westernist stream and the revivalist stream. He says - "In the history of the Bengal Renaissance, I rank the

29. Ibid, pp. 34-35.
33. Various articles published in 'Frontier' and 'Kalpurush'.

contribution of westernism higher than that of traditionalism.\textsuperscript{34} Again, Amales Tripathi thinks that the creativity of the Bengal Renaissance lay dormant in her traditions.\textsuperscript{35} According to Sumit Sarkar the Renaissance movement in Bengal was an imitation of the west. Let us see the opinion of Narahari Kaviraj also. Vidyasagar was modern in his approach, but he was reverent towards India's traditional values. Bankimchandra and Vivekananda were in favour of Hindu revivalist stream, but they were not against modernity. But the best synthesis of tradition and modernity was found in Rabindranath.\textsuperscript{36} This theory has been emphasised by Sushil Jana in his essay called \textit{Rabindranather dristite Navalagaran}.\textsuperscript{37}

Rabindranath's writings have been clearly divided into traditionalist and modernist phases, his thought into traditional and liberal streams. At one level, there were contradictions in Rabindranath, but at another level, and looked at through the years too, there was a consistency in his thought. Rabindranath's problem was that he passionately loved his country, yet he did not belong to its orthodoxies. His problem was that he admired Western liberal values, he wished to belong to the world, yet he felt an acute humiliation in the British presence in India. These contradictions which came out of his circumstances created an ambivalence in Rabindranath which shaped his thinking. If Rabindranath supported caste at certain times, he did it

\textsuperscript{34} Susobhan Sarkar, \textit{Bengal Renaissance and other Essays}, (1970), pp. 18-19.
\textsuperscript{36} Kaviraj, \textit{Op. Cit.}, p. 215
partly because he felt uncertain and to what was best for his society, to justify it against the forces of alienation created by the British presence in India. This is why even if we divide Rabindranath into compartments, we find him laying aside what he called the trivialities of Hindu custom on the one hand, and almost in the same breath trying to find meaning in them. Rabindranath knew definitely that caste had created division within Indian society just as much as English education had done. But in his love for his country, in his eagerness to find something to admire in the customs from the past, he upheld even the custom of Sati daha because he admired the few who were dying for a passion. In a very real sense, Rabindranath was like his creation, 'Gora' who was conforming out of a compulsive devotion to the society he thought he was born into, and not always out of conviction. The conflict was too easily resolved, because the contrary conviction was there throughout. This what makes it possible to see Rabindranath beyond these contradictions, to see him in his consistencies and to view him as a whole. 38

Rabindranath himself, when enquired gave two very distinct replies about his quality and failing:

1. What do you think is your best quality?
   Inconsistency.

2. What do you think, is your greatest failing?

The same.

These confessions are found in one autograph book.39

Unfortunately Rabindranath could not leave the same
impression as a politician and a social reformer as he could
as an educationist and as an aesthetic thinker. In that way
Gandhiji, Jawaharlal Nehru or Vivekananda were more successful.
Rabindranath, throughout his life was a searcher of aesthetics.
Over and above he was a humanist - a true lover of man, which
has also given him a high pedestal. But we cannot size up his
personality as a politician or as a political leader, because
as an aesthetic thinker his thoughts always clashed with anything
crude or vulgar. Politics is always thorny and diplomacy does
not go in with aesthetics; so Rabindranath's failure as a
politician can easily be surmised. As a social reformer also, he
does not come in the same category with Gandhiji, Vivekananda
or Nehru. All of them gave thought for the country and
Rabindranath took much labour in doing numerous works of social
benefits, including his school at Santiniketan - but the fact
is, while the formers were genuine workers, Rabindranath remained
essentially as an utopian thinker. His model school at
Santiniketan gave much impetus to the world audience, but today
in the 20th century, it has no longer such as big appeal which
it used to have in his days. As an educationist, his ideas were
definitely robust, but he could not fully materialize his ideas

for short of funds and for lack of co-operation from other quarters. In the village-rehabilitation programme also, his own 'blue blood' clashed with the rustic realities. As a messanger of East-West reconciliation, Rabindranath was partly successful. His ideas were mostly misunderstood, and sometimes created severe reaction in countries like China and America. Though, Rabindranath could not be wholly successful as a politician, or as a social reformer, his name shines even to this day as a poet, a philosopher and a humanist of all times.