CHAPTER XII : TAGORE

1. Reality and Life

Tagore is a philosopher whom it is not difficult to classify. In his ideas he is very near to the illustrious contemporaries, Tolstoy and Gandhi. Like them he is a humanist to the core but cast in the mould of a poet. He has a strong passion for art. Aurobindo derived his conception of human unity from contemplation or pure thought. But Tagore's forte is emotion and not introspection. He is more an artist than a dialectician and has expressed himself mainly through colourful poetry which naturally made a wider public appeal than pure philosophy. This medium makes him deeply human. For him life is not a prison to be escaped; it is to be lived and enjoyed in its largest relations and affinities.

"Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight." ¹

But these bonds do not tie him down to a static reality. The earth for him is an eternal flux of change where life is in tune with the rest of universe.

"The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers." ²

Tagore's metaphysics has a close affinity with that of Bergson. The flight of the ducks in the poem 'Balaka' symbolises a vibration of life pulsating all round which recalls the surge of the élan vital. Like Bergson again, Tagore sees that Spirit is struggling unceasingly to break the shell of matter and burst out in a sweep of creative force. Thus in Nirjharbon Swapnabhanga (Awakening of the Mountain Spring):

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1. Geetanjali No 73, Macmillan and Co Ltd. London 1919
2. Ibid. No 69.
"I know not what stirs my life to-day; 
I hear the surge of the ocean from afar. 
Ah, I feel a dark prison around me, 
I must hit and hit and knock it down, 
What a melody the bird has sung to-day! 
And what a piercing light is come!"

This dynamic spirituality is the essence of Tagore's humanism. 
Life is a ceaseless flow towards the Spirit which is implicit in 
the vast ocean of humanity.

2. Human Equality

Like all other philosophers of modern India Tagore began his 
public life as a staunch nationalist and revivalist. He threw 
himself headlong in the Swadeshi movement during the days of the 
partition of Bengal. He felt the necessity of political freedom 
in order to liberate humanity from suffering and hence he immor- 
talized the revival of Maratha, Sikh and Rajput nationalism in his 
ballet poems (Katha O Kahini). But soon he discovered that his 
nationalism was not of the common variety. He found that the real 
problem of India was her social degradation wrought by poverty, 
ignorance and caste rules.

"Oh my cursed Motherland....... 
Those whom you have deprived of human rights, 
Kept standing before you yet did not have your lap for them, 
In degradation you shall be equal made."¹

When India was fighting for political liberty Tagore saw that 
real emancipation will never come if she builds upon the 
quicksand of social slavery. Thus he writes in Ebar Phireo More
(Take Me Back from the Ivory Tower):

"The dumb millions who stand there downcast, the sorrow of centuries 
written on their face, who transmit the burden of their 
miseries to their sons, never blame anybody, neither man

¹ Geetanjali (Bengali)
nor God, who know not where to seek redress,.............
In those mouths dull, dark and dumb, I have to give voice; in
those tired, dry and broken hearts I must raise the thrill of hope."

Indian nationalists showed a woeful indifference towards these
basic needs. And so Tagore recoiled from politics and devoted
himself to the work of education and social uplift of his people
through the institutions of Santiniketan and Sriniketan.

It is significant that Tagore realized much earlier than many
firebrand Indian nationalists the incipient class differences
which have rent society into twain.

"All over the earth, since the beginning of history, we
find that one class of men prosper at the expense of another class.
They establish their class domination upon the slavery of the other
class. For a long time man has been doing this. Still, I must say
that this is not human. Man's greatness cannot endure on his depen-
dence upon slaves. This is injurious not only to the slaves, this
also destroys the masters too. Those whom we insult and trample under
foot are the hardest obstacles to our steps forward."¹

Tagore makes the same observations in Russian Chithi (Letters
from Russia). He welcomes the solidarity which the poor and the
oppressed are forging among themselves. He was struck by the success
of Russia in her campaigns against illiteracy, poverty, frustration
and racial servitude. He agrees that the cultivator and not the land-
lord is the real owner of land, that land to be productive must be
brought under collective farming. But he is against uprooting the
human instinct of enjoyment by force as the Soviet state is doing. He
wants property to remain but would curb its enjoyments in the interests
of society.² The only solution between the claims of individual and
society is cooperation, i.e., the cooperative system in every form
of economic enterprise.³

1. Tagore on Gandhi 1933, Mahatma Gandhi (Bengali), Viswa Bharati, p.32
2. Russian Chithi (Bengali), Viswa Bharati, p.48
3. Ibid. p.177
In the USSR Tagore found a light in darkness to solve India's age-old problem of social inequality.

3. Nationalism

Tagore is a lover of that kind of nationalism which helps a people to stand on their feet and to attain freedom from tyranny and exploitation. His nationalism is the antipode of the Hegelian variety preaching supremacy of the world-historical nation and generating a feeling of hatred towards the weaker people. Society as such has no ulterior purpose, the development of human ideals in cooperation with one another. A nation, on the contrary, is nothing but the political and economic organization which is intended to keep politically inferior people in bondage. "A nation, in the sense of the economic and political union of a people is that aspect which a whole population assume when organized for a mechanical purpose."¹ It is "the organized self-interest of a whole people where it is least human and least spiritual."² The consciousness of national feeling develops only when the living bonds of society are breaking up and giving place to merely mechanical organization. The West is under the grip of this type of nationalism. It has forged a tremendous machine of greed and power. The natural thread of morality which holds society together is snapping and the moral man is giving way to professional man.

The nations of the West are trimming their minds, regulating their thoughts, manufacturing their feelings and welding themselves into one uniform mass through their governments. The so-nations like India and China have been victims of their greed. Western nations have become a terror to humanity and to themselves. This organization of politics and commerce whose other name is the Nation is like a father who has become a gambler. The gambler risks his family for chances of game. The nation risks the community for chances of

2. Ibid. p.15
success. A nation's wisdom lies in distrust. It lives in perpetual fear of others. Fear brings out all that is base in man. Jealousy, theft, robbery and lies become virtues for a nation.

This accounts for the chronic maladies with which society is infected to-day. The only reason for anarchist movements is that "power has become too abstract — it is a scientific product made in the political laboratory of the nation through the dissolution of personal humanity". As to the reason for the endless economic war between capital and labour: "What, but that the wealth-producing mechanism is incessantly growing into vast stature, out of proportion to all other needs of society, — and the full reality of man is more and more crushed under its weight?"

The West has developed its weapon but has lost its soul. The real power is not in the weapons but in the man who wields them, in the soul. The West has borrowed from science its motto of 'survival of the fittest' which means 'help yourself and never heed what it costs to others'. It ignores to its own cost the fact that men are intimately closely knit together and that when you strike others the blow recoils on yourself.

The history of Europe is not merely a history of conflict for power and preparation for scientific development. During the mediaeval period, the natural man tried to reconcile the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. Both the material and spiritual forces acted strongly upon her nature. Europe owes all her greatness to that period of moral discipline. Then came the age of intellect. Intellect is an impersonal abstraction. At this stage man attains power and freedom in the material world. He attains the rapidity of pace but inspite of all these advantages the moral man lags behind because intellect does not deal with whole reality but only with the laws of things which are impersonal. "Thus man with his mental and material power far outgrowing his moral strength is like an exaggerated giraffe.

1. Ibid, p.11 2. Ibid, p.11
whose head has suddenly shot up miles away from the rest of him, making normal communications difficult to establish.  

Nationalism is sweeping like an epidemic over the West. Unlike India Western countries have no problem of social adjustment. Their only problem is to overcome obstacles in their physical surroundings or the menace of their powerful neighbours. Hence they have organized power for defence and aggression. Thus in the West the nations have become powerful at the cost of higher social life. National feeling has converted a living people into an automaton led by the power of greed.

Some would say that the exploited people should form themselves into nations and resist encroachment. But that is no remedy. "An endless bull-fight of politics" is no remedy against exploitation. Tagore is sure that this reckless career of the machine is bound to break into a crash. "Whenever Power removes all checks from its path to make its career easy, it triumphantly rides into its ultimate crash of death. Its moral brake becomes slacker everyday without its knowing it, and its slippery path of ease becomes its path of doom."

Tagore is confident that people who are politically weak, who are not nations shall live. Man will be reborn in the freedom of his individuality. "I assert that man's world is a moral world not because we blindly agree to believe it but because it is so in truth which would be dangerous for us to ignore. And this moral nature of man cannot be divided into convenient compartments for its preservation."

4. Bondage and Freedom

Nationalism militates with the spirit of the West. For, Europe too has spiritual strength which is the fountainhead of her creative art and literature, her great quest for knowledge, her deep love for freedom. The nation is mechanical, but the Spirit is creative, it lives in freedom. "While the Spirit of the West marches under its

1. Ibid.p.35 2. Ibid.p.22 3. Ibid.p.32f
banner of freedom, the Nation of the West forges it iron chains of
organization which are the most relentless and unbreakable that
have ever been manufactured in the whole history of man." It
obstructs the free flow of the inner life of the people and exploits
it for the augmentation of its own power. "In the so-called free
countries the majority of the people are not free, they, driven by
the minority to a goal which is not even known to them. This becomes
possible only because people do not acknowledge moral and spiritual
freedom as their object." This centralization of power is multiplying
fast and the cry of the oppressed spirit of man is in the air which
struggles to free itself from its grip.

Political freedom does not give any freedom unless the mind
is free. "Those of us in India who have come under the delusion
that mere political freedom will make us free have accepted their
lessons from the West as the gospel truth and lost faith in
humanity." To-day Europe has lost her soul in the mad pursuit of
wealth and power. She is a prisoner of her own vanity:

"Prisoner, tell me who was it that wrought this unbreakable chain?"

"It was I," said the prisoner, "who forged this chain very carefully.
I thought my invincible power would hold the world captive
living me in a freedom undisturbed. Thus night and day I worked
at the chain with huge fires and cruel hard strokes. Then at
last the work was done and the links were complete and
unbreakable, I found that it held me in its grip."

Hence, with all his praise for Russia Tagore did not approve
of her regulation of the mind. He did not approve of the suppression
of opinion. He observed: "With the education system they have made
a mould. But mankind cast in a mould can never last. If the truth
of a living mind is not adjusted with the truth of education then
either the mould will break one day or the human mind will be
stultified or it will be converted into a marionette." Dictatorship

1. Ibid.p.24f 2. Ibid.p.121 3. Ibid.p.123
4. Geetanjali, No.31
5. Russian Chithi, p.6
spoils both the ruler and the ruled. Freedom is possible only through a true synthesis of the individual and the society.

The freedom which Tagore seeks for his country and for his people is the freedom of the mind and of the soul:
"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken into fragments by narrow domestic walls; Where words come out from the depth of truth; Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action -
Into that heaven of man's freedom, my father, let my country awake." ¹

5. Future : Japan and U.S.A.

Europe is undoubtedly great. But she has stopped half-way in her journey because of her pride of power and greed of possession. Her nationalism is poisoning the fountainhead of humanity. It has infected the East. Eastern Asia which was pursuing its own path, evolving its own civilization based upon the deeper relations of humanity is overtaken by Western nationalism. In this crisis Tagore puts faith on two quarters, on Japan in the East and on USA in the West.

Japan is not a mere replica of the West. She does not indulge in crude display of power and wealth. Everywhere in Japan there are emblems of love and beauty. She has shown her genius not by acquirement but by creation, not by dominating nature from outside but by realizing it in her own life. Hence she has a mission to fulfil.

¹ Geetanjali, No.35
"She must infuse the sap of a fuller humanity into the heart of modern civilization." But Tagore has his fears about Japan. He is afraid that from the rude pressure of political ideals of the West she may lose her own. He warns Japan that her acquiring of modern weapons should not go beyond the need of self-preservation. "My brother, when the red light of conflagration sends up its crackle of laughter to the stars, keep your faith upon those stars and not upon the fire of destruction."  

Japan did not heed and fell grovelling in the dust.

America is a projection of the Western civilization. But while Europe has grown old America is still young and is making experiments. As yet she has come to no conclusion. But in future she will contribute something to the ideal of human unity. "America is destined to justify Western civilization to the East. Europe has lost faith in humanity and has become distrustful and sickly. America, on the other hand, is not pessimistic or blase'."

After thirty-six years of his writing Tagore's words are still a cry in the wilderness. In his expectation that America is the land of future progress Tagore comes close to Hegel. Of course, the outlook of Tagore differs basically from that of the Western philosopher. Hegel thought that in the ages that lie ahead the burden of world's history will reveal itself in America. With her vast economic resources, mechanical power and atomic weapons, she really seems to be playing the role of a world-historical nation. But the fulfilment of Hegel's prophecy is the burial of Tagore's hopes. Is it through the travail of another world war and laborious international reconstruction after that, that humanity will step forwards towards the goal of spiritual unity as visualised by Tagore?

1. Nationalism, p. 68  
2. Ibid. p. 92  
3. Ibid, p. 103. Compare Goethe who wrote in a poem in 1837:
America, thou art more fortunate than our old continent, thou hast no ruined castles, and no ancient stones. No useless memories, no vain feuds of the past disturb thee from living in the present.
Make happy use of the present. And should any children start to write poetry, may a kind Providence preserve them from stories of the romantic past.
6. Doctrine of Spirit

Oriental institutions are built upon a deeper reality than political. That is why they have a longer longevity. While the political civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome lie dead and buried, the civilization whose basis is society and the spiritual ideal is still alive in China and India. There is the complaint that the East is static, it does not move; but the West is dynamic, it moves fast. It must be remembered that speed and movement are not the criteria of progress. "If the office cannot wait, or the buying and selling, or the craving for excitement, love waits and beauty and the wisdom of suffering and the fruits of patient devotion and reverent meekness of simple faith. And thus shall wait the East till her time comes."¹

The East has viewed politics and business in the larger framework of life. The West and the modern man cultivate the falsehood that business is business and politics is politics. "We must know that man's business has to be more than mere business and so should be his war and politics."² If man is to be saved from the madness of national selfishness, pride and greed which are fast leading to a suicidal conflagration "man will have to exert all his power of love and clarity of vision to make another great moral adjustment which will comprehend the whole world of men and not merely the fractional groups, nationality."³

"Some of you may say that such a doctrine of spirit has been in its death throes for over a century and is now moribund; that we have nothing to rely upon but external forces and material foundations. But I say, on my part, that your doctrine was obsolete long ago. It was exploded in the springtime of life, when mere size was swept off the face of the world and was replaced by man, brought naked into the heart of creation, man with his helpless body, but with his indomitable mind and spirit."⁴

¹. Ibid. p. 64f.  ². Ibid. p. 85  ³. Ibid. p. 102  ⁴. Religion of an Artist, - in Contemporary Indian Philosophy, Ed. by S. Radhakrishnan and J. H. Muirhead, pp. 28f.
Life based on mere science has its glamour which attracts people as insects are drawn to fire. The effect of such life is fatal to man's nature. It not only deadens his moral sympathy but also his intellectual sympathy which is necessary of different races. At the time of her making, Europe had never to face the recurrent incursion of new races. Hence it easily constituted itself into national states. Europe is one country made into many. India, on the contrary, was naturally many, yet adventitiously one. She had to absorb new races coming again and again on her soil into a vast social organism. Accordingly, she suffered from the looseness of diversity and feebleness of unity. "The tie has been as loose as possible, yet as close as the circumstances permitted. This has produced something like a United States of a social federation, whose common name is Hinduism."¹

But Europe's solution of race problem was different. She colonised America and Australia after exterminating the original settlers. Therefore, she has shut the doors there against foreigners, or has accepted them as menials.

Thus India has shown her enormous capacity of Spirit to adjust different races within one body. Through the caste system she evolved a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together. As her problem was the problem of the world in miniature she has offered a model to the world with her solution as to how a synthesis of races and nationalities may be achieved.²

But while recognising difference and seeking unity in diversity, "she has made grave errors in setting up the boundary walls too rigidly between races in perpetuating in her classifications the results of inferiority; often she has crippled her children's mind and narrowed their lives in order to füt them into her social forms."³ She has ignored the law of mutation which is the law of life. India is to make amends for this mistake and regain her spiritual vitality.

1. Nationalism, p. 115
2. 'Bharat-tirtha' in Geetanjali (Bengali)
3. Nationalism, p. 5
So Tagore, with all his praise for Russia and his hopes on Japan and the USA, looks back again to India of hoary antiquity, loaded with heaps of dust and dirt accumulated through centuries, who has to purge herself of these accretions by means of a spiritual revolution. He warns his countrymen again, again not to imitate the West, not to seek to pay evil with evil, not to forget her own and follow other peoples' history. "When we show nails and teeth we thereby only salute those who fight with their tooth and nail. Scorn them, do not imitate." \(^1\) "We must show those who are over us that we have in ourselves the strength of moral power, the power to suffer for truth." \(^2\)

Hence Tagore's testament to the country is:

"Be not ashamed, my brothers, to stand before the proud and the powerful,
With your white robe of simpleness
Let your crown be humility, your freedom the freedom of the soul." \(^3\)

And there was a man to carry the testament and the message of soul.

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1. Russian Chithi (Bengali), p. 135
2. Rationalism, p. 113
3. The Sunset of the Century, - in Nationalism