

Chapter 4

Rabindranath Tagore

A. Early Years and Development (Upto 1890)

The Tagores in Calcutta had retained an exclusive position from the very beginning. They were “twice separated from the Hindu fold by blood and land” (Mukherjee, D. P. 5). A leading Indian merchant of his generation, the poet’s grandfather Dwarakanath (1794-1846) was a very rich man. Along with Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), his friend and one of the well known contemporary social and religious reformers, Dwarakanath participated with a leading role in the movements for promotion of higher education that was to invite renaissance. He cared little for social prejudices and visited England twice and it paved the way for the “infiltration of English manners, etiquette, furniture, western music and musical instruments like the organ, the flute etc. into the Tagore household” (Mukhopadhyay, P. K. 19). His son and the poet’s father, Debendranath (1817-1905), however, was in contrast, a man of high Hindu tradition of the *Upanishadas*, who gave “leadership to the Brahmo Samaj, a platform of non-conformist movement for the reform of Hindu orthodoxy, initiated by Rammohun”(Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, 3). In order to resist the threatening wave of alienation through conversion into Christianity, which was the sole aim of the missionaries, Debendranath felt the need to arouse the people of Bengal with a strong awareness of their cultural heritage, and through the pages of his *Tattvabodhini patrika* (1843), “the Bengali translations of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishadas* for the first time were serialized’ (Poddar 7). In order to formulate a cultural resistance, *Tattvabodhini* also

participated in social issues and exposed the conspiracy of the Missionaries and the indigo planters or emphasized the necessity of women emancipation through education. On the whole, as Bipin Chandra Pal puts it, Debendranath and his movement “helped to create a new conceit of the superiority of Indian thought and culture to Christian faith and theology” (34).

It was in this environment of sprouting patriotism and national pride that Rabindranath Tagore was born and brought up. In Chapter 21 (Patriotism) of *My Reminiscences*, Tagore gave a lively account of it:

Looked at from outside, our family appears to have accepted many foreign customs, but at its heart flames a national pride that has never flickered. The general regard my father had for his country, he never forsook through all vicissitudes of his life, and in his descendants it took shape as a strong patriotic feeling. Such however, was by no means characteristic of the time of which I am writing. Our educated men were then keeping at arm’s length both the language and thought of their native land. My elder brothers had, nevertheless, always cultivated Bengali literature. On one occasion when some new connection by marriage wrote my father a letter in English, it was promptly returned to the writer. (133)

This unique achievement of an open and free space in the household, willing enough on the one hand to absorb the signals of the widening horizon of knowledge and human achievements from Europe and the West, and careful enough on the other, to preserve and adhere to the historic continuity of India’s cultural inheritance, enriched and diversified from the Upanishadic times through endless blend and endless regeneration, – contributed to the making of Rabindranath Tagore. In his mature years also he describes himself with the metaphor of the bird with two nests, one on each side of the world.

The Hindu Mela (1867) also provided its shaping influence on Tagore. In fact, it was the first platform from which national and patriotic thoughts sprang up formally to greet and permeate Bengal. The following lines offer an account of this fair in detail:

In order to organize an assembly and to ensure the emancipation of the enriched motherland with active support from her own children, the Chaitra Mela was inaugurated on Chaitra Sankranti (12th April, 1867), the last day of a Bengali calendar, in Belgachia villa, close to Calcutta. Every year it was organized on the same date in one of such gardens, and the main objective was to arrange a show of indigenous crafts, sports and gymnastics. . . . In diverse ways, the Mela is indebted to the Jorasanko Tagore family. For the first three years Ganendranath was its secretary and Nabagopal supported him as assistant secretary.

[Bandyopadhyay, Brajendranath. *Biswabharati journal*: 1945, 277]

In 1867, Tagore had been just a little boy of six years. Later he writes about it in *My Reminiscences*:

The Hindu Mela was an annual fair, which had been instituted with the assistance of our family. Babu Nabagopal Mitra was appointed its manager. It was perhaps the first occasion dedicated to serving all India as our country. My second brother's popular national anthem, 'Bharater Joya' (the Triumph of India) was composed for the Mela. The singing of songs glorifying the motherland, the recitation of poems about love for the country, the exhibition of indigenous arts and crafts and the encouragement of national talent and skill were the features of this Mela. (134)

It is under this active influence of Hindu Mela that he wrote his first nationalistic poem, '*Hindu Melar Upahar*' (the Gift of the Hindu Mela). Later in *My reminiscences* he recapitulates about this poem:

On the occasion of Lord Cruzan's Delhi durbar I wrote an essay, but at the time of Lord Lytton's it was a poem. The British government of those days feared the Russians, it is true, but not the pen of a fifteen-year-old poet. So although my poem lacked none of the fire appropriate to my age, there was no sign of consternation in the ranks of the authorities from commander-in-chief down to commissioner of police. Nor did any letter to the Times allude to apathy among the men on the spot in dealing with such impudence and go on in tones of sorrow more than anger to predict the downfall of British Empire. (134)

Not only the young poet's immature poem, but the entire Hindu Mela, could not create any sort of awe or anxiety for the British. But that does not confirm the failure of the enterprise. In its second annual meet, as Srimanta Kumar Jana shows from the annals of Hindu Mela (*Hindu Melar Itibritiya*, in Bengali) by J.C. Bagal, Ganendranath himself explained the objectives of the fair in unambiguous words:

The first objective of the fair is to assemble together the Hindus. Though at the moment it is not visible as to what profit and benefit is to be derived from this harmonizing effort, no body perhaps is in doubt about the need of such enterprise. A general meet at one common place, on one fixed day may yield many useful results like accomplishment of great works, a lift in spirit and enthusiasm and blossom of national feeling. The more people get congregated the more enhanced gets the sense of unity and conformity. This get together is indeed neither for any religious or ritualistic exclusivity, nor for any recreation or amusement; it is

arranged solely to assemble people together, to ensure the emancipation of India, the mother and the mother land.

There is a second objective too, that is the spread of the principle of self-reliance. It is a noble quality found among the English. We have to imitate that. To begin a great work on self effort, to accomplish it with confidence – this is self-reliance. That is one demerit in India. We seek help of the great men and rulers in every simple matter. This is shameful. Why? Are we not human beings after all? What is a matter of greater ignominy than to be a man and to depend perpetually on other's assistance? Therefore, it is the other aim of the fair to establish and ensure this self esteem and confidence among the people of India. (49)

He was prophetic. Hindu Mela indeed, provided a significant impetus to the greater task of making of the nation and no less to the making of Tagore as well.

Besides Hindu Mela, the influence of another political association engrossed Tagore's mind in his growing years, and this is the Sanjibani Sabha. Not so much effective in its political impact as the Hindu Mela had been, it still warmed the spirit of the poet and his friends with radiant bubbles of patriotic fervour. Tagore once again remembers its thrill in the pages of his memoir:

It held its sittings in a tumble-down building in an obscure Calcutta lane. The proceedings were shrouded in mystery. This was its only claim to inspire awe, for there was nothing in our deliberations or doings of which government or people need have been afraid. The rest of our family had no idea where we spent our afternoons. Our front door would be locked, the meeting room in darkness, the watch word a Vedic mantra, our talk in whispers. These alone provided us with enough of a thrill, and we wanted nothing more. Though a mere child, I was also a

member. We surrounded ourselves with such an atmosphere of hot air that we seemed constantly to be floating aloft on bubbles of speculation. We showed no bashfulness, diffidence or fear; our main object was to bask in the heat of our own ardour. (*My Reminiscences*, 134-35)

Little could he know then that the bubbles of speculation would soon be facing the challenge of reality. The thrill, enjoyed earlier, did never appear as a road-block when responding to the call of the hour, the poet jumped into real activities. Potentials accumulated in the spiritual domain, provided necessary ground, upon which the challenge of the world of activity was to be duly answered.

Another person, immensely influencing and preparing the world of the little poet in the family circle was Jyotirindranath Tagore, the fifth brother whom lovingly he used to call Jyotidada. A boiling enthusiasm, wild and boisterous in many folds, finding no easy outlet in the existing reign of terror under the British misrule, got in him the counter struggle of a nationalist rebel, some times dragged to the point of eccentricity but never yielding. He had been in the Sanjibani Sabha. Then he began to “busy himself with designing a costume for all India” which finally hit upon the compromise of a pair of trousers, “decorated with the addition of a false dhoti-fold in front and behind”. An even more fearsome thing resulted from the combination of turban and sola-topee. “No person of ordinary courage”, Tagore declares affectionately in *My Reminiscences*, “could have dared to wear it, but my brother unflinchingly wore the complete outfit in broad day light....There may be many a brave Indian ready to die for his country, but there are few, I am certain, who ever for the good of the nation will walk in the streets in such pan-Indian garb” (136-37).

The next goal was to manufacture an indigenous match box. After many experiments, the mission succeeded with a simple defect that “our matches would not burn unless there was a light handy to encourage them”, “If they only could have absolved”, the

poet recalls later in the same essay, “some of the patriotic spirit which conceived them, they might have been marketable even today”.

After similar experiments and results in the textile project, Jyotirindranath finally purchased a steel hulk, which in due course of time was filled not only with engines and cabins but with loss and ruin too. The mission this time was to compete with the British Flotilla Company in the business of running a steamer line:

A golden age dawned between Khulna and Barisal: not only were the passengers carried free of charge, but they were offered light refreshments gratis! Then a band of volunteers formed up who, with flags and patriotic songs, marched the passengers in procession to the Indian line of steamers. So while there was no dearth of passengers, every other kind of want began to multiply apace.

(Ibid., 242)

The steamer *Swadeshi*, finally had fouled the Howrah bridge and sunk but the indelible stamp it left upon the collective spiritual domain nourished and enriched it for many years to come. “These uncalculating, unbusinesslike spirits”, Tagore comments later with the full maturity of advanced years,

sow and water the country’s field of business with their activities. Though the flood subsides as rapidly as it comes, it leaves fertilizing silt behind to enrich the soil. When the time for reaping arrives no one thinks of these pioneers;...Others certainly gained – the passengers with free refreshments, the staff who showed no sign of starvation – but it was my brother who gained most, by facing his ruin so valiantly. (Ibid., 243)

The soil enriched with such leading family responses, ‘made ready even before the coming of challenge’, prepared Tagore¹ not only for his task of mythologizing and

consolidating the spiritual domain of the nation, but it also imparted to him the lessons, how to bear ruin valiantly, defying crisis in the real world of day to day activity. He had many relatives living together in Jorasanko, but he grew up alone, amid the servants. He was put in a school, but he took more interest in teaching himself and the iron railings of his veranda which had been his pupils. From behind the curtain, someone had been giving directions and the player unknowingly followed His signs. Little did he know that the Potter by all these, had been busy in making His rough clay model, which time, in due course was to decorate, polish, test and burn in its furnace of diverse experiences.

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B. In the World of Men: Tagore's Arrival in the Spiritual Domain of Nationalism

It is an insult to his humanity if man fails to invoke in his mind a definite image of his own ideal self, of his ideal environment which it is his mission externally to reproduce. It is the highest privilege of man to be able to live in his own creation. His country is not his by mere accident of birth, he must richly and intimately transform it into his own, make it a personal reality. And what is more, man is not truly himself if his personality has not been fashioned by him according to some mental picture of perfection which he has within. His piled up wealth, his puffed up power can never save him from innate insignificance if he has not been able to blend all his elements into a dynamic unity of presentation.

[Das Gupta, 2006: *Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words*, 52]

The culturally enriched family background and unique blend of modernity with tradition that Tagore inherited as family heritage, helped him no doubt, but the immediate task at hand was to avail “a dynamic unity”, “to invoke a definite image”, both of the self and the country, and to “make it a personal reality” (ibid, 53). It was decided in the family that, he should be sent to England, and accordingly on September 20, 1878, Rabindranath boarded the ship, *S.S. Poona*, escorted by his second elder brother Satyendranath. But England failed miserably to touch the height of expectation in the mind of the young visionary. The second letter from *Europe Prabasisir Patra* (Letters from Europe) recalls:

Before coming to England, I had imagined like a fool that this small island would be filled with Gladstone's oratory, Max Muller's explications of the Vedas, Tyndall's scientific theories, Carlyle's deep thoughts and Bain's Philosophy. I

suppose I was lucky to be disappointed. Just like anywhere else, women here are preoccupied with fashions, men with their jobs, and politics is a source of great excitement.

(Das Gupta, 2006: 55)

So was London, that betrayed the imagination of the young poet with its dismal look: “Such a dismal city I had never seen before, smoky, foggy and wet, and everyone jostling and in a hurry....It seemed as if Nature wore a perpetual frown, the sky was turbid and the light of the day lacked luster like a dead man’s eye” (Kripalani 79). Before leaving London in his second visit, in 1891, Tagore wrote in a letter to his niece Indira Devi:

After I have come here I do feel that wretched helpless India is truly my mother. She does not have so much power or splendour as England, but she loves us. Whatever little love, whatever little happiness I have known in my life rest on her lap. The charm and glitter of this place will never be able to bewitch me, how I wish to return to her lap. If I could, residing in one of her neglected corners and remaining totally unknown to the entire civilized world, gather love like a bee overflowing its hive with honey, I would ask for nothing else. (Poddar 42)

The impetus was gathered in the first visit (1878), when he first experienced, though from a distance, English racial animosity. In a letter sent from England for the readers of *Bharati*, the family run magazine, he wrote even then:

Hundreds of Johns and Joneses and Thomases are found swarming the lanes and by-lanes of this city, whose mothers and fathers and sisters are known to none but to a butcher, a tailor or a coal porter. But the moment they set their foot on any locality in India, their names become a topic of everybody’s discourse. The roads through which they pass whip in hand (which understandably is used not merely

for the horse), become immediately desolate, all the passersby taking themselves off in a frantic hurry. At their slightest gesticulation trembles the thrones of an Indian king....The fact is, you know, whenever the small is installed in high positions, it makes an ostentatious parade of its highness by exhibiting its red eyes or expanded chest. (ibid, 25)

Obviously, British imperialism and its exploiting design was getting exposed to the poet, more so, when he went to the House of Commons during his first visit to England and “noted with regret the plight of the Irish members of the House, who found the House almost deserted whenever one of them got up to speak” (Kripalani 83). Extremely displeased and inwardly unmoved, the poet felt that, “the light of my country, the sky of my country, had been silently calling me” (ibid, 85), and returned to India. It may be interesting to note that still, the men and the women of his country are not calling him, but only the light, only the sky. And this has its own significance in the growth and development of his poetic self. In spite of being born amid the crowded flow of human world, he came to know and feel nature first. Then, when he will be in the boundless lap of nature in Shilaidaha, as it will be seen shortly, he will be preoccupied with man, as if fate has destined it that exchanging the environment, she would lead him to the beauty of nature while amid the din and bustle of city and man, and to the mystery of life and its thousands whirlpools, while amid nature’s seclusion (Bishi 7). Following the same rule, first came *Sandhya Sangeet* (Evening Songs, 1882), “morbid and full of vapours of heated imagination” (ibid, 15). In Tagore’s own words, “I was busy blowing up a raging flame with the bellows of my emotions” (Kripalani 95). The journey for the motion and motivation of life was yet to start. The sunrise was yet to follow.

‘*My Reminiscences*’ registers the mood of this period in simple words:

The sadness and pain which sought expression in the *Evening Songs* had their roots in the depths of my being. As one’s sleep-smothered consciousness wrestles

with a nightmare in its efforts to awake, so the submerged inner self struggles to free itself from its complexities and come out into the open. These songs are the history of that struggle. (53)

The struggle ended suddenly. Whose call it was nobody can assert. *The call* has appeared in Tagore's life at so many vital junctions and has changed its course in such unexpected ways that one, like the poet himself, is forced to see it as the call of providence or *Jiban Debata* (life God). Whatever he has seen, heard or felt, whomever he has met, befriended or sang, it is this He, whom he has looked for, found, greeted and loved; it is to Him that he has submitted himself and offered his life songs. He found Him everywhere, but mostly within the self. Thus it is that Rabindranath searched everywhere and strove to identify with everyone, but never forgot to return and re-tune the within. To make a bridge between the within and without has ever been one of the chief aims of his poetic cult.

The process started as soon as the sun rose. The poet recalls his sudden illumination in a letter to C.F. Andrews:

It was morning. I was watching the sunrise from Free School lane. A veil was suddenly withdrawn and everything became luminous. The whole scene was one of perfect music – one marvelous rhythm. The houses in the street, the men moving below, the little children playing, all seemed parts of one luminous whole – inexpressibly glorious....Everyone, even those who bored me, seemed to lose their outer barrier of personality, and I was full of gladness, full of love, for every person and every tinniest thing....That morning in Free school lane was one of the first things that gave me inner vision, and I have tried to explain it in my poems. I have felt ever since, that this was my goal: to express the fullness of life, in its beauty, as perfection – if only the veil were withdrawn.

(Das Gupta , 2006: 24)

That very day the poem, '*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*' (The Awakening of the Waterfall), gushed forth and coursed on like a veritable cascade. Nirjhar, the Waterfall, till now had been frozen, it was unknown amid snow and cave and hill and nature's seclusion. The moment it awakened from slumber, it had the urge to flow to the world where men and women, children and aged, were waiting alike on both the banks for a dip. The poet uttered in *Kodi o Komol* (Sharps and Flats, 1886):

I do not wish to die to this lovely world.
I wish to live as man among men,
With the sun shining, the flowers in bloom,
And perchance some loving heart responding!

How varied is the game of life on this earth,
Its meetings and partings, its laughter and tears!
Oh to sing of man's joys and pains
And leave behind a melody undying!

(Qtd. in Kripalani 122)

This led him to the real world of men and women, where Providence, again unexpectedly drew him forth.

Around 1890, Rabindranath was asked by his father to take charge of the family's Zamindari in East Bengal and also in a little part of Orissa. The young man had to obey. He had made a plan of traveling all over North India in a bullock-cart, so as to watch leisurely and at first hand, the vast reality of his country's life. Instead, he had to establish himself in a house boat on the river Padma and look after the interests of the family estates and adjust them, as best as he could, to the welfare of his *rayts*. "Much as he may have shied at first from this onerous responsibility, he was later grateful to his father for having yoked him to it" (Kripalani 144). Shelaidaha widened and strengthened his intimacy with nature, but more

than that, it enabled him to meet and get experienced of the common flow of life in rural Bengal. In his own words:

I saw all aspects of village life and felt a great keenness to understand the daily routine and varied pageant of their lives...slowly but surely I began to understand the sorrow and the poverty of the villagers and I grew restless to do something about it. I began to feel ashamed of spending my days simply as a land-lord, concerned only with my own profit and loss. So I began to think about what could be done. I did not think helping from outside would really help. I began to try and open their minds towards self-reliance.

(*“An Address to Village Workers”*, 1919, *Palli-Prakiti*, 98-9)

It is here that Rabindranath got his pass-port to step inside, shape and subscribe to the spiritual domain of the nation. Of course he did not begin with the nation, but a faint notion, that gradually found around it the half whispers of the infinitely helpless, infinitely suffering common people of the land. His task was to make them audible, confident and self-reliant, to consolidate them into a discipline that with the aid of cultural diversity, marches towards the same goal, like so many feet in a procession. The more he saw, the more grew the acquaintance, to result into a literature that not only paralleled to the active politics of the outer world, but constructed and developed the individual and collective unconscious and thereby lifted it to the level of an awakened sense of unity and uniformity, where the nation was supposed to be born.

But before that what was required was self-preparation. Tagore in this phase was gathering manifold experiences from man, nature and their mysterious, mutual co-existence, suppressed equally under the shadow of an overwhelming sorrow and agony, which in the political interpretation, has been customarily seen as a symbol of British colonial and

imperial hegemony. Indeed, it had been the British ruling policy of dual Government and permanent settlement and many other similar pretexts of economic exploitation like forceful indigo plantation, destruction of hand crafts and looms where *muslin* had been produced, which robbed the peasants of Bengal of their fortune, peace and resistance capacity. It is these unfortunate, broken-hearted, helpless creatures whom Tagore meets in his estate. In one of his letters, he writes:

What a store of water must have been laid up in the sky this year. The river has already risen over the low char-lands [Sand-banks by the deposit of a river], threatening to overwhelm all the standing crops. The wretched *rayts*, in despair, are cutting and bringing away in boats sheaves of half-ripe rice. As they pass my boat, I hear them bewailing their fate. It is easy to understand how heart-rending it must be for cultivators to have cut down their rice on the very eve of its ripening, the only hope left them being that some of the ears may possibly have hardened into grain.

There must be some element of pity in the dispensations of Providence, else how did we get our share of it? But it is so difficult to see where it comes in. The lamentations of these hundreds of thousands of unoffending creatures do not seem to get anywhere. The rain pours on as it lists, the river still rises, and no amount of petitioning seems to have the effect of bringing relief from any quarter.

(The Glimpses of Bengal, 97)

That petition hardly works, Tagore had been well aware of, but what he witnessed before his eyes, day in and day out, inspired him to lay hands upon some social activities and curative measures within his capacity, to redress these helpless people. In another of his letters, collected in the same book, *The Glimpses of Bengal*, Tagore writes:

I feel a great tenderness for these peasant folk – our *rayts* –, big, helpless, infantile children of Providence, who must have food brought to their very lips, or they are undone. When the breasts of Mother Earth dry up they are at a loss what to do, and can only cry. But no sooner is their hunger satisfied than they forget all their past suffering. (104-5)

It is regarding them that he must have thought when he wrote his famous poem ‘*Ebar Firaao More*’ (Turn Me Back Now):

They stand there! Head down, stolid and silent. Lined faces carry the sad, tragic chronicles of centuries. Whatever burden comes upon shoulder, they never protest but bear it till body permits; then, pass it to children and generations. They never rage at fate, neither scold God, nor accuse man. Evening comes and just a few grains suffice their animal need. When that too is denied and in addition, crude power stands aloft, red-eyed and impudent to strangle every sense of humanity, still they obey, unaware how and where to beg justice. A hushed appeal releases half way, salutes the Poor’s God; a sigh drops; - they die; unmourned and uncounted.²

Indeed, Tagore’s deep concern reached them and did some good. His efforts in village construction, penned in the essay “*Swadeshi Samaj*” and recorded more elaborately in Elmhirst’s book, *The Poet and The Plowman*, will be discussed at proper places. But the Shelidaha years, as a prologue to those mature works of Swadeshi period, already drive the point home that it is never so easy to do some good for others. Tagore recounts his amazement in a number of instances during this period, for example in the essay “*City and Village*”, in *Towards Universal Man*:

....One day a fire broke out in a village nearby. The people were so utterly dazed that they could do nothing. Then the men from a neighbouring Muslim village came rushing and fought the fire. There was no water and thatched roofs had to be pulled down to stifle flames. Sometimes force also is required to extend support! Then they came to me saying, ‘what luck that our roofs were dismantled – that is how we have been saved’. They were happy that the beating benefited them; but I was filled with shame by their submissiveness. . . .

(Bhattacharya 318 - 19)

But his amazement turns into a heart-felt pity, when he analyses their psychology and realizes the reason of their helplessness:

The poor in our villages have borne many insults; the powerful have done many wrongs. On the other hand, the powerful have to do all the welfare work. Caught between tyranny and charity, the village people have been emptied of self respect. They ascribe their miseries to sins committed in previous births, and believe that, to have a better life, they must be reborn with a greater fund of merit. The conviction that there is no escape from suffering makes them helpless. (Ibid., 320)

No one else among his contemporaries had been willing to think of these helpless people, much less to work for them. But Tagore developed his strategy well in advance. He realized that a healthy state of society could never be reached where the individual had lost his initiative and confidence and looked up for assistance from others in matters where he could help and guide himself best. Help from outside would keep them feeble, fragmented and dependant forever. Hence his rural community development programme concentrated on the twin principles of self help and enlightenment. From the former emerges Tagore, the

nationalist, from the latter, Tagore, the educationist, and both of them contributed jointly, immensely, to keep the spiritual domain of the nation vibrant and independent.

Unlike the political leaders, preoccupied with begging and petitioning for some trifling political benefits, advantageous mostly for their own upper class interest, – Tagore realized it early that the peasants, rooted in the soil of the country, represent the core of Indian society and economy. Until and unless change comes there, the nation will not move one step forward. That is why he repeatedly rebelled against the colonizer’s education policy that intentionally keeps the gap wide and alive. As a nationalist educationist his plea had been to bridge the gap adequately, the sooner, the better. “The soil, in which we are born”, he reminded his age again and again, –

...is the soil of our village, the mother earth in whose lap we receive our nourishment from day to day. Our educated elite, abstracted from this primal basis, wander about in the high heaven of ideas like aimless clouds, far removed from this our home. If this cloud does not dissolve into a shower of loving service, man’s relation with mother-earth will never become truly meaningful. If all our ethereal ideas float about in vaporous inanity, the seed time of the new age will have come in vain. It is not as if there is no rain but the land remains untilled. It is as if from our vast country, stretched like an arid waste, a thirsty cry goes forth heavenward: All your accumulated ideas, your wealth of knowledge arrayed in fine splendor – all this should be mine. Give to me all that is mine. Prepare me so that I may receive it all. Whatever you give will be restored to you a thousand-fold. (Kripalani 161-2)

The spiritual domain of nationalism required words first, then works. Still as a man, if not as a poet, “Tagore’s chief concern for fifty years, from 1890 to his death, was the welfare and upbringing of Indian peasant” (ibid., 162). With his limited resource and within

the limited field where he could function, first in his family estates and later in Sriniketan, he helped and made it possible for the peasants to build their own schools and hospitals, roads and water tanks, set-up co-operative enterprises and banks and a system of self government, thus saving them from the exertions of “usurious money lenders and petty lawyers who would fatten on false litigation” (ibid., 162). The good amount which he was awarded with the Noble Prize in 1913, he donated to his school in Shantiniketan and invested in the agricultural co-operative bank, he had earlier set-up in Patisar. The bank ultimately failed and the money was lost. But he never rued for his decision. A letter written to Abala Bose, wife of the scientist Sir J.C. Bose, records the success of his enterprise:

...arrangement has been made so that the villagers should be able to undertake welfare measures themselves by repairing roads, removing the dearth of water, settling their disputes by arbitration, establishing schools, clearing jungles, providing against famines by setting up Dharma-Golas (grain bank) etc. and in every way to contribute their own share in the welfare of the village to which they belong. (Ibid., 165)

That these were no idle words can be easily confirmed by the report of the officer in charge of the Rajshahi District, recorded in the District Gazetteer (1916) in the following words:

A very favourable example of estate government is shown in the property of the poet, Sir Rabindranath Tagore. The proprietors brook no rivals. Sub-infeudation within the estate is forbidden, raiyats are not allowed to sub-let on pain of ejection. There are three divisions of the estate, each under a sub-manager with a staff of tahasildars, whose accounts are strictly supervised. Half of the Dakhilas are checked by an officer of the head office. Employees are expected to deal fairly with the raiyats and unpopularity earns dismissal. Registration of transfer is

granted on a fixed fee, but is refused in the case of an undesirable transferee. Remissions of rent are granted when inability to pay is proved. In 1312 it is said that the amount remitted was Rs. 57,595.00 There are Lower primary Schools in each division and in Patisar, the centre of the management; there is a High English School with 250 students and a charitable dispensary. These are maintained out of a fund to which the estate contributes annually grant of Rs. 1250 and the raiyats 6 pies to rupee in their rent. There is an annual grant of Rs. 240 for the relief of the cripples and the blind. An agricultural bank advances loans to raiyats at 12 percent per annum. The depositors are chiefly Calcutta friends of the poet, who get interest at 7 percent. The bank has invested about Rs. 90,000.00 in loans. (Adhikari 221-22)

True, Tagore was never made the Congress president, true, he never led any political movement delivering burning words to the people and then watery prayers to the Government, but as Milton said, “they also serve” who engage in these thousand nameless activities, add strength to the backbone of the nation and try their utmost to protect the honour of the mother while her gallant sons in the political field, copy from the Western political models and stoop down to every sort of compromise. Unlike them, Tagore never lectured from afar, he came down where live the poorest, the lowliest and the lost, and relied on the power of light. He believed that human heart, however stupefied in darkness, can still catch the fire, once the light of education sparks in it. For Education, as another heroic leader of the spiritual domain, Swami Vivekananda defined it, was nothing but “the manifestation of the perfection already in man”. What these trodden and pressed rustic mass required, was a spark and a little initial help to set the wheel into motion. Then it, by itself, could gather the speed and force, necessary to break all shackles of dependence, spiritual and political.

All this time while he came to know and stood by the *rayats* of his estate, the artist in him did not sit idle but kept on watching every detail of the flow of common life, its joy and sorrow, love and enmity, little deeds of endurance and sacrifice and profound submission before injustice and oppression. He himself wrote in one of his poems:

Whoever wishes to,
May sit in meditation
With eyes closed
To know if the world be true or false.
I, meanwhile
Shall sit with hungry eyes,
To see the world
While the light lasts.

(Datta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, 108)

Vision leads to meditation and from there to the philosophy of life. In one of his letters he describes how he feels wearied and dejected one evening and closing down his book on aesthetics, he blows out the lamp with a desire to retire to bed:

The moon light just then peeps through the open windows. Looking out at the sky flooded with light, he wonders how a little, man-made lamp can succeed in shutting out all this beauty. ‘What I had been looking for in the empty wordiness of the book? There was the very thing itself, filling the skies, silently waiting for me outside, all these hours!’ he is just amused at the irony of man’s fate seeking the eternal, himself tied to the ephemeral. ‘The very spot on which the moon light falls is my landed property, but the moon light tells me that my ownership is an illusion and my landed estate tells me that this moon light is all emptiness. And as for poor me, I remain distracted between the two.’ (Kripalani 146)

Little did he know it then, that years afterwards, he will be able to overcome this distraction, having his preference fixed for the vast broad humanity in place of the territorial limitation of his own nation and its narrow nationalism.

For the time being the struggle continues. In a letter dated 28th March, 1894, he writes:

I am overwhelmed by this awareness of the baffling mystery within me which I can neither understand nor control. I know not where it will take me or I it, I know not what I can do or cannot do. I cannot see, nor am I consulted about, what surges up in my heart, what flows in my veins, what stirs in my brain, and yet I move about and keep up the pretence that I am the master of my thoughts and deeds. I am like a living pianoforte with a complicated network of wires hidden within it, but what makes it play and who comes suddenly to play on it and when and why, I do not know. I can only know what is being p-layed at the moment, whether the keys are struck in joy or in sorrow, whether the notes are sharp or flat, high-pitched or low, whether the music is in tune or out of tune,- but wait, do I really know even that? (Kripalani 175)

It is that Providence, that life long companion, *Jiban Debata*, who has seated at the helm of his boat and is steering it, this time to the faint smiles and big drops of tears, rising and falling like endless waves, in the complex labyrinth of life in rural Bengal. Out of this contact emerge *Manasi* (Of the Mind, 1890), *Sonar Tori* (The Golden Boat, 1894) and the short stories.

In a letter to one of his friends, Rabindranath tried to answer the query as to who was the object of his love poems in *Manasi*:

Man's cravings are unlimited, his capacity and reach very limited, and so he builds up in his mind an image of his desires which he can adore. The beloved in *Manasi* poems is of the mind only. It is my first, tentative, incomplete image of God. Will I ever be able to complete it? (Ibid., 144)

Manasi is no particular woman of this earth, but one who resides in the mind only. Seeking her, results into no possession, but evermore unrest and further seeking only. . In one of his poems, the poet asks:

Who will make me mad once again? This heart, cold, indifferent and virtuous, is become like a stone. Whose eyes will make the fountain flow out of this very rock? But what happens when such a one comes? I come near, I hold her hands, I crush her against my heart, wanting to suck all her loveliness into me, to loot with my kisses the smiles on her lips, to trap her glances for ever into my eyes. No, It's all a vain chasing, a grabbing of emptiness, like straining the blue of the sky. The body is there in the arms, the beauty flees, the weariness remains. At dawn I return home, weary and shamefaced. What is of the mind,- how can it be found in the body? (Kripalani 138)

The quest continues in the next volume and this time, the poet does find the golden boat, his long cherished dream. But the boatman, he dimly recognizes. The boat collects all his harvest, then sails away, leaving him behind, puzzled. Obviously, the poet's search has still not met his target. But what is important for him, is that he has not left the chase:

I clasp your hands, and my heart plunges into
The dark of your eyes, seeking you whoever
Evade me behind words and silence.

[*'Nishphal Kaman'*, (Fruitless Desire), in *Lover's Gift and Crossing*, poem no. 25, 106]

Now in the world of the short stories, at last, the voyage seems to reach its long sought resting island, the voyager disembarks on the *ghat*, the bank and the bathing steps on the river, which finally confides to him its hushed secret, preserved affectionately in its own spiritual domain, where the external bustle and hurry could not interfere. The Ghat speaks and recalls how a charming little girl used to come to the river. So sweet she seemed that

When her little shadow fell on the water, I wanted to hold on it for ever. If only I could have bound it to my stones!...When she trod on my stones, her four fold anklets tinkling, my clumps of moss and weeds seemed to tremble in delight. It was not as if Kusum played or chatted to excess, or laughed or joked very much: yet the strange thing was that she had more companions than anyone else. Even the naughtiest girls could not do without her. Some called her Kusi, some Khushi or joy, some Rakshusi or Demonesse. Her mother called her Kusmi. Every now and then I would see Kusum sitting by the water's edge. There was a strange affinity between her heart and the water. She loved the water.

(*'The Ghat's Story'*, in *Selected Short Stories: Rabindranath Tagore*, 33)

Days passed. Kusum returned to her village, a young and lovely woman, but a widow. Some more years elapsed. One day a tall, fair and handsome Sanyasi arrived in the village and took shelter in the Shiva temple near the ghat. Kusum fell in silent love with him, who in all probability had been her disappeared and supposed to be dead husband. The Sanyasi, anxious for her long absence, once caught her on the steps, - it was a full moon night,- and at his cross examination she confessed that she had had a wicked dream in which she found the Sanyasi making love to her. The Sanyasi was stunned. He begged of Kusum to forget him and disappeared once again. Kusum slowly came down to the steps, stood looking at the water:

From her earliest youth, she lived beside these waters; now that she was weary, if the water were not to reach out to draw her to its lap, who else would do so? The moon set, the night passed into deep darkness. I heard a splash: I could make out nothing else. The wind rose and fell in the darkness; it seemed as though it wanted to blow out the stars for fear that the least thing would be visible. She

who used to play on my lap ended her sport that day and moved away, I could not learn where. (Ibid., 34)

Tagore, at last, seems to have found out his real strength, that is, depiction of a mood, creation of an atmosphere or sudden unexpected turn in the flow of a character or plot that in all resemblance had an affinity with the innate lyrical impulse within him. The swift and intuitive grasp of a situation now begins to respond to each and every impression or suggestion received from the outside and in a characteristic prose, flowing like the river itself, registers the imprints of imagination in story after stories.

In another story of this period, '*The Post Master*', the central figure is not the Post master but Ratan, an orphan girl who had no one to call her own, and so worked as his maid-cum-cook. When Malaria made the Post Master bed-ridden, the little girl had her constant vigil at the bed side and nursed him back to health. She got her prize for that. The Post Master resigned from his post and prepared to leave for Calcutta. Ratan's innocent plea to take her with him was cast aside to the airs. Instead, at the departing moment, the Post Master offered her some money. But the little girl refused, cried and ran out of the sight. The boat left and looking at the whirlpool of the river, the Post Master had been musing on the mystery of life, its meetings and partings. The rain – swollen river struck him as tears flowing up from Mother Earth. He felt as if a boundless sorrow had pierced his heart and overwhelmed him with a vague, all pervasive grief. The face of an insignificant village girl hovered in his mind. But no such philosophy arose in Ratan's heart. She kept alive a faint hope that the Post Master will return:

Alas for the foolish human heart! It cannot avoid making such blunders. Logic is slow to penetrate it. It distrusts proof, however absolute, clutches at false consolations, until they sever all its arteries and suck its life-blood. Only then,

finally, does the mind become aware of its errors, but the heart continues eagerly to fall into further nets of entanglement. (Datta and Robinson 117-18).

Ratan's despair, indeed was the despair the nation had been striving to come out of, in its spiritual domain, and Tagore knew that it had a long distance to cross, before reaching the point. It had the imminent task of achieving a self confidence and faith, with which to fight the gathering clouds. Individual enlightenment was not enough; the requirement was a mass rising. Anything short of that was destined to end in an inevitable tragedy, as was Shasibhusan's struggle in '*Megh O Raudra*' (The cloud and the Sun).

In '*Megh O Raudra*', Ratan's counterpart is Giribala. The letter of July 1891, which offers her source, also records her tragic crisis:

One girl in particular attracts my attention. She must be about eleven or twelve, but being well-built and buxom, she might pass for fourteen or fifteen. She has an attractive face,- very dark, but very handsome. Her hair cut short like a boy's, seems to suit her face which beams with intelligence and a frank simplicity. She has a child in her arms and is looking at me with unabashed curiosity, – not a dull, stupid stare but lively and straightforward. Her utter lack of self consciousness and her half boyish, half girlish manner, confident and yet full of feminine grace, is singularly charming. I did not know we had such types among our village women. Her people had come to see her off and were waiting for the boat to take her to her husband's home. So young and lively and yet already burdened with a child and with household cares! How does she react to her mother-in –laws nagging and to the self-complacence of a Hindu husband who takes his wife's devotion for granted? (Kripalani 171-72)

In fact, early marriage and widowhood had been the destined fate of most of the lower middle class women at that time. The issue, in its variegated forms, supplied Tagore a number of plots for his stories and he kept on describing the struggles of Subha (*'Subha'*) and Nirupama (*'Dena-Paona'*, Debt and Dowry) and Bindu and Mrinal (*'Strir Patra'*, The Wife's Letter) and Kadambini and so on. The author's favour and support mostly go for these women characters, weak and unfortunate, and the children; Phatik of the story 'Chhuti' (Leave) being the leader of them. The male adults, especially from urban background, in contrast appear priggish, wicked, ridiculous and contemptible (Kripalani 168), with a good dose of irony granted for them. Besides Sashibhusan, the only probable exception may be the Kabuliwala, a rough Afghan and not a Bengali.

Sashibhusan had been a Bengali, but only in name. In his idealism and his chase after it, he resembled the Arab Beduin, Tagore much admired in his forming years. When Giribala's father settled her marriage elsewhere and made it impossible for him to stay any more in the village, Sashi took the boat and sailed for the city. On the river a tragedy occurred. A native boat was competing with a foreign steamer. When it overtook the steamer with the help of its full sail, the young English manager fired his gun at the sail just playfully and the boat sunk. Sashi from his boat saw everything, saved the drowned boatmen, except one, and was furious. He could not resist himself from protesting such cruel and despotic behaviour of the colonial rulers. But the steamer disappeared fast and he could not do anything. He requested the boatmen to complain to the police. He did not agree. The passengers of the steamer also denied to witness, they said they had seen nothing, nor heard anything. Sashi himself complained and bore the cost of the law case. The manager acknowledged that he had fired, but he said his intention was to kill birds. And the case was dismissed there.

A second incident followed the first within one year. Sashi was again on the boat, bound for Calcutta. This time a magistrate was passing on a boat which did not listen to the alarms of the fisher men but moved over the fishing nets in the river. Its helm was caught in the net. The sahib ordered to cut and destroy the costly net and catch the fisher men. His guards could not find them as they all flew away in fear. He produced some three or four innocent persons who did not know anything and began to cry and plea to the sahib for release. The magistrate, however, did not care their plea and was about to order his guards to arrest them and to send to prison. But Sashi appeared before him and charged for his illegal action and orders. The magistrate used some abusive words, and Sashi pounced over him and bet him black and blue and all colours.

In the court nobody said anything in favour of Sashi. The fisher men, whose costly fishing nets had been destroyed by the magistrate, said that he did not pass any such order, and only called them to his boat to ask about their names and address. Some other villagers who had been known to Sashi and were present on the spot at that time, witnessed with full enthusiasm that Sashi himself without any provocation from the Magistrate or his guards, attacked and wounded them, before their own eyes. Sashi again protested such dry lie, but obviously, was sent to prison.

This time, however, Sashi did not protest and went happily behind the bars, with the words:

I prefer the jail. The iron chains do not tell lies. The freedom that prevails outside deceives me and endangers my life. And if you speak of good association, the number of ungrateful and lying cowards in prison is small, for the place itself is small, but in the world outside their number is countless. (Qtd. in Poddar 62)

Against the countless cowards, one Sashibhusan could not win the battle, but it could not stop him or his creator as well, from the battle. While his calculative comrades

were striving after their own, narrow interests in the external political sphere, one Sashi in the spiritual domain was enough to dismiss the gathering clouds. The nation and Mother India required a few such daring sons and daughters instead of the tottering plenty, worthless even to themselves.

Tagore never ventured in writing patriotic stories; even Sashibhusan does not belong to the category of a heroic patriot. His author was pleased to make him just self-reliant and self-helping. Of course, he hated foreign rule and Mother India's suffering under bondage. But he also believed that, "as a sick body easily falls prey to outside infection, so a society where the individual has lost all confidence and backbone and does not like to take any initiative in any field, that society must invite foreign exploitation. No people can be exploited for long who are themselves conscious of their rights and willing to die in their defense. Tagore, therefore, was more concerned with rousing in his people a sense of dignity" (Kripalani 173), than with finding fault with others or begging freedom with cries and tears. Thus he contributed to building resistance in his characters who did make and represent the body of the nation.

It is true that resistance does not work alike in everybody, not even in Tagore's works, but this in fact, enriches his art, rather than making it a defect. It has enabled him to present the working mass in their varied forms and colours, as they had been in real life; in other words, it has saved his art from turning into propaganda. The people and their fate, in the writings of Tagore, suffer sudden changes, their aim varies, their path bifurcates itself at crucial points, leading to doubt and conflict, but ultimately, none of them yield, a sense of tragic greatness hovers round them and make them lovable. In fact, in one of his letters to his niece, Tagore wonders at this puzzle of life:

So vast and varied is the mind of man, so many its hungers and so varied its claims that it must now and again swerve and reel and toss. This indeed is what makes man human, the proof that he lives, the refutation that he is not a mere bundle of matter. He who has never felt this weakness, who has never wavered on the brink, whose mind is narrow and strait, such a man is not truly alive. What we call instinct, what we always refer to disparagingly in our daily life, – this it is that leads us out of the jungle of virtue and vices, our elations and afflictions, into an awareness of the ultimate possibility of our destiny. One who has never known the turbulence of life, in whom the petals of the mysterious flower within have never opened, such a one may seem happy, may seem a saint, his single-track mind may impress the multitude with its power, but he is ill-equipped for the life's true adventure into the infinite. (Qtd. in Kripalani 134)

Obviously Tagore was no longer in search of the single track of the mind, but its mani-fold variations and multiple tunes, which were to raise the symphony in the spiritual domain of the nation. His familiarity with the walking multitude, which makes the nation, was nearing completion. And like his own Ratan in the story Post Master, he had been waiting expectant, for the rise of the curtain to peep into the new horizon, his Jiban Debata was leading him unto.

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C. Exposure of British Imperial Policy, Protest of Anglophilism and Call for Atmashakti in Essays and Articles

The desire to come down to and understand face to face the vast world where common life flows unbarred, with its thousands of waves rising and falling in an endless way, started occupying Rabindranath from his early years. Patriotic thoughts found their first expression in 1876, when in the papers, *'The Gnanankur and The Pratibimba'* he criticized three poetical works in Bengali, "Buhbanmohini Prativa", "Abasor Sarojini" and "Dukha Sangini" (The Lady Charmer of the World, The Goddess of Leisure and Born of Grief). Even in the early years, he is seen to criticize the 'exhibitionist excess', characteristic of Bengali Patriotism:

The Bengali heart is shedding tears for the misery of India. The salted drops find a steady flow into Bengali lyrics. 'The children of India, assembled together', is the first national anthem of the country....From that dawn till now, wherever we look, every song speaks of India. As one day the poet allowed to sing the glory of India, today, even the girls and boys have started to play the tune in such an exaggerated way that it sounds ludicrous....'Mother India', 'Rise', 'Get Up', 'Philistines', 'Vishma', 'Drona', -and similar words have been repeated so many times that they do not carry any more, any special appeal to us. The more they will shout calling 'India! India!', the more it will be difficult for others to suppress laughter....They who sing and compose such songs, fail to realize that the sleeping ears soon get used to the sound, however nagging it may be, and sleep never breaks....That is why Shakespeare wrote, "words to the heat of deed too cold breath give". Whenever your heart is all aflame in enthusiasm, control it,

lest it will soon burn itself out, the more it will be controlled, the more it will rise in blaze.

[*Visva Bharati Magazine*, Baishakh-Ashad, 1962 (1369 Bengali Calendar), 316]

The lines foreground the sense of a restrained discipline in Tagore, even in his early days. The later maturity and depth he earned in the articulation of diverse issues of national feeling and patriotic matters, offers its first cultural forecast in these early pieces of writings (Jana 88).

Another peculiar drawback of the Bengali character he met in England. A Bengali always criticizes his country before an Englishman. He calls the Indians ‘native’, and uncivilized and superstitious. His utmost desire is that the Englishmen consider him an exception from his race. This ugly habit pained Tagore very much and induced him to write from the foreign land:

I strongly desire that the Bengalis, who will visit this country in future, read this letter. The Bengali character has enough stain upon it already. I pray they will not increase it anymore; they will not spread their odour beyond the seas.

[*Europe Prabasis Patra*, (Letters From Europe:), 89]

Europe, especially England, attracted the poet by its endless search for knowledge. The sincerity and diligence with which people cultivated in the fields of science, literature, logic and industry, the democratic liberalism cultivated in society, the honour of the individual, liberty, equality and fraternity, practiced in reality and not in posters only, fascinated him profusely and he remembered this till the last days of his life. But after 1880, the situation changed drastically. Tagore returned home and saw the colonial greed and shameless competition to capture foreign lands among the European nations. From that period onward, a parallel suspicion and doubt captivated his mind, resulting in a deep-seated

inner conflict and confusion about the West that left him restless at times. It had its due consequences, as will be discussed at various phases of this analysis, in shaping and reshaping his career, his character and the no man's land between the two, that is, his inner spiritual domain where words and ideas, developed and modified each other, endlessly.

The first disillusionment got articulated in the essay, "*Dyalu Mangshasi*" (The Gracious Carnivore). It was published in the *Bharati*, a monthly journal, edited by the poet's elder brother, Dwijendranath. The idea of Tagore's *Gracious Carnivore* grew naturally from his reading of contemporary political situation:

Carnivorous England has swallowed and well digested blind and vegeterian India. With renewed faith in the digestive power, it then took Kandahar, but found problem with the people there, who had been carnivorous themselves. The attempt to digest Zululand and Transvaal proved even more disastrous. The liver could not manage. Disease threatened to affect the system.

(*Rachanabali*, Aprachalita Sangraha, 1: 348)

Citing these instances he draws the lesson for his countrymen that if anybody intends to avoid the greed of the beast of prey, he needs to be carnivorous himself. Otherwise self sacrifice will only multiply blood-corpucles in other's body. The world feeds on blood and praises its worth. The essay calls forth masculine power and strength to register protest against despotism, it entreats the countrymen, much in the same manner as Swami Vivekananda did, to shake off despair, fear and weakness.

India at this time, under the arrogance of Lord Litton, earned enough experience of British exploitation, torture and lowliness. The Bengalis, among all, had been the special target. The paper, *Indian Mirror*, reported one day: "This evening's *Englishman* has discovered the secret of correctly treating the people of Bengal. It says kick them first and

then speak to them”. It is unknown whether any protest came from any other corner, but the creator of the character of Sashibhushan could not bear the ignominy and wrote the essay, “*Juta Babyastha*” (The Shoe Recipe): “Government has decreed a law that since the bodies of the Bengalis have grown out of order, every day, they will be beaten well by the shoe, before the day’s work commences” (*Bharati*, 1881, 215-19).

To this the following editorial comment was adjoined: “If any other newspaper in any other country ever dared such insults for the nation, the people would have taken multifarious measures to arrange for its instant funeral” (Mukhopadhyay. P. K, *Rabindra Jibani*, Vol. 1, 139-40). That nobody even protested such a national insult, itself made it clear that the sense of nationality was yet to develop in India. But, at the same time, it did show that at least one Rabindranath Tagore was engaged in its invocation. He had already found out the source of the English racial hatred and exposed it ironically in another essay, entitled “*Antesti Satkar*” (The Funeral Rites):

People opposed to English rule say indignantly, ‘Look at the injustice of the English; they have built their culture borrowing India’s thought, they are rich with India’s wealth; yet how unjustly do they behave with India. To this I say, they are doing what successors are obliged to do; they are performing India’s funeral rites...what more do you want? When ghost India at times was causing disturbances here and there, they pacified her with offerings of big cannon-balls. Moreover, it is enjoined in the sacred books that people get relieved of their obligations towards ancestors through careful rearing of their own children. No warrant will ever be issued against the English for this, from the court of Chitragupta. In whichever country and wherever there exists wide pasture, Jane cow (feminine of John Bull) is grazing her own children and shoving those of others. (Qtd. in Poddar 24)

Soon after this, the country faced huge tension, excitement and political agitation regarding the Ilbert Bill. It was issued by the direction of Lord Ripon who succeeded Lord Litton. The bill sought to overcome racial inequality in the legal system. R. C. Majumder, in *History of Freedom Movement in India*, records:

In those days the European British subjects enjoyed the privilege of trial by a judge of their own race, and hence Indian Civilians, even though they might hold the rank of Magistrates or Session Judges, could not try any European criminal. The Ilbert Bill sought to withdraw this privilege in order to remove a galling, glaring instance of racial inequality. (373)

The English strongly opposed this Bill and exposed their extreme racial animosity. Finally Ripon had to revise the Bill with some amendment and correction. Meanwhile Surrendranath, who had been sent behind the bars as the first Indian political offender, for criticizing some sub-judicial matters in his paper, *The Bengali*, got released and along with Ananda Mohan Basu, Sibnath Shastri, Dwarakanath Ganguli and others, he founded the Indian National Conference on 28th December, 1883. The activity of the council having been confined to the economically strong and enlightened intelligentsia, its chief aim was to convey their demands to the foreign rulers and administrators. Rabindranath had been in Karowar at that time, he seemed to have taken little interest in these matters. By instinct he disliked the policy of begging and praying for favours. His target was to educate and enlighten the countrymen so that they could depend upon themselves. He could not find any sustainable meaning in those fashionable and customary movements in the contemporary political field. In 1882, in the essay "*Chenchie Bola*" (*Shouting*'), he wrote:

Till it flows like the gas in the pipe in order to make light and work as a lamp, Patriotism is useful. But when the pipe cracks and the gas leaks out from pores, people themselves fly away....The phrases like 'brothers', 'sisters' and 'Bharat

Mata' have earned such a massive currency in recent times that they are mounting high airs like rockets and fireworks in India now. At a high point in the sky they suddenly die and fall flat on the earth with a big thud. Even two hundred such rockets do not make any meaning for me, in comparison to one lonely lamp at the corner of the room, that silently works and illuminates. (*Bharati*, 1882, p. 515-6.)

As a means of spreading light, he stressed on the necessity of introducing a large-scale education system, and added: "Let the entire land abound with Bengali schools, and let that education spread through Bengali. Education through English will never reach the four corners of the land" (Poddar 30).

Rabindranath never accepted or approved any political agitation and excitement that had no link with the basic needs of life and its upliftment, however adventurous and high-sounding it might have been in patriotic fervour. The true political activity, as he pointed out in one after another of his articles and essays, is to empower the common people of the country, to help them overcome their subjugation to the foreigners. That could be achieved, as he said, only when the hungry, weak and neglected millions of villagers would be united through a cord of fraternity and political agitation or gymnastics of the tongue would be replaced by true and practical works on the soil:

The speakers of our country advise, agitate, that is, never allow the tongue rest for a moment....Lecture from village to village. It will spread political education. The people will learn where the country's benefit lies.... But the hail storms of those English lectures, however rich with elements of Constitutional history, may be hurled repeatedly by so many Indras from behind the cloud, these will never enter the heads of the common people.... Whenever one Englishman in our mofussil towns torture a native employee under him, our country suffers a defeat, a shame. Every time that native creature passes through such exploitations, every

time he considers himself helpless against these and endures all in the name of fate, our country also sinks down in the dark pit of slavery, step by step. How can you teach him lessons of self esteem, verbally?...One thing can be done. Save, for once, one native sufferer from the grip of a powerful Englishman. Give him chance to know for once that the English man is not the God or fate...When the autocracy of the foreigners will be mitigated and our people will start to consider themselves equal to them, that day our national movement will really commence. That day the tremor and quiver of our frightened slavery will be removed and our downcast head will again look at the sky....When that good day will come, when our countrymen will really stand upon their feet!

[“*Hate-Kalame*” (The Practical Way), *Bharati*, 1884, 234]

The poet’s love for the country stands upon his commitment to truth. To take support of a lie, to behave like a hypocrite in order to meet some practical need, – this Tagore could never allow or sanction as a policy:

If the real upliftment of the nation is to be aimed, let us avoid all cunning and diplomacy, let us walk like a man on the straight highway of life. Delay can be endured, for speed may lead to inevitable accident, in its one eyed, gasping venture for unwholesome and noxious short-cut.

[“*Samolochana, ekti Puratan katha*”, (Criticism, an Old Word), *Rachanabali*,

Aprachalitya Sangraha, vol. 2, 155]

Tagore entered the depth of Indian social history and his findings helped him to find out ways for the problems of Indian nationalism. Due to Enlightenment and spread of Western education in 19th Century the old conflict of modernity and orthodoxy was revived fresh. It was difficult for Tagore too, to make decision. But with surprising flexibility and

efficiency he concentrated on analyzing the idealism and point of views of the old and the new generations. His *Chthipatra* (Letters: 1887) foregrounds the various aspects of the issue, impartially.

The issue of representative membership in the Indian council tensed the political air of the country at this time. From its inception and official birth in 1885, the Indian National Congress demanded an increase of the number of members and their being representative in place of being nominated. But the demand of “the application to India of democratic methods of Government and the adoption of a Parliamentary system” appeared to Lord Dufferin, “a very big jump in the unknown”(Das Gupta, Hemendranath, *Bharater Jatiya Congress*, in Bengali,121). The English newspapers shared and supported Dufferin’s views in choric voice. And the Indian Secretary, Lord Cross, a member of the reactionary group in England, accordingly devised many rules to block the Indians to be employed in higher services. Tagore, confident as he had been about the competence for and right of his countrymen to the higher ranks in administration and politics, wrote an essay “*Mantri-Abhishek*” (Appointment of Ministers: 1890) and delivered the same as a lecture on 26th April in Emerald Theatre, “at a meeting, presided over by his elder brother Dwijendranath Tagore, then secretary of the Land Holders’ Association”. Tagore, in full throated ease, demanded that the responsibility of selecting representatives should be conferred to the Indians themselves, without any further delay:

Even though East and West are geographically in opposite directions, the essential human nature there does not vary to accommodate any contradiction....Our nature has not been contaminated so far that when you will sanction some noble right, we will grow discontent.

At least we shall be able to make you aware of our need and sufferings. That will render some comfort to us, we believe, even though we live in the East. We do

not think that, you the warriors of the West differ much in your aspirations in this field. So we request you not to worry that Indians will be unhappy to get the freedom of expressing their sorrow. (Qtd. in Jana 101)

It has been noted by many that though Tagore is demanding here the right for the native Indians to send to the Indian Council their representative members, his language has become that of an Anglophile pleader, appealing for a special consideration. In fact, he also acknowledges his belief in the nobility of English people and he makes prayer to their kind, honest conscience:

Had we not been in the Congress, we would have been never known from such a close range, how noble the English are. Hence, through the instrumentality of the Congress our true loyalty to the government is being enhanced day by day, and in our lives too nobility is imperceptibly radiating through close contacts with noble humanity. (Qtd. in Poddar 33-4)

He openly says: “We do adore you as devotees and believe in your grace. Therefore we pray. Otherwise it would have been better to keep mum” (ibid., 34). Poddar seems to be right when he comments in this context:

To one who seeks to study the growth of Rabindranath’s political personality in the socio-historic perspective, this article, coming as it did in 1890, is sure to stir conflicting emotions....Moreover he was not himself unaware of the limitations and also the opportunism of contemporary political leadership, and had on occasions given vent to his anger at the collaborationists. (34-5)

And Nepal Majumder, in his analysis in *Bharater Jatiyata, Antarjatikata O Rabindranath*, (in Bengali) conjectures: “It seems that having been under the influence and request of some influential Congress leader, Tagore delivered this essay as lecture” (vol. 1, 70).

Fifty years later, looking at this point of dispute in “*Mantri Abhishek*”, Rabindranath acknowledged in *Kalantar* (A Different Age):

The time has been changed considerably from the days when *Mantri – Abhishek* was written. So it will appear unfit for us now. The chief difference between the two periods is that, then we had but a very meagre scope of begging to the king. We had been the enchained cockatoos; we would spatter our wings and shout to extend the chain at leg for some more inches. Today we demand neither the stand, nor the chain, but want to spread wings in the sky. But at that time, even that naïve demand would infuriate our rulers. I answered their red eyes in my own hot language. But never forget, it was my pleading on behalf of the begging clients of that earlier period.

(Mukhopadhyay, P. K, *Rabindra Jibani*, vol. 1, 220)

Tagore made his second visit to England in August-September 1890, but cut short his sojourn and returned home by early November. The excess and glitter of material prosperity in the West could not impress the poet and he had severe doubt in its aimless journey after restless toil that was rough and maddening at once:

In all directions one sees countless materials heaped together for gratification of the hunger and lust of man, the supreme lord....But a little reflection reveals the darkness this splendour hides from view. Hood’s poem ‘song of the Shirt’ is the bewailing song of oppressed humanity. One does not see what an appalling poverty resides underneath its glow of happiness and splendour... but in the books of nature this is recorded every day. In the natural order of things, the neglected would some day surely have their revenge... I remember one highly esteemed European savant has predicted that the Africans will some day conquer Europe. I pray let this not happen, but what wonder if it does happen. Wherever

darkness gathers, danger also silently gathers its strength there.
(Poddar 41)

Tagore was getting fast disillusioned about the English civilization. Years ago, he noted with disgust its imperial design and greed that captured China and the Zulu land. In the essay entitled "*Chine Maraner Byabsay*" (Death traffic in China), he described how

From greed of wealth an entire nation was forced to drink poison. No one has ever heard of such a fraud. China wept and pleaded, 'I won't take opium!' The English Traders replied, 'Tut! Tut! How can that be?' China's hands were chained and opium was forced into her mouth; and after that they demanded to be paid for this. For a long time the English have been running such a wonderful trade in China....If we call this lust for money, commerce instead of dacoity, this is only for the sake of courtesy. In deed this is nothing else but that a strong nation is earning profit by selling death to a weak nation.
(*Bharati*, 1881, 93-100)

Now in 'Europe Yatrir Diary' appear his matured and consolidated thoughts of national reawakening. Regarding its *introduction*, from which two separate essays, "*The New and the Old*", and "*The East and the West*", were to be born later, Pavat Kumar Mukhopadhyay commented: "The questions Tagore raised in his thirtieth year, he discussed again and again for next fifty years and never had dearth of personal initiative towards their lasting and permanent solutions" (*Rabindra Jibani*, vol. 1, 278).

It is from this time that Tagore came to settle the problems of East and West with his ideals of complete humanity. Cultivation of Indian culture and English education, together – this is the poet's formula to ensure rich and effective participation of the people of the country, in the national reawakening.

Tagore had already enough disillusionment about Europe's imperial journey after territorial occupation and its colonial plunder of Indian resources. In one of his essays he wrote:

The current and flow of the great river collects sand in its way, which ultimately blocks and kills her. The European civilization appears at times like that river. Its current draws and drags every unwanted trifle from all corners. The debris of civilization gains height everyday and grows enormous as a mountain.

[“Purba O Paschim” (*The East and the West*), in *Samaj, Rachanabali*, vol. 14, 237]

Experiences soon made him conclude that the English declaration of the sanctity of life is valued and restricted within Europe only. In the outside world it has no liability to follow those ideals. In other words, Europe's concern for morality and human values is only a show, as fake as the tears of a crocodile. The Indian concept of Culture in contrast is far wider, it accepts and accommodates every race of the world, it embraces the essential spirit of humanity and welcomes the universal man.

Tagore wanted to blend this cultural lesson of India with the Western determination and a disciplined, diligent quest for scientific knowledge. Of course he noted that Europe's journey after matter and material prosperity had led it merely to a lifeless mechanization. But at the same time he believed that “Where man is free and loves freedom, there is always a chance of rectification there, sooner or latter”.

[“*Karmer Umedar*”, (The Seeker of Job), *Sadhana*, January, 1891, 38]

But looking at India, he had his principal fear in this that:

We in our mental world are still bearing that rule of the machine....The way we work shows as if we have been designed by machine to work thus. Manu, Parassar, Vrigu, Narada, joined to kill our last drop of confidence and power of

self-determination....Never do we hope that our effort can always change the situation and bring forth any remedy. (Rachanabali, 12: 471)

Tagore wanted to awaken his people towards the effort and believed that only education could raise them and their fortune from the present abysmal ditch. He realized that the country's all round development required before all and above all a true teaching-learning system through the vernacular. He never opposed Western drive for science and technology. But the first requirement, according to him, was an access to an unbiased, uncontrolled education through the mother tongue that could match and adjust the goal of learning with the needs of life. In the essay "*Sikhar Herfer*" (the State of Education: 1892-93), he said:

The Education we receive is not in conformity with the life we live; our text books do not contain any elevated picture of our hearth and home where we would live till death, we do not get in the literatures we are taught any high ideal of the society in whose bosom we have to pass the days of our life; we do not find our fathers and mothers, our friends and kith and kin, our brothers and sisters, portrayed in them; nor are the actualities of our life given any place in those narratives; the sky and the earth we behold, our crystal morning and enchanting sunset, our crop-filled fields and the music of our fortune-giving rivers are not sung in them; when we deeply ponder this, we invariably feel that no genuine accord can ever be established between the education we receive and the life we live. (Qtd. in Poddar 51)

One important factor should be kept in mind here. It is not that Tagore had been ever indifferent to the political need of the country. Like others, he also realized its urgency. But merely the political urge of independence he could never accept as the final or even sufficient cause of nation building. Thousands of meaningless and irrelevant verdicts of the scriptures

and equal number of blind social customs and conventions had not only blocked the natural flow of life in India, but had kept it stagnant and enchained. Tagore tried first to remove those blocks. Unless the social life comes out of blind imitation of dead cryptic conventions and dull, dreary immobility, political freedom, even if it is achieved by chance, cannot live long. The disease needs to be cured from within, an external polish cannot turn base metal into gold. Tagore comprehended that early. All his arguments and criticism moved around one central idea, that is, to achieve national unity and prosperity, and to attain this the most reasonable option should be to go for a free, clear, rational exercise of thought first, which then in its own way could ensure the boundless extension of knowledge and activity to all other fields:

If we believe that earlier we never had been one race, one nation; this idea of nationalism is emerging with the arrival of the new education, its petals opening one by one; if a new oath gathers strength in our mind to place and establish this collective aspiration of the nation's heart in and amid the endless presincts of eternity, to ensure the arrival and arousal of that great and powerful man within us, his strength resplendent with fresh flow of life blood; if we want that our country will occupy its special rightful rank in this vast world and varied human society, that it will participate in the endless give and take of knowledge and faith and shelter, itself bold and confident of its resources, – then make strong your faith, make way for freedom and love of truth, never retreat in fear and never refuse to take the risk of the unknown. Never contradict your youthful hope like an old man, bent on mere argumentation.

[“*Adim Sambal*” (The Ancient Faith), *Sadhana*, 1892, 181-2]

Meanwhile the political sky of the country had been fast gathering dark clouds of doubt, suspicion and anxiety. The colonial Government was gaining rapid dissatisfaction

about Congress, so much so that during the viceroyalty of Lord Curzon, in a letter to Lord Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, on Nov. 18, 1900, “the viceroy expressed that one of his greatest ambitions while in India is to assist it [Congress] to a peaceful demise”(Poddar 86). The political ground became so muddy and slippery that even Congress leaders apprehended that the situation might be overwhelmed by events “beyond their grasp and control”. Even a strong supporter of British generosity like Dadabhai Naoroji had to say:

Events are moving now at lightning pace, and it is difficult to say what tomorrow may bring, as forces evil or beneficence, once set in motion, will move with accelerated speed to their natural results – evil out of evil, good out of good.

(Poverty and the British Rule in India, 9)

The first evil that aroused chaos was the Age of Consent Bill (1890). Even though it had its progressive overtones, many voices protested together, claiming it as a planned injury at the native religious faith. This gradually led to the rise of a new movement of Hindu nationalism, especially in Maharashtra, under the able leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Tilak introduced the Shivaji and the Ganapati Festivals, to poke the sleeping fire and glorious nostalgia of Maratha regime. Rabindranath made his protest and blatantly exposed the hideous colonial strategy of the Government:

As a state policy it may not be written anywhere in official papers, but it is not a secret anymore to our people that thousands of English officers within the Government, have voluntarily donated their individual lung-air and thus set up this great fire of communal hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims in this country. *(Sadhana, 1893: 541)*

In the essay, ‘*Subicharer Adhikar*’ (Right to Demand Justice), written in the same period, he went deeper and analyzed the political expediency of showering tenderness on the

particular community, in this case, the Muslims, and commented that forcible establishment of peace from above, could open the gate for greater ostentatious encouragement to unrest. He forbade his people to appeal to this Government anymore, as it itself had been the source of all troubles. Rather he appealed to his countrymen to unite and overcome the wound inflicted upon the national feeling of solidarity. In his words:

It is not that we are seeking unity for making a revolution, no; we do not possess that strength. But people can ill afford to disregard the dimension and strength forged through unity. If we fail to elicit respect from others, it will be extremely difficult to elicit justice from them. (Qtd. in Poddar 59)

It is here that Tagore attempted to ensure the liberty of the spiritual domain of nationalism. Countless arguments have been raised to stress that he opposed the movements in the external political field (Poddar 82). But it is not true. Tagore never opposed political formalities. He only felt the need of an adequate preparation in the spiritual domain of the nation before confronting such political challenge, which then could be confidently conquered, by an indomitable desire arousing out of a strong back bone, illuminated consciousness and enhanced power of a unified mass. He wrote:

If we are to stand against untruth, our greatest fear lies in our own people. Whom you will struggle for, he himself will betray you; whom you will die to assist, he will not assist you. The cowards will deny the truth, the suppressed will hide themselves under pressure, law will extend its iron grip and the prison will rush to lock us before its bar. But if out of instinctive greatness and innate love of truth, even a few of us, still retain their oath and attend their due course of work, only then the tight noose around our national aspiration will begin to loosen. Only then we shall earn the right to expect normal justice from our opponents.

[“*Ingrajer Atanka*”, (The Trauma of the English: 1893), qtd. in Jana 113]

And it is here, in this ultimate desire to overcome self weakness and shine in tested self-emancipation that one is to locate and measure the real contribution of Rabindranath Tagore to Indian nationalism. Freedom did not mean to him the mere change of the ruler's baton from one hand to another. He looked for a greater freedom, that of life from a dull, fatalist inertia; that of soul from the luring trap of greed. That is why he prayed:

This is my prayer to thee, my Lord-strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart.

Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.

Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.

Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.

Give me the strength to raise my mind high above the daily trifles.

And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love.

(*Gitanjali*, No. 36, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 1, 53)

And what he expressed there in poetic passion, he repeated again and again in the cool, objective analysis of prose:

We may expect much from England. But it is beyond her power to over-ride the natural law. It is the old habit and established custom of this earth to strike at and insult the weak. Only when England will realize that a strong and united India is judging her actions through its millions of open eyes, she will not risk ignoring India totally.

[“*Raja O Praja*”, (The King and the Subject: 1894), *Sadhana*, 417]

Once this inner strength is achieved, nationalism in a country sets wings to free air. Tagore had been a zamindar, but came down and marched with his countrymen, shared their agony and witnessed their hopelessness of life, however weak, dependant and docile they had

been in their out look and desire. Here, he allowed himself to be shaped by the existing spiritual domain of his country, striving for the identity and solidarity of a nation. But then he , in his own turn, fought single handed and reshaped the character of this spiritual domain, offering it the inspiration, confidence and mental support it lacked so miserably and found nowhere else. Mahatma Gandhi also longed to come down to these unfortunate helpless mass of India and did stand by the Harijanas and others who had been marginals and even socially untouchable. But he had his call for greater work in the political arena and thus even after his arrival in the nationalist struggle of India, as much as before his entrance there, it was left for Tagore to fight against dead conventions, dark stagnation and suicidal divisions and differences of a nearly dead civilization and to nurse and revive it back to the regular rhythm of a normal life, unabashed and confident to aspire for both political freedom and spiritual emancipation. It was only Tagore who felt their agony (Mahatmaji had the desire but not enough time and opportunity) and cured it by his overflowing sympathy for the dying and debased:

Oh my unfortunate land, those whom you insulted and did not acknowledge in the right of humanity, who could never be accepted to your bosom, you will have to come down to them, to their lowliness.

You did never touch them and so, had never been touched by the God within them. When the famine will come you have to struggle for food with them...

Those, who have been dropped below will bind you below; who have been put back, will drag you back. He, who is under the cover of darkness and ignorance, is shadowing your good under the same cover. You have to repent and come down one day.

The ignominy and disgrace of centuries will demand its toll. Lower your eyes and behold the God of the marginals and fallen, walking on the dust. Someday, You will have to come down there and smear the same disgrace.

Death stands at your door. Curse belittles your national pride. If you still do not call them and keep aloof from the march, time will not let you go. The last breath and funeral pyre will equate all your distance and differences into ashes.

(*'Hey Mor Durbhaga Desh Jader Korecha Apaman...'*,
in Bengali *Gitanjali*, poem No. 108, *Sanchayita*, 126)

It is amid them that he found the real meaning of his life and his ideal, his God or Jivan Debata. He dissuaded his countrymen from the wrong path and advised:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

Deliverance? Where is deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever.

Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.

(*"Gitanjali No. 11"*, *The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 1, 46)

Spiritualism did not mean for Tagore the blind imitation and follow up of rituals. He served his God by serving light to those who lacked light and offering life to those who lacked the vitality of life. And thus he reconstructed the spiritual domain of Indian nationalism.

The political situation grew turbulent by 1897 and the years following. In Maharashtra, where the plague calamity received gross negligence from the Government, the anti-British sentiment reached climax. The Government did not show any interest to stand by the affected, but got busy in the preparation of extravagant celebration for the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria's coronation, ignoring the nationwide criticism. Nationalism countered back, and Rand and Ayerst, two notorious English officers, were murdered the very night celebrations were held in Poone. In mad rage, the Government adopted various punitive measures. Numerous suspects were imprisoned and sent to exile for immense torture. Meetings were banned. Leaders were arrested. News papers were gagged. Unable to endure it anymore, Tagore from Shantiniketan raised his protest:

If ever in a pitch dark night, our weak mother India sets out with a faint hope in her daring pursuit for revolution, it may be that the dog will not bark in the entrance of the royal castle, and the guard will not be shaken in his unworried sleep, but the thousand ornaments in her own body, her diverse papers and magazines will definitely betray all care to jingle and rustle in their many voices. They will defy all measures and all directions.

[“*Kantha Rodh*”, (Gagging), *Sadhana*, 1898: 428]

The essay read also by the poet in the crowded Calcutta Town Hall and appreciated by all listeners, once again shows that even though Tagore never did like the political issues

and movements very much, he never detached himself from the soil. But Congress failed to take care of these basic things, and made the poet lament:

We like to participate in the welfare of the country, but we do not like to touch it. How can one touch the country? By speaking the language of the people, by wearing the rough clothes people do wear...

In order to beg rights from the English you may require the English language, but if you want to make your country fit for those higher bargains, your only way is to weave the infrastructure of national improvement with materials from native tongue, native literature, native society.

[“*Apar paksher Katha*”, 1898, (Words of the Other Side), *Rachanabali*, Vol. 14, 585-6]

That one should cultivate English in order to have access to new inventions of science and imagination and discourse of higher logic and diverse modern theories which had been the contribution of the West, – Tagore admits. But that the nation’s prosperity solely depends on the practice of mother tongue and cultivation of native culture – this he firmly believes. That is why he encouraged the use of vernacular in India’s educational planning. Years later, in *Kalantar* (A Different Age) he is seen to recapitulate:

The politics of that age had its entire appeal to the higher English authorities, and not to the people of the country. That is why the use of English tongue even in provincial or village conferences did not appear unjust. In Rajshahi Provincial Congress, making a prior consultation with the now dead king of Natore, Maharaja Jagadindranath, when I first attempted to introduce Bengali as good enough for official works, W.C. Bannerjee and other national leaders grew angry and criticized me severely with many fold satires....Next year, even in my poor

health I attempted the same in Dhaka Conference. Regarding this ambition of mine, the leaders then laughed and said in half whispers that my love for Bengali originated from my poor command over English. They intentionally cut jokes there where it would bleed most. (Qtd. in Jana 114)

Finally in Natore provincial Congress Conference (1897), Abanindranath and other young members under Tagore's leadership succeeded in performing all official works in Bengali. A lively description of it one can find in Abanindranath's book *Gharoa* (The Homely Words: 1946, 42-43).

No patriotic movement, however skillfully led, can ever earn a remarkable success and glory for the country, unless it links itself with the culture and languages of the people and countrymen. Tagore, even though he had been only a poet and not a political leader, never ignored this first political lesson. He decided to stand by the voiceless men of the voiceless land. In order to find his roots in the soil, he implored the rich and educated and remote city dweller, to come and stand by these mute, trampled mass, this houseless poverty. He asked the intelligentsia to come down and recover its lost culture from their daily struggle for existence:

I am not alone, an isolated being. As I have a small body, I have also a large one. The earth, water and sky of my native land are my own extended body, in their health is my health; all the hearts of my fellow countrymen stirred by joy and sorrow are an extension of my own heart, their amelioration constitutes the amelioration of my own heart. So long as we do not comprehend this vital truth, we will continue moving as now from famine to famine, disaster to disaster; so long we will only tremble in fear and be persecuted with insults.

(Qtd. in Poddar 72)

This is the spiritual domain of nationalism and here Tagore worked. With experiences earned from the diverse welfare activities, attempted at different phases of his Shelaidaha years, he now proceeded to make a realistic and exhaustive plan for village-reformation and reconstruction in the essay “*Swadeshi-Samaj*”.

Critics in their analysis have picked up three basic points of argument in this remarkable essay which, briefly speaking, summarizes the ideas Tagore tried to express all through his life. These are:

- a) The modern European conception of state includes in it both the ideas of administrative governance and social service responsibilities. This had never been the case in India where the royal authority and Samaj had their specific areas of activity, that is, the king was obliged to protect sovereignty whereas social needs had been the prerogatives of the Samaj that got sufficient support from the king and other rich men. The water supply, medical help, education and amusement were naturally maintained by men of property through a spontaneous sense of mutual obligation. This was made possible because the limit set to the individual scope of self-indulgence was narrow and surplus wealth could easily follow the channel of social responsibility. Wealth in such society made way for self sacrifice and commendation. State and Samaj existed in mutual co-operation, none interfering in other’s business and the system satisfied all.
- b) But the advent of British rule killed that very system first. The State, being merely an alien, exploiting power, did not agree to support Samaj; nor did it take upon itself the service responsibilities which it is forced to bear in Europe. Moreover, property being changed into a sign of material progress, lost touch with social ethics and started to drain away the life sap of community. The gap widened dangerously between the millions of poor, destitute and a handful of rich, advanced men. This was, then, conducive to the interest of the colonial exploiter. It mastered its full possession and control over the heart of the land.

- c) To gain back the lost self-sufficiency and to repossess the heart, what appeared necessary was development of self ability, formation of self esteem and formatting of racial harmony. The individual heart needs to respond first to the call of its countrymen. Only then the national heart can start operating and ensure blood circulation to the remotest part of the body. Tagore therefore, appealed to his fellow people to ignore the European concept of state and advised them to organize ‘Melas’, which had a natural call to a large number of people and where the rural, rustic spirit could easily meet the sophisticated, urban one, to promote the required harmony. He assured,

If the leaders of the country will abjure empty politics, and make it their business to give new life and objective to those melas, putting their own heart into the work, and bringing together the hearts of Hindus and Muslims, and then confer about the real wants of the people – schools, roads, water reservoirs, grazing commons and the like – then the country and the people will soon awake. (Qtd. in Poddar 75)

In spite of general acceptance and applause, “*Swadeshi Samaj*” and its author, however, had to face some criticism. Four points have been specifically raised against:

- a) Tagore wrote, “The chief good of absolute British rule in India is that it is uniting the different races and communitiesThis has endowed British rule with divine grace... English rule is central to us until such time as the emergence on a true and permanent basis, of unifying power to fuse all races into one, but after that not for a day.” This was nothing new, as from before the inception of Congress itself, the political leaders harped on the issue and such appeal also came many times from Congress Conferences.

- b) If English rule is taken as beneficial to India, how can it be challenged and confronted ideologically, as has been prescribed in the same essay, almost in the same breath?
- c) The idea and activities of Swadeshi Samaj depended upon the general framework and the socio-political-economic infrastructure provided by the colonial administration. The Samaj thus needed the support of the colonial administration for its survival and fruition. This very fact demolishes its claim to be *Swadeshi* or indigenous.
- d) The Swadeshi Samaj in reality, was never allowed to perform its works which again and again had to be discontinued by the intervention of British police. Tagore could not anticipate this. Moreover, since the expectation of unity kept eluding forever and even freedom was achieved amid the air of growing disunity, was it insightful at all to suspend all political activities and concentrate solely on the building of inner strength which, however, never succeeded to reach the expectation mark, till date?

All these charges, however, can be logically countered back, but before probing into them, it is also important to keep it in mind that Rabindranath also was a man and not a God, whatever divine charm his songs and poems may possess; – that it was neither known nor easy for him too, to select or recognize the right path of progress that was supposed to bring freedom in an electrical speed. Like others he also had to employ the trial and error method and like the wise he also decided to make use of experiences, earned at such a bitter cost.

Of course it was true that as a matter of expediency, British rule by its devastating colonial exploitation, unwittingly paved the way for national unity. All the different races of India, having been fried in the same pan and fire, did realize the need of unity. British torture

was necessary to make people realize this and not a moment after that. Here was Tagore's real argument and difference of stand from Congress. Congress wanted to pursue and make the English realize that it was the English who had been degenerated to become Un-English in their exploitation of India, which, in Congress opinion, had been sufficiently united to get the alms of freedom. The reality was not this. The Congress leaders themselves, let alone the mass, did not have unity and habitually differed from one another in almost every trivial issue.

Tagore knew that India did not possess unity. He never tried to convince England in hundred ways, about the false claim, for true unity is self evident; it does not require witness and lawyer to prove its arrival in the country. Instead, Tagore endeavoured to make his countrymen aware of their disunity and showed them way how to overcome that. He hated mendicancy and did believe that no people could rise into nationhood with alms collected from outside but with their own resources mobilized within. It will be foolish to say that this was a misconception.

Similarly Tagore never allowed patriotic emotion to mystify his rational judgement and did believe that apart from the hateful policies of colonial and imperial exploitation, the West had side by side, many positive contributions too. The endless research in Science and technology, the advent of humanism and rational judgement, the journey after liberty, equality, fraternity, the spark of enlightenment that fights superstition and age old orthodoxy and liberates man from the grip of fundamentalists, – these Tagore could never hate, simply because these had a Western origin. He felt the need of motion and realized that a greater motion was needed to free India than that of the Charka. He kept emotion reserved for his poetic purposes and tried to adopt the good things of Europe.

Side by side, he knew that Indian nationalism had been so immature and fragile in its early, nascent years, that it did not possess the strength and capacity to begin a real combat

with the English. The need of a combat he never denied, in fact, he himself participated in some Congress Conferences and always had a soft corner for those martyrs who never thought twice to sacrifice life in the armed struggle for freedom. He had respect for these sparks that attempted to ignite the nation, though he knew it to be futile and insufficient to achieve the final target. He never hesitated to use the British infrastructure, for, the British themselves, never hesitated to use the native ones in the early years of their settlement in India. He could not call for a final combat, because the land was not tilled. The ground was not ready to grow seeds. He concentrated on the ground work and not on the mirage of an early and premature harvest.

Finally, even though it is to be admitted that India got freedom amid division and disunity, definitely Tagore cannot be blamed for his dream of a greater and better India. His ‘Janaganamana-adhinayak’ is sung as the national anthem in India, even though in reality, the janaganamana-adhinayak is yet to appear in the country. Tagore cannot be made responsible for that. It is not that he ever forbade political activities (and even if he would forbid, the leaders would not agree to leave that easiest way to popularity), – it is only that he stressed more on the need of self-preparation and national unity, that could be used to accelerate the speed and power of politics itself, in the executive domain. The fruit which is forced to a premature ripening by appliances of artificial chemicals, lose quality and taste. The freedom India earned, before achieving a self-esteem and racial, regional, religious harmony, now returns as a boomerang and amid the growing separatist desire and chaotic political commotion, once again makes Tagore relevant, not only for his diagnosis but also for his prescription of medicines.

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D. Realization and Reconstruction of the True Indian Identity with

Lessons from the Past

The advent and spread of Western education in early 19th century Bengal and thereafter gradually in India, with its sparks and ignition introduced a new era, that of new enlightenment. Acquaintance with the brave new world and its modern thoughts and theories; its doubt, belief, experiences and experimentation, and mostly its devoted preoccupation with the world of matter, its supreme urge to dominate there with new and newer findings in the realm of science and technology – all these together enkindled the true spirit of renaissance and gave birth to an intelligentsia, spirited, cultured and solvent. But the new education could not reach the mass, the poor, the marginalized, and even where it reached, it bore and imprinted the inevitable stamp of colonial domination and diplomacy. It intended only to prepare a group of half educated, limpid clerks, who neither could, nor would ever challenge the colonial and imperial exploitation. The English education did arouse a sense and desire of national reawaking and independence, but tutored as it had been by foreign rulers, it set out to follow the Western models blindly. Benedict Anderson appears to be right here in his insistence on the worth of Western models which India was to follow and imitate.

Following that Western model even Indian History was written and interpreted, – not by Indian writers, but by Western scholars. The Indians had been given only the duty to read and cram those lists of historical records and to pass examinations. It is here that Tagore came forward to register his protest:

The history of India which we read and remember to pass examinations is only the story of a stormy night and its bad dreams. It rejects everything else and records only who came from where and fought with whom for how many days, months and years. Father and son, brother and brother, each and everyone targeted the throne and played the mouse-cat game. The Pathans, the Mughals,

the Portuguese, French and English all came in due course of time and complicated this chronicle.

But these coloured looking glasses fail to catch the true India. This chronicle projects only those who fought and killed and burnt one another, as if apart from these invaders, there had been no native people.

[“*Bharatbarsher Itihas*”, (The History of India), *Bharatbarsha*, 1]

Even in a stormy day, the storm may not be the principal event, despite its great roaring. The daily flow of life that passes from hut to hut, under the thatched roof and behind the mud walls, itself bears the seeds of true history of India and her people. But unfortunately, as Tagore regrets, the Indians do not have access there:

The son of the Englishman knows from early childhood that his father and grandfather have fought many battles, captured many countries and made business there. He also strives to shine in the same line and enjoy the same glory of war, wealth, business and statesmanship. We know from our early days that our fathers and forefathers have never captured foreign countries, never gone there for interests of trade and commerce. The chief aim of our history is to furnish this and this information only. We do not know what they had done. So we cannot fix what we should do. The only way left for us, thus, is that of imitation and making copy of others’ models. No one needs to be blamed. The education we get from early childhood itself separates us from our country every day, and thus one day we get completely detached and stand against our own motherland. (Ibid., 1-2)

Tagore therefore, requests the native historian to make new interpretations of history, to illuminate those dark, vague spots and phases, where under thick cover of dust and

neglect, mother India waits patiently for him, with her unknown events, untold stories, unidentified children and unheeded message. He is supposed to pick from these, the right path that even through variety and plurality, leads to the final destination which is the center of Indian civilization and which reveals her innermost principles. India never suppresses difference. Difference adds variety and spice to life. But underneath its external outfit, there runs a thread of unity that binds together all differences and prepares the garland of India. This is, according to Tagore, the true lesson of Indian history.

In order to reach that final unity, India has always refrained from the race of political power. Domination and control, expansion and encroachment which produce political command and glory, had never drew any interest for her, because political glory and state power stand upon the force of contradiction. Tagore realized early that

...the noose of opposition within the political nature of European consolidation can protect it against the external enemy but cannot offer it any internal harmony. Hence it keeps alive the point of contradiction between individuals, between the king and his subject, the wealthy and the penniless. It is not that they assemble together and carry forward or maintain their society by individual share of work, executed with a profound inspiration to support one another. It is only that they differ and oppose one another from the beginning to the end, every one alert and careful that the other is not gaining strength and getting ahead even for one inch.

(Ibid., 3)

The equilibrium achieved in this artificial way, by members of a society, each neutralizing the other, cannot control, – so Tagore contends, the balance and poise required for long term prosperity and sustainable development. The government in its desperate attempt to maintain status quo, passes rules and regulations, one after another, but in vain.

Seeds of contradiction take roots in the soil and burst from within. The society splits in revolts and endless fragmentation.

India, as Tagore continues to explain, has taken the other way. She has tried to mitigate and overcome contradiction from within. She has never attempted to erase difference where it lies in substance and truth. For real difference can never be overcome by external force and pressure, it needs to be allocated to its proper place, it requires a proper and justified classification and allocation of authority within its circle. Only then its keen edges lose sharpness. India intended and followed this model for centuries, her call of unity and cultural superstructure stand upon this base.

India followed this particular way not playfully or accidentally, but from a systematic approach, derived out of hard earned experience. She has always strove to rearrange and unify diverse elements of her civilization; she never flung anybody aside, she neither rejected nor expelled the outsider marking him as harmful for her unity and a mismatch. She acknowledged all and accepted all who came to her and trod on her path of harmony and sacrifice, belittling all forces of contradiction.

Europe protects her purity by closing her door to the outsider. She does not hesitate to follow the prejudice of racial and cultural untouchability that divides man on the pretext of skin-colour. She is scared of diversity, because she lacks in her internal discipline and harmonizing power. She apprehends her own cultural plurality and intends to cast all dissimilarities into one single pattern by force. But India subdues force and overcomes all contradictions through her deep-seated faith in harmonious co-operation and co-existence. She gains by sacrifice. She teaches man not to run after matter and material profit, for there is a greater bargain, that is, the awakening of the mind and spirit. Resources to be found there are endless. Bliss and joy of that world is unlimited.

This awakening of the spirit, India calls religion. Religion, as Tagore explains, is one and indivisible. There cannot be anything like the life of the hand, the life of the leg, or of abdomen, – for life resides everywhere in the body. Likewise India has never segmented religion into pieces like the religion of faith, religion of behaviour, religion of Sunday, religion of other six days, religion of Church or that of home etc. The religion of India is the religion of her entire society, the feet and head are not separate there, but it stands and functions like a great tree, each of its foliage offering fruits, shade and shelter to the universal man. The unity felt within is to be established among many. To discover it through endless search for knowledge, to establish it through endless sequence of works, to feel it through the profound philosophy of love and to spread it through all activities of life – this is what India is after, making way through all opposition and contradiction. So Tagore says, “ the moment this fundamental effort and mission of Indian civilization we shall realize, the gap between our present and past will also be erased” (ibid, 5). His chief contribution to nationalism is to make his countrymen aware of and believe in this unsegmented and uninterrupted flow of History, which preserves the keynote of Indian civilization and reveals the secrets of its struggle towards that goal.

Among many other meanings, Renaissance, in one sense means, the freedom of thought from established patterns, customs and conventions. Renaissance came to India, first to Bengal, through enlightenment due to the advent of Western Education. Rabindranath is usually considered a product of the renaissance waves. And here pointedly, the first mistake occurs.³ Tagore definitely took his cue from his age, but he did not stop there, he utilized and exercised the freedom of thought and delved history to reach its inner truth. At the same time he explained the rationale of this search, the need of exploring the past in the essay “*Anabashyak*” (*The Non-essential*):

When the present appears dry and grainless, and famines disturb too much, we take recourse to the past, which like mother earth, offers refuge in its mother's lap. When the sun shines pitiless and the rains do not come, we can collect life giving sap from the deep, dark entrails of Past, through our roots. [Qtd. in Sen, Probodh Chandra 35]

Like a true artist of renaissance, Tagore loves this past, because it recalls the collective achievement of Indian civilization, it restores her forgotten honour and glory in the memory and thus it stimulates the new age to recreate upon the resources of heritage. Unlike the other nationalists, between time and space he prefers and picks up time in order to overcome narrow nationalism. Probodh Chandra Sen has correctly analyzed the issue in his *Bharat Pathik Rabindranath* :

We live in time and space. But our love is mostly for our space, our country, our territory. We fight desperately for one acre of land but care little for our right upon the far extended time!...if we lose the past, then it is an unrecompensable loss....A moment's pleasure cannot satisfy the need of Man. If our life is nothing but a collection of some scattered and unrelated water images, then it is indeed a poor life. But on the contrary, if our life maintains the essential link between the birth peak and sea mouth of final submission, passing in an uninterrupted flow through diverse vales, plains and deltas, and thereby connecting the past, present and future of that temporal journey, then it is next to impossible to suspend her dynamism. Then she will not obey the frowns of stones....I am not a parasite. I stand upon my past that spreads roots deeper under the earth. I have certain holy points and places in my past. Exhausted and fatigued under the heavy chains of sinful present, I make pilgrimage there and seek refuge in the melodious plot of

beechen green and shadows numberless. The melody of the past keeps on ringing.

To miss its call is to lose your address, path and identity. (35)

The necessity of keeping this connection with the past, Tagore explains in various ways with examples from individual, social and national perspectives:

Nothing lasts forever, but passes away. Still, a few signals and tokens, left behind, speak of the past days and revive old memories. Who is so heartless to destroy even these! . . . Is there anybody in this world who has not preserved carefully a torn letter of very old days or a ring of a dear one! . . . That little letter is the shrine and image of my past. It has no worldly value, still it is invaluable because my past is buried deep and preserved in it. (Ibid., 37)

Taking cue from this, he then moves forward to justify the need of established social customs and rituals. These are, in his view, neither good, nor harmful; their only fault is that they are no longer useful; there is no need to follow them in the present age. But to reject and refuse these also leads one to reject and refuse the great heritage established and preserved among them. Appealing to emotion and nostalgia, Tagore writes in his own inimitable way:

If the last memento of your dead mother is valueless to you, simply because it has no longer any value in the market, then your wisdom is deceived. You are not at all a son. (Ibid., 37)

Similarly, as he claims, those meaningless social customs and conventions are important for us because they bear the history of our forefathers. The grey, old and fragrant past they carry, even in its suspended motion, disregards the eruptions, the sick-hurry and divided aims of the disjointed present, and directs man towards the bygone age. The march of civilization halts before it, looks back, listens carefully the whisper of relics, and thus regains insight, refines strategy and resumes journey. In Tagore's opinion, only this insightful

journey, rich and refined with lessons from past, can lead India to her successful rebirth as a nation.

To explain his points, Tagore refers to the eloquent silence, lying resplendent in the walls of Indian temples. It reminds him of the basic lessons of India's message to mankind:

When I first saw the Bhubaneswar temple in Odissa, the experience was like that of reading a new book. It seemed that those stones stored, within themselves, speech, unexpressed and silenced for centuries. Their message affected the heart more. The sages in old Vedic age composed lines in rhyme. This temple also seemed to be muttering lines and incantations in the rhyme of stones, which appeared like the last, few, torn leaves of an ancient epic....

My mind, tutored from early childhood in Western education, was trained to divide heaven and earth and to maintain the holy distance between them, lest it opens up new vistas of sinfulness. But man here comes upon the very shrine of God....

It signaled a wider meaning in my heart. I caught the language of stones and realized that, God does not maintain distance. He lives within us and this very real and tangible world of dust and dirt is His only abode, permanent residence...the expression of God within man, His arrival and appearance in our realization amid this dull, daily routine, these had been the root words of new Hinduism....The temple of Bhubaneswar followed the same way and...coroneted man in godliness.

[“*Mandir*” (Temple), in *Bichitra Prabandha*, (Various Articles), *Rachanabali*, vol. 15, 426-7]

He finds the same message written in the dust of the land, walled in the north by the great Himalayas and in the south by the great ocean and seas. Nature has made India her playground, her endless gifts have provided endless resources for the people who live here. From ancient times, they have watched her joy, profundity and playful tolerance. They have made it a custom, as Tagore considers, to salute her and they strive to imbibe the lessons.

Then Rabindranath concentrates on the literary resources of India's past and restores their dazzling glory to the public eye. His enthusiasm for the classical epics was a sort of 'worship' (Sen Probodh 152). He tried to probe deeper into the inner spirit of the Ramayana and said:

The Ramayana of Valmiki should not be treated as mere poetry, but the Ramayana of India. Only then India by the Ramayana and the Ramayana by India will be realized....I read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata from this angle. In its simple Anustup metre [a kind of Sanskrit metrical pattern] the heart of India vibrates for ages.

["*The Ramayana*", in *Prachin Prabandha*, (Ancient Literature), qtd. in Sen, Probodh 152]

On the story of Ramayana, he composed plays like '*Kal Mrigaya*', and '*Valmiki Pratibha*', and poems like '*Ahalyar Prati*' (To Ahalya), '*Patita*' (The Fallen Woman), '*Vasha o Chhanda*' (Language and Rhyme) etc. Similarly from the Mahabharata, he took story line for his immortal poems like '*Kach O Devjani*', '*Gandharir Abedan*' (Gandhari's Appeal), '*Karna Kunti Samvad*' (The Meeting between Karna and Kunti) and composed a verse play, '*Chitrangada*'. Each of these cannot be discussed here but one or two instances can project the basic ideas Tagore intended to restore through them:

In *Karna Kunti Samvad*, on the eve of the great battle Kunti introduces herself to Karna as his mother who disowned him at the time of birth, and entreats him in every possible way to transfer his love and allegiance to the Pandavas, with the promise that he would be made king after victory. True to the tradition of honour of a Kshatriya warrior, Karna firmly rejects her offer, and adds, how could she have offered him a kingdom now when at the time of birth she denied him the love of a mother? His manliness and honour refuse to be persuaded and he prays that he may not betray the truth of a hero for the allurements of fame and kingdom.

(Poddar 54-55)

The same idealism is expressed in '*Gandhari's Appeal*', where even when her son Duryadhon begs of her blessings for victory in the forthcoming war, mother Gandhari cannot utter those words but says, 'Truth must win at the end'. In a like manner the king Somak in the poem '*Narakbas*' (In Hell) maintains his word of honour and agrees to offer his infant son to the sacrificial fire at the instigation of his priest, Ritwik, who executes the deed.

After the epics, Tagore takes up the Buddhist era. He composes some of his unforgettable poems on the spirit of mercy, pity, peace and love, propagated by Lord Buddha and his disciples. '*Malini*', '*Natir Puja*', '*Chandalika*', '*Shrestha Viksha*' (The Best Alms) etc. bear statements of his homage to that great idealism practiced in India and followed in various other parts of the world. Reference here may be drawn from the poem '*Abhisar*' (the journey to meet the beloved):

Upagupta, the disciple of Buddha, lay asleep on the dust by the city wall of Mathura.

Lamps were all out, doors were all shut, and stars were all hidden by the murky sky of August.

Whose feet were those tinkling with anklets, touching his breast of a sudden?

He woke up startled, and the light from a woman's lamp struck his forgiving eyes.

It was the dancing girl, starred with jewels, clouded with a pale-blue mantle, drunk with the wine of her youth.

She lowered her lamp and saw the young face, austerely beautiful.

'Forgive me young ascetic,' said the woman; 'graciously come to my house. The dusty earth is not a fit bed for you.'

[*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 1, 171.]

But the Sannyasi only smiled and did not comply with her request. He assured her, however, that when time will come, he definitely will go to her.

She did not have to wait for long. The spring came to the end of the year. The trees blossomed in all colours, the breeze breathed all the fragrance, the cuckoo cooed in the bower. The Sannyasi reached the cottage, where lay the dancer girl, Vasavadutta, left alone and deserted by all, suffering from the intolerable pain of small pox. She was surprised to see his gracious face and begged for pity. The very timing of his arrival gave her a rebirth to holiness, where desire could never trespass.

The lesson is well imbibed by Shrimati, the worshipping maid, in the poem *Pujarini*. Emperor Ajatshatru passed an order forbidding worship of Lord Buddha in the temples within his land. Since law-breakers will be punished to lose life, nobody dares disobey the ruling. But the maid of the palace, Shrimati, does not have any such fear. She comes out, calls everybody to join and offers her worship to the shrine, alone, unaccompanied. The guards warn and then kill her, but she does not deviate from her decision, her dharma.

Similarly the glorious past of Punjab and Rajasthan, the heroic feats of the Rajput and Sikh Communities, Tagore records and revives in poems like '*Bandibir*' (The Chained Hero) and '*Horikhela*' (The Holy). The first poem begins with assurance of the rise of the Sikh:

The Mughals attacked Punjab with a great number of soldiers and force. But the Sikhs did not yield. The day has come when they must show their valour keeping life at the stake. The torches set fire to the sky; the roars defeat the clouds and darkness. The Emperor in Delhi frowns in worry. His order reaches Punjab and blood streams fresh, like new rivers. Banda was a rebel who despite his furious struggle got captivated. Interested in increasing the mental agony, the conqueror Kaji ordered Banda to kill his own young boy. The father did not utter a word, but blessed and kissed his young cheeks, then said something in his ears. The son also sang in roaring words and showed his courage. Father killed the son and himself was tortured to death by the men of Kaji. But behind their death, survived the belief that 'the Sikhs never fear to die.'

In '*Horikhela*' the Rajput queen invites the Pathan ruler to participate in the play of Holi. He comes with his soldiers, boiling within with the carnal desire and lust. The dance begins, the spell rises. Suddenly the queen throws down her metal dish of colours at the Pathan and the hundred maid dancers come out of disguise as hundred warriors. All his lustful desires crushed within, the Pathan was killed and conquered just playfully.

Examples may be multiplied. In fact, the entire volumes *Katha* and *Kahini* (Tales and Stories) bear many such pearls of Indian mythology which Tagore endeavoured to revive and connect with the past and present history of the land. His intention is clear. A story is a narrative which everybody enjoys but never trusts. A myth is a story which in spite of its fictional elements, is trusted and believed to be true. But a history is an analytical account that convinces with evidence of its truthfulness. Tagore realized that his countrymen had lost

conviction in their past and had been struggling with belief and dis- belief that step by step led them away from truth. He attempted to bring back and restore the conviction and thus to re-furnish the mythical and historical accounts in mellowing verse, sweet and stimulating simultaneously.

At the same time, he responded also to the responsibility of fighting against superstitions and untruth of religious dogmas like castism and untouchability. This was never the field of a poet, but a social reformer. Tagore employed his poetic muse even in social reformation. Two examples may drive the point home; one is the poem '*Brahmana*' (The Brahmin), the other '*Debatar Grash*' (The Toll of God).

In the first one, a young boy entered the hermitage of sage Goutam and expressed his desire to take lessons from him like his young friends. But as a principle Goutam imparted his lessons only to those boys who were *Brahmins*. So he inquired the boy of his parentage, clan and caste. The boy did not know that and went to his mother to ask:

She clasped him to her bosom, kissed him on his hair, and asked him of his errand to the master:

'What is the name of my father, dear mother?' asked the boy. 'It is only fitting for a Brahmin to aspire to the highest wisdom, said Lord Goutam to me.'

The woman lowered her eyes and spoke in a whisper.

'In my youth I was poor and had many masters. Thou didst come to thy mother Jabala's arms, my darling, who had no husband.'

[*The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 1, p. 183]

Next day morning, Satyakama appeared before sage Goutam and informed him what he had learnt from his mother. The boys present there laughed, ridiculed and scolded the

ambition of an outcast to get wisdom. But sage Goutam stood up and embraced the boy and welcomed him as the greatest Brahmin who is born to the clan of Truth.

The Chandal girl in the dramatic play '*Chandalika*' also shares this broad view and points to the hundreds of Brahmins who are in fact worse than the Chandals in their daily conduct, and thus pollute the Brahmin households. Tagore's point is clear. He does not believe in orthodox caste system and wants that his countrymen also come out of this dark, blind convention. Man, if he is true to his work and idealism, can achieve greatness and greatness never makes any distinction between the high and the low, the rich and the poor. – This is Tagore's message to his country, aspiring to take the shape of a nation.

The nation should equally reject superstitions. The meaningless, unknown conventions grow into customs and interfere with the meaning and truth of life itself. This is also a lesson, earned by the Brahmin, *Maitra Mahasay*, in the poem '*Debatar Grash*':

The young widow Mokshoda appeals to the *Brahmin* to take her, along with others, as a pilgrim to the holy point where the river Ganga meets the sea. Her little boy was supposed to stay with his aunt during her absence. But when the boat was about to start, the mother discovered her son Rakhhal as a determined co-passenger. No amount of pleading and scolding could dishearten or persuade the little boy from the fatal adventure. The mother got angry and uttered that she would throw him in the water of the sea. This also could have no effect in the boy, though the mother was scared to receive the foul echo. Finally the *Brahmin* took pity on the poor boy and to everybody's relief included him in the party.

On the way home, a storm rose. The river was furious, its waves were about to swallow the boat at any moment. The pilgrims cried in fear and started throwing their things in the river as donation to appease the enraged God. The *Brahmin* declared his verdict: Mokshoda must throw the boy into the water, as she promised at the start of the pilgrimage.

The mother denied and said she never really meant that. But all others pounded over the poor woman, snatched away Rakhal from her lap and threw him overboard into the river.

The last cry of the drowning little boy was piercing the sky and it finally pierced the ears of the *Brahmin*. His conscience now revolted and to atone his sin he jumped into the river to reclaim the boy back to life.

This poem had a much more effective design as to free people from baseless superstitions. The *Brahmin* here is shown not only to commit a mistake and misjudge the true reason of the storm, but he finally comes forward to rectify his guilt and jumps into the river to save the boy. In a similar way the people of India also should come out of their stupor and blind faith in baseless conventions. They should jump into the whirlpool and find out the boy, a symbol of lost happiness and harmony. The poem also exemplifies that national awakening should not wait endlessly for the arrival of its leader, even a poet can give it necessary direction and shape, if he is not an idle man, preoccupied with his private dream and illusion only, if he can write poems on anything and everything to inspire man to wake up and overcome submission to untruth.

True it is that Rabindranath evoked the past glory and excavated the corridors of History, Literature and Culture to find out new resources that could renovate, reform and regenerate the national feeling, but it is not true that he found all glory and nothing wrong there. Rabindranath is never preoccupied with past, he learns from past and present equally; he confronts the challenges of his time with a modern outlook, with logic, reason, acquired knowledge of science and technology and other amenities. But in that combat he never ignores the lessons of history and he never deviates from the path of truth.

This instinctive detestation of greed, separation, anarchy and untruth, led Tagore to learn from History and widen the spiritual domain where his countrymen could stand free and

boast of a rich heritage that still could provide solutions to the crises of civilization. The truthful and glorious India that he revives and recreates in an untiring enterprise, is the sacred bed where nationalism germinates and takes root. He celebrates this revival and reawakening in the hundred sonnets of *Naivedya* (The Offerings) and finds emancipation of his country not in closed door sacrifice, but in invocation of strength and power, confidence and self-esteem amid thousands of traps and temptations. Thus he said in the poem '*Mukti*':

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

Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim.

My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy flame and place them before the altar of thy temple.

No I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delight of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.

Yes all my illusion will burn into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love.

(The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, vol. 1, 68)

It is also here that Tagore's nationalism embraces all and finds for all a place in the lap of mother India. He calls everybody to unite there:

Awake my mind, gently awake in this holy land of
pilgrimage

On the shore of this vast sea of humanity,
that is India.

Here I stand with arms outstretched

to hail man, divine in his own image
and sing to his glory in notes glad and free...

No one knows whence and at whose call
came pouring endless inundations of men
rushing madly along- to lose themselves in the sea:
Aryans and non-Aryans, Dravidians and Chinese, Scythians,
Huns, Pathans and Moghuls

All are mixed, merged and lost in one body.
Now the door has opened to the West
And gifts in hand they beckon and they come-
They will give and take, meet and bring together
None shall be turned away
From the shore of this vast sea of humanity
That is India.⁴ (Kripalani 227-8.)

And he is especially careful to embrace the meek, mild and lowly. For God himself stands by them and loves them. In the poem '*Deena Dan*' (the Poor Gift) he shows how God detests pride and arrogance of wealth and how does he live with the foodless, homeless multitude who do the work and bear the weight of civilization. They, along with all, make the true nation. Tagore salutes this nation.

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NOTES

1. Kripalani records an experience in this regard: “While in Shelidah, the budding poet was seized with the romantic notion of scribbling his verse, not in ordinary prosaic ink but appropriately in the perfumed extract of flowers. But the moisture he could extract by squeezing the petals was not sufficient even to wet the tip of his pen. He thought of designing a mechanism by which a pestle could be made to revolve in a big cup-shaped wooden sieve by means of strings and pulleys. He discussed the plan with his elder brother. It may be that Jyotirindranath smiled to himself, but he gave no sign of being amused. He merely said, ‘Go ahead’! and sent for a mechanic to work for Rabi’s instructions. The machine was ready and the sieve was filled with flowers, but turn the pestle as he would, the flowers merely turned to mud and not a drop of essence ran out....Later recapitulating this incident Tagore wrote, ‘My brother...unreservedly let me go my own way to self knowledge, and only since then could my nature prepare to put forth its thorns, it may be, but likewise its flowers. This experience of mine has led me to dread, not so much evil itself, as tyrannical attempts to create goodness. Of punitive police, political or moral, I have a wholesome horror. The state of slavery which is thus brought on is the worst form of cancer to which humanity is subject’ (*Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, 58-59).
2. The translation of this passage is indebted to some extent to Poddar (64).
3. Probodh Chandra Sen in his , *Bharat Pathik Rabindranath* in Bengali (Rabindranath: The Traveler Towards India), comments, “It is not enough to call Tagore the true child of Indian Renaissance, he is its creator too. Goethe once compared Shakuntala, the heroine of Kalidasa’s great play, simultaneously to ‘young years’ blossom and the fruits of maturity”. This, according to him, is applicable to Tagore also.
4. Kripalani makes this translation from the Bengali poem, ‘*Bharata Tirtha*’.

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