

BEYOND BENGAL : THE GENIUS OF

RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

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The world is celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's creative genius found expression in poetry, novels, short-stories, plays, paintings and essays. In the history of Indian literature, he forms a trinity along with Sanskrit poet and playwright Kalidas and Hindi poet and philosopher Goswami Tulsidas.

The Bengali personality bears the impact of the genius of Rabindranath and he occupies a place of prominence in their homes. Rabindranath, however, has a message for mankind. His poems and essays provide a way to tackle the challenges that the world is facing today. This could be viewed in the context of conservation of environment, threats to world peace, and ways to expand human mind and its potentialities.

II

THE forest cover is fast depleting and several species have become extinct and many more are threatened. The main reason is human greed furthered by machine. The culture of wealth at any cost and by any means has invaded forest land, the home of biodiversity as well as minerals.

Tagore saw this greed phenomenon clearly and wished that we draw lessons from forests. In Tapovan, he writes about the “culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life”. In conflict between greed and compassion, conquest and cooperation, the nature alone would “impart peace of the eternal to human emotions”.

How do we work for conservation of ecology? How to deal with the threat of global warming? Tagore wanted us to use our machines not for the conquest of nature but for conservation of ecology. He abhorred concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and recommended the traditional institutions of cooperatives and panchayats to work for

restoration of human-animal balance in habitats and for conservation of ecology.

III

IN a poem entitled ‘The Sunset of the Century’ written on the last day of the 19th Century, Tagore observed: ‘The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.’ The mood on the last day of the 20th century, however, was one of hope. Many viewed the termination of the Cold War as the end of major conflicts in global politics and emergence of a harmonious world. This was short-lived. The attack on the United States of America on September 11, 2001 established that religiously motivated violence is going to pose a major threat to world peace.

In this context, Rabindranath’s message of harmony among religions is of great significance. Tagore described his Bengali family a product of a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Muslim, and British. It is not so much that Rabindranath tried to produce a synthesis of the different religions, either in his life or in his poetry or novels, but that it

went into the making of his personality in a natural manner. In his novel, Ghare-Baire (The Home and the World), the character who is really the author, declares:

‘It was Buddha who conquered the world, not Alexander—this is untrue when stated in dry prose—oh when shall we be able tossing it?’

Rabindranath worked for one supreme cause, the union of all sections of humanity in sympathy and understanding, in truth and love.

Rabindranath Tagore was opposed to every kind of religious fundamentalism and cultural separatism. He writes:

‘While God waits for his temple to be built of love man brings stones.’
The building of the temple of love remains mankind’s unfinished agenda.

Tagore was never lacking in judgment or resolution in siding with the forces of peace and harmony, spirituality and freedom against religious discrimination, nationalistic arrogance, terrorism, and social discrimination. He wanted Indians to learn about how other people lived,

what they believed in and so on, while remaining interested and involved in their own culture and heritage.

Rabindranath Tagore believed that true democracy and freedom alone would lead to the realisation of the full potentialities of human beings. It was in this context that he emphasised freedom of the mind. A poem in Gitanjali catches this ethos admirably:

'Where the mind is without fear and head is held high:

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depths of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit.....'

Tagore wanted education to be an instrument of realisation of human potentialities. He raised Visva-Bharati as an international university aimed at assisting students to realise the true character of our interlinked humanity and deeper unities of our civilisation in the West and the East. Could we not build a better world by teaching love and not hatred?

The movements of democracy, ecology, religious harmony, good education and world peace need not be viewed as separate ideals or goals; these are inter-related. Creative minds, civil society institutions, the media, and the global political architecture need to have a unity of purpose. The future of mankind depends upon the manner in which it harnesses the ideals of freedom and democracy for expansion of the human mind.

May Rabindranath Tagore continue to be our guide! May we move on the path of expansion of freedom of mind with earnestness!

The author, currently the Governor of Sikkim, is a distinguished scholar and public servant. His latest book is *Bahudhā and the Post-9/11 World* (OUP: 2010).