

Towards a better world: A Tagorean model of environment

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Abstract: *Amidst the plethora of problems which confront us in the twenty first century, the most dreaded is the environmental crisis. The ruthless destruction of nature and apathy towards environment had threatened our very existence. It is indeed amazing that ancient Indian seers and law-givers even in that hoary past could realize the significance of conservation of environment despite the fact that they were not ecologists in the modern sense of the term. Following their footsteps, Rabindranath Tagore, one of the most astounding personalities of the nineteenth century and the first Asian Nobel laureate nurtured nature and environment in his creative writings. With his profound admiration and love for nature embedded deep down in his psyche, Tagore introduced an eco-friendly education system initially in his school and finally in Visva-Bharati, acclaimed as a centre of international culture and exchange. He also forged a bonding between nature and community when he initiated village reconstruction work at Sriniketan. This article will delve deep to show Tagore's fascination for nature and awareness of environmental balance. His message towards conservation of nature may act as a torch bearer towards ailing humanity.*

Keywords: Environment, Nature, Conservation, Rabindranath Tagore, Visva-Bharati.

In an Alfred Hitchcock film *The Birds* (1963), modeled on a story by Daphne du Maurier, we come across a series of violent and unexplained attacks by birds on the citizens of a particular city at California. This savage attack by

birds has been explained by critics as retaliation by Nature against the misbalance in ecology, caused and created by insatiable human lust for enjoyment and colossal power. Notwithstanding the phenomenal progress in science and technology enabling man to explore even the remotest corner of the galaxy, the fact remains that the very existence of our planet earth is threatened by environmental crisis. Against a global back drop of growing consciousness about conservation of nature, though occasionally thwarted by the uncanny highhandedness of the so called rich countries, India presents a rather dismal picture because of the fact that in the first phase of development in post-independence India, concern about environment had been pushed into insignificance because of our thrust on rapid industrialization which we presumed will accelerate growth of economy. As an inevitable consequence India in twenty first century is confronted with a series of environmental hazards, created by indiscriminate destruction of forest which in turn threatens the survival of indigenous bio-diversity and affects wild life habitat; ruthless use of pesticides, excessive extraction of water from earth and a staggering amount of industrial wastes damage the entire environmental scenario. This onslaught against nature and mother earth has its disastrous consequences in the form of natural calamities which claim huge toll of human lives and other species. The atrocities committed against nature has led to such a catastrophic situation that we are forced to take stringent measures for conservation of nature involving both academia and common milieu for our self-survival. As we are groping in dark to face challenges which our surrounding has posed because of plummeting of nature, we may look back to our heritage to find out a solution as suggested by our ancient seers. It is indeed amazing that ancient Indian intelligentsia had already paved the way as to how to implement effective conservation of nature despite the fact – that one of the primary causes of man-made pollution, created by alarming magnitude of industrialization was absent in that remote past. But prudent and sagacious as our seers were, they were bent upon conservation of nature as they could realise that their existence depends upon the flora and fauna of nature. After a lapse of several centuries this reverence towards nature had elicited profound admiration of another astounding personality of nineteenth century. The hazards of rat race of industrialization backed by power lust and a tendency

to dominate nature, culminating in wanton destruction of resources and pollution of environment had been seriously debated by the first Asian Nobel Laureate poet, an innovative educator and initiator of village reconstruction and cooperative movement in British-ruled India. He was Rabindranath Tagore, an icon whom the world emulates today even seventy eight years after his demise.

It may be noted in this context that this discourse is not aimed to portray Tagore in the background of Eco-criticism, which, according to critics is the study of relationship between the literature and physical environment because Tagore perceived both living and nonliving, intertwined with supreme divinity. The question which immediately confronts us relates to the logic behind selecting Tagore as an advocate of environmental conservation because of the fact that in pre-independence India during his lifetime industrialization was a far cry and as such man-made blow to environment could not be a major concern to him.

To answer this query we have to look back at his life, his philosophy, his educational concepts, his social welfare activities – all of which are enmeshed with his deep and profound love for nature – its biotic and abiotic components. An avid admirer of man-nature bond of affinity, as exemplified in our ancient hermitages (*Tapovanas*), he firmly believed that conservation of environment should gain proper credence and deserves careful attention. He also believed that all serious problems pertaining to civilization hardly had any time frame, as was emphasized by him in his introduction to “*Raktakarabi*” (1926). Viewed from this perspective, his attitude and comments towards nature have their relevance in the contemporary scenario too.

In this context, Tagore’s attitude towards nature which finally led to formulation of his philosophy about nature deserves mention. He considered nature as manifestation of the Supreme soul – “The sea beach of Karwar is certainly a fit place in which to realize that the beauty of nature is not a mirage of the imagination, but reflects the joy of the infinite and thus draws us to lose ourselves in it”. (Tagore 1917: 237)

This identification of nature with supreme soul finds its most poignant expression in *Gitanjali Song Offerings* – (Mukhopadhyay, Sen 2012: 53) –

“Day by day Thou art making me worthy of the simple, great gifts that thou gavest to me unasked – this sky and the light, this body and the life and the mind – saving me from perils of overmuch desire”. (*Song Offerings*: verse 14, Mukhopadhyay, Sen 2012: 53).

The eco-philosophy of Heidegger which theorises to accept nature and environment in their own magnanimity finds its nicest expression in Tagore’s concept of philosophy and environment: This bond of affinity with nature which Tagore emulated from ancient Indian spiritual texts was so enmeshed deep down in his psyche that it shaped his philosophy towards life and universe in its totality.

Another pertinent point which deserves attention in this context is that Indian concept of *Panchabhûta* comprising *kshiti* (earth), *apah* (water), *tejas* (light), *marut* (wind) and *vyoman* (sky), which covers the basic underlying elements of creation has been individually honored and eulogized by the poet, indicating thereby his awareness of the supreme importance of the natural forces for our survival and progress. Modeled on the *Bhûmisûkta* (hymn addressed to earth) of the *Atharvaveda* where the poet seer describes himself as son of the Mother Earth, Tagore in his poem *Prithivî* (earth), recorded his salutation to the Mother Earth, but at the same time uttered a word of caution that earth can assume the role of both a benefactor and a destroyer (Ghosh 1989: 383-84).

Significantly enough, in another poem of *Gitanjali Song Offerings*, Tagore emphasized identification of life with earth.

“It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers”. (Mukhopadhyay, Sen 2012: 69).

Like earth, water – one of the primordial elements of nature attracted the poet philosopher since his youth. During his sojourn in Silaidaha, he developed a strange kind of affinity with the river Padma, as is evident from his letter – “When I stay in boat at Silaidaha, Padma appears to me truly like an individual persona”. (Silaidaha May1893: Translation mine).

Another two constituents of *Panchabhûta* – light and air captured poets’ imagination. In another letter he came up emphasizing his love for these two elements of nature – “I am so much fond of light and air Goethe said at the

moment of his death – More light. If I am to express any desire at that moment, I will speak out – more light and more space”.

Mention may be made of a poem of *Gitanjali* which not only illustrates the poets’ attitude towards various elements of nature but also shows how he identifies various manifestations of nature with supreme divinity. (*Rabindra Rachanavali* Vol. 2, 1982: 222).

Tagore’s philosophy of inter-winning nature and environment with supreme divinity emerges from his deep bonding with nature throughout his life. Since his childhood, the poet felt relieved and rejuvenated by the solemn touch of nature – be it so in the serenity of Ganges or amidst the grandeur of the Himalayas or in the arid surrounding of Bolpur where he considered himself to be the reigning monarch.

“Once when the dengue fever was raging in Calcutta, some portion of our exclusive family had to take shelter in Chhatu Babu’s riverside villa. We were among them. This was my first outing. The bank of the Ganges welcomed me into its lap like a friend of a former birth. ... I felt that out of the bowels of wall beam and rafter, I had a new birth into the outside”. (Tagore 1917: 45-46).

On their way to Himalayas, Tagore came to Bolpur. He discovered himself within the bounties of nature as exploring something unheard of. He considered himself as Livingstone of that tiny empire. (Tagore 1917: 84).

At night his father Debendranath showed him stars and galaxy and discussed in lucid terms about the planetary world. This can be considered as a turning point in young Tagore’s life when slowly and gradually he developed a strong affinity with nature and this finally shaped into a protective attitude towards the environment including both biotic and abiotic elements. Admittedly he was not an expert in ecology but with his profound artistic sensibility he could feel the significance of conservation of nature for the benefit of the mankind.

It is indeed interesting that Tagore always perceived nature to be bright and illuminating and always a source of inspiration to the human mind. This was the reason he disliked London because of its gloomy dismal look during his first visit to Europe at the age of eighteen. (*Rabindra Rachanavali* Vol.12, 1989:150)

A protagonist of conservation of nature, Tagore expressed his agony and angst towards destruction of nature through excessive industrialization in quite

unambiguous term in his travelogue *Japan Jatri* (Way to Japan). He felt sad at the degeneration of Ganges through littered wastes of industrial units, situated on her banks. (*Rabindra Rachanavali* Vol 12, 1989: 150).

He equated this experience with a similar incident witnessed by him in the port of Aden where the sea water is being polluted through industrial waste – “I felt equally bad at the port of Aden. Imprisoned by man the sea was spoiled there. Oil is floating over water; even sea could not get rid of wastes thrown by man”. (*Rabindra Rachanavali* Vol. 12, 1989: 150 Translation Mine).

This description of pollution of sea reminds us of Kuwait war a few years back when massive spillage of petrol in sea water endangered water species. Tagore’s profound admiration for Japan because of its ancient civilization, artistic nature faced a great jolt on his arrival at Kobe in Japan which appeared like a dragon devouring ruthlessly greenery of earth due to insatiable lust.

“When I look at the city of Kobe from my window side, I felt that it is Japan made of iron, not human flesh and blood. It has already gobbled up, the green earth with its huge, truncated body. (*Rabindra Rachanavali* vol.12, 1989: 76, Translation Mine.).

What Tagore saw and lamented upon long back continues unabated till date. We are taxing nature, we are extracting natural resources ruthlessly, nature retaliates in consequence and we are helpless, when faced with fury of nature. Tagore’s condemnation of destruction of nature to promote material prosperity finds its touchiest expression in a speech on June 13, 1916 in a reception at the Kannoji Buddhist temple organized by Buddhist community.

“I descended from my ship which decked at the harbor of Kobe city ... From what I saw I felt that a huge serpent had its mouth agape and was devouring all the people. At the same time if felt that since Japan was a country of such a materialistic civilization, I need not have come here. (Roy 2007: 187)

Tagore’s attitude towards Nature was reflected in his concept of education too. It is indeed remarkable in the history of world literature that a Nobel Laureate poet could engage himself in serious deliberation on innovative education. He had the energy and guts to start a school in a remote village far from the clamour of busy city life. He authored delightful and effective primers for child education and finally succeeded in converting a tiny school

which started with five students initially in 1901 into a university and a center of inter-national culture and learning. Thoroughly averse towards the British-introduced system of learning which restricts education within the periphery of four walls of classroom, Tagore introduced a system of education in his school which will be embedded in nature. Modeled on the precept of *Tapovana* in ancient India where education was imparted to young learners in the solitude of forest, the system of education initiated by Tagore was marked by synergy of nature as its most important constituent. Tagore's conscious endeavor to protect environment and get education linked with nature had emanated from his admiration of ancient Indian cultural scenario. This idea has been echoed in his *The Religion of Forest* (Das 1996: 513) – “The hermitage shines out in all our ancient literature, as the place where the chasm between man and the rest of creation has been bridged”.

In another illuminating essay Tagore tried to establish that despite certain divergences due to passage of time, he tried to maintain a delightful cohesion with the earth in the education system, initiated by him in Santiniketan – “... it might not be an exact copy of the past, many contractions well be there, even a few opposites may persist, but the principal ideal will remain intact. It could not be maintained always, the nature of the school changed – even then the relation between teacher and the taught, and a bonding of nearness I tried to maintain. (*Rabindra Rachanavali* Vol. 14, Calcutta, 27 Baisakh, 1982: 463-464).

Tagore believed that Indian civilization flourished in the cradle of forest and even in the present perspective he felt the utility of serene and calm environment for promoting education. In his opinion, the trees, the transparent sky, the open air, clear lake, beautiful scenery these are no less in importance to bench and board, manuscript and examination.

Tagore established another school *Sikshasatra* in Shriniketan to make the village boys grow up in the serene beauty of nature and to make them self-reliant with training of 3 Rs – reading writing and elementary Mathematics.

In another illuminating essay *A poets School* (1926) where he described Robinson Crusoe as one of the best books for boys that has ever been composed, Tagore explained the reason for such a selection by stating – “Robinson Crusoe's island comes to my mind when I think of an institution where the first great

lesson in the perfect union of man and nature not only through love, but through active communication, can be had unobstructed. (Tagore 1926: 8). His mission and vision of Visva-Bharati where he nurtured man-nature bonding to blossom in an orchestrated symphony, has been voiced in another essay *The educational mission of the Visva-Bharati* (1930) – “I believed that children should be surrounded with the things of nature that have their own educational value. Their mind should be allowed to stumble on and be surprised at everything that happens before them in the life of today. The new tomorrow will stimulate their attention with new facts of life”. (Das 1996: 626).

Another novel experiment initiated by Tagore to highlight synergy with nature was exemplified in the inclusion of function and festivities in the curricula of his institution i. e. Visva-Bharati. Planting of saplings and Ploughing – these two functions which are still practiced in Visva-Bharati aptly demonstrate Tagore’s concern for protection of land and sincere attempt for harvesting has been exemplified in his speech delivered on the occasion of ploughing and planting of saplings in Sriniketan, 1345 B.S. He categorically stated that this function has two parts – the first one is ploughing which is required for crops, for our survival. But the damage inflicted on the earth by ploughing has to be compensated. To do our duty to mother earth, to elevate her pain from the wound – planting of sapling has been arranged. In his introduction to Elmhirst’s address *The Robbery of the Soil*, Tagore explicitly declared why environment requires due credence – “Mother Earth has enough for the healthy appetite of her children and something extra for rare cases of abnormality. But she has not nearly sufficient for the sudden growth of a wholesome world of spoil and pampered children”. (Fraser, Mukherjee, Sen 2018: 203).

As a matter of fact, flora and fauna of nature and environment captured the poet’s imagination and were considered as inseparable part of human entity. His love for trees, plants and surrounding environment found its nicest expression in his collection of poems *Bonobani* (1926).

Another significant feature of Tagore’s philosophy of nature and environment was inter-wined with community welfare. In his essay *The educational mission of Visva-Bharati*, he made this point amply clear – “From the commencement of our work we have encouraged our children to be of service to our neighbors from which has grown up a village reconstruction work in our neighborhood,

unique in the whole of India. Round our educational work the villages have grouped themselves in which the symphony for nature and service for man have become one. (Das 1996: 627). On August 29, 1923 he emphasized the role of Visva-Bharati in the eradication of Malaria. He emphatically stated that he sincerely wanted to bring together education in close proximity with the day to day life of the villagers. He pointed out time and again that community consciousness is needed to clean the environment. Tagore's sincere endeavor to connect education with environment and community service found its fruition in developing a group of dedicated young boys – *Brati* boys who will visit villages and train the common man in basic hygiene, conservation of environment etc.

In the context of the present discussion, the question which confronts us is: can we apply the modern theory of eco-criticism to Tagore's work? While extending eco-criticism to Shakespearian studies, Simon C. Estok attempted to seek analogies between ecosystem and imaginative texts to project a regenerative ecological function between such texts and the cultural system. (Estok 2005: 16-17). In the light of this concept, Tagore's two dramas *Muktadhara* (*Waterfall*, 1922) and *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*, 1926) may be analysed.

In *waterfall*, the scene is laid in the mountainous land of *Uttarakuta* facing the temple of Bhairab. Bibhuti, the royal engineer had succeeded in building up a dam across the waterfall. In consequence the people of Shibtorai were deprived of water. Tagore has exemplified in this drama how marginalized people were always coerced because of unrestrained lust of the strong. Bibhuti unabashedly states that it hardly matters what would happen to some wretched maize fields of some wretched cultivator or other. Power politics is also intertwined with this effort to subjugate nature. The hero Abhijit is thoroughly against enslaving nature and cries out when he cannot endure the monster that mutes the music of earth. Finally Abhijit destroys the damn and loses his life. The concept of eco ethics has nicely been propagated by Tagore.

In *Raktakarabi* (*The Red Oleanders*), the king is extracting huge chunks of gold from the depth of earth, but hardly dares to come out from darkness, whereas Nandini has been described as nature incarnate. Professor describes her as the light that startles in the dark region. Finally Tagore hinted at the transformation of the king when he started his journey for liberating nature from clutches of anarchy.

The concept of eco-friendly education which swept Europe in thirties found its staunch supporter in Rabindranath. He invited Patrick Geddes, the Scottish educationist to Santiniketan. Later his son Arthur Geddes came to Santiniketan and did his Ph.D. on rural reconstruction work, undertaken in Sriniketan. The arid land of Santiniketan had become an abode of greenery through persistent efforts of Tagore and his son Rathindranath. The flowerbed of *Uttarayana* complex surrounded by five houses – *Udayana*, *Konarka*, *Shyamoli*, *Udichi* and *Punascha* is indeed a source of joy for an environmentalist even today. Even in the architectural designs of the buildings, environmental factors had been accorded top priority. The building *Shyamoli* (1935) was indeed an architectural marvel as it was completely made of mud as per instruction of Rabindranath. It is no wonder therefore that this particular building was extreme favorite of Tagore and he considered it as his last resort.

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, an innovative educator, a philosopher, a protagonist of Universal humanism and at the same time an environmentalist of highest magnitude. What he wrote on February 14, 1941, a few months before his demise amply testifies his love for mother earth and its environment.

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 “Sweet is the world,
 Sweet the dust of it,
 This great hymn I chant in my heart,
 It makes my life significant”.

(Bose 1959: 69).

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