

# IMPACT OF TAGORE ON MODERN INDIA

## Part I: Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Calcutta on 7 May, 1861 and passed away in Calcutta on 6 August, 1941. At the time of his birth there were three revolutionary movements in Bengal. The first was the great socio-religious movement of the Brahmo Samaj<sup>1</sup>, started by Rammohun Roy (b. 1772, d. 1833) in the early years of the nineteenth century which sought to break through the shackles of established beliefs and rigid social customs of the Indian society of the time. After the death of Rammohun Roy in England in 1833 the second leader of the Brahmo Samaj was Devendranath, the father of Rabindranath. The Brahmo movement accepted universal theism and brotherhood of all men, completely rejected all idols and icons, the infallibility of the Vedas (and other scriptures) and caste differences; and proclaimed the equality of rights of men and women and of all castes, races and nations of the world. The Brahmo movement was also associated with early educational, political and literary efforts in Bengal; and its influence gradually spread to other parts of India.

The second was the first creative revolutionary movement in Bengali literature. Rammohun Roy had translated into Bengali some of the most difficult philosophical books in Sanskrit (the Upanishads); had given an original commentary on the monistic philosophy of the *Vedanta*; and had also written many tracts on social and political subjects. He was followed by other social reformers through literature and philosophical writers, like Iswar

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1. Brahmo Samaj (Theistic Church) for worship and adoration of the Eternal, Unsearchable, Immutable being.

Chandra Vidyasagar (b. 1820, d. 1891) and Akshaya Kumar Dutta (b. 1820, d. 1886). A true renaissance of Bengali literature started with Madhusudan Dutt (b. 1824, d. 1873), the first great poet of modern Bengal, Hem Chandra Banerjee (b. 1838, d. 1903) another poet, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (b. 1838, d. 1894), novelist and essayist, who were all alive and had already established their reputation when Tagore was young.

The third was the beginnings of a national (political) movement. Rammohun Roy had initiated some of the early thinking on politics, but ideas began to be more definite at the time of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore. The "Sepoy Mutiny" (as it was called by the British), which had occurred in 1857, only four years before Tagore was born, was somewhat restricted in character. The national movement in Bengal was based on more comprehensive ideas of both cultural and political independence of the whole country.

The Tagore family very actively participated in all the three movements; and Rabindranath was brought up in an atmosphere of intense social, religious, political and cultural activities which no doubt exercised a deep influence on his life.

Rabindranath was mostly educated at home. He started writing verse when he was a young child; translated into Bengali Shakespeare's *Macbeth* at the age of 13; and published his first poem at the age of 14. The works of the early *Vaishnava*<sup>1</sup> poets of Bengal were being printed at this time; and the young poet published a series of poems in the old tradition under an assumed name (Bhanusinha Thakur) which many people thought to be that of a

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1. *Vaishnava* is the name given to the Hindu sect the members of which worship Vishnu in a special way. The immortal tale of the long separation and final reunion of Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu and his mortal counterpart Radha is the main theme of *Vaishnava* literature.

genuine old poet. From 1875 Rabindranath made regular contributions to Bengali literature for 66 years until his death in 1941 ; and many posthumous publications were issued after his death.

Rabindranath read a great deal of English literature, and also learnt some German and read Heine and Goethe's Faust in the original ; he also read the works of many other European writers (like Dante, Moliere, Schiller) in translation at an early age. Study of English and European literature, in combination with the study of the *Upanishads* and Sanskrit classics and Bengali literature, gave him a very wide cultural outlook. Throughout his life he was also very fond of reading books on science, travel, art, philosophy and modern literature of different countries of the world including Russia.

Tagore's position in Indian literature is unique, with lyric poetry holding the first place and also in sonnets, narrative poems, blank verse, drama, comedy, musical and satirical plays and prose-poems. He is one of the great short-story writers of the world ; a foremost novelist ; and an essayist and writer of articles on almost all subjects including literary and historical criticism, social reform, politics, education, popular science, biographical studies, religion and philosophy. There is practically no form of literature in which he did not make outstanding contributions. He made important studies on Bengali language and grammar. He was a great educationist who founded the Santiniketan School in 1901, actively participated in teaching and wrote improved text-books for young students and also popular books and articles on science. He was a great musician and composed over two thousand songs in Bengali which he set mostly to new tunes and melodies composed by him ; this started an entirely new school of Indian music now known as "Tagore Music". He was a powerful public speaker and greatest actor of his time in India. He started making pictures in black and

white at the age of 65, and in colour at 69; and exhibitions of his pictures and paintings were held in Paris, Berlin, London, New York, Moscow and other places in 1930's.

His personal biographical history can be given very briefly. He married at the age of 22 and lost his wife at the age of 40, but did not marry again. He had two sons and three daughters of whom one son and one daughter survived him.

His public activities were extensive, about which something has been already mentioned. He founded a residential school "Brahma Vidyalaya" at Santiniketan about 150 kilometres from Calcutta in 1901 and converted it into an international cultural centre called "Visva-bharati" in 1921 which is now a University of the same name. He was associated with most of the progressive movements in the country. He visited Europe for the first time at the age of 17 for a few months with the intention of studying in London, but decided to return to India to grow up in the cultural traditions of his own country. In later life he undertook eleven foreign tours, in the course of which he visited most of the countries in Europe, Canada, USA and some countries of South America, and also China, Japan, other Asian countries and the Middle East. He also visited Moscow and wrote a series of letters from Russia which are well-known and in which he gave an illuminating description of the new society which was being built in USSR.

The first book of English translation of his poems (called *Gitanjali*: Song Offerings) was published in 1912 which attracted world-wide attention and subsequently many other books were translated into foreign languages. A recent survey by UNESCO shows that he is one of the most translated authors in the world with translations into ( I believe ) 52 languages.

## Part 2 : Social and Political ideas

Rabindranath Tagore was known outside India chiefly as a great poet and writer. In India, however, he was not merely a literary figure, He played a most significant part in giving form to the present age of India. I shall speak briefly on this aspect of his life,

Rabindranath Tagore had started writing social and political articles at an early age not only on Indian but international affairs. At the age of 20 he made scathing criticism of some aggressive nations for the continuation, by military force, of the opium trade in China (1881).<sup>1</sup> Of Indian politics he took a very wide view and considered it as an integral part of social activities and progress. At the age of 20, he had insisted that political progress was not possible without removing social injustices. He said :

“Unless we have faith in freedom, knowing it to be creative, and manfully taking all its risks, not only do we lose the right to claim freedom in politics, but also we lose the power to maintain freedom with all our strength. Men who contemptuously treat their own brothers as eternal babies, never to be trusted in the most trivial details of their personal life and coercing them at every step by the cruel threats of persecution, often driving them into hypocrisy and into moral inertia—they will fail over and over again to rise to the height of their true severe responsibility.”<sup>2</sup>

Here he was attacking social injustices of his own country and pointing out that true freedom cannot be won without removing such injustices. In 1883,

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1. *Chine maraner Byabasāy* : The traffic of death in China (*Bhārati*, May, 1881, Pp. 98-100),
  2. *The Spirit of Freedom* a letter from New York to the author's own countrymen (*Creative Unity*, p. 139 )

at the age of 22, on the opening of a "national fund"<sup>1</sup> for political purposes, he warned his countrymen against political agitation being made the exclusive object of the proposed fund; and said that a policy of "begging favours from the white masters" would only foster an infantile mentality of irresponsible criticism or a spirit of parasitic dependence on foreign rulers.<sup>2</sup> He urged that vigorous attempts should be made to awaken the consciousness of the Indian masses by spreading education and to create self-reliance by initiating welfare work by our own efforts. This may be compared with some of the basic ideas of the mass movement started by Mahatma Gandhi nearly 40 years later.

In 1892, at the second session of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta, he sang the opening song "Assembled are we today at the call of Mother" (that is India) which was composed by him for the occasion. In 1898 he made a vigorous plea for the use of the mother tongue (instead of English) as the medium of education in Indian schools<sup>3</sup> which has been now accepted 60 years later, as public policy in India.

From 1890's he continually made vigorous criticisms of the reactionary policies of the British Government, and made a public protest against the passing of a new Sedition Act by the British Government in 1898 but he never became an active politician. In fact, his awareness of the deep social foundations of politics made him increasingly concerned with the weakness of the educational system; and he decided to start a school at Santiniketan in 1901, and continued to give it his personal attention for 40 years till his death in 1941.

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1. "National fund" (article in Bengali) *Bhārati*, October, 1888.

2. *Chatrader prati Sambhasan* : ( *Shiksha* )

3. *Sikahār bāhan* : ( *Siksha* )

It is significant that he selected Santiniketan for this purpose. His father Devandranath had built here a guest house and a place for meditation in the midst of an open country and had dedicated it for the use of everyone who wished to meditate on God, free from all antagonisms of race, creed or religious sects. Rabindranath was thinking of the ancient *tapovana* (forest homes) of India :

“The one abiding ideal in India has been... communion with the universe... this can be made possible only by making provision for the students to live in intimate touch with nature, daily to grow in an atmosphere of service offered to all creatures, tending trees, feeding birds and animals, learning to feel the immense mystery of soil water and air”.<sup>1</sup>

In 1907 he said :

“At one time we had a mind of our own in India which was alive and which could think and express itself. Our mind was both receptive and creative. Education must liberate the mind of India to seek truth, and to make truth its own whatever be its origin. Our education must be in harmony with our complete life, economic, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual; and our educational institutions should be the very heart of our society”.<sup>2</sup>

He laid great emphasis on education maintaining close touch with the economic life of the people :

“Our centre of culture should not be only the centre of intellectual life but the centre of economic life also. It must cultivate land, breed cattle, weave cloth, produce the necessities of life, calling science to its aid, and uniting teachers and students in productive:

1. An Eastern University : ( *Creative Unity*, p, 201 ). See also *Sikshar milan* ( *Siksha* )
2. The Centre of Indian Culture ( Address delivered at a Convocation of the National University. Adyar. Madras. 1918 ) Pp 1-2.

activities on cooperative principles whose motive force would not be greed of profit. Such an institution must group round it all neighbouring villages virtually unite them itself in all economic endeavours.”<sup>1</sup>

These were advanced ideas fifty years ago in the whole world ; and are perhaps being properly appreciated today to some extent, in the USSR, China and other socialised countries. In India some of Tagore's ideas were accepted, in principle in the theory of “basic education” which was formulated under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi about twenty or twenty-five years later ; but, unfortunately, there has not been satisfactory implementation of these ideas in practice. However, it seems to me that India will have to go back to Tagore's ideas in order to solve the problem of education of the youth of the country.

In addition to his literary and educational activities, he continued to take active part in political movement from time to time. In 1904 the British Government partitioned the province of Bengal into two parts one in the West and the other in the East ; and the first massive nationalist movement of India started in Bengal in protest against this partition. Rabindranath composed many patriotic songs and led big processions singing these songs in the streets of Calcutta, and wrote articles and gave public speeches to strengthen the national movement. He looked upon this movement not as a narrow, purely political, agitation but as a great opportunity for constructive work for the reorganisation of society. He was convinced that our real problem centred around villages, and he said :

“It is not enough to try to remove wants ; you can never remove them completely from the outside ;

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1. The Centre of Indian Culture ( Address delivered at a Convocation of the National University, Adyar Madras. 1918 ), p-47- See also Sikshār Milan ( Siksha )

the far greater thing is to rouse the will of the people to remove their own wants."<sup>1</sup>

He recommended that bands of workers should be organised to give a new objective to village life; to build schools, roads, water reservoirs, grazing commons and the like; to go from village to village with new compositions of *yātrā* (folk-drama) and songs and magic lanterns and cinemas; deliver lectures on sanitation, arrange exhibitions of home-made goods and agricultural produce; and try to unite Hindus and Muslims as well as the rich and poor in common endeavours for welfare.<sup>2</sup> In 1913 he purchased some land at Surul village (near Santiniketan) to start experiments in agriculture, cattle breeding, and village arts and crafts which developed a few years later into Sriniketan, the Institute of Rural Reconstruction.

It would be recognized that the ideas, which Tagore had expounded more than fifty years ago, now form in many ways the basic principles of the Community Project movement in India; and the importance of rural reconstruction is being increasingly recognized by political leaders in the country. It is also worth mentioning that about 60 years ago Tagore (although himself belonging to a family of landlords) had advocated the abolition of the land-lord system (*zamindari* based on permanent settlement) with redistribution of land. Tagore was also a strong advocate of agricultural cooperatives. These ideas have been now accepted by the Government of India, and it is hoped that vigorous efforts would be made to implement them at an early date.

I shall now briefly refer to some of his other political ideas. He always said Indians should not continually look to the foreign rulers for political concessions, but

1. *The Growth of Visva-Bharati, 1901-1921*, p. 6

2. *Ewadeshi Samaj (Samuha)*

should concentrate their efforts on building up a strong organisation of national life which would be independent of the foreign Government.

In 1909, in a drama called *Prāyaschitta* (Atone-ment) Tagore worked in a remarkable manner the philosophy and technique of "non-cooperation" against tyranny in the character of *Dhananjaya Bairagi* who led a vigorous movement against the reactionary policies of a tyrannical king, and went to prison rather than have recourse to violence. The poet himself took the part of *Bairagi* when the play was staged in the Santiniketan School. This drama completely anticipated in a literary form, the non-cooperation movement started by Mahatma Gandhi ten years later.

The problem of Hindu-Muslim unity was continually in his mind. He had always insisted that Hindu-Muslim unity was the only sound foundation of national strength. He continually pointed out that Indian culture was not to be identified with Hinduism. At the time of the great political movement, called "*swadeshi*" (patriotic) movement of 1905, he composed many patriotic songs of which perhaps the most famous was one in which he prayed for the "unity of all brothers and sisters of Bengal." As this movement progressed he felt that it was becoming too predominantly Hindu in character and that sufficient attention was not being given to win the wholehearted support of Muslims. This was possibly one of the reasons which made him withdraw gradually from this movement. A few years later, in 1915, in his well-known novel "*Ghare-bāire*" (translated as "Home and the World") he strongly criticised the tendency to give the national patriotic movement a Hindu character; these criticisms made him unpopular with one section of his countrymen. It is also well-known that he was unable to accept Bankim Chandra Chattetjee's song "*Bande-mātaram*" as truly

national because it stressed the image of *Durgā* the Hindu goddess as "Mother India."

It is significant that only about four months before his death when he was unable to write himself, he dictated a sketch of a short story which was left unfinished in which the theme was the social relations of Hindus and Muslims.

It must be confessed that Tagore's vision of Hindu-Muslim unity was not fulfilled; and the failure to achieve such unity was the basic cause of the Partition of India in 1947. It may even be said that Tagore's vision still remains valid. Without a deep understanding between Hindus and Muslims there can never be stable peace and prosperity in India and Pakistan.

### Part 3: Message of India

It will be appropriate at this stage to consider the message which the history of India had for Rabindranath Tagore. In 1908 he said :

"In India the history of humanity is seeking to achieve a definite synthesis. The history of India is not the history of Aryans or non-Aryans; it is not the history of the Hindus, nor a history of Hindus and Muslims taken together. Of late the British have come in.....This was not an accidental or uncalled-for intrusion. If India had been deprived of the touch of the West, she would have lacked an element essential for the attainment of perfection. On us today is thrown the responsibility of the building of a Greater India in which Hindus and Muslims and Christians will find their place."<sup>1</sup>

He always emphasised the fact that in India it is not possible to reach uniformity by eliminating all

1. The Growth of the Visva-Bharati, 1901-1921, p. 10

ethnic and cultural differences. India must reach unity and harmony amidst diversities.

Tagore was continually drawing inspiration from Rammohun Roy who, Tagore often said, was his hero :

“Rammohun was the only person in his time, in the whole world of man, to realise completely the significance of the Modern Age. He knew the ideal of human civilization does not lie in the isolation of independence, but in the brotherhood of interdependence of individuals as well as of nations in all spheres of thought and activity.....Therefore, he represented India in the fullness of truth : and this truth is based, not upon rejection, but on perfect comprehension.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1911 Tagore composed a song which gave expression to his view of India and which proclaims :

Thou art the Ruler of the minds of all peoples,  
Thou Dispenser of India's destiny :

Day and night thy voice goes from land to land  
calling Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, and Parsis,  
Mussalman, and Christians round thy throne :

Offerings are brought to thy shrine by the East and  
the West to be woven in a garland of love :

Thou bringest the hearts of all peoples into the  
harmony of the life :

Thou Dispenser of India's destiny : Victory, Victory,  
Victory to thee’<sup>2</sup>

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1. Presidential Address by Rabindranath at the Rammohan Roy Centenary meeting on 18 February 1933, *Father of Modern India*, Part 2, p. 4. See also *Bharat Pathik Rammohun Roy*.

2. Pooms, p- 58 translated from the original Bengali song “*Jana gana mana adhinayaka jaya he*” composed in 1911 and first sung at the session of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta in 1911. It was first published in *Dharma Sangit* in 1914.

This is the famous song with the refrain "*jaya he jaya he jaya he*" (victory, victory, victory to thee) which was adopted as the national song of India after independence in 1947.

#### Part 4 : Nationalism and humanism

During the First World War there were great expectations of constitutional reforms in India ; but the British Government did not make any substantial concessions. There was great disappointment and meetings of protest began to be held all over the country. In 1919, one such meeting of unarmed citizens was being held at a Square, Jalianwala Bagh in Amritsar in the Punjab, when fire was opened by the army and many people were massacred. This was followed by the declaration of Martial Law, and the whole country was numbed into silence. It was Rabindranath Tagore alone who took action, and renounced the Knighthood (which had been conferred on him by the British King five years ago) "taking all consequences upon himself in giving voice to millions of his countrymen surprised into dumb anguish of terror." He did this in the name of humanity without any desire to increase political bitterness.

I remember he was extremely upset when he began to get the news of Jalianwala Bagh massacre and of Martial Law and became physically ill and was ordered to stay in bed by physicians so great was his mental anguish. One evening he asked me not to come to his house next day. When I went to see him early next morning, just before sunrise, I found he had kept awake the whole night and he was writing at his table and had just finished the letter to the British Viceroy protesting against the cruel oppression and renouncing his Knighthood. After despatching the letter, he completely recovered and became cheerful. That very afternoon he started writing his greatest prose-poems which

were published later in the Bengali book *Lipika* (which, however, had nothing to do with politics.)

I should like to add one magnificent fact. Some time later a movement was started by our countrymen to erect a memorial at Jalianwala Bagh, but Tagore refused to support this proposal, because he said there was nothing to commemorate, and it was something shameful for the British and the Indian crowd also had been all trying to flee and did not fight, so that there was nothing heroic on their part to remember.

After the First World War he travelled widely in Europe and then in USA. He became convinced of the great need for promoting international goodwill and peace through the meeting of the cultures of the world. On 22 December 1922 he founded at Santiniketan an international centre (university) for which he coined a new word, "Visva-bharati" (which literally means "message of universe") and adopted a Vedic text as its motto "*yatra visvam bhavati ekamidam*"<sup>1</sup> which means :

"Where the whole world finds its single shelter."

Rabindranath Tagore influenced Indian thought deeply. On his seventieth birthday in 1931, Jawaharlal Nehru sent the following message :

"I wish to pay my homage to one who has become a beacon light to all of us, ever pointing to finer and nobler aspects of life, and never allowing us to fall into ruts which kill individuals as well as nations. Nationalism when it urges us to fight for freedom, is noble and life-giving. But often it becomes a narrow creed, and limits and encompasses its votaries and make them forget the mansidedness of life. But Rabindranath Tagore had given our nationalism the outlook of internationalism, and had enriched it with art and music and the magic

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1. *Āshramer rup o bikas (Visva Bharati Bulletin 29, 1941)*

of his words, so that it has become the full-blooded emblem of India's awakened spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Tagore's vision has been partly fulfilled. India has again a place among the nations and is again offering hospitality to the different cultures of the world.

### Part 5 : Meeting of cultures

The meeting of cultures had two different aspects in his mind. He welcomed the West because of its great gift of science :

"Let us admit that modern science is Europe's great gift to humanity. We in India must claim it from her hands and gratefully accept it in order to be saved from the curse of futility by lagging behind."<sup>2</sup>

"I say again that we must accept when it comes from the West and not hesitate to render it our tribute of admiration. Unless we accept it our civilization will be one-sided, it will remain stagnant. Science gives us the power of reason, enabling us to be actively conscious of the worth of our own ideals."<sup>3</sup>

Tagore fully acknowledged the greatness of :

"the Europe who, with a mind which is titanic in its untiring power, is sweeping the height and the depth of the universe, winning her homage of knowledge from the infinitely great and the infinitely small, the Europe who is making the earth yield more fruit than seemed possible, coercing and compelling the great forces of nature into men's service."<sup>4</sup>

1. *Golden Book of Tagore*, p. 183.

2. *An Eastern University (Creative Unity)*, p. 193).

3. *Talks in China*, p. 68. See also *Purba O Paschim : East and West (Samaj)*.

4. *Nationalism in Japan (Nationalism)*, p. 65).

A second aspect was the need of transcending the barriers of aggressive nationalism. Tagore had rejected this exclusive nationalism in his Bengali writings between 1898 and 1902 and had characterised it as "based on the blind pursuit of selfish ends and brute force and falsehood".

"The spirit of conflict and conquest is at the origin and in the centre of Western nationalism ; it has evolved a perfect organisation of power but not of spiritual values."<sup>1</sup>

On the last day of the nineteenth century he wrote a sonnet in Bengali in which he made the prophecy :

"The last sun of the century sets amidst the bloodshed clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred. The naked passion of self-love of nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance."<sup>2</sup>

After his return to India in 1921 he concentrated his own efforts on building up Visva-Bharati as a meeting place of different cultures of the world. Mahatma Gandhi had by that time started the "Non-cooperation" movement, but in spite of much pressure, Tagore refused to join this movement because he was out of sympathy with what he felt was a negative and isolationist outlook. He explained his own views in two lectures in Bengali in 1921 (in translation, "Call of Truth", and "The Meeting of Cultures", and said : <sup>3</sup>

"It is a fact of unique importance in the history of the world today that the human races have come

1. Nationalism in the West (*Nationalism*, p. 21).

2 The Sunset of the Century (*Naivedya*, p. 75 ; Satādir surya āji rakta megh mā,he.....tr. by the poet as "The Sunset of the century", *Nationalism*, p. 138 )

3. Satyer Ahwān, a lecture delivered at the Calcutta University Institute on 29 August 1921 and Sikshār milan, a lecture delivered in Calcutta on 15 August, 1921.

together as they have never done before. In the olden days geographical barriers had kept them apart. The advance of modern science has altered the situation irrevocably. The physical barriers between man and man have been overcome, only the barriers of habit remain. In place of the national obstacles of the past, they put up their own artificial modes of exclusion—their armaments, their prohibitive tariffs, their national politics and diplomacies.”<sup>1</sup>

“The mentality of the world has to be changed in order to meet the new environment of the modern age. To accept the truth of our own age it will become necessary to establish a new education on the basis, not of nationalism, but of a wider relationship of humanity,”<sup>2</sup>

He went on protesting against the use of military power for aggressive nationalistic purposes :

“The blind confidence of the strong in their apparent invincibility has often led them, from their dream of security, into terrible surprises of history... The time has come to use all our wisdom to understand the situation, and to control it.”<sup>3</sup>

“It is in cooperation and love and mutual aid which makes for strength and real progress of civilization. New spiritual and moral powers must continually be developed to enable man to assimilate their scientific gains, to control their new weapons and machines or these will dominate, enslave, and slay them.”<sup>4</sup>

These words were spoken more than forty years ago during his visit to Japan in 1916 ; and they have become even more valid to-day after the discovery of hydrogen bombs and guided missiles.

1. *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Vol. 1 (April 1923), Pp. 2-3.

2. *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* Vol. 1 (April 1923), Pp. 2-3.

3. *An Eastern University (Creative Unity)*, p. 170

4. *Talks in China*, p. 74

Tagore continually spoke against the political aggressiveness of the West which, he said :

"is based on exclusiveness. It is always watchful to keep the aliens at bay or to exterminate them. It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies ; it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future. It is always afraid of other races achieving eminence, naming it a peril."<sup>1</sup>

These words were spoken in 1916, but are perhaps even more valid at the present time.

During his visit to China in 1924 he said :

"That we should welcome science from the West is right. We have a great thing to accept from the people of the West—their treasure of intellect, which is immense and whose superiority we must acknowledge."<sup>2</sup>

But he also pointed out :

"The West is becoming demoralized through being the exploiter, through tasting of the fruits of exploitation ...Physical power is not the strongest in the end. It destroys itself. Machine guns and bomb-dropping aeroplanes crush living men under them and the West is sinking to its dust"<sup>3</sup>

He said :

"Truth,—any truth that man acquires—is for all. Science also is truth. It has its own place, in the healing of the sick, and in the giving of more food, more leisure for life. But when it helps the strong to crush the weaker, that is using truth for impious ends and those who are so sacrilegious will suffer and be punished, for their own weapons will be turned against them."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Nationalism in Japan (*Nationalism*, Pp. 59-60)

2. Talks in China, p. 67

3. Talks in China, p. 70. See also Nababaraha : New Year (*Swadesh*)

4. Talks in China, Pp. 84-85

In his address to students in Peking in 1924 he spoke of the barriers between nations and said :

“This age, that still persists, must be described as the darkest age in human civilization. But I do not despair…… My heart sings to proclaim the coming of a great future which is already close to us. We must be ready to welcome this new age.”<sup>1</sup>

“What a delight it must be for you, and what responsibility, this belonging to a period which is one of the greatest in the whole history of man! We realise the greatness of this age dimly,……in the suffering that has come upon us, a suffering that is world-wide ; we do not even know fully what form it is going to take.”<sup>2</sup>

“In human history, though the forces of creation work oftenest in the dark, it is the privilege of man to give them direction, and thus to take part in the development of his own destiny. The sheath of the present age has burst. It lies in you, in each one of you, to give this new-born life the impulse of growth.”<sup>3</sup>

A few years later, in 1930 Tagore visited Moscow and wrote a series of letters in Bengali in which he gave a most wonderful account of the new impulse of creative activity in USSR. He started by saying that

“the pilgrimage of this life of mine would not have been complete without visiting USSR”

and although conditions of life were very hard at that time, he had the prophetic vision to see the bright future of a new civilization. Throughout the remaining period of his life he used to refer to what he had seen in USSR. (I need

1. Talks in China p. 83

2. Talks in China, p. 87

3. Talks in China, p. 87

not give more details as his letters from USSR have been translated into the Russian language).

Tagore had complete faith in the message of peace. In 1935 he quoted Budha who had said "conquer anger by compassion," and pointed out :

"The world saw the end of a terrible war only the other day. The victory that crowned one group of belligerents was a victory of armed might ; but, because brute force is not man's supreme source of strength, that victory has proved unfruitful and is only sowing seeds of fresh dissensions. Man's strength lies in mercy and compassion."<sup>1</sup>

Tagore was a great lover of peace. His message was the meeting of cultures in peace. But he never accepted abstract pacifism. In a Bengali poem<sup>2</sup> he had written :

Where tolerance is weakness  
O Terrible, let me be ruthless.  
At your bidding, let true words flash  
From my mouth, like a sword  
At your signal."

When the Second World War broke out in 1939 his spirit became more and more troubled. I remember the day in 1940 when travelling by train to Santiniketan, I heard the news over the radio at a railway station, that Fascist Germany had invaded Norway. When I reached Santiniketan I learnt that Rabindranath had also heard the news. It was then time for his evening meal but he was in such mental anguish that he could not take any food. When I entered his room, his face was dark with pain ; and he burst out saying : "The demons are now in Norway. They will not leave any one untouched." And

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1. Buddhadeva (translated by Somnath Maitra from the original address in Bengali on 18 May, 1935 at Mahabodhi Hall) *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. 22, no. 3. See also *Buddhadev*, p. 11

2. *Naivedya*, p. 81 : Tomār nyayer danda pratyeker tare.....

he went on continually to speak of Norway, of the people Norway, and how they were suffering.

On his 80th birthday, three months before his death, he wrote his last essay in Bengali on "The Crisis of Civilization" which he concluded with the following words :

"As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility, and yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in man, I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in history after the cataclysm is over.....A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage."<sup>1</sup>

Today we witness the perils which attend the insolence of might, one day will bear out the full truth of what the sages have proclaimed and quoted a sanskrit verse which means :

"By unrighteousness man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root,"

Tagore had retained firm faith in the future of human civilization :

"Let us then be glad with a certainty of faith that we are born to this age when the nations are coming together. This bloodshed and misery cannot go on for ever.....There are signs that the new age has arrived."

This was Tagore's message to humanity.<sup>2</sup>

I may conclude with my last talk with Rabindranath Tagore, half an hour before the surgical operation, from the shock of which he died. In his last illness in July 1941, he waited eagerly every day for the news of the war in Russia. Again and again, he used to say Russia's victory

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1. Crisis in Civilization, Pp. 17-18 authorized Translation of the original Bengali address 'Sabhyatār Bankat' delivered on completing his eightieth year in May 1941 (tr. by Kshitis Roy and revised by K. R. Kripalani and the author)

2. Talks in China, p. 58

would give him great happiness. Every morning, he would hope there was good news. If the news happened to be bad for Russia, he would throw away the newspaper and not read it any more.

On the day of the operation, half an hour before he was placed on the operation table, he asked me, "Tell me the news about Russia." When I said the war had taken a better turn, his face was beaming and he said: "Will it not be? It must be. It has got to be better. They can do it. Only they will do it,"<sup>1</sup>

Those were his last words to me. I am fortunate indeed to have seen in the light of his face his firm faith in the glory of man.

1. they—Russians; "Only they will do it" in this context means "Only the Russians will win victory".

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