

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE: SOME REFLECTIONS*

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Human beings' history of civilisation, broadly speaking, is their history of emancipation from Nature. It is an ongoing process of exercising their power of reason to conquer Nature. By means of their technological and rational astuteness they are trying to emancipate from the compulsion of natural necessity. Their power of reasoning leads them to make a distinction between human and non-human nature and on the basis of power of reasoning they deny the strength and integrity of every living and non-living being and dominates over Nature too. As a result human beings alienate themselves from the whole Nature. But the great divorce between human and nature is threatening now the entire humanity. Human beings are now is forced to 'rethink' about Nature. As a consequence, various environmental issues are emerged and thoughts are developed. But most of these are raised from the interest of their own species. The aim of these thoughts is to protect environment in order to protect human species. Such a view is anthropocentric and ultimately leads them to think human beings as an individual detached from Nature. It treats Nature as 'other' than human beings and environmental degradation is going on in the interest of human.

Thinkers of different countries express their views on environment in different times. Rabindranath Tagore is aptly considered as one of the fifty leading thinkers of the world on environment. His poems, short stories, novels and essays exhibit his love, concern and responsibility for Nature. In this paper an attempt has been made to explore the contention that Tagore's approach is different from anthropocentric view in this sense that he "who's soul seems at once to vibrate in full harmony with the orchestra of melodies and echoes reflected from the sound of rushing waters, from the songs of birds, from the rustling of leaves" cannot see himself detached from Nature. Tagore compares this detachment of the man from Nature is like "dividing the bud and the blossom into separate categories and putting their grace to the credit of two different and antithetical principles" (Tagore, 1972 p. 7). His love and care for Nature on aesthetic ground, on the

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other hand, has become one of the major thrust of field of concern for environmentalists throughout the world today.

The development and progress of civilization is always taking place at the cost of Nature which includes not only non-human beings but also human beings of marginalized class. The logic behind to build a dam on the river, or more nuclear power station, or to open a new mine on the edge of a national park, is to increase employment or to bring comfort for the human beings. All these are doing through the destruction of biological diversity, disturbing the harmony of nature and ecological balance.

The basic structure of world view through which human beings continues the domination over and destruction of Nature is based on the rules of two-valued logic. It always divides the world into two opposite parts where the one always is considered superior to the other. Thus, Nature is subordinated to human and the progress of civilization is going on at the expense of the Nature.¹ Peter Singer, in *Practical Ethics* upholds the view that the Western culture and tradition is somehow responsible for the dominating attitude of human over nature. He states that Aristotle maintained a hierarchy in Nature where creatures with less reasoning ability exist for the sake of beings with more reasoning ability.²

This dichotomy is nurtured by the enlightenment theory too. The Cartesian concept of dualism makes a difference between spirit and matter. Later, Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest makes the difference broad. The mainstream Christianity, at least its first eighteen centuries, was dominated by the tradition that the natural world exists for the benefit of human beings. As a result, the entire universe other than the human beings is treated as the means of the progress of human civilization. Nature has no intrinsic value. Even the preservation of Nature is considered only from the standpoint of human interest. Environmental concern of Rabindranath is different from such attitude. Through his writings and speeches he has spoken about the kinship of man and Nature, the breaking of which, according to him, brings sorrow and misery. He admits the intrinsic value of Nature.

Rabindranath acknowledges the kinship of man with Nature, the unbroken relation of man and Nature. According to him, the unity of man and Nature was felt by the ancient seers of India. The Indian seers "felt in serene depth of their mind that the same energy which vibrates and passes into endless forms of the world, manifests itself in our inner being as consciousness and there is no break in unity" (Tagore, 1972, p.21). There is no such thing, in his opinion, which is absolutely isolated in existence. Rabindranath criticizes the western attitude to Nature. "In the West the prevalent feeling is that Nature belongs exclusively to inanimate things and to beasts, that there is sudden unaccountable break where human-nature begins". (*Ibid*, p.6) Attacking their reason-based attitude to measure the value of objects he says, "According to it, everything that is low in the scale of beings is merely nature, and whatever is the stamp of perfection on it intellectual or moral is human nature" (*Ibid*, p.7). It is his realization that... "the Indian mind never has any hesitation in acknowledging its kinship with nature, its unbroken relation with all" (*Ibid*, p. 7). He feels that because of wrong perspective of man Nature appears separate or alien or antagonistic to us. He brings the analogy of 'the goal and road'; sometimes he uses the metaphor 'the river and its banks'. All these analogies show that in his opinion the boundaries or the bondages that we see in Nature are actually ways of our onward direction. In his notion of man the concept of 'unity' and harmony has

been always emphasized. Being an *Upanisadic* poet he can easily make the philosophical foundation of unity of man and Nature. In contrast with western cultural tradition the Indian culture projects a holistic all-life embracing view. An all inclusive thought is in the centre of all *Upanisads*. Rabindranath, in a true sense, was an *Upanisadic* poet who harmonized the man and the Nature and recognized the diversities and interconnectedness among human beings and other life forms.

It may be noted that the contemporary environmental ethics speaks about the unity and harmony between man and nature. It recognizes the interdependence of living species and ecosystem. Arne Naess, a philosopher from Norway, proposes an eco-centric theory of environmental ethics which is known as deep ecology. It directs us to preserve the integrity of the environment for its own sake and emphasizes a high degree of symbiosis as a common feature in mature eco systems, interdependence for the benefit of all. The Cosmo-centric theory of environmental ethics believes that “through the extension of our understanding of the ecological context, it will ultimately be possible to develop a sense of belonging with a more expansive perspective eco-spheric belonging” (Srivastava (ed), 2005, p. 27).

In his short story *Balai*, Rabindranath has shown the unity of man and Nature very beautifully. *Balai*, the central character of the story, expands his consciousness to the whole nature by uniting himself with the black clouds of the sky, with the raindrops, with the sunshine. He feels the harmony of the nature at the time of his playing with grasses and feels sorrow when grasses are cut by the gardener. Such attitude leads to a loving and protective attitude towards the world. In the same way Rabindranath points out the kinship of man and Nature in his another story titled *Atithi*. Tarapada, a boy realizes his freedom in the lap of nature, in playing with nature and emancipates himself from the bondage of home. The home and the social customs appear to him as a cause of his alienation from the Nature and it makes a road block to unite him with Nature.

Alienation from Nature, for Rabindranath, brings sorrow to our life and the destruction of Nature is felt as if the destruction of one's self. He always gives stress on compassion, a lesson of care ethics with Nature which is full of diversity. For Rabindranath, “when we become merely man, not man in the universe”, it creates wildering problems, and having shut off the source of their solution, we try all kinds of artificial methods each of which brings its own crop of interminable difficulties. (Tagore, 1972, pp. 9-10) The problem, according to Rabindranath, lies in maintaining man's attitude of separate identity and keeps man away from the inner harmony of the universe.

Three elements of human nature namely, pride, greed and power, Rabindranath thinks, are the root causes of man's separateness from the harmony of the nature. In the play *Muktadhara* through the construction of a dam over the river, Rabindranath has shown that modern development uses its technology, which is a product of human's rational element, only to conquer Nature. The dam not only would stop the flow of water but also stop to grow the crops of peasants and break the harmony between human and Nature. The Nature is like a mother to Abhijit, the son of the king of *Muktadhara*. The prince revolted against the attempt of putting chain on the river. In *Muktadhara* Rabindranath has given shape the idea that man with his power has attempted to establish his absolute power over Nature. It ultimately destroys the relation of man with Nature and breaks the harmony in Nature. The harmony can be realized through love and care, but not by power. It appears to us as a voice of Eco-feminists, who propagate that modern

development policy, which causes environmental degradation, ignores the symbioses, the interconnections of Nature and sustainability of life. It is a matter of grave concern how common people's life are sacrificed for the sake of the so-called development³.

In *Raktakarabi*, Nandini, who is the centre of the play, appears not from the place where labourers are digging the earth for gold, but from that rhythm of nature. Here Rabindranath pointed out that the greed of human's power alienates them from enjoying the beauty of growing grass on the earth, the blooming flower of plants. He was very much aware that human's greed gradually was taking away the fertility of land, caused global warming. Plantation, in his view, is necessary to fulfill the damage occurred by human due to deforestation. He introduced it in Shriniketan and Shantiniketan under the name of Halokarsana.

From the standpoint of moral philosophy there is a distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value. According to Peter Singer, "something is of intrinsic value if it is good or desirable in itself; the contrast is with 'instrumental value', that is, value as a means to some other end or purpose." (Singer, 2003, p.274) Money is valuable to us only, because it is a means to bring happiness in our life, but if we are in a desert it has no value. Today's environmental ethics emphasizes on the integrity of the biosphere for its own sake. At its most fundamental level it considers the interest of all sentient as well non-sentient creatures and recognizes the value of nature as the source of the greatest value of aesthetic appreciation.

Nature, for Rabindranath, with her varied forms and beauty is not only a "physical phenomena to be turned to use and left aside," but the varied forms of nature are "necessary... in the attainment of the ideal of perfection as every note is necessary to the completeness of the symphony." (Tagore, 1972, p -21) From what has been reflected is that Rabindranath admitted the intrinsic value of nature. His admission of intrinsic value of nature is to be understood in a different way. He adds an aesthetic value to nature. The nature, in the view of Rabindranath, should be preserved because it with all its enthralling beauty causes our aesthetic appreciation. It outwardly appears that Rabindranath takes an anthropocentric attitude in preserving nature and therefore, Nature has only an instrumental value to him. But a close observation shows that his intention is *not to claim that Nature is a means for satisfying human interest, but a source of aesthetic enjoyment – the enjoyment which is disinterested*. In describing the nature of disinterested aesthetic enjoyment Kalyan Sengupta mentioned: "The same forest which is the source of one's livelihood can open a different horizon – an alternative world – which is unconnected with any question of livelihood, with any pragmatic concern or interest" (Palmer, 2001, Routledge, p.145). It does not mean any pragmatic or any instrumental value of Nature. He holds that in our aesthetic experience with nature the relation of love or of heart works and when we love anyone we cannot think of seeing our beloved in the light of any usefulness or interestedness. So the relation of man with nature as a source of aesthetic experience is beyond the bounds of any narrow interest related to material world and disinterested. Rabindranath describes it as "an element of surplus in our heart's relation with the world. When the smile of her baby creates aesthetic experience to the mother this does not mean that the value of baby is instrumental. This type of experience cannot occur unless we feel the unity between the perceiver and the object perceived.

L.E. Johnson, the writer of *A Morally Deep World*, describes the environmental degradation as a time bomb which can explode any time unless man changes his present

attitude to nature which is a suicidal attitude. He feels that today we need an eco-centric view. Such a view recognizes that life in nature (which includes human being) is interdependent and co-operation, mutual care and love should be maintained. From this perspective Tagore is rightly considered as one of the leading thinkers of the world on environment. Tagore's attitude to nature can provide a single motivating force for all the activities and movements aimed at saving the plant from human exploitation and domination.

NOTES:

1. The two-valued logic works through the laws of thought which are three in number, namely, law of identity, law of contradiction and law of excluded middle. It dichotomizes the reality into two parts 'p' and 'not-p', which hierarchically opposes to each other and the one always is considered superior to the other. In this way man is superior to women, 'have' to 'have not', developed to underdeveloped, global to local and so on. Therefore, the intra-human discrimination with its multidimensional aspects is also taking place on the basis of rationality and its three laws of thought).
2. Aristotle in his book Politics stated that "Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beast for the sake of man – domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (at any rate most of them) and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools." (London, 1916, p -16)
3. Vandana Shiva, a renowned eco-feminist in her article titled 'Homeless in the Global village' says that dams, energy plants, military bases etc. are built up at the cost of nature's life and people's life and also causes the ruins and desecration of sacred soil, the mother of common people, especially the tribal. She writes, "The World bank-financed Suvarnarekha dam is being US\$ 127 million loan, primarily to provide industrial water for the expanding steel city of Jamshedpur. These dams will displace 80,000 tribal". She further points out that the people of Balliapal in coastal Orissa, protested against the setting up of the national rocket test range which would break their link with their 'mother earth' who has nurtured and sustained generations of balliapal farmers. (Mies & Shiva, 2010, pp. 98-101)

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