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CONTENTS

Foreword 4

Section I: Academic Articles 7

Rabindranath Tagore: The Deep-Rooted Environmentalist and The Origins of Sustainability, Charles Bruce 8
Re-reading Tagore’s Letters, Lectures and Addresses, Joyjit Ghosh 16
Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Politics of Science, Christin Hoene 26
Significance of the environment in the songs of Rabindranath Tagore, Reba Som 41
Liberating the River: Land and Politics in Tagore’s Plays, Debamitra Kar 51
A Home in the World: People and Places in Rabindranath Tagore’s Chaturanga, Kamalika Mitra 66
Ecotourism In and Around Santiniketan: Challenges and Potentialities, Sharmila Chandra 79
A Spoken Silence: Rabindranath and the Ecology of Modern Consciousness, Aseem Shrivastava 112

Section II: Book Review 128

Book Review: To Whom I Return Each Day 129

Section III: Poetry and Art 132

Chrysal Salt 133
Ceramic leaf with words from Voltaire 140
Sue Whitmore 141
Dark Hedges 142
Jamaica 144
View from Moorish Castle 147
Path to Stella 148
Borgue beeches 149
Liz Niven 151
Prof (Dr) Tapati Gupta 154
Spring/Esctasy 155
Peace/Repose 156
Aspirations/Struggle for fulfilment 157
Elation/Youth/Adventure 158
Ross Donlon 160
Usha Akella 168
Jaydeep Sarangi 172
Zoe Bicat 178
Beth Junor 185
Mario Relich 189
Sam Smith 192
Celia Purcell 197
Mandy Haggith 201

Section IV: Essay 205

The Ocean-Cradle of Birth and of Death – An Appreciation of Tagore’s Sea Poetry, Mandy Haggith 206
Foreword

Rabindranath Tagore and the Environment

When Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a little boy, he longed to step out into the wide world and experience nature, but his early memories are of confinement within Jorasanko, the sprawling Tagore family home in Calcutta. He would watch the outside world through the shutters of their great French windows, from the balcony and terrace, admiring the trees, marveling at the freedom of little boys diving into the pond outside, fascinated by the women filling pitchers or washing clothes and ducks swimming without a care in the world there. In *My Reminiscences* he recalls,

> How intimately did the life of the world throb for us in those days! Earth, water, foliage and sky, they all spoke to us and would not be disregarded. How often were we struck by the poignant regret that we could only see the upper story of the earth and nothing of the inner story.¹

His first sight of this outside world came when the Tagore children were sent away to a house in Panihati on the Adi Ganga to escape a dengue epidemic raging in the city. Those days of exploring the garden and observing the river made a deep impression on young Rabindranath. A few years later, when he was twelve, just after his sacred thread ceremony in 1873, his father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, asked him if he would like to join him on his next journey. Rabindranath was delighted. He could escape from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the classroom of the Bengal Academy in Calcutta and witness the world beyond the city. The sense of freedom that Rabindranath experienced in the empty fields under the limitless skies at Santiniketan where they first stopped, and the awe the forested Himalayan ranges aroused in him at the end of their journey, the wonder he felt under the silent starlit skies, would remain with him right through his life, as expressed in songs like,

> The sky is full of the sun and stars
> The universe is pulsating with life
> Amidst all this I have found my place
> And my wonder finds voice in my song

Some years later, in 1889, the Maharshi entrusted his fourteenth child, the youthful Rabindranath, with the management of the Tagore estates. Rabindranath based himself at Shelidah while he looked after the estates at Patisar, Shahjadpur, Kaligram and Berahimpur. This was when Rabindranath came in contact with rural Bengal, and realised the gulf that existed between urban and rural India. It was here that Rabindranath encountered the apathy in neglected villages where a despondency seemed to engulf a whole population. Rabindranath strove to help to recover the rural economy through establishing cooperatives, improving education and investing in the infrastructure through programmes that would

inculcate self-reliance and restore hope in these desultory backwaters. But he found that the people were not always ready to adopt his ideas.

As his children grew older, Rabindranath felt restless. He knew that education was the core to development. He moved with his wife and young family to Santiniketan, the ‘Abode of Peace’, and began his school at the ashram established earlier by his father. Rabindranath admired the tapovan, the forest hermitage schools of ancient India, where teacher and students stayed close to nature, sustained by the natural environment, with sowing, harvesting and gardening being part of the lived experience of a holistic education. The love of the open world of nature and her nurturing role was evident in these schools. This model was perceived by Rabindranath as appropriate for education, which he adopted in his school which was established in 1901. Here classes were held for most days in the year, under the trees, as children learnt about and experienced a continuity with their environment.

The Shelidah experience had brought home the necessity of investing in rural communities and agriculture in a nation-building endeavour. Rabindranath sent his son, Rathindranath, the latter's friend, Santosh, and Rabindranath’s son-in-law, Nagendranath Ganguly to study agriculture and animal husbandry at the University of Illinois, Urbana, with the view that they would bring back their expertise and knowledge of rural regeneration work to India. He founded his International University, Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in 1921. He felt that the university should not be estranged from its hinterland which consisted of depressed communities in villages more or less untouched by modernity and progress. With his conviction that universities should maintain a continuity with the surrounding area, Rabindranath bought land at Surul where he set up his rural reconstruction centre, which he named Sriniketan in 1922. On a visit to America after winning the Nobel Prize, Rabindranath met Leonard Elmhirst, who was studying agriculture at Cornell University. He asked Elmhirst if he would be willing to develop Sriniketan and engage in the task of rural uplift in the neighbouring villages, which Elmhirst earnestly took up after he finished his studies at Cornell, with generous funding from the heiress, Dorothy Straight whom he later married. The Elmhirsts became the chief benefactors of Sriniketan. When Elmhirst was away, Arthur Geddes, the geographer son of the town planner, conservation architect and environmentalist, Patrick Geddes, taught at Sriniketan. From here, Arthur wrote to his father about the rural reconstruction work Tagore initiated and he and Elmhirst implemented and continued with Rabindranath’s approval in the surrounding villages (there is a reference to ‘dairy, tannery, weaving, scouting’ and ‘garden-plot’(s) in a letter he writes to his father on 12 March 1923). Rabindranath used an interdisciplinary curriculum at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, where the methods of pushing back the desert were implemented through literature, the arts and festivals. Rabindranath incorporated the folk festivals into the ashramic life, replacing religious festivals with seasonal festivals such as, Basanta Utsav

(Spring Festival), Saradotsav (Autumn Festival) and festivals signifying sowing and growth, e.g., in the tree planting ceremony (Briksharopan, which is very much in the spirit of Patrick Geddes’ idea, ‘by leaves we live’) and Halakarshan, the ploughing ceremony.

The sanctity of nature embodies the sanctity of life, and for Rabindranath, there was a universal oneness that linked human life to all life, signifying a unity that flowed through all things. In all his work, his poetry, songs, plays, dance dramas, his fiction and essays, we have a consciousness of this pulsating life as sacred, which needs to be valued, protected and cherished. Long before the dangers of climate change and global warming became rallying points for environmentalists and ecologists, Rabindranath was consciously practising and promulgating methods to create and maintain the green mantle of Bolpur, a dry district known for its red soil which needs to be coaxed to bear fruit, crops and flowers, In his remote corner, Rabindranath lent impetus to the Sriniketan experiment which could become a benchmark for a self-sustaining society which lives in harmony with its environment. The academic section of this issue has articles which look at the local significance and global impact of Rabindranath’s literary and pragmatic projects, establishing through different articles, the relevance and validity of Rabindranath and his circle’s ecological consciousness today as we confront the urgency of sustaining our environment in order to save our planet. The creative section brings a rich bouquet of visual art, poetry and prose which signifies a universal oneness with the natural world and reinforces an ecological consciousness.

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Gitanjali and Beyond
An Academic and Creative Peer Reviewed e-journal from the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs)
Issue 2, October 2018
Rabindranath Tagore: The Deep-Rooted Environmentalist and The Origins of Sustainability

Charles Bruce

Abstract:

The opening years of the twentieth century witnessed rising public disquiet about evident environmental degradation and the ever more obvious loss of important habitats. In the United States, following the personal intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt, Congress passed an act in 1906 to establish a protected inventory of national parks and forests. A year later the UK Parliament passed an act to establish the National Trust. Following the well trailed campaigns of self-anointed environmentalists such as John Muir and Octavia Hill, the protection of vulnerable landscapes appeared for the first time on the public policy agenda.

Against this background of rising awareness of the unfettered consequences of economic growth, a similar concern can be detected for the plight of rural communities in the Indian state of Bengal, largely as a result of the personal involvement – in both word and deed – of Rabindranath Tagore. It can be argued further that Tagore’s innate empiricism as a result of this growing awareness, anticipated the discourse that would lead eventually to the World Conservation Strategy published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in 1980. It was followed by the Brundtland Report (1987) *Our Common Future.*
Swadeshi Samaj

In July 1905, following the Proclamation of Partition – a decade before the return of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to the subcontinent in 1915 – the cause of Indian nationalism appeared poised to follow the leadership of a remarkable Bengali poet and songwriter. During this momentous time there is no doubt that Rabindranath Tagore emerged as a charismatic and persuasive leader of the Swadeshi movement. In one month alone he composed 23 patriotic songs including ‘Banglar Mati Banglar Jal’ (‘The Soil and Waters of Bengal’) which was adopted spontaneously as an anthem of protest. Many years later Nirad C. Chaudhuri reflected on the impact which the song had made on him as a boy in East Bengal: Even now I cannot read the words of these songs…without instantly bringing back…all the sounds from the soft rumble of the rain on our corrugated-iron roofs…and all the sights of the boats on our great rivers to the spreading banyan tree…the sights and sounds which embody for me the idea of Bengal.1

The year before the first partition of Bengal happened, Tagore published an essay ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ (Society and State) in the magazine Bangadarshan. It was first presented as a lecture on 19th May 1904 to an audience of 1,000 at the Minerva Theatre in Calcutta, and was repeated at the Curzon Theatre to a larger audience, nine days later. Responding to the agitation which had greeted the colonial administration’s inability to handle a water shortage in Calcutta, Tagore argued for an alternative system of governance which would recover a sense of a broadly-based popular autonomy, saying that: “in our country the government (Sarkar-bahadur) is not part of society”.2 Rochona Majumdar explains that the main object of reform in Swadeshi Samaj was society conceived as an agrarian family-based group of people, the majority of which resided in the thousands of Indian villages: sovereignty would be secured by returning attention to society.3

The essence of Swadeshi Samaj – the idea of moral economy – gathered strength and poignancy in Tagore’s subsequent writing. In 1926 he wrote a foreword to Pramatha Chaudhuri’s Ryoter Katha: ‘No law can protect him who does not know how to preserve himself. The strength of self-preservation comes from a holistic life not through piecemeal policy initiatives. Rights acquired through laws, the practice of Khadi, spinning the Charka, or becoming a four anna Congress member, cannot fulfil the goal of self-determination. Only if our villages come alive again will the peasant also acquire Shakti (strength)’.4 Tagore had faced the impending partition of Bengal with the authority of a widely published poet and songwriter, but by 1907 his burning indignation had turned to remorse in the wake of communalist riots which broke out in Calcutta. Dutta and Robinson explain that the

‘Swadeshi movement turned out to be the precursor of Gandhi’s movement (but) it failed to develop because in Bengal there was no one capable of wearing the mantle of leadership. Tagore was the only one who might have done; but when it lay within his grasp, he felt unable . . . and escaped to Santiniketan’.

Indeed Tagore’s brush with nationalist politics convinced him that rather than pursuing a political career he would achieve longer lasting benefits by finding practical methods to improve the livelihoods of his people, in particular the rural poor. He criticised meetings of Congress and the self-serving nature of political engagement. ‘The moment we come into contact with a person, we strike up a relationship with him,’ he wrote, ‘we do not slip into the habit of looking on man as a machine or a tool for the furtherance of some interest’. For the remainder of his life Tagore never relinquished his antipathy to the political process. This is clear in a letter written in 1930 to the Scottish philanthropist Sir Daniel Hamilton, who had pioneered rural reconstruction in the Sunderbans. In the letter Tagore reflected on the shortcomings of Congress’s emerging leadership: ‘We . . . fondly cherish the pathetic faith that the deep-rooted welfare of a country can be grown chiefly on the surface soil of politics’.

A sojourn at Shelidah

It is possible that Tagore’s political journey started in 1889 when he took on the task of managing his family’s agricultural estates at Shelidah and Patisar in East Bengal. Although the youngest of fourteen children, the responsibility fell on his shoulders as his father had intended. As it happened, none of Tagore’s brothers wished to relinquish a metropolitan existence. They would have considered the half-day journey from Calcutta into the Bengal hinterland a deplorable exodus from civilisation, but Tagore soon found that the remoteness and tranquillity of Shelidah gave him the space and the time to work out his own philosophy, writing a short poem in 1896 to explain his state of mind:

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.

6 Ibid, p. 143.
7 Ibid, p. 382.
8 Ibid, p. 108.
Based in Shelidah from where he would travel the surrounding waterways in his houseboat, the *Padma*, Tagore entered a richly creative time of his life writing poems, plays, songs, musical dramas and essays – many of which he contributed to a magazine published by his family, *Sadhana*. Indeed the empiricism gained from this prolonged exposure to the rhythms of rural life formed an important quotidian from which he would draw his characters and depict village existence. Satyajit Ray who turned Tagore’s short story *The Postmaster* into a celebrated film in 1961, later wrote that Tagore’s experience of living among his tenants gave him ‘an intimate contact with the fundamental aspects of life and nature’. Dutta and Robinson explain that the genesis of Tagore’s contribution to India’s long march to independence emerged from the time he spent at Shelidah: ‘It was his work on the estates that bred in [Tagore] two unshakeable convictions: that Indians must help themselves…and that India could not regenerate itself without regenerating its villages…in both convictions Tagore was ahead of his time, even of Gandhi’.11

A sense of the political paradigm that formed in Tagore’s mind at this time is given in this 1926 reflection about the poverty which he had found in the countryside and the fact that it was largely invisible when viewed from Calcutta: “The rural people cannot catch our sight because we regard them as chhotolok meaning literally, small people. Given such contempt for their own village people, educated Indians prefer to learn about their…history and society from Europeans. There have been many an ethnological movement among our common people, but that remains unknown to our educated class”.12

The disconnection of urban and rural India is a continual theme in Tagore’s canon, and often he does not seek to conceal his own self-reproach. Although he wrote over 59 short stories largely about rural life in the decade ending in 1901 – a prolific counterpoint to his seemingly languid life on the Padma - he was also quick to acknowledge the practical deficit in his skill-set when it came to improving the productivity of his estates. In a speech given in 1928 on the seventh anniversary of establishing the Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IRR) at Sriniketan, he explained how he had tried to encourage his sharecroppers to achieve economies of scale by efficiently pooling their labour, oxen and harvested crops. The advice was not well received: “They listened and said, ‘the idea is good but how to work it out?’ If I had the knowledge and training, I would have said, ‘I will take the responsibility’ they all know me. But one cannot do simply by wanting to; there is nothing so dangerous as ignorant help. Young men from town once went to a village to help the people. But the people cried jeering, ‘Look, there comes the quarter-rupee gentle-folk!’ No wonder – these young men know neither the language of the villagers, nor the workings of their mind”.13

Later Tagore credited this encounter as something of an epiphany that propelled him in 1906 to enrol his son Rathi, and a friend’s son, Santosh Chandra Majumdar at the

11 Ibid, p. 120.
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to study agriculture. The following year he sent Nagendra Nath Ganguli, his son-in-law, to the same place, with the intention that the most advanced theories in agronomy could be brought back to India and implemented at IRR.

**Sriniketan: rural reconstruction and the birth of sustainability**

The decision to send the next generation of his family to study agriculture in the United States marked a critical shift in Tagore’s response to the relentless cycle of poverty which he had witnessed so directly in rural East Bengal. In seeking a practical solution based on the most advanced ideas in crop science, animal husbandry and mechanisation, Tagore was keen to complement poetry with agronomy. His son Rathi recounted that on his return from Urbana in 1909: ‘I think Father must have been hugely amused to hear me … glibly repeat copybook maxims on agronomy, genetics, evolution, and such subjects as were still fresh in my mind… Rarely did he talk about literature, probably thinking that my training in the sciences barred me from appreciating the arts’.  

Rathi stressed however that although his father was willing to embrace science, his primary focus was the anthropology of village life: ‘Most of the time he would listen patiently, but when he did talk it was about the social conditions of our rural folk, the problems of their life and his experience of dealing with them.’

Seven acres of farmland acquired by Tagore in 1912 at Surul close to Santiniketan provided the base for the IRR. He explained his ideas for improving the rural economy in an eventful meeting in New York in 1921 with Leonard Elmhirst, a British agronomist who later married the American heiress Dorothy Paine Whitney. Elmhirst recalled that Tagore had expressed his concern that his new institute was ‘almost wholly academic and though surrounded by villages… (had) no intimate contact with any of them at all inside their own communities. For some reason these villages appear to be in a state of steady decline. In fact they are all in decay’. Evidently Elmhirst’s brief was to investigate the root cause of farming failure in the Bengali countryside, and find a solution. Tagore was emphatic about the need for the IRR to succeed. He wrote: ‘I alone cannot take responsibility for the whole of India, but even if two or three villages can be freed from the shackle of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established’. Elmhirst arrived at the institute at Sriniketan in 1921 and straightaway wired Dorothy for a donation of $20,000 to allow the campus to be built. Her donations provided an important source of regular funding for IRR for the next 25 years.

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The enduring legacy of Sriniketan lies in the influence that it bestowed on sustainable...
development policies throughout the subcontinent. In a preface to Leonard Elmhirst's essay on soil in 1922, Tagore gave a clear indication of the cumulative impact of his reconstruction experiment, despite its modest beginnings, and the unifying appeal he was convinced it would extend: ‘We have started in India, in connection with Visva-Bharati, a kind of village work the mission of which is to retard this process of race suicide’, he wrote, ‘If I try to give you details of the work the effort will look small. But we are not afraid of this appearance of smallness, for we have confidence in life. We know that if, as a seed, smallness represents the truth that is in us, it will overcome opposition and conquer space and time. According to us the poverty problem is not so important. It is the problem of unhappiness that is the great problem...Our object is to try to flood the choked bed of village life with streams of happiness. For this the scholars, the poet, the musicians, the artists as well as the scientists have to collaborate, have to offer their contribution’.18

Uma Das Gupta writes that in post-independent India, Sriniketan’s principles were adopted widely throughout the government’s Block Development Scheme and Community Project for the villages.19 S. Aminul Islam explains the essence of Tagore’s vision for Sriniketan in terms of an integral structure contributing to the well-being of the village as a discreet societal unit, and carried aloft on what would now be considered the four pillars of sustainability - economic, social, environmental, and cultural. He sees it as nothing less than a ‘paradigm which highlighted human agency and volunteerism, and included cooperatives for mobilisation of the poor, schooling for development of human capital, healthcare, infrastructure development, modernisation of agriculture, development of cottage industries, micro-credit for indebted peasants, alternative dispute resolution for good governance, rural appraisal for knowledge generation and, above all, the growth of self-potency and human creativity’.20

Conclusion – Tagore’s synthesis of rural sustainability is adopted by the United Nations

The process of defining sustainability as an important determinant of public policy emerged in 1980 as part of the World Conservation Strategy published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Davoudi and Layard (2001) explain that the IUCN approach was widely criticised for focussing on the preservation of habitats to the detriment of conjoined human activity. Just as Tagore had suggested a century before, they express the folly of regarding poverty and the actions of the poor ‘...as one of the main causes of non-sustainable development rather than recognising that poverty and environmental degradation are both consequences of existing development patterns’. (Soussain,1992, p.24, quoted in Davoudi and Layard, 2001, p.8).

Within seven years, however, a much more satisfactory definition of sustainability arose from the World Commission on Environment and Development - the Brundtland Commission. Its remit stemmed from a UN resolution, which in turn had been prompted by the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. A report, *Our Common Inheritance*, in which the Commission’s proceedings were published, defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. In 1992 the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development published the Rio Declaration, later endorsed as Agenda 21. The simple and unambiguous definition coined by the Brundtland Commission was now extrapolated into a further 27 principles, although many were laid down rather as prompts to encourage governments and other authorities to take action.

Writing of the period that followed the Declaration, Campbell (1996) concluded there was an optimistic interpretation of the broad embrace given to sustainability ‘…in the battle of big public ideas, sustainability has won: the task of the coming years is simply to work out the details and to narrow the gap between theory and practice’. Tagore surely would have drawn satisfaction from this development after the lapse of almost a century since he was sent on an extended furlough by his family to Shelidah.

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The Interface between Education and the ‘Rural Uplift Work’: Re-reading Tagore’s Letters, Lectures and Addresses

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Abstract:

The present paper, by taking cues from Tagore’s letters, lectures and addresses, attempts to explore that he was unconventional in his ideas of education. Nature was the best teacher for Tagore, and he adopted the model of the ‘Ashram’ of the Ancient India for the realisation of his educational ideals. An academic institution, according to Tagore, should not merely impart information to the learners. It should offer elements of culture and opportunities for studying the socio-economic condition of villages around an educational centre. Leonard Elmhirst, the famous agronomist, helped Tagore in establishing ‘Siksha Satra’ at Sriniketan where the former started rural reconstruction. Tagore shared his views of education including the ‘Visva-Bharati ideals’ with Elmhirst. Another leading intellectual who gave original ideas of university education to Tagore was Patrick Geddes. Like Tagore, Geddes also advocated for the service to the community life. Arthur Geddes, the son of Patrick Geddes, to a great extent, fulfilled the poet’s dream of uniting teachers, students and humble village workers in an organic bond of necessity. Tagore’s championing of ‘the rural uplift work’ as a part of education continues to appeal to the Twentieth Century mind.

Keywords: Tagore, Visva-Bharati, Siksha Satra, education, Elmhirst, Geddes, rural reconstruction
Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet
where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.
When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance
cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest
among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost – *Song Offerings* 1

W
e may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence – *My School*.2

Tagore believed that education should never be dissociated from life.3 He called Santiniketan an ‘asrama’ because he always felt an affinity with ‘the ancient forest-schools’ that followed the ‘ideal of reciprocity and love’.4 Visva-Bharati was not merely an academic institution to him. It was envisioned as an ideal centre of education. He was hopeful that ‘she will illumine the path of pilgrimage and not merely fill the store room of benefits’.5 According to Tagore, a school or for that purpose any academic institution, should offer (apart from stipulated courses of teaching) elements of culture including music, art, dance, seasonal festivities, and on top of everything ‘opportunities of helping the neighbouring villages’.6 In the present paper I would like to concentrate on the last element, with a purpose to show that Tagore throughout his life attempted to widen the ‘human sympathies’ of the students of Visva-Bharati by engaging them in what Leonard Elmhirst (1893-1974), a British philanthropist and agronomist, described as ‘Village Reconstruction Work’.7

In the essay titled ‘*City and Village*’ Tagore states that since villages are nearer to nature than towns, they are in closer touch with the spirit of life and vitality. There must be cities in man’s civilisation but they should never ‘feed upon the whole social organism that runs through the villages’. Tagore was alarmed to see that the modern cities were draining away ‘the life stuff of the community’ and shamelessly ‘assuming a lurid counterfeit of prosperity’. In Tagore’s imagination, Kuvera, ‘the genius of property’ was worshipped in place of

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1 Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*): A collection of prose translations made by the author. (Published by UBS Publishers’ Distributors Pvt. Ltd. in association with Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, ninth reprint 2006), p. 21
3 Tagore’s letter to Patrick Geddes in *The Tagore-Geddes Correspondence*, compiled and edited by Bashabi Fraser (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2004), p. 63
7 Tagore’s letter to Leonard Elmhirst in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 413
Lakshmi, ‘the Deity of Prosperity’ and modern cities ‘represent his protuberant stomach’. He advocated for a symbiotic relationship between the city and the village and laid emphasis on ‘the spirit of co-operation’.\(^8\) Sachin Sen lucidly explains this,

Tagore has preached no doctrine of class war, no technique of violent conflict. His was the search for harmony and balance.\(^9\)

Tagore knew that if the relationship of city and village became that of exploiter and exploited or master and servant, it would give birth to a perverse state ‘whereby the body-politic becomes its own enemy and whose termination is death’. Through the work of village-reconstruction, in connection Visva-Bharati, he aimed at retarding ‘this process of race suicide’.\(^10\)

In his open lecture (‘My School’) during his talks with students in Moscow (1931), first published in *The Modern Review* (January 1931), we read:

We have in the neighbouring villages some primitive people who need our help and we have started some night-schools and our boys go there and teach them. Then you have the village work in connection with our institutions and those boys who have the opportunity to study the conditions of our village life and to know how to help them efficiently through scientific and up-to-date methods of cultivation and of fighting diseases. To impart not merely academic information, but how to live a complete life is …the purpose of education.\(^11\)

Tagore thus wanted to give his students a lesson of living a complete life. He wanted to inculcate in them life-affirming values. He realised that the villages ‘build the foundation of our country’ and India would never achieve ‘true independence’ unless the villagers, living almost from hand to mouth, were provided with ‘decent means of existence’.\(^12\) In *Swadeshi Samaj* Tagore cautioned that the educated class should never alienate the vast majority who are the commoners, and categorically stated that to unite all the people of the country should be the ultimate aim and objective of political leaders.\(^13\) In an open address he exhorted the students at Santiniketan to imbibe ‘a real human interest’ which he found missing in the spirit of nationalism:

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12 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘To Students at Santiniketan’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 603  
Our nationalism is like a special dress which we don or doff according as there be or be not ceremonial or sensational occasions. We often clamour for things of no account whatsoever. … The young patriots of our country I would like to ask, what real interest they have taken in the rural uplift work.\textsuperscript{14}

Tagore never did embrace the ‘insipid demonstrativeness of platform patriotism’.\textsuperscript{15} We have a critique of ‘platform patriotism’ in \textit{The Home and the World} through the portrayal of Sandip, the demagogue, who mesmerizes the common folk with his oratory by mixing up elements of politics and religion, and deliberately ignores the interest of the poor masses who mostly belong to the marginal community. Tagore, far ahead of his time did sense, as we read in ‘Nationalism in India’, ‘Our real problem in India is not political. It is social’.\textsuperscript{16} It is not always necessary that one should think of the welfare of the whole country. One may adopt a village and try to understand its socio-economic situation. Tagore was convinced that if

we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established.\textsuperscript{17}

‘Such concern may well have been grounded in a patrician’s sense of \textit{noblesse oblige}, as Michael Collins insightfully observes, ‘but this should not blind us to the role played by Tagore’s religious and social perspective’. The argument of Collins sounds convincing as he argues that Tagore’s concept of ‘active love’ is always ‘expressed within a social context’.\textsuperscript{18}

Under Tagore’s inspiration and mentorship Elmhirst established Sriniketan, the ‘institute for rural reconstruction’ at Surul, the village near Santiniketan. Tagore wrote to Elmhirst on 13 November 1922,

You know my heart is with Surul. I feel that it has life in it – it does not deal with abstractions, but it has its roots deep in the heart of living reality.\textsuperscript{19}

The idea of Sriniketan was certainly not an abstraction. Apart from Tagore, Elmhirst borrowed counsels from Dorothy Straight in New York to translate the idea into a ‘living reality’. Tagore had tremendous admiration for Elmhirst, and in a letter addressed to Dorothy Straight he wrote that ‘he has been born with a true mission’.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p. 603.
\textsuperscript{16} Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Nationalism in India’ in \textit{Nationalism} (India: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 64
\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in \textit{The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism}, ed. by Uma Das Gupta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 134
\textsuperscript{19} Tagore’s letter to Elmhirst in \textit{Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore}, p. 296
\textsuperscript{20} Tagore’s letter to Mrs Straight in \textit{Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore}, p. 312
\end{flushleft}
Tagore shared his ‘Visva-Bharati ideals’ with Elmhirst in a letter dated 26 June 1924:

There are numerous institutions in this world for all kinds of object – but they are for practical people possessing expert knowledge and trained skill. I have neither the ambition nor talent for such organisations. But I believe I have the power of vision which seeks its realisation in some concrete form. Unless our different works in Visva-Bharati are luminous with the fire of vision I myself can have no place in them. This is why all the time when Sriniketan has been struggling to grow into a form, I was intently wishing that it should not only have a shape, but also light; so that it might transcend limits of time, space and some special purpose.21

Tagore thus brings home the points of distinction between Visva-Bharati and other academic institutions. In Tagore’s vision, education has no value if it is confined to the metropolitan centres and fails to give service to the people at large. Tagore therefore established Visva-Bharati far away from Calcutta. But the above quote also alludes to Sriniketan which is envisioned as a centre that will ‘transcend limits of time, space and some special purpose’. Tagore’s use of the word ‘light’ in connection with Sriniketan is significant. It suggests a kind of illumination that a centre of culture always cherishes as its ideal.

In 1924 Tagore urged Elmhirst among others to establish a weekly boarding school for village children at Sriniketan, which he named ‘Siksha-Satra’, ‘based upon immediate contact with the world of nature and with the life’. The dream of Tagore was that the children would learn at the boarding school various enterprises such as gardening, weaving, carpentry, painting and cooking.22 Tagore, in fact, always followed the model of school in the ancient India where the students were brought up in an atmosphere of living aspiration. Tagore believed that Nature should be considered the best teacher, and so he opposed the rigid cloistered ambience of scholarship and learning.23

Tagore’s idea of education was never elitist. He did not identify with the ‘bhadro lok’ class of his time who were in search of ‘an artificial standard’ and desperately wanted ‘a university label on their name’. His prime concern was for ‘a vast obscure multitude who cannot even dream of such a costly ambition’.24 In ‘Apamanita’ (The Dishonoured) the poet voices a word of caution against all those who deprive the socio-economically disadvantaged masses of their rights and privileges:

He whom you cast down, binds you there below:
He whom you press back, draws you backward too.

21 Tagore’s letter to Elmhirst in Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore, p. 312
23 In a letter addressed to Geddes, C. F. Andrews affirmed, …I feel certain that the ‘Ashram’ of Ancient India is always in the Poet’s mind. That is fundamental with him
He whom you shroud in dense
Mantle of ignorance,
Veils your own good by that obstructing pall:
With all, in your dishonour equal.25

In Tagore’s vision, education should be of the same quality for all people across class and creed. In other words, social hierarchy should never play a role in the spread of education. K. C. Mukhejee in ‘Pioneer in Education’ justly writes that in those days when the Government used to work with a mechanical routine and showed no responsibility for rural welfare it was Tagore who saw education as an important means of social reform.26 In the letter to Elmhirst dated 19 December 1937, Tagore made it clear he did not approve of the discriminatory attitude of the ‘charitably minded city-bred politicians’ who adopted a rather negligent view regarding the issue of education for the villagers:

They are callously unmindful of the fact that the kind and the amount of food that is needful for mental nourishment must not be apportioned differently according to the social status of those that receive it.27

Tagore was keen that ‘Siksha-Satra’ should emerge as a model centre of education and justify its ideal by inspiring in the students the ‘courage of experiment and initiative of mind which we lack as a nation’.28 Tagore’s emphasis on scientific training and experiment in the building of a ‘nation’ appeals to the modern mind. It is important to note that Mahatma Gandhi was much impressed by the concept of ‘Siksha Satra’ when he paid a visit to it, and it is often said that Gandhi’s scheme of ‘Basic Education’ was partly influenced by Tagore’s educational venture.29

Tagore’s pioneering venture in the realm of education for the masses appealed to a leading contemporary intellectual, Sir Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), the Scottish sociologist, biologist (trained by T. H. Huxley) and educator.30 In a letter dated 12 March 1927 Geddes wrote:

Here I think, we are fundamentally at one in principle, despite all differences in expression. Notably in the idea of converging our studies, our surveys of the fields of

27 See Elmhirst’s selected letters. .
28 Tagore’s letter to Elmhirst in Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore, p. 491
29 The indebtedness of Gandhi’s scheme of ‘Basic Education’ to Tagore’s idea of ‘Siksha-Satra’ is discussed in the prefatory note to the letter written by Tagore addressed to Elmhirst in Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore, p. 490
30 About Geddes Tagore wrote:
He has the precision of the scientist and the vision of the prophet, at the same time, the power of an artist to make his ideas visible through the language of symbols in The Tagore-Geddes Correspondence, p. 56
knowledge, upon the service of the community life – at present so depressed – in east and west alike – and so towards *Vita Sympathetica*, and this beyond our existing beginnings of academic residence etc, and in touch with our Villages.\(^{31}\)

The ‘differences in expression’ that Geddes alludes to will be understood from the exchange of letters between himself and Tagore in 1922. On 15 April 1922 Geddes wrote to Tagore on his University planning:

> We need to be logical in our reasoning, and mathematical in our statistics and graphics, physical in our construction, biological in our agriculture, horticulture and hygiene, economic in our general undertakings: yet of all these sciences and arts … are ineffective, when not calamitous, while expressing only the sciences and arts of the material and mechanical order, still so predominant, and so characteristic of the West.\(^{32}\)

This is indeed a solemn rhetorical discourse. Geddes wanted to listen to Tagore’s response (‘I should indeed be grateful if it turns out to be in harmony with your own vision’).\(^{33}\) In his reply Tagore wrote that his ‘own work in Santiniketan has been from the first to last a growth’.\(^{34}\) While commenting on Tagore’s educational ideals Alex Aronson observes,

> Tagore was no professional educationist. All his pronouncements on education start with the assumption that education is not a profession, but an art.\(^{35}\)

Aronson’s statement compels conviction for Tagore himself compared the ‘living growth’ of the university with the writing of his stories:

> In writing my stories I hardly ever have a distinct plot in my mind …. The same thing happened with my Santiniketan Institution.\(^{36}\)

> Tagore appreciated Geddes's schemes but he did not forget to add that ‘they have a different idiom, which I have not the power to use’.\(^{37}\)

Geddes honoured the differences in idiom but he believed that he was close to Tagore in principle. In his vision, ‘the valorisation of rural France’ did correspond to the ‘renewal of Bengal’. And he raised a vital question: ‘if we can help in Bengal and in France, are we not in principle, dealing with Asia and Europe – and finding their possibilities more and more at one?’\(^{38}\) Geddes thus spoke in favour of mutual sympathy across the world. Interestingly,

\(\text{31} \quad \text{Fraser (2004), p. 134.}\)
\(\text{32} \quad \text{Citation is necessary.}\)
\(\text{33} \quad \text{Fraser (2004), pp. 60 – 62.}\)
\(\text{34} \quad \text{Ibid, p. 63.}\)
\(\text{35} \quad \text{Alex Aronson, “Tagore’s Educational Ideals”, International Review of Education 7.4 (1961), p. 385.}\)
\(\text{36} \quad \text{Citation is necessary.}\)
\(\text{37} \quad \text{Fraser (2004), pp. 63 – 64.}\)
Tagore also spoke of the same thing in his writings although using a different language. In ‘An Eastern University’ Tagore firmly stated that universities should not be conceptualized as ‘mechanical organisations for collecting and distributing knowledge’. A university should act as a centre where ‘people should offer their intellectual hospitality, their wealth of mind to others, and earn their proud right in return to receive gifts from the rest of the world’.39

It is, therefore, interesting to note how two illumined minds thought alike. To quote the words of Bashabi Fraser,

The ideas are their own, yet the resemblance is apparent – strong echoes in similar minds, but not mere imitations of each other.40

Geddes spoke of devoting studies and knowledge to ‘the service of the community life’. Tagore in ‘An Eastern University’ also laid emphasis on the co-operation with the villages around an educational centre:

Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of the intellectual life of India, but the centre of her economic life also. I must co-operate with the villages round it, cultivate land, breed cattle, spin clothes, press oil from oil seeds; it must produce all the necessaries, devising the best means, using the best materials, and calling science to its aid.41

Tagore’s educational philosophy thus broadens our mental horizons. It does not speak of only teaching and learning, it speaks of larger interests, of a cultural upbringing, of a common sharing of life with the village folk with no feeling of moral superiority. From a letter written by Arthur Geddes to his father (Patrick Geddes) dated 12 March 1923, we come to know that in spite of the physical distance between Santiniketan and Sriniketan in Surul Khoti, there was ‘some unity and good feeling between the two’. From this very letter the reader learns the experiences of Arthur Geddes at Sriniketan:

The students of Sriniketan are just +10 boys who came down here from Santiniketan school a year ago, but they’re developing into manly fellows varying very much. They’re gradually taking charge of special jobs – dairy, tannery, weaving, scouting, and each has his garden-plot, and most have chickens. The staff have complete charge of the above, one whose special ally I hope to be is a wonderful village worker, – pulling the people together in his gentle way with great success, – Kali Babu, by name.42

Sriniketan thus largely fulfilled the poet’s desire of uniting teachers, students and village workers in an organic bond of necessity and interdependence.

38 Ibid, p. 135
40 Fraser (2004), Introduction, The Tagore-Geddes Correspondence, p. 16
By his own admission, Tagore was ‘an incorrigible idealist’. But Tagore’s educational ideals and methodology were never impractical. His idea of education was ‘to emancipate children’s minds from the dead grip of a mechanical method and a narrow purpose’. Tagore’s championing of rural reconstruction as an integral part of education has not lost its relevance in the twenty-first century. While framing the curriculum across disciplines for the students of colleges and universities, the educationists in the present scenario often include a section that is based on field trips to neighbouring villages thereby integrating the academic stakeholders of an institution with community life. Tagore’s philosophy of education once attracted intellectuals all over the world, and we strongly believe that it will continue to inspire human mind across nations in the years ahead.

References:


Fraser, Bashabi, Introduction, in *The Tagore-Geddes Correspondence* compiled and edited by Bashabi Fraser (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2004), pp. 1 – 45.


43 Tagore’s letter to Miss Muriel Lester in *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 435
44 Fraser (2004), p. 64.
Joyjit Ghosh

Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Politics of Science

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Abstract:

On 6 June 1901, Jagadis Chandra Bose read a paper at the Royal Society in London, entitled ‘On Electric Response of Inorganic Substances’. Bose showed that external stimuli, such as poison or electricity, have a similar effect on living tissue, such as plants or muscle, and inorganic matter, such as iron oxide or tin. Bose recorded response curves for muscle, plant, and metal and was thus able to show parallels between the living and the non-living. This was not only revolutionary, but also unacceptable to parts of his audience. At this talk, Bose encountered two difficulties: firstly, in upsetting traditional disciplinary boundaries between physics and physiology, he, the physicist, undermined the authority of the physiologists who were present. Consequently, they attacked Bose’s findings on the grounds of the second difficulty, namely the common prejudice against Indians according to which the Indian mind, in its pursuit of metaphysic ideals, was unsuited to scientific thoughts and practices. The physiologists thus confounded Bose’s theory of unity between the living and the non-living with a theological bias according to which they believed that Bose could only have arrived at his results because of his predisposition for mysticism rather than by carefully executed experiments. They failed to see that both could be true: for Bose, the intuition to search for a unifying principle between the living and the non-living and the scientific rigour with which he strove to prove it were not mutually exclusive, but, in fact, mutually dependant.

Keywords: Jagadis Chandra Bose, science, nationalism, Macaulay, prejudice, unity of life, interdisciplinarity, wireless telegraphy, Patrick Geddes
Jagadis Chandra Bose (1858–1937) was born in Mymensingh, Bengal Presidency (present-day Bangladesh), in 1858. He graduated from St. Xavier’s College, Calcutta, in 1880 and then went to England to study medicine at the University of London and natural sciences at Christ’s College Cambridge. In 1884, he graduated with a B.Sc. from Cambridge in the Natural Science Tripos and a B.Sc. from London University. He returned to Calcutta and was appointed Professor of Physics at Presidency College, a position he would hold until opening the Bose Research Institute in Calcutta in 1917. Throughout the 1890s, Bose conducted research on electromagnetic (millimetre) waves (then called Hertzian waves) and wireless telegraphy. Amongst other experiments and inventions, he invented a coherer that would prove to be crucial for Guglielmo Marconi’s successful attempt at wireless telegraphy across the Atlantic in 1901. With the turn of the century, Bose changed his field of research from physics to physiology. Instead of continuing with his work on wireless telegraphy, he became interested in the physiology of plants and the similarities between inorganic and living matter in their responses to external stimuli such as electricity, poison, and temperature. To Bose, these similarities suggested an underlying principle of unity at work between the living and the non-living that undermined the distinction between organic and inorganic matter. As he writes in his 1902 book *Response in the Living and Non-Living*:

> it is clear that on the discovery of similar effects amongst inorganic substances, the necessity of theoretically maintaining such dualism in Nature must immediately fall to the ground.

Bose continued to work until his death in 1937, and his scientific career thus spanned five decades and two continents. He would return to Europe several times throughout his career,

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1 Throughout the twentieth century, Bose’s contributions to the invention of wireless telegraphy and the radio were largely forgotten (see Subrata Dasgupta, *Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Indian Response to Western Science* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], p. 5). The history of the radio has been told as a predominantly western history, with Marconi as its main protagonist. This is slowly beginning to change, and Bose’s work is being appreciated in publications such as: Dasgupta (see above); Tapan K. Sarkar and Dipak L. Sengupta, ‘An Appreciation of J. C. Bose’s Pioneering Work in Millimeter and Microwaves’, in *History of Wireless*, eds. by Sarkar et al. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), pp. 291 - 310; Probir K. Bondyopadhyay, ‘Sir J. C. Bose’s Diode Detector Received Marconi’s First Transatlantic Wireless Signal of December 1901 (The “Italian Navy Coherer” Scandal Revisited)’, *IETE Technical Review*, 15:5 (1998): pp. 377 - 406; and by a Google Doodle, of all things, in honour of Bose’s 158th birthday on November 30, 2016, that read: ‘Bose was to become known not only for his work in biophysics, but also his innovation in the world of radio and microwave sciences, ultimately inventing an early version of wireless telecommunication’ (‘Doodles Archive’, Google, https://www.google.com/doodles/jagdish-chandra-bose-158th-birthday, 30 Nov. 2016, accessed 9 Apr. 2018). Interestingly, this Doodle was neither published on the Italian nor the U.K. Google.

2 Jagadis Chunder Bose, *Response in the Living and Non-Living* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), p. 182. The spelling of Bose’s name in English varies, particularly in early texts by and about him. The anglicised version of Chandra is Chunder, and Jagadis is often written as Jagadish. Throughout this essay, I spell his name Jagadis Chandra Bose, except for when, as in this case, he published his work using a different spelling.

3 Three continents, if we include his scientific excursions to the United States of America in
and in this paper, I will focus on his first (1869-1897) and second (1900-1901) trip to Europe as well as on the opening of the Bose Research Institute in Calcutta in 1917 to sketch how his scientific reputation in Europe was first made, then un-made and ultimately re-made over the course of two decades. The unfolding narrative is one of colonial and scientific prejudices and how these affected Bose’s work during his lifetime and his legacy throughout the twentieth century.

As an interdisciplinary scientist from India working at a time when neither interdisciplinarity nor scientists from India were regarded highly in the west, Bose faced and challenged prejudices, the colonial government, and the workings of western scientific institutions. In this regard, his research on plant physiology is of central importance, because his underlying theory of a unifying principle between organic and inorganic matter challenged the strict disciplinary boundaries in western sciences; but it also seemingly confirmed a well-established prejudice according to which ‘by its very peculiar constitution, the Indian mind would always turn away from the study of Nature to metaphysical speculations’, as Bose would later phrase it. Bose felt the consequences of this racist prejudice most keenly in 1901, at a time when he thought that he had made it – that he had achieved recognition for his work on the grounds of its scientific merits and that he had thereby overcome the prejudices levelled against him on the grounds of his nationality. And he was right: he had made it. Four years earlier, during his first scientific excursion to Europe as a Professor of Physics (he had, of course, been to England for his university studies in the 1880s), Bose was invited to deliver a lecture at the Royal Institution’s Friday Evening Discourse in London on January 29, 1897. On the significance of this invitation to the heart of the British Empire and British sciences, Subrata Dasgupta writes the following:

For the Royal Institution, the lecture was, perhaps, just one more entry in its record books. For science, the occasion was yet another addition to its vast corpus. For Bose and for India, it was a moment of profound history. Western science, the science of Galileo and Newton, had finally taken root in India amongst Indians, and on that January evening in 1897, the west tacitly acknowledged that fact. Fifteen years earlier, a British observer in India had written that the Indians could never become discoverers or inventors in the realm of modern science and technology [reference here is to Sir Richard Temple’s 1882 publication ‘Men and Events of My Time in India’]. This was an opinion long held, quite openly, by Englishmen of the time. Bose had refuted this contemptuous thesis. Through his work on radio waves, he laid claim as the Indian pioneer in physics – the most advanced, admired and envied science of the time.

The reason I have quoted Dasgupta at this length is because he raises several points that will be important throughout this paper: first, Bose’s success was not only personal, it was

1908/1909 and 1914/1915.


5 Subrata Dasgupta, Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Indian Response to Western Science, pp. 2 - 3.
also national, ‘a moment of profound history’ for him and for India. Second, given Bose’s success, the west had to acknowledge the fact that Indians are capable scientists which, third, countered a prejudice to the contrary that was prevalent in nineteenth-century England. And fourth, it was Bose’s work as a physicist that made his reputation in the west.

I will duly and repeatedly return to all these points throughout the course of this piece, but I want to start with the last: Bose’s work as a physicist. From 1894 to 1900, Bose was invested in researching the properties of electromagnetic waves. To this extent, he invented new and highly sensitive instruments with which to detect, produce and receive electromagnetic waves, and he effectively helped to pave the way for wireless telegraphy and for the invention of the radio. Although Guglielmo Marconi and Ferdinand Braun would later reap the fruits and win the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1909 without mentioning Bose’s name in either of their acceptance speeches, Bose’s work was acknowledged by his peers in the west. Between 1895 and 1898, Bose’s papers were published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society, the Philosophical Magazine, The Electrician, and in the Asiatic Society’s Journal. In these three years alone, Bose published thirteen papers in some of the west’s most acclaimed scientific journals. And it was on the strength of this research that Bose was invited to demonstrate his ‘Complete Apparatus for the Study of the Properties of Electric Waves’ at the annual meeting of the British Association in Liverpool in 1896; that he was awarded his doctoral degree from the University of London; and that he was invited to deliver the above-mentioned Friday Evening Discourse at the Royal Institution on January 29, 1897. Overall, Bose’s trip to Europe from 1869 to 1897 was a great success. And it was not only a personal one. Bose became the living proof that the prejudice against Indian scientists was false. As Patrick Geddes, Bose’s contemporary and friend, recalls in his 1920 biography of Bose:

From the above account of the success of Bose’s scientific deputation to Europe, it will be seen that the long-standing prejudice which the West had entertained regarding the incapacity of Indians to do advanced scientific work was removed.

Geddes goes on to quote Sir Henry Roscoe, then Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, who ‘acknowledged that the Eastern mind was equally capable of making great scientific discoveries and producing experimentalists as eminent as those of the West’ and Lord Reay, former Governor of Bombay, who,

representing the statesman’s point of view, drew attention to the importance of India’s contribution to science: ‘For science was absolutely international, and any result obtained by Dr Bose in India could at once be annexed by us without protest’.  

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6 Ibid, p. 2.  
7 Subrata Dasgupta, Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Indian Response to Western Science, p. 49.  
8 Ibid, pp. 56 – 57.  
10 Patrick Geddes, An Indian Pioneer of Science, p. 65.  
11 Ibid, p. 65.
Bose’s success became India’s success. He had proven the prejudice of Indians’ inaptitude for science wrong. As Geddes summarises it:

the general press and the public were struck by him as the first Indian to win distinction through investigation in science – in the most strictly Western of all its departments, and at that times also the most progressive.\(^{12}\)

An article about Bose titled ‘A Bengalee Professor’ published in *The Spectator* on February 6, 1897, eight days after the Friday Evening Discourse, describes the deep-seated nature of this prejudice:

The Western world has in modern times seen no great Asiatic physicist, and, indeed, is more than half inclined to believe that no such phenomenon is possible. Though all the religions which have yet found acceptance on earth have been founded by Asiatics, and though the very words assure us that the first discoverers in chemistry and algebra must have belonged to the same continent, the European contempt for the Asiatic mind is ineradicable, and is, above all, vigorous in the direction of science.\(^{13}\)

The article goes on to praise Bose’s scientific achievements and describes him as an exemplary figure who shows that the ‘Asiatic has now the same means of accumulating and transmitting knowledge of physics as the European’.\(^{14}\) Despite the praise, the article’s author is not sure whether ‘Professor Bose and his few colleagues, either in India or Japan, may be, for anything we can yet be sure of, mere accidents, as much ‘sports’ among their countrymen as, for instance, was Michael Scott, the philosopher, chemist, and ‘wizard’ of the Middle Ages among his countrymen north of the Tweed’.\(^{15}\) To hail Bose as an accident and his achievements as exceptional is a backhanded compliment, as it celebrates his individual success while implying that this is an exception to the rule. This confirms rather than dispels the prejudice of Indians’ inaptitude for science at large. In her 1928 book *Pioneers of Science* Amelia Dorothy Defries similarly describes Bose as a ‘genius’ who

still stands in solitude, one amongst a million, by its nature without the support of the masses[,] yet living for them.\(^{16}\)

To consider Bose one of the titular pioneers, one of a kind, is to consider him an exception to the rule that is the prejudice of ‘a dying and chaotic India’.\(^{17}\) This narrative of

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17 Amelia Dorothy Defries, *Pioneers of Science*, p. 28. Defries here refers to Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (New York: Blue Ribbon Press, 1927), in which Mayo argues against Indian independence from British colonial rule. It should be noted that Defries counters some of Mayo’s views and acknowledges that Bose
the individual genius who succeeds against the odds effectively allows Defries to ignore the fact that the odds stacked against Bose were thus stacked by the colonial government and not by the ignorance of his own people.

The prejudice of Indians’ inaptitude for science was both prevalent and institutionalised, and it served as a foundational myth and justification for British rule in India. One of the most notorious and influential proponents of this prejudice was the historian, essayist, and parliamentarian Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859), who served as a member of the supreme council of the East India Company from 1834 to 1838. In that capacity, he oversaw major educational and legal reforms. In his ‘Minute on Indian Education’ (1835) Macaulay claims that neither the languages of India nor the minds of Indian people are suited to the study of science and that therefore all education in India should be conducted in English:

> when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immesurable.  

This was, of course, blatantly racist and plainly untrue. It was also, and more subtly, politically motivated. As D. P. Sen Gupta writes in *Remembering Sir J.C. Bose*:

> It was not in the interest of the colonials of the East India Company to introduce Western science into a colony any more than was necessary for them to carry out surveys and geological explorations to measure the resources that they could exploit.

In other words, colonial subjects were to be educated on the terms and for the sake and profit of the empire. This educational policy was motivated by (at least) three factors: (1) the urge to exploit the colonies’ every resource, including human intellectual capital, which was justified by (2) the prejudice that there was no scientific tradition in the colonies that could parallel ‘western’ sciences. This was motivated by (3) the deep-seated anxiety that to educate colonial subjects is to instil in them the desire for political autonomy and independence from colonial rule. As Ashim Kumar Mukhopadhyay writes in his book *Colonialism, Nationalism & Scientism*, the science education that the colonial government in India sponsored was ‘colonial

paves the way for other Indian scientists:

One scientist here and there being mentally vigorous among the hundreds of millions of the Indian people, it may be said by Miss Mayo’s believers, is an exception, not a rule. But even my small knowledge of Indians is sufficient enough for me to know that Bose, though outstanding by reason of exceptional genius, is not an exception among the scientific, the learned and thinking classes in India: where he leads many are following (pp. 37 - 38).

in the sense that its agenda was decided on the grounds of political and commercial gains’. Thus, Mukhopadhyay argues,

the production and growth of modern science in India was encouraged by the British with a view to furthering colonial interests.

The few scientific institutions established by the British in India (amongst others Bose’s employer, Presidency College, Calcutta) were initially meant for Europeans only, and the research conducted by, for example, the Geographical survey was primarily field science to aid the British exploration and exploitation of India.

As to the second factor, that is the prejudice that there is no modern science tradition in India, Amelia Defries’s 1928 book quoted above is again conclusive. She writes:

When in Catholic Europe any knowledge outside that of the established belief was so much feared, in India all knowledge was held to be a beatitude. But when modern science began, with its manifold wonders, and the manifold abuse of the wonders in application, India, lost in ancient memories, let it pass her by. It is a strange thing that the India where much of science arose has not until now created a scientific movement.

The orientalist stereotype that Defries deploys here is the familiar one of a country being stuck in the past: India used to be great and advanced a long time ago when Europe was still in the shackles of medieval Catholicism; now, however, India is ‘lost in ancient memories’ and missing out on progress, science, and overall development, all of which are taken to be characteristics of and justification for the colonising power. Crucially, Defries considers this regression to be India’s fault, who has actively ‘let it [modern science] pass her by’. There is again no account of Britain’s role as the imperial power in suppressing science education. Defries ignores the political dimension of modern science in India both from the point of view of the British, who suppressed and appropriated science as fit their own agenda, and of the Indian, who used science as an anti-colonial platform (about which more below). Instead, she wonders why India,

seeming so long deaf and blind to modern science, suddenly produced a man like Bose, more modern than our moderns, infusing science with a light it has, hitherto, scarcely known?

21 Ashim Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Colonialism, Nationalism & Scientism, p. 1.
24 Ibid, p. 27.
In her own explanation she again evokes an Indian scientific tradition that is in and of the distant past:

Because there was a time when India was alive with similar men [...] and behind the young Bose there stood a mighty web of intellectual tradition – original in its day, as epoch-making for ancient times as is our own newer scientific tradition to us, in the West, to-day.25

Defries is conveniently vague when it comes to dating this golden age of Indian intellectual tradition. She variously dates it ‘in ancient memory’ and ‘ancient times’, at the time of ‘Catholic Europe’, which in and of itself could be anytime between the 5th and the 15th century CE, and even further back when she writes that ‘[t]he highest peak in her [India’s] civilization was reached thousands of years ago’.26 To thus project India’s scientific tradition back into the distant past as something that was good ‘in its day’ allows Defries to negate the existence of modern science in India. Moreover, allowing for a past Indian ‘golden age’ during which India was superior to the West makes it easy to argue that this age is now past, that the West has overtaken India, and that this justifies the imperial myth of colonising India ‘for her own sake’. This orientalist mind-set is part of the foundation of the prejudice that Bose faced throughout his life: that scientifically inclined Indians cannot exist because they have not existed for a long time.

The flip-side of the prejudice that the well-educated colonial subject does not exist is the coloniser’s anxiety of the opposite: that they do exist and that to educate colonial subjects is to instil in them the desire for political autonomy and independence from colonial rule. Thus, Macaulay concludes that the British mission for education in India should be to form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.27

In other words: should the scientifically inclined Indian really exist, the coloniser better make sure to educate them in the context of western and westernised institutions that are very likely to discriminate against colonial subjects on the grounds of racial prejudices so as to maintain control over them lest they exert their mental capacities on political issues such as independence. The Spectator article from 1896 mentioned above confirms this. In the concluding paragraph, the author writes:

Europe is suddenly developing the Asiatic mind in a dozen different countries without giving it anything to exert itself upon, the result being the unsettlement and almost savage discontent which puzzle European observers.28

And further on:

His intellect, unless he is a doctor, is left to consume itself, and the result is fret, leading to the curious phenomenon we see, that while the peasantry are content with the white-man's rule, and the educated admire the white man, the latter chafe furiously under what we have ourselves heard them describe as the 'sceptre of lead.' There could be no vent for this useless energy, which, be it observed, Europe is incessantly developing and increasing, like the pursuit of scientific truth, which can never end.  

The implicit anxiety is clear: if we as Europeans educate the people we rule, we better let them occupy their minds with scientific study so that they do not occupy their minds with politics. However, this never really worked with Bose. From the beginning of his career he challenged the colonial higher education system and its intrinsic racial prejudices. His appointment as Professor of Physics at Presidency College is a case in point. Although the viceroy Lord Ripon recommended Bose for the post upon Bose's return from England in 1884, Sir Alfred Croft, then Director of Public Instruction for Bengal, insisted to Bose:

There is no higher-class appointment at present available in the Imperial Education Service. I can only offer you a place in the Provincial Service, from which you may be promoted.

Bose declined the offer, because he knew that the lack of an available position was not Croft's true motivation. As Bose would later recall in a speech to students at Presidency College on January 19, 1925, Croft told him that he 'did not possess the requisite temperament for the exact sciences'. However, Croft's protest was to little avail. Bose got the position, because the viceroy intervened on his behalf. Bose was, however, only paid two-thirds the salary that his English colleagues were paid because he was Indian. This amount was even further reduced, as he was initially appointed as Officiating Professor on a temporary contract. Again, Bose protested against the institutional racism. He did not accept his pay cheques for the three years it took for his salary to be raised to be equal to that of his English colleagues. These instances show that from the beginning of his career, Bose was motivated by intellectual curiosity and the scientific pursuit of truth as much as by national pride. As Dasgupta writes,

for Bose knowledge and glory were inextricably entwined with the Indian past and the colonial present. Science was also a path to the discovery, or recovery, of self-pride, as much the collective pride of the Indian people as of the personal self. The long trail of British contempt for the Indian as a thinker in the exact sciences stung. [...] Bose adopted the life of a creative scientist because he saw it as a means to confound the British critics and their 'paralysing' prejudice against the very idea of Indians doing science.

In short: from the beginning, science was political for Bose. And his politics

29 ‘A Bengalee Professor’, The Spectator, 6 February 1897, p. 13.
30 Patrick Geddes, An Indian Pioneer of Science, p. 33.
31 Rephrased. Subrata Dasgupta, Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Indian Response to Western Science, p. 43.
32 Subrata Dasgupta, Jagadis Chandra Bose and the Indian Response to Western Science, p. 45.
were anti-colonial.

In an article on ‘The Promotion of Advanced Study of Physics in India’, published in the February issue of the *Electrician* in 1897, Bose defends Indian science students against the prejudice of inaptitude:

I have heard it said seriously, as a proof of their inaptitude, that India has not yet produced a Davy or a Faraday. Now, it is forgotten that it took the whole world many centuries to bring forth a few men like Davy or Faraday, and it is somewhat unreasonable to expect India to produce such men before science teaching has even been properly introduced.\(^3\)

The science teaching that Bose refers to is science education as introduced and institutionalised under the colonial government. The lack of an Indian Davy or Faraday is therefore not due to Indians’ inaptitude for sciences, as the prejudice has it, but due to underfunded universities, as Bose lays it out in his article. Amongst other things, he calls for the establishment of fully equipped laboratories and for postgraduate scholarships. According to Bose, Indian students of science lack neither the talent nor the enthusiasm nor the dedication to become great scientists; they lack the equipment and the funds. Overall, Bose’s tone in this article is complaisant to the point of being deferential towards the colonial government. He praises the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, for his ‘enlightened and keen interest taken in the advancement of science in my country’ and notes that ‘Bengal has been fortunate in having three successive Governors who have been promoters of science’.\(^4\) But in changing the focus from personal inaptitude to institutional problems such as lack of funding, Bose refutes the prejudice and shifts the blame for the lack of scientific success from his countrymen to the colonial government and thus from the colonised to the coloniser. As opposed to Defries, Bose thus identifies and acknowledges the racist politics of science in colonial India. Almost twenty years later, in his inaugural address at Benares University on February 4, 1916, Bose would be much more critical, albeit not much more explicit, in his criticism of the negative impact of colonialism on the development of an Indian scientific tradition:

The cause of our scientific ill-success has been the want of true recognition of the experimental side. This may have been due to decline of national life, however, brought about, or to the general distraction consequent on the unsettled condition of the country.\(^5\)


\(^{5}\) Ibid, pp. 153-165, (p. 165).
conclusively be read as anti-colonial criticism, particularly when read in the context of other speeches such as ‘The Uphill Way’, an autobiographical speech that Bose delivered to his students at Presidency College (date unclear). In this speech, Bose stresses that India is ‘one and indivisible’ and that ‘we shall be indomitable in our efforts, belonging to the band of pioneers in the task of nation building’. The ‘we’ is crucial in this context, for it indicates that Bose considers it part of the Indian scientists’ task to contribute to the project of building India as an independent nation. Sciences and anti-colonial politics were thus inextricably linked for Bose, just as sciences and colonial politics had been inextricably linked for Macaulay, Croft, and others.

Three years after the huge success that was his first professional trip (1869-1897), Bose returned to Europe in 1900-1901. Just when he thought that he had made it – that he had garnered approval for his work in the west and had overcome the racial prejudice levelled against him – the same prejudice came to haunt him again when he presented his most recent research ‘On Electric Response of Inorganic Substances’ to the Royal Society in London on June 6, 1901. In his talk, Bose showed that external stimuli, such as poison or electricity, have a similar effect on living tissue, such as plants or muscle, and inorganic matter, such as iron oxide or tin. Bose recorded response curves for muscle, plant, and metal and was thus able to show comparable effects of external stimuli on animals, plants, and metals alike. This was not only revolutionary, but also unacceptable to parts of his audience.

Bose, the physicist, was crossing disciplinary boundaries to physiology, and the physiologists were not happy. He was asked to revise his paper and negate his own results about the electric response of plants, not because his experiments were scientifically unsound, but because Sir John Burdon Sanderson, a famous professor of physiology, did not believe what he had seen with his own eyes. After all, he had tried to obtain these results in his experiments, but never managed.

At this talk, Bose encountered two difficulties: firstly, in upsetting traditional disciplinary boundaries between physics and physiology, he, the physicist, undermined the authority of the physiologists who were present. In Bose’s words, he had thus ‘unwittingly strayed into the domain of a new and unfamiliar caste system and so offended its etiquette’. Consequently, the physiologists attacked Bose’s findings on the grounds of the second difficulty, namely the common prejudice against Indians according to which the Indian mind, in its pursuit of metaphysic ideals, was unsuited to scientific thoughts and practices. Bose confirms this in his inaugural speech at the opening of the Bose Research Institute on November 30, 1917:

An unconscious theological bias was also present which confounds ignorance with faith.

37 Before that, Bose presented his results to great acclaim at the Congrès International de Physique, Paris, August 1900; the Bradford Meeting of the British Association, September 1900; and at his second Friday Evening Discourse at the Royal Institution, May 1901.
 [...] To the theological bias was added the misgivings about the inherent bent of the Indian mind towards mysticism and unchecked imagination.  

The results of Bose’s experiments that he presented at his Royal Society talk suggested to him that the common reaction of organic and inorganic material to external stimuli ‘seemed to bring together metal, plant and animal under a general law’. But for Bose, this link between physics and physiology was never solely scientific; it resonated with his general belief in what he variously called ‘The Law Universal’, ‘the idea of unity’, ‘the great generalization of the unity of all life’. And it was these insinuations of a greater unity that made Bose’s new research so divisive. What to his supporters seemed like a revelation of an underlying greater truth, to his opponents must have seemed like a confirmation of the prejudice that no great contribution to exact knowledge could be made in India, since the Indian temperament was merely speculative and dominated by exuberant imagination.  

In other words: the physiologists present at the Royal Society talk thus confounded Bose’s theory of unity between the living and the non-living with a theological bias according to which they believed that Bose could only have arrived at his results because of his predisposition for mysticism rather than by carefully executed experiments. They failed to see that both could be true: for Bose, the intuition to search for a unifying principle between the living and the non-living and the scientific rigour with which he strove to prove it were not mutually exclusive, but, in fact, mutually dependant. Combining notions of traditionalism with modern science and technology, Bose thus embodied the ideas and ideals of the Bengal Renaissance. And it is this duality of traditionalism and modernity that Rabindranath Tagore picks up on and celebrates in his poem about and for Bose, which Tagore sent to his friend while Bose was still in the UK in 1901:

Where didst thou spread thy hush’d and lonely mat –  
Thy mat of meditation? Thou, thy mind  
Curdling into calm gravity, didst plunge  
In thy great quest after the viewless ray,  
Beyond the utmost borders of this world  
Of visible form, there where the Rishis old  
Oped, and passed in beyond the lion-gates  
Of the Manifold and stood before the One. 

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40 Ibid, p. 229  
43 Jagadis Chandra Bose, ‘Convocation address at the University of Bombay’, in J. C. Bose Speaks, pp. 109-112 (p. 110).  
44 Ibid, pp. 67-77 (p. 69).
Tagore celebrates the combination of scientific rigour (‘thy great quest after the viewless ray’), meditation (‘thy hush’d and lonely mat’), the Indian scientific tradition (‘Rishis old’), and a monist worldview (‘stood before the One’); a combination that he and Bose shared and both embraced in their lives and work.

And sixteen years after his fateful talk at Royal Society, at the opening of his eponymous research institute in Calcutta and arguably at the height his career thus far, Bose does not only refute the theological bias by his sheer scientific success, he also inverts it. In his speech he defines the interdisciplinary research that connects ‘the lines of physics, of physiology and of psychology’ as the space where ‘those who would seek oneness amidst the manifold’ will assemble and where ‘the genius of India should find its true blossoming’. Bose thus redefines a supposed weakness to be a defining strength of Indian scientists. In a cunning reversal of the west’s criticism, Bose attacks the disciplinary boundaries of western scientific institutions and argues that the excessive specialisation of modern science in the West has led to the danger of losing sight of the fundamental fact that there can be but one truth, one science which includes all the branches of knowledge.

He further argues that

India through her habit of mind is peculiarly fitted to realise the idea of unity, and to see in the phenomenal world an orderly universe.

He appropriates a prejudice that had been levelled against him throughout his career and he uses it as one of the cornerstones for his research institute, which in turn he considers to be one of the cornerstones for an independent India: ‘This has always been the cry of the soul of India, not for addition of material bondage, but to work out through struggle her self-chosen destiny and win immortality’, he says in his inaugural speech. It is ‘the burning flame born of thought which has been handed down through fleeting generations’ that, according to Bose, safeguards the nation’s immortality. In other words: the tradition of knowledge and education. And it is in this tradition that Bose founds his research institute in 1917, to build a new and independent nation upon

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48 Ibid, p. 236.


50 Ibid, p. 240.
the foundation of an old and independent scientific tradition:

    We stand here to-day and resume work tomorrow, so that by the efforts of our lives and our unshaken faith in the future we may all help to build the greater India yet to be.\textsuperscript{51}

\section*{References}


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p. 241.


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Significance of the environment in the songs of Rabindranath Tagore

Reba Som

Abstract:

Born in a family of fourteen siblings Rabindranath Tagore spent a lot of time alone though not lonely. From his childhood he had been a lover of nature. The large expanse of meadows in Santiniketan, the wide stretches of the river Padma at Shilaidah skirted by the murmuring rows of coconut palms made him feel that he was part of a universal oneness. Tagore’s philosophy behind his school in Santiniketan was to enable his students to relate to the environment. With an unorthodox approach to education he encouraged them to walk bare footed to feel the dust under their feet and experience the touch and feel of trees which they could climb. Rabindranath’s model was the forest dwellings of ancient times – the tapoban – which Kalidasa had immortalised in his epic works. Most of Tagore’s Gitanjali songs were composed in Santiniketan and spoke of a deep spiritual presence in nature’s harmony amidst the diverse moods of the seasons. To celebrate the environment Tagore organised several festivals in Santiniketan and composed songs especially for them such as Basant Utsav (for spring), Barsha Mangal (for the monsoons), Sharad Utsav (for autumn) and Ritu Ranga (for all the seasons). He also introduced the colourful festival of tree planting (Briksha ropan) from a Bali dance tradition. Harvest was celebrated with Halakarshan when agricultural fields were symbolically ploughed. In the school song ‘Santiniketan’, students sang of their communion with nature, nurtured by groves and protected by an embracing sky.

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1 Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, (Song Offerings) A collection of prose translations made by the author from the original Bengali, with an introduction by W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan & Co London, 1961). It was first published in 1911 – which won Tagore the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.
Keywords: Environment, Songs, Rabindranath Tagore.

Born in a family of fourteen siblings Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) spent a lot of time alone though not lonely. Raised in an atmosphere where freedom of ideas was cherished by his artistic, musical and literary brothers and sisters, Rabindranath could nurture unconventional thoughts and give free rein to his creative imagination. He recalled as a child how the row of coconut trees by the garden wall with their branches beckoning the rising sun on the horizon gave him a sense of companionship as if he lived in their world.\(^3\) As an eleven year old, Rabindranath accompanied his family to a garden home in Peneti to escape the outbreak of plague in the city of Calcutta. He felt like a caged bird set free, witnessing for the first time the glorious sunsets and sunrises on the water front. He was to write in his memoirs,\(^4\) how each day-break came to him as a gilt edged envelope, inviting him to unknown delights.

Over the years it was a mature Rabindranath who delved into the meaning of these simple delights of childhood and came to a spiritual understanding of the environment. The turning point in Tagore’s life came in 1890 when he was asked by his father Debendranath Tagore to look after their ancestral estates in east Bengal and locate himself in Shelidah. Tagore was at a loose end at the time. His father’s ambition to train him to be a barrister by sending him to London had been unsuccessful. His closeness to Kadambari Devi, the wife of his elder brother Jyotirindranath, who had been a childhood playmate to Rabindranath and later as an adolescent, an admirer of him and his literary qualities, made the patriarch uncomfortable. Rabindranath was married off to ten year old Bhabatarini (later renamed Mrinalini) in 1883. Six months later Kadambari committed suicide. This was a blow from which the Poet never fully recovered.

In Shelidah, on the banks of the majestic river Padma, Tagore found the time to heal his soul. In the decade that he spent in and around Shelidah, Tagore was able to establish a communion with nature. The environment grew on him while the rural society fascinated him. In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in Stockholm in 1921 Tagore recalled how his stay at Shelidah had made him aware of the deep spiritual energy in nature. He said:

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\text{when I was about 25 years I used to live in utmost seclusion in the solitude of an obscure Bengal village by the river Ganges in a boat-house. The wild ducks which came during the time of autumn from the Himalayan lakes were my only living companions, and in that solitude I seem to have drunk in the open space like wine overflowing with sunshine, and the murmur of the river used to speak to me and tell me the secrets of nature.} \]


Tagore came to recognise that he was part of a universal oneness. Recalling a certain day in Shahjadpur in his riverine estate, Tagore wrote that his view from the window captured on a wide canvas, the dark monsoon sky, the anchored boats bobbing up and down with the tide, the loud cheer of young boys playing on the water front. He felt intuitively that he was an intrinsic part of this experience. He sensed a feeling of freedom. Although alone he was not lonely for he could sense the presence of an eternal companion that lay within him and conversed with him incessantly. This was his realisation of a *jeevan devata*, the god that dwelt within him, on which Tagore was to elaborate later in 1930 in his Hibbert lectures at Oxford University on the Religion of Man. As he absorbed the beauty of his environment in Shelidah, Tagore felt for the first time the pulse of a rural society. To the Bengali bhadralok city dwellers, the villager had long been dismissed as illiterate, unrefined and therefore chhotolok (lower class). Tagore discovered a fine rhythm in village life with simple human values on which he based many of his famous short stories. He was also amazed to discover the community of itinerant rural singers, the bauls, whose message of *moner manush* or man of the mind was akin to his own concept of *jeevan devata*. He spent long hours conversing with bauls, discussing their philosophy and hearing their music. Many of Tagore's songs bear the deep influence of baul music and philosophy and have come to be known as Rabindra-baul. Above all, Tagore introduced folk music into the musical concerts of the urban elite in the city for the first time.

The closeness with the environment and the communion with nature that Tagore experienced in his decade long stay in Shelidah, led to his resolve to open a school in rural settings along the lines of the old forest ashrams or hermitages celebrated by Kalidasa. True education he felt could only come with the realisation that there was a creative unity that linked man with the environment and nature. The hermitage in Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* overshadowed the King’s palace in creating the ideal environment for nurturing the soul. Such forest ashrams were run by great teachers devoid of book learning. They were neither schools nor monasteries in the modern sense of the word. ‘Students were brought up not in the academic atmosphere of scholarship or in the maimed life of monastic seclusion but in the atmosphere of living aspiration.’

This was the ideal behind Tagore’s ashrama school in Santiniketan and later his Visva Bharati University. His own unsuccessful experience with formal education had led him to abandon school after class five. He had found the structured school routine soul killing for:

\[\text{all of a sudden I found my world vanishing from around me, giving place to wooden benches and straight walls staring at me with the blank stare of the blind.}\]

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7 Postmaster, Samapti, Chhuti etc
He was to realise that ‘the highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.’

All of Tagore’s wisdom and learning was self-realised. He now sought to create an atmosphere where he could take on the role of an unconventional teacher allowing students freedom to explore their environment and discover themselves. They could walk bare-feet to feel the dust under their soles and climb trees to get the feel of the bark and foliage. Santiniketan seemed to Tagore the ideal environment for students to imbibe the spirit of their surroundings. At a distance of hundred miles from Calcutta Santiniketan was a spot selected by his father Maharshi Debendranath several years ago. It was devoid of vegetation and open all round to the edge of the horizon. In 1901 Tagore’s days in Shelidah came to an end when he relinquished charge of the Tagore estates and came with his family, which had now expanded to five children, to stay at Santiniketan.

Rabindranath created his school around the only green life he found there – a cluster of tall saal trees and a shady mango grove. It was in the open space all around that could best be appreciated the dramatic change of seasons. Tagore observed that the sense of space, deeply valued by Japanese and Chinese painters, brought with it not a feeling of emptiness but of freedom. To open a school in such pristine settings was a gamble that Tagore took. As he explained to his Santiniketan students years later, it had been ‘a great sacrifice’ to leave the beautiful seclusion of his houseboat on the Padma where he could immerse himself with his ‘special gift of music and poetry’ and choose instead to take on the great odds of running a school in arid settings that ‘sapped my life and energy’. However, what kept him going was his conviction that his ashram-school would throw open its doors to all and become ‘the guest-house of India, a centre of culture and maitri’.

Tagore invited renowned artists and scholars from the city to live in residence and inspire his students. He himself held classes under the big shady trees teaching them what he could, playing with them, reciting the ancient epics and singing his songs. As he recalled:

I trusted the spirit of freedom in the atmosphere. I had to fight the teachers who assisted me, who had been brought up in a different environment to that of mine who had no faith in freedom, who believed that it was impertinence for the boys to be boys.

In the world of the young Rabindranath rediscovered his youth. His creativity flourished and in his forties he found himself still growing, although life dealt him serious blows as he lost his wife and two of his children in quick succession. Tagore explained:

the reason is this, that I offer freedom, and therefore that I get freedom, the freedom

10 Ibid.
which has the power to stimulate the creative mind and life.\textsuperscript{14}

Santiniketan proved to be the most productive environment for Tagore’s songs. The majority of his \textit{Gitanjali} songs were written here, many of which he translated into English later in Shelidah, while recuperating from an illness and which went on to win him the Nobel Prize in 1913. The wide horizons and extreme weather conditions in Santiniketan gave Tagore a greater feel for nature. He would keep his windows wide open to the glare of the midday sun in the extreme heat of summer and to gusts of rain bearing winds during the monsoons. Each morning he woke up before dawn so that the first rays of the sun would stream in through the open windows onto his face.\textsuperscript{15} His affinity with nature and sense of connect with life primordial found expression in some of the best nature songs that he wrote now.

Tagore’s songs on nature or \textit{prakriti} numbering 283 form a distinct genre in his musical oeuvre. In these songs Tagore sought to capture the self contained balance that he discovered in nature. The varying moods of the seasons resounded with different rhythms and reflected the changing patterns in foliage and flower. But nature’s self-sufficiency created a unity in this diversity. As Tagore pointed out, the colours of a rainbow were like the hues of love – there was place for each hue without encroachment by another. Like the notes of music, they collectively created harmony. The seasons too, rich in their different manifestations, blended into each other, forming one composite whole. Tagore interacted with each season as a long lost friend, welcoming and bidding farewell in due course to each. Tagore’s appreciation was not limited to the external beauty of colour, fragrance and form. In his understanding of nature and the environment Tagore sought to discover an underlying divine bliss – \textit{anandaroop}. One had to look beyond the dust or the water of the earth and regard them as manifestations of a divine presence, recognising them as spiritual offerings and inspiration for an advanced consciousness. Rabindranath felt truly blessed to find himself in the midst of life that surged around the skies, the sun, stars and the earth. One of the finest expressions of this awareness of being connected with cosmic creation is in his song \textit{Akash bhaura sburjo tara}:\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{quote}
The sun and star-studded skies – a world throbbing with life  
In the midst of which have I found my place  
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!  
The turbulence of eternal time – the ebb and flow that rocks the world  
Have sent a tidal surge coursing through my blood stream  
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!  
On blades of grass have my feet stepped along the forest path  
My mind has started at the heady fragrance of flowers  
The gifts of your joy are scattered all around  
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 526.  
\textsuperscript{15} Reba Som, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song}, p. 82.  
I have poured out my life unto the bosom of the earth
I have searched for the unknown in the midst of the known
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!

In arid inland Santiniketan, with its red dusty roads and distant horizons, Tagore sensed acutely the dramatic changes that came between summer and winter. Summer came with its sizzling heat and Tagore captured the mood of a long summer day thus in his song **prakbar tapan taapey**:17

In the intense heat of the sun, the earth shivers in deep thirst, the winds rage
I come to a temple and cry at the end of a long journey ‘open, open, open the doors

*Varsha* or the rains were perhaps the most favourite season of the Poet. It drew a veil of rain over the mind and created a canopy of clouds so that the mind could not wander. The rhythm of thunderous rain made the mind withdraw inwards in contemplation, creating a mood of solemnity, not frivolity. The monsoons were celebrated in Santiniketan with *varsha mangal*, a festival of dance and songs composed specially in celebration of the rains. Welcoming the rains as *shyamal sundar*, or the verdant beauty,18 the Poet called out for its ‘cooling, thirst-quenching nectar of companionship.’ The mood was of a lovers’ reunion after days of desolation and pain celebrated through the rhythm of vigorous dance to the accompaniment of the sound of the rains. In another song19 Tagore recalled Kalidasa’s cloud messenger *meghduta* emerging after ages and hovering over the banks of the river Reba, making its way to the lover as she waited with bated breath. Tagore’s rich imagery wove a brilliant tapestry around nature’s wondrous moods in his songs, which matched in music and rhythm the nuances of the lyrics. The rejuvenating impact of the rains on a parched countryside is captured in his song **Abar eshechhe ashad** where he spoke of the fragrance of the rains carried by the breeze which made his old heart dance with joy as he looked skywards at the darkening clouds. Wishing goodbye to the rains as he would a dear friend, Tagore’s song was heart wrenching. *O verdant shade surely you don’t need to depart after pouring out your last showers he wrote.*20 But despair soon gave way to hope as he concluded in the song:

the new sun will yet rise in laughter
the clouds will play a golden flute
darkness and light will combine creating the mood of union.

*Sharad* was the season of golden sunshine, blue skies, swaying bulrushes in fields, heaps of *harsingher* on green dewy patches and white floating clouds. He addressed an autumn day thus:

I know not your name, I know only your tune/ you are the message of light,

17 Translation mine. Ibid, p. 97.
18 Esho shyamal shundor, Translation mine (unpublished).
19 Bohu juger opar bate ashad elo.
20 Shyamal chhaya nayi ba gele, Translation mine (unpublished).
heralding sharad’s dawn.\textsuperscript{21}

This beautiful and evocative description captures the essence of the very short season of sharad, celebrated by students in Santiniketan as \textit{sharadotsav}. The season of Hemant came with star spangled skies and dewy nights. With the imagery of diwali or the festival of lights in mind, Tagore composed his celebrated song \textit{beemero ratey oyi gogoney}. It was a season of empty flower gardens where singing birds had become silent and bulrushes poured their foliage into the river. But carrying the message of hope and revival, the myriad stars in the night sky seemed to inspire earth’s children to light their own lamps of \textit{deepalika}, conquering despondency and darkness with life sustaining illumination. Winter brought with it golden sunshine and the promise of a rich harvest. Tagore wrote:

\begin{quote}
The season of Paush hails you, come hither, come hither/ Her platter is filled with ripe harvest, come let us celebrate.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

With a catchy baul tune this song lends itself well to a group folk song and was introduced by Tagore as an item in his play \textit{Rakta Karabi} (Red Oleanders).

To complete the cycle of seasons in the collection of Tagore’s nature songs was \textit{ritu-rajbasant} or spring, the king of seasons. Basant, to Tagore, was like a free wandering spirit which released the mind from its deep recesses, making it float on a balmy breeze, intoxicated by a heady floral fragrance and lulled to sleep in moonshine. Unlike the solemn \textit{Varsha}, it was flirtatious and frivolous. But it also came as the harbinger of hope and inspiration as an affirmation of life after the long winter. The magic of spring was beautifully captured by Tagore in a song\textsuperscript{23} thus:

\begin{quote}
A light touch do I feel, a few words do I hear
And I conjure in my mind spring’s full moon
The intoxicating red of the ‘palash’
Mixed with a dash of champa’s heady fragrance
I weave with music into a net of colour and fervour
\end{quote}

Spring was celebrated in Santiniketan with abandon on the day of the festival of colours – \textit{boli}. The day began with girl students streaming onto the streets singing\textsuperscript{24} an invocation to householders to open their doors for spring had descended on land, on waters and in the forests. The procession gradually swelled with residents joining in, and wound its way through the alleyways towards the mango grove which sported a festive air with fluttering coloured stoles tied to branches. On a central stage, hand painted with alpona, were assembled girls wearing mustard coloured saris symbolising spring. The Poet would usually begin the celebrations with his recitations which would be followed by his

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{Tomar nam jani ne shur jani}, Translation mine. Reba Som, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song}, p. 98.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{Paush toder dak diyeche}, Translation mine. Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ektuku chhoya lage}, Translation mine. Ibid., p. 97.
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{O re gribo bashi kbol daar kbol legechee dol}, Translation mine. Ibid., p. 98.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
celebrated songs of spring such as:

The southern gates have opened – come, come, come my spring or Today we have to blend into each other’s colours.\textsuperscript{25}

The play of colours would follow using only dry red powder and sandalwood and the festival of \textit{Basantotsav} would end on the full moon night with a feast of song and dance celebrating the magic of spring.

Despite the apparent impermanence of the seasons, Tagore found in nature a continuous and ever-present spiritual presence, which was held in balance and harmony. In his communion with nature, Tagore felt blessed in the divine revelation that made its presence felt in the dust, the green grass, the animate beings and the celestial bodies in the skies.

Tagore’s magnificent song composition \textit{Nataraj} on the theme of the mutability of human existence amidst the permanence of nature was performed during the Holi celebrations in Santiniketan in 1927. \textit{Nataraj} or Shiva, in his cosmic dance or \textit{tandava} created the external beauty of the universe with the strike of one foot, while with the stamp of the other he caused the emotional landscape of the individual to be manifested. Since the concept of the eternal passage of time or \textit{shomoye} was integral to Shiva (\textit{Nataraj}) as also the seasons, Tagore later restructured his composition \textit{Nataraj} and called it \textit{Riturangashala}. Incorporating classical dance movements with new songs and involving men and women students in the dance composition, Tagore’s path breaking production was staged on multiple occasions in various places.

Tagore’s \textit{anushthanik} or occasion-specific songs in his song anthology \textit{Gitabitan} were meant to create a mood appropriate for a whole range of events that marked quotidian life. Following his visit to Bali, the poet introduced Bali dancing in a colourful festival in 1928 to commemorate tree planning or \textit{briksharopan} as part of an environmental awareness campaign. Brightly dressed young girls sang songs and blew on conch shells while accompanying tree saplings in procession. In the same year he introduced another festival – \textit{Halakarshan} – to celebrate agricultural fields being ploughed and harvests being reaped, which would help bring together the human community. Many Santhal tribals who lived around the village were invited to be part of these celebrations. At Sriniketan, adjacent to Santiniketan, where Tagore had set up a centre for agricultural studies, a festival celebrating handicraft was annually held on ‘\textit{Viswakarma Puja},’ a religious festival dedicated to the patron deity of artisans and workers, who blessed their professional implements and tools and brought good luck to their services. Many songs celebrating the dignity of labour were sung accompanied by group dances such as ‘\textit{We lend our hands to all work}’\textsuperscript{26} or an invocation to the instruments of handicraft.\textsuperscript{27}

Tagore’s continued attempt to instill in his students a respect for the environment grew with his increasing disillusionment during foreign travels when he observed with alarm how:

\begin{itemize}
\item Aji dokhino duwar khola; Aj shobar raunge raung melate hobe, Translation mine. Ibid, p. 99.
\item Shaub kaje hath lagayi mora, Translation mine. Ibid, p. 101.
\item Namo jantro, namo jantro, namo jantro, Translation mine. Ibid.
\end{itemize}
fashionable beauty-seekers trample down the beauty of the lake scenery with the proud
march of gaudy comfort and convenience. They choke the great voice of space with
brick and mortar, with din of advertisements and throng of things.\textsuperscript{28}

Tagore’s words of caution sound uncannily prophetic today as he predicted:

before long, the sky over the human world, the East and West, will be smudged with
factory smoke and the green of the living nature will be licked grey by the demon of the
utilitarian spirit.\textsuperscript{29}

In their school anthem \textit{Amader Santiniketan}, students sang of their communion with
nature, nurtured by groves and protected by an embracing sky. Tagore’s sustained efforts
to create an oasis of inspiration in arid Santiniketan by immersing young minds in creative
freedom is best expressed in his song\textsuperscript{30} composed on the occasion of \textit{Briksharopan}.\textsuperscript{31}

Vanquish the desert flying high the banner of victory, o committed heart!
Bring glory to the dust engaging it with compassion, o benevolent heart!
When will the song of the mute earth resound in your own Song
Filling with beauty, the flower, fruit and leaf?
O traveler, take a seat in the shade of the verdant green
Be a companion to the restless breeze coursing the skies
May the dawn raise in the tree branches the intimation of Music
May the evening descend with its language of deep repose
Giving voice to the latent music of the night

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\textit{The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three}, ed. by Sisir K. Das (New Delhi:
Sahitya Akademi, 1996).

\textsuperscript{28} Rabindranath Tagore, ‘To the Child’ lecture June 17, 1924, in \textit{The English Writings of Rabindranath
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Morubijoyer ketan}, Translation mine (unpublished).
\textsuperscript{31} The festival of tree-plantation.
Reba Som studied history at Presidency College, Kolkata, standing first class first both in BA and MA examinations, and obtained a PhD from Calcutta University. She was the recipient of the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 2000–02. She has served as the regional director of the Rabindranath Tagore Centre, ICCR, Kolkata, from 2008 to 2013. Her publications include Differences within Consensus: The Left-Right Divide in the Congress (Orient Longman, 1995), Subhas Chandra Bose and the Resolution of the Women's Question (CWDS, 2002), Gandhi, Bose, Nehru and the Making of the Modern Indian Mind (Penguin 2004), Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song (Penguin, 2009) and Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda (Penguin Random House, 2017). She is also a trained singer of Rabindrasangeet and Nazrul Geeti; her compact disc albums, Selected Songs of Rabindranath Tagore (Saregama, 2005) and Love Songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam (Times Music, 2016) also include her English translations of the lyrics.
Liberating the River: Land and Politics in Tagore’s Plays

Debamitra Kar

Abstract:

In matters of development and progress, it has always been a question of the acquisition of land. As history shows, control over land—extendable to different metaphors—and its resources has been instrumental in the development and destruction of human civilisation. Tagore’s Muktadhara dwells on the principle of identifying how the manipulation of a river-course could change the destiny of two neighbouring states and establish the rule of one man over others. So, in the character of Abhijeet, a typical Tagore-protagonist, one who breaks the dam to put an end to the authoritarian regime, a prototype of modern day environmental activists could be seen. The text goes beyond a mere pantheistic and humanist quest for the freedom of man as Tagore politicises the concept of land into a geopolitical space, and relates it to the imperialist policies and hegemonic propaganda that he experienced personally in his travels across Europe, Japan and America during this time.

From Muktadhara (1922) to Raktakarabi (1924), Tagore seems to continue with this politics of land. If the former text represents the appropriation of nature for political benefit, the latter shows how industrialisation destroys the agricultural base, forces migration, and how these steps would be the only logical progress of the economy that advocates rampant capital accumulation. Interestingly, a play set in a mine uses a theme song about ‘pous’—a month of cultivation and opulence. The essays written by Tagore during this period, like his Introduction to Elmhirst’s ‘The Robbery of the Soil’, also reveal his vision of a sustained and inclusive human development.
In his book on Tagore’s internationalism, first published in 1982, Chinmohan Sehanobis identifies four different phases of the poet’s oeuvre that mark the evolution of his thoughts on international and domestic politics and their interface. These four phases are 1878 — 1901, 1901 — 1912-1913, 1913 — 1928, 1930 — 1941. Though the evolution of a poet’s mind can hardly be compartmentalised into such time-specific structures, yet the study proves to be helpful to systematise a reading of the poet’s works, both polemical and poetic, to show how from a typical and traditional Indian perspective Tagore moved towards a more international model in politics. For instance, Sehanobis argues, that in the works of the first phase (including essays and monographs like: ‘Europe-Jatrir Diary’, ‘Prachya o Pratichyo’, ‘Socialism’) Tagore shows his growing awareness of the foreign domination, the economic models at work and the unholy entente between the financial well-being and xenophobic tendencies that imperialism promotes. The democratic principles that the Western states use for themselves are curiously absent in their colonial policies. Thus, his works reflect an East-West binary model which to some extent is carried forward to the next phase as well. In texts like, ‘Pather Sanchay’, ‘Imperialism’, and ‘Bharatbarsha’, the argument of the supremacy of Indian spirituality over Western imperialist politics is easily discernable. The major shift in Tagore’s thought comes in the third phase, which also coincides with his receiving of the Nobel Prize and extensive foreign tours, chiefly for raising funds for Visva-Bharati which officially began as a university in 1921. In 1922 he establishes the Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Sriniketan, Santiniketan’s sister institution at Surul. The writings of this period shows a few basic principles: first, the realisation that certain ideological principles have the ability to corrupt even the Eastern/Indian society and nationalism is one of them; secondly, nationalism justifies the growth of an uncontrolled chauvinistic approach to the self, which when combined with effective economic tools, can lead to fascism. At this time, his friendship with Romain Rolland deepens and in his various public statements two themes seem to be uppermost in his mind, the concept of an intellectual discourse that would bring the East and West together and his notions of peace. I will refer to two specific incidents that would throw light on his works discussed in this article. First, he was one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence of Thought which was drafted in 1919. He wrote to Romain Rolland:

It is enough for me to know that the higher conscience of Europe had been able to assert itself in one of her choicest spirits through the ugly clamour of passionate politics; and I gladly hasten to accept your invitation to join the ranks of those free souls, who, in Europe, have conceived the project of a Declaration of Independence of Thought.

The second event takes place much later in 1936, when he sent his response to the World Peace Conference that was organised by Rolland and Barbusse: ‘We cannot have peace until

2 Sehanobis, Rabindranather Antarjatik Chinta, p. 62.
Arguably then, Tagore’s idea of the West was not entirely based on negativity and rejection and his notion of the East is not of uniform appreciation either. Though writing from a different perspective, Alaistair Bonnet, in his book *The Idea of the West* studies Tagore along with radical Islamic scholars like Sayyid Qutb, Al-e Ahmad and others to show that the rejection of the West is an important facet of the postcolonial politics, though the approaches and means could be varied. He specifies two such approaches: one that is national-political as found in Japan, China (post-1911 revolution) and India (after 1920s), and transcendental-cultural, a pan-Asian identity that was established by the eastern scholars like Tagore and Okakura. However, Bonnett’s sympathetic study Tagore has a few contradictory claims, for instance he writes that for Tagore, ‘the West was not freedom but a spirit of repression and coercion’ and almost in the same breath he asserts ‘Tagore was not an anti-Westerner’.

He finds an epistemic break between Tagore’s imaginative and polemical works — the former he believes has used several Western genres like novels, (though it is hard to say if Tagore was not following the example of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who had already established and popularised novels in Bengali literature) as well as ideologies like romanticism, (once again a problematic supposition since there is a distinct strain of romanticism in Indian classical literature), while in the latter he endeavoured to represent himself as the indigenous Indian ideologue.

My aim over here is not to show the points of differences between the two scholarly studies made above but to point out the difficulty of typifying Tagore to any one school. Sehanobis has tried to find the socialist principles in Tagore’s internationalism, and complains of his lack of practicality in approach, while Bonnett sees him as the transcendental-cultural ideologue, who has consciously upheld his identity of a sage from the East, rejecting both capitalism and communism as soulless Western doctrines. Taking these two standpoints as the boundary within which my reading of Tagore’s texts is to be located, I would like to premise the enquiry of the present study on the following arguments: first, the typical East-West binary is a fruitless attempt to understand Tagore because he accepted both and rejected none; such confluence of principles will be found in all his works, imaginative, polemical and practical; for Tagore transcendental is political and philosophy is praxis, which can only be understood if we read his works in totality. Therefore, while reading *Muktadbara* (The Waterfall) or *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleanders) one need not wonder whether the instances of

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3 Ibid, p. 85.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, p. 98.
7 Sehanobis, *Rabindranather Antarjatik Chinta*, p. 11.
9 Tagore translated *Muktadbara*, the play as ‘The Waterfall’. However, when he referred to the actual stream he used ‘free current’.
protests recorded are essentially political or philosophical, dramatic or lyrical, communitarian or individualistic, for Tagore transcends such binaries with ease and confidence. For him, nature, man and community are all subservient to an overriding principle of ethical and moral imperative. Thus, Tagore’s philosophy of nature and man can be equally related to the Vedas or relevant to the contemporary discourse on deep-ecology and eco-socialism.

Itself a nature religion, the ancient Sanskrit texts have underscored the importance of natural resources and their judicious use. Nature in the Vedantic texts both appears as part of the physical world and as the part of the chetana (self). This element of chetana operates through the achetana (non-self). ‘Although these two are opposite entities, they co-operate in such a smooth manner that our life and dealings with the world are harmonised’. Between the chetana and achetana operates the manas, which helps the individual to ‘realise the aim of creation’. Tagore’s philosophy of nature is deeply rooted in the pantheistic creed. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the various manifestations and appropriations of the traditional Hindu texts in Tagore’s writings, a point should be noted that any overzealous assertion of this aspect would lead us to the categorisation of the poet’s writings into the transcendental-cultural paradigm associated with the East. Rather, one needs to understand that Tagore’s use of the Hindu cultural ideas and texts is a practice of the collective consciousness that participates in the creation of a poetic creed and specificities at a given time, space and historical moment. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay makes a succinct observation in this regard. He compares the poet’s attitude to shastra to Plato’s attitude to his predecessors. He quotes from Plato’s Theory of Man and refers to John Wild who observes: ‘He [Plato] himself had no interest whatsoever in the thoughts or words of his predecessors, except in so far as they aided him in understanding himself and the world around him, though he often consulted them and wrestled with them at great length when in difficulties’. Tagore uses shastra in the same manner, Mukhopadhyay reflects.

Thus, Tagore could at once transcend the ideological restrictions of religiosity and translate the cultural and ethical concepts into political connotations, where by political I mean ‘contingent construction of social links’. The idea can be more fully asserted when one takes into consideration how religious worship could be politically motivated as the opening of the play Muktdhara shows that the people of Uttarakut are going to celebrate the construction of the dam which is going to stop the flow of the river downstream and thus deprive the people of Shiv-tarai, the neighbouring kingdom situated in the plains below, of their due river water for irrigation. Ranajit, the proud king of Uttarakut believes that this would make the subjugation of the delinquent neighbours complete and irrevocable for they will be forever dependent on his state for their staple need of life, water. Here worship of the machine is symbolic of the consolidation of power, similar to the worship of the dhwaja (the flag or ensign) in Raktakarabi. Any worship that does not heed to the cry of the millions is unacceptable to the poet. A number of characters in the play reflect on this point.

11 Ibid.
For instance, the stranger who talks with a citizen at the beginning of the play says that it is blasphemy to allow the engine towers to ‘soar so high above the temple tower’. Amba, the mother who has lost her son Suman in the construction work of the dam which has killed many other workers observes: ‘that is where I went that day, to evening worship. Since then I have been afraid to go to worship. And mark my words, our prayers don’t reach the Father, they get snatched away on the road’. Viswajit, the King’s uncle reflects ‘I have come to tell you that Bhairava will not accept today’s worship’. When Ranajit protests and says that it is Bhairava who has helped him to punish the delinquent residents of Shiv-tarai by denying them of their drinking water, Viswajit quips, ‘Then your worship isn’t worship, but wages’. Thus Abhijit destroys the engine tower of the dam that soared passed the trident of the Shiva temple, just as Raja, the king himself tears the dhwaja and danda (sceptre), emblematic of his unquestionable power and domination in Raktakarabi.

Of all the names that he had in mind, like Path (the path) and Path-mochan (In search of a path), Tagore finally opted for ‘Muktadhara’ - the free current is more symbolic than real. He writes:

The waterfall round which the action of this play revolves is named Mukta-dhara — the free current. Such a descriptive name may sound strange in English, but those who are familiar with geographical names prevalent in India, will at once be reminded of the Pagla-Jhora — the waterfall of Darjeeling, whose meaning is Mad Stream.

The name Free Current is sure to give rise in the reader’s mind to the suspicion that it has a symbolic meaning; that it represents all that the word freedom signifies in human life. The interpretation will appear to be still more obvious when it is seen that the machine referred to in the play has stopped the flow of its water.

Freedom, as Tagore asserts is a psychological achievement since freedom is not simply an opposition to the repressive apparatuses of an unjust state but also every trace of consent that is embedded in the mind of the man who has been dominated for a long time. Abhijit, the crown prince who is sent to collect the tax from the people of Shiv-tarai, realises the grief and economic deprivation that the lack of water has resulted in. His love for freedom involves him in a conflict of loyalties from which he, as a typical Tagore hero, chooses the truth which is beyond the political. Mukta-dhara leads him to the search for a greater truth, a philosophy of life:

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14 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Mukta-dhara’, in Three Plays: Mukta-dhara, Natir Puja, Chandalika, Trans. Marjorie Sykes (Glasgow: Oxford, 1961), p. 10. I have used the English translation of Mukta-dhara, titled, Mukta-dhara, as done by Marjorie Sykes, first published in 1950. I have used the fifth impression made in 1961. All the subsequent references to the text are made from this translation.
15 Rabindranath Tagore, Mukta-dhara, p. 11.
16 Ibid, p. 19.
17 Ibid.
Somewhere or other in the external world, God writes for us the secret mystery of each man's spirit. *Muktadhara* is His word to me, bearing the secret of my inner being. When her feet were bound in the iron fetters, I was startled out of a dream. I realised the truth — the throne of Uttarakut is the dam which binds my spirit. I have taken the road in order to set it free.\(^{19}\)

It is revealed in the course of the play that Abhijit is an adopted son of the King. He was found under that very waterfall that he sets out to liberate with divine signs of kingship on his person. Once the mystery of his birth is revealed to him, he realises that his first duty is not towards the throne but towards nature and its people. He strikes the dam at its weakest spot, thereby liberating the stream which carries away his body in its turbulent and leaping torrent of water. Kripalani says, ‘The socio-political motif of the play, if such there is, seems to dissolve at the end in an undefined sense of mystic self-fulfilment...',\(^{20}\) but it can be argued that mysticism is not free from a greater political reality which asserts that man’s first duty is not towards the continuation of the power-structures and hence to the reproduction of the forces of production, but to resist the power that opposes the basic human principles, both literally (the dam stopping the natural flow of life), and metaphorically (denying the authority of the king/state when it goes against common human good). Tagore’s brand of renunciation is actually a resistance to a system, a revolution with a difference. I shall revert to this point again in the course of my study.

Tagore finished writing the play on 14 January 1922. He read it first to his ashramites in Santiniketan and then with some minor corrections read the play in Kolkata, at Gaganendranath Tagore’s home in the early weeks of February. He planned staging it which was unfortunately postponed as the news of Gandhi’s arrest and imprisonment came.\(^{21}\) The play was first performed by the students of the Presidency College in 1926\(^ {22}\) and then as late as in 1959 when it was directed by the well known thespian of Bengal Sambhu Mitra, but the production was not successful. His group again performed the play in 1996 under the direction of Kumar Ray. However, the play was better received among the rural populace, as street theatre in Delhi, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. It was most popular among the social workers who work against the indiscriminate dam construction and displacement of people. For instance, Shyamali Khastagir, active member of the Narmada Bachao movement, directed the play in Delhi in 1993. The play was also performed at Santiniketan, in honour of Medha Patkar when she visited the university.\(^ {23}\)

The symbol and the relevance of the dam in present ecological and social context has increased the relevance of the play in the present times because over 1554 large dams have been constructed in India since independence\(^ {24}\) and approximately 1 crore 40 lakh

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\(^{19}\) Rabindranath Tagore, *Muktadhara*, p. 27.
\(^{21}\) Kripalani, Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography, p. 312.
\(^{22}\) Tapashya Ghosh, Rabindranath Thakur Muktadhara, p. 8.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Vandana Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts over Natural resources in India* (New Delhi: Sage
people have been displaced due to such developmental programmes. The incident like the conflict between the two states of Shiv-tarai and Uttarakut has seen many parallels in both internal politics (like the Cauveri water dispute between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) and international politics (the Padma river issue between West Bengal and Bangladesh or the Sindh river issue between Punjab and Pakistan). However, to read the play only as an ecological metaphor of how the dam could be instrumental in manipulating the diplomatic relationship between two states could be limiting the play to a certain level of relevance that does not take into consideration the realpolitik and deep philosophical comments on the greed of man and the freedom of the individual. Even the issue of use and abuse of natural resources was particularly relevant at the time of writing the play since the colonial power was instrumental in effecting change in the state’s attitude to natural resources. Prior to the arrival of the British and consolidation of power the utilisation of natural resources was in the hand of local communities, based on equal distribution and aimed at better and smoother process of agriculture. The colonial rule introduces a different type of economic pattern that destabilised the indigenous economic reality. For instance, the allocation of water within the villages was managed by cultivators themselves through indigenous methods like parabandi (equal distribution of water from common source), tank system (both prevalent in South India), abars, pyues (irrigation methods practised in South Bihar), bandharas (in Maharashtra) and separate water communities functioned for the maintenance of the systems. The notion of collective labour like goam (South Bihar) or kundimarammath (South India) was practised. Arthus Cotton, the founder of modern irrigation has shown deep respect for these indigenous mechanisms. The British attitude to the natural resources of a colony was obviously different: it was to be tailored for the direct and non-local demands of Western Europe. Thus, ‘[c]olonial domination systematically transformed the common vital resources into commodities for generating profits and growth of revenue’. The state assumed total control over the natural resources which could be transformed for generating revenue. For instance the Sambhar Lake in Rajasthan was monopolised for the flourishing of the salt trade and in Bengal the river course and canals were used for better transport network. That nature could be used at its optimum level for the benefit of a few irrespective of what it could do to the masses of people is what Muktadhara presents so brilliantly. In the play, the Messenger from the crown prince asks Bibhuti, the Master Engineer:

After all these years, you have finished the dam on the Muktadhara waterfall. Again and again it has burst, many men have been crushed under earth and sand, many others have been swept away in floods...Was that not the purpose of your dam — to make their [people of Shiv-tarai] fields wither and die.

To this Bibhuti replies:

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25 Shampa Mitra, Muktadhara: Mukhtarantrer dike Yatra (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, 2008), p. 121
28 Rabindranath Tagore, Muktadhara, pp. 11 – 12.
The purpose of my dam was that human intelligence should win through to its goal, though sand and stone all conspired to block its path. I had no time to think of whether some farmer’s paltry maize crop would die.\textsuperscript{29}

If the reading of the play once again support a binary between Bibhuti, one who creates a machine and Abhijit, one who demolishes such construction, the problem will not be resolved, rather one would move on to Tagore’s principles of mysticism and self-annihilation, none of which can lead to any practical solution of the crisis. It is true that in \textit{Muktadhara} he has described the machine as a ‘demon’s head’, a grinning skeleton head, lying in wait to devour your city in its sleep,\textsuperscript{30} or he has made the citizens of Uttarakut sing about the terrible nature of power of the machine: ‘A vulture thou, whose talons tear/ The bowels of earth, and lay them bare’,\textsuperscript{31} but it would be unwise to consider that the demolition of the machine by Abhijit is actually the East’s whole-hearted rejection of the machine-driven civilisation (\textit{kalbalsambal sayyata}) of the West. Tagore was not against the machine but the process of machination. Even when he criticises the machine he does not criticise it for itself but how it is employed without any consideration for human well-being. Two decades before Gandhi entered into the national politics of India, and half a century before the Indian government thought of any holistic community oriented programme, Tagore, as a result of his hands on experience as a Zamindar, experimented with rural community development. He was not a traditionalist, or a blind adherent to indigenous practices irrespective of their practicality of application in the modern context. He rather spoke about the use of scientific approaches to agriculture. He sent his son, Rathindranath abroad to learn about Agricultural Science and also employed Leonard Elmhirst, the fresh graduate from Cornell University at his farm in Surul to change it into a model village. He writes:

man worked with small tools until the advent of modern machinery driven by steam and electricity. The time has come for our cultivators to consider the use of machinery....and considerable funds are needed for their procurement and use.\textsuperscript{32}

He also knew that the British would not help the Indians to modernise their equipments, hence self-help was the only means. Thus the concept of the co-operative system that he put into practice in Sriniketan was conceived by him.\textsuperscript{33}

The process of machination is thus inalienably bound to the notion of a political reality that Tagore theorised on in his fictional and polemical writings though the practicality of these ideas have been severely criticised. \textit{Muktadhara} represents that a certain social consciousness, and percolation of power among the masses is required to resist the ideologies that work behind such constructions. It joins politics with ethics. Abhijit may be the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid, p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid, p. 10.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid, p. 15.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid, pp. 117 – 118.
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protagonist who physically destroys the dam, but Tagore paralleled his character with that of Dhananjoy Bairagi, a well-developed character from an earlier play *Prayashchitta* (Atonement), who creates an alternate reticule of power that is more accessible to the common mass to create a counter-ideology. While heading a group of citizens from Shiv-tarai who have come to meet the King to ask him to release the crown prince Abhijit so that they can re-instate him as their ruler of their own province, he asks them: ‘What will you ask of him?’ As the citizens are confused, he further asks them: ‘Will you not ask for your kingship?’ The barbed irony of his question perplexes his followers, who are then told:

> Kingship is crippled, if it is the King’s alone, and not the people’s. You may shiver with fright to see that one-legged kingship limp along, but the eyes of the gods fill with tears. For king’s own sake, men, you must demand your kingship.

The idea expressed by Dhananjoy constitutes the core of Tagore’s concept of power-politics that forms the basis on which all his works and his philosophy are based. From the conservation of nature for the benefit of the human race or colonial domination and the nationalist politics to international power relations or the East-West debate, he has always criticised the excessive use of power, and proposed for an equilibrium which can only be achieved when the powerful leaves his greed and the powerless his nonchalance and passivity. Dhananjoy can go to the extent of refusing payment of taxes for that year as there has been severe drought due to the inconsiderate resource management. He says to King Ranajit: ‘Our excess food is yours; the food of our hunger is not’. The problem of appreciating Tagore lies in the fact that such bold assertions are not matched with any physical action of assertion, a fact that is ruled by his contemporary nationalists and present day critics alike.

Tagore believed in non-violence, but he never theorised adequately upon it. Tapati Dasgupta in her work has referred to a conversation between Saumendranath Tagore and Romain Rolland, where the former said:

> When Rabindranath Tagore was in Europe in 1930, I discussed the questions of non-violence with him and he told me that he would write an article about it. But he has not done so. His idea of non-violence is as incomplete as that of Gandhi, for they believe in the necessity of class division. They are not with the masses. Tagore sees that problem from the intellectual point of view — Gandhi does not see it at all.

It would be out of the purview of the present paper to elaborate further on the Gandhi-Tagore debate, however, a few crucial points can be made regarding the appreciation of Tagore among his contemporary and later day critics. That Tagore’s attitude was of an intellectual cannot be wholly accepted for his practical developmental works at Sriniketan and Santiniketan. Definitely he had no pan-Indian agenda as a politician, may be these ideas

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34 Rabindranath Tagore, *Muktadhara*, p. 36.
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid., p. 44.
38 Tapati Dasgupta, *Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 93, 94.
were only applicable in the small range of the village, but one must bear with the fact that he wanted to make a model out of his villages and to some extent he succeeded in that.

Secondly, since Tagore showed no penchant for violence, or because he was a zamindar by class and a poet by profession it does not mean he was in favour of maintaining the status quo. Even if he uses the mysticism of the *Upanishads*, which was used as a weapon against the working class, ‘Rabindranath was definitely free from the bias of feudal ideas’.  

I would once again refer to the first proposition with which I began this discussion that Tagore cannot be read within binaries, and at this point I would like to extend the binaries to include Gandhian and socialist nationalism (both of which were actually gaining momentum in Indian politics at that point of time) to further suggest that he steered away from both of these two extremes. I would like to propose that of his many ideas the notion of ecological preservation vis-a-vis development, a debate that *Muktadhara* so well establishes is an adept expression of a separate and indigenous political philosophy that owes its roots both to the western principles and colonial experiences. The recognition that nature can be colonised and subjected to injudicious experimentation and thoughtless enterprise, stops Tagore from romanticising the landscape as a passive receptacle and brings him closer to the early Marxist writings that modelled itself on humanistic principles. Arguably, Tagore’s association with the socialists at this point of time, his views on peace and an egalitarian society made him lend his support to Henri Barbusse, who in his *Clarté* magazine published a fifteen-point manifesto regarding the failure of contemporary politics and the need of a revolutionary politics. 

Similarly, Dhananjoy and Abhijit in *Muktadhara* have both resisted the appropriation of natural resources for state politics. Not only has Abhijit conducted the demolition of the dam, but he has also opened the pass through the Nandi Hills that would help the people of Shiv-tarai to access the market directly to sell their products and not remain dependent on the whims of Uttarakut. This would definitely increase the price of food and clothing in Uttarakut, but self-reliance is what is most important in the brand of politics that Abhijit believes in. Dhananjoy also approves of this in his own way. He does not want to remain the leader on whom people would blindly depend, thus he chooses to leave the citizens to themselves, though time to time, he interferes on their behalf so that they are not intimidated by the rampant violence of the King. ‘When the right hand is niggardly enough to close the road against them, men cannot be saved by the bounty of the left.... I cannot bear to see a poverty that depends on charity’, Abhijit criticises the policy of his own state. This brand of self-reliance is also what Tagore wanted to practice in Sriniketan. The landlord is like the father, but it is the duty of the father to make his children self-reliant. Thus, to reject Tagore on the basis of class-politics would be difficult. The question is the nature of resolution that Tagore offers. As I have already pointed out that it is non-violent, indigenous, and therefore it cannot be categorised as the typical socialist paradigm but I would like to propose that the causal parameters that he employs to find out the root cause of the crisis is comparable to the principles of Marx’s writings.

40 Sehanobis, *Rabindranather Antarjatik Chinta*, pp. 63, 64.
42 Ibid, p. 45.
To prove my point I shall discuss one essay that has been written by him in 1922 as an introductory comment to Elmhirst’s ‘Robbery of the Soil’ which was first read out by Elmhirst at Rammohan Library in Kolkata on 28 July, 1922, with Tagore presiding, and printed in The Modern Review in October 1922, and later included in Elmhirst’s volume titled Poet and Plowman. Tagore’s essay also prefaces Elmhirst’s essay in the volume with the title Introduction by Rabindranath Tagore to Elmhirst’s Lecture on the Robbery of the Soil.44

There are three moot points that Tagore raises in his essay, the first is the essential difference between wealth and personal property, the greed of human beings and the rising estrangement of the city and the village. He begins the essay with the observation that modern civilisation has raised the average level of our necessity. This increase is not based on necessity but on our greed, which leads to a distinction between wealth, something which is collective and is to be shared among all, and private property, which needs to be hoarded. This distinction is a new phenomenon for previous rulers and rich people willingly took a share of the developmental work, but ‘...property itself, with what is called material progress, has become intensely individualistic, the method of gaining it has become a matter of science and not social ethics’.45 This idea is further extended in his distinction between two godheads in Raktakarabi, where Kuber is associated with mining and hoarding of wealth that necessitates ‘unlimited production’46 whereas Laxmi is associated with general well-being and wealth that needs to be distributed and not accumulated. Interestingly, he titled one of his essays ‘Bhumilaxmi’ (also the name of a journal that was published from Birbhum that Tagore referred to in this essay). In his collection ‘Palliprakriti’ the land is compared to Laxmi, and the work of the land needs to bring together the goddess of wisdom Saraswati and of wealth Laxmi, thus making the association clearer by associating knowledge with wealth.

The rift between wealth and property comes because ‘civilisation today caters for a whole population of gluttons’.47 Wealth now is self centred. ‘This creates envy and irreconcilable class division. In other words property becomes anti-social.’48 Interestingly, Tagore’s use

44 There is a serious scholarly debate about the time of writing of this essay. Abhra Ghosh in his criticism of Sandip Bandyopadhyay’s book, titled Sampatti o Sampad: Bhusampader Bittoharan, where Bandyopadhyay translated Tagore’s essay into English has pointed out the anomalies. According to him, the time of writing has not been recorded by the biographers of Tagore like Prashanta Kumar Pal or Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay. Also, the introductory comments given by Tagore on the day of Elmhirst’s lecture is not this essay. Hence, when and how he had written this essay could be questioned. The Visva-Bharati edition of Elmhirst’s Poet and Plowman however includes both the essay and the text of Tagore’s speech given on the day of Elmhirst’s lecture. The ideas seem to overlap, and Ghosh himself has referred to the letter that Elmhirst wrote to Tagore that gives a hint of this particular essay (Abhra Ghosh, Ganatranter Rabindrik Paradigm [Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi, 2009], p. 48). Thus, it is included in this study with the references provided by the Visva-Bharati publication.
45 Rabindranath Tagore, Introduction to Elmhirst’s lecture on The Robbery of the Soil, Poet and Plowman (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2008), p. 18.
47 Ibid.
of human behaviour can be paralleled to that of Marx. In his Economic and Philosophical Manuscript, while discussing the nature of private property and capitalist crisis and competition Marx writes:

The only wheels that political economy sets in motion are greed, and the war amongst the greedy — competition.

...we have to grasp the intrinsic connection between private property, greed, the separation of labour, capital and landed property; the connection of exchange and competition, of value and devaluation of man, of monopoly and competition, etc.—the connection between this whole estrangement and the money system.  

The point of overlapping with Tagore’s idea is noteworthy, for Ranajit in Muktadhara monopolises the river water. In Raktakarabi Tagore has made the division between the karsbanjibi (the labourers/peasants) and akarsbanjibi (the hoarders/miners), which once again is an extension of the Kuber/Laxmi dialectics. Though in traditional Marxist approach the focus is more on historical materialism and techno-centrism, David Pepper in his seminal work on Eco-Socialism argues that in the early works of Marx, the concern for the allocation of exhaustible resources is present, though it is placed within a certain paradigm. According to Marx, the man-nature relationship is dialectical, they are dependent on each other for their survival and growth — a point of departure from the traditional deep ecologists who believe that nature exists on its own; I find the dialectical relation closer to Tagore for the traditional Hindu religious philosophy also speak of a symbiotic relationship between man and nature; it is never nature versus man in Tagore. A similar point resonates in Marx’s writing:

Nature is man’s inorganic body... man lives on nature — means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.  

Thus the labour that estranges man from nature ultimately estranges him from himself, from his active functions, his life activity. Thus at the opening of Muktadhara, the stranger says that the machine makes him feel that it would dry up his ‘soul like dead wood’, the life of the individual that exists in the cosmic vitality. It is once again comparable to the notion of the metabolic rift that Marx associated with ecological degradation caused by capitalist agriculture, which Tagore compared with rift in the individual and in collective life, the loss of ‘collaboration and helpfulness’ in his Introduction to the Robbery of the Soil. He

48 Ibid, p. 18.
50 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical, p. 31.
51 Rabindranath Tagore, Muktadhara, p. 10.
furthers the argument that this basic rift would cause a greater social malady, that would infect the entire administrative machinery and ideological construction of the social opinions, where power will be in the hands of the few and development will be restricted to zones that they occupy, namely the city. Though the idea is not fully developed in Muktadhara yet one can get an idea of a discriminatory development of Uttarakut (land of the dam or machine) at the cost of the agricultural fields of Shiv-tarai.

I have already argued that Tagore’s interaction with socialist faith did not turn him into a socialist for his ideas were equally tempered by his understanding of Indian soil and clime, to which all the principles of Marxist approach could not be included. However, it can be proposed that the metaphors that stem from a European perspective needs to be translated and re-read in the Indian context. Marx never detailed on the Asiatic mode of production, as Ashok Rudra opines, and such a history of India could only be written when we take into consideration the caste system, the rationalism of its ancient texts and the influence of Puranas. Thus, instead of rejecting Tagore’s ideas as ‘poetic licence’, one can argue that he realised the intricacies of the colonial and capitalist interface, from an indigenous perspective that was informed by Western scientific systems, and could show the effects of evils of the present economy both on man and nature, on individual and the collective and on nationalist politics and society.

I would conclude the paper with a reference to two very different incidents: one factual, another fictional. The Srisailam project in Andhra Pradesh began in 1960, removing an ancient temple dedicated to Srisailam, or Lord Shiva or Bhairava. It began as a power project, and the dam was to provide water to an estimated 4,95,000 acres, with sure irrigation to 1,95,000 acres in Kurnool and Cuddapah districts. But it required that 106,925 acres of land had to be submerged, which meant that 117 villages would lose all the land and the people would have to be relocated. In a compelling study, Vandana Shiva shows the layers of injustice done to the people of those 117 villages. From an agriculturally vibrant community, they were evicted out of their houses and forced to vacate their villages. The compensation was either meagre or inadequate, reaching just a handful, and mostly lost in unplanned business ventures, or loan repayment or injudicious expenditure, the farmers, potters, toddy-tappers, fishermen, and others dependent on agricultural activities, had to look forward to non-agricultural occupations. They mostly shifted to nearby villages or towns and got engaged in construction activities that were on the rise due to the dam construction.

Tagore’s Muktadhara, in spite of its positive end, led to the writing of Raktakarabi (1926), where the mine workers are engaged in a soulless work of mining resources out of the belly of the earth. The very act of mining — stripping resources without worrying about their

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
future productivity — is a capitalist trend, which has been upheld by the very structural pattern of the Yakshapuri. Here, the labourers are reduced to numbers. Here the king is invisible and omnipotent. But, outside, the season of Pous (Spring) is resplendent in its glory. Nandini, the protagonist comes to the land of the miners to talk about the glory of the world, the happiness in the wealth that the earth gives willingly to man. The play with its complex and intensely symbolic action ends with the song of Pous, where, the call of the earth makes the unwilling labourers resist the fetters of domination that the system has generated and implemented.

Rabindranath Tagore, in spite of his optimism, had realised that it would not be easy to resist the system which is so steeped in unnatural activities. It would require the active participation of the ruler and the ruled alike. The only hopeful aspect is that once people are aware of the happiness that lies in renunciation, in living in harmony with nature, they will not be afraid to sacrifice their lives. For ultimately, living well is not accumulating money for individual benefit as Aristotle said, and non-mechanical mode of consumption is not poverty and ‘[t]rue happiness is not expensive’. Goodness can be only realised when it can be applied to all and forever.

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62 Rabindranath Tagore, Introduction to Elmhirst’s lecture, p. 21.

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A Home in the World: People and Places in Rabindranath Tagore’s Chaturanga

Kamalika Mitra

Abstract:

There is a tendency in literature to poeticise rural settings over their urban counterparts based on the proposition that villages bring human beings closer to nature, whereas cities come between them. Problems born and accentuated in urban environments are often, in fiction and poetry, resolved in a more rural atmosphere. In his 1916 novella Chaturanga, Rabindranath Tagore seems to challenge this popular inclination. The story begins in Calcutta, moves to rural Bengal and then returns to the city. After his uncle, who was also his father-figure, philosopher and guide, dies, Sachish disappears from Calcutta. When his friend and the narrator of the text, Sribilash, finds him two years later in a village, Sachish has joined a so-called mystic named Leelananda Swami. He has also changed unrecognisably. Sribilash is shocked at his transformation and is distrustful of Leelananda Swami, but he cannot abandon his friend, so he too, joins the guru. He too seems to leave behind his old self and becomes engrossed and entranced in a new, unreal world. It is only when he returns to the city that Sribilash seems to come out of his trance and shake off the false skin; he misses or becomes his former hard-working and useful self again. Sachish’s path, however, is irrevocably changed.

In this paper, I wish to examine why and how Tagore, who wrote so many thousands of lines in so many different forms eulogising nature, depicted an apparent divide between nature and human beings in this text: when the men are in the city, they are grounded in reality and engaged in meaningful activity; when they are in the lap of nature, so to speak, they seem to become disoriented escapists. I will also address the importance of the fact that these characters retire froity when they are bereaved and spend their mourning period in the villages, and that their return to Calcutta is closely linked to the appearance of a new love
interest in their lives. The paper will explore how, in this particular text, people and places seem to affect each other and what they signify.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, urban, rural, home, *Chaturanga*

Rabindranath Tagore's 1916 novella *Chaturanga* (variously translated as *Quartet* and *Play of Four*) is possibly one of his most complex and important works of fiction. Besides important themes like mourning and desire, this text also studies people and places and how they affect each other. In this article, I will look at some of those relationships.

Sribilash and his friend Sachish have their guide and father-figure in Jagmohan, Sachish’s uncle. After Jagmohan dies, Sachish disappears for two years. When Sribilash finds him, he has joined a guru called Leelananda Swami and has changed drastically. Sribilash too, joins the guru, and they meet Damini, the guru’s ward. Damini falls in love with Sachish and Sribilash falls in love with her. The three of them set off on their own. Eventually, Sribilash and Damini get married. But their happiness is tragically cut short when Damini dies.

*Chaturanga* is divided into four chapters, named after Jyathamoshai (Bengali for ‘uncle’, here meaning Jagmohan), Sachish, Damini and Sribilash, which appear in this order. Through these four chapters, the narrative flows continuously between rural and urban settings. The opening line of the text is, ‘I arrived at Calcutta from my village and enrolled in a college’. The novella thus begins with a movement, a transition. Along with his old address, Sribilash, the narrator, also gives up his old beliefs and prejudices and adopts Jagmohan’s secular creed. In fact, this shift from his village to Calcutta proves to be no less than an uprooting for him, as we never see him going back to this village again. The rest of the chapter takes place in Calcutta. Chapter two begins in Calcutta, moves to Chittagong, then to different villages, then back to Calcutta, then to an unnamed seaside, and ends inside a cave. Chapter three takes place in a village near the sea and shows Sribilash, Sachish and Damini living in the same house (with the guru) and struggling between solitude and company, and ends with their decision to leave. Chapter four starts amongst the ruins of a *neel kuthi*, one of the infamous indigo plantations in British Bengal, travels back to the past to follow the journey of the trio to a house beside a river, then accompanies Sribilash and Damini to Calcutta, and ends at the seaside. This constant movement of the narrative symbolises the characters’ restlessness, their emotional upheavals and their attempts to find a place to drop anchor.

It may not be remiss to assume at first that the characters drift towards more rural settings, to the so-called ‘lap of nature’ to find the solace that urban heartlessness denies them. For instance, after Jagmohan dies, the city of Calcutta, where we have seen him and Sachish fighting with their own family, becomes an unbearable place for the bereaved young man, driving him towards a complete change of scene. Thus, he disappears for two years, staying hidden from the narrator and the readers of his story. According to Sribilash, during these two years, Sachish had been wandering around. What is this wandering, if not a search

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1 I will be referring to my translation of *Chaturanga* entitled, *Play of Four*, Rabindranath Tagore, trans. by Kamalika Mitra (Kolkata: Kamalika Mitra, 2015), Chapter 1, Paragraph 1, Kindle edition.
for something to hold on to and a hunt for a home? In this period, Sribilash, however, remains in Calcutta and continues with renewed force the work that he had started under Jagmohan’s guidance. Yet, he reflects, ‘Sachish had been our flower; when he moved away, merely our thorns became naked and severe’, implying that Calcutta had lost some of its charm for Sribilash in the absence of Jagmohan and Sachish. Chittagong, where Sribilash eventually locates Sachish, is a seaport, and thus, like the seaside which appears later in the text, is a kind of border between land and sea—a place between places. Emotionally too, Sachish is between places at this point—at crossroads, as it were. It is not simply a matter of finding a physical foothold, but also an intellectual, emotional and philosophical ground. It is somewhat similar to Sribilash being undecided about where to sit when he first meets Leelananda Swami, full of mistrust; he remains standing near the door — he is unwilling to enter and unable to leave.

Finally, Sribilash joins Sachish and they start going around villages with Leelananda Swami. However, the villages are not named, and it is not just because they are individually unimportant. It is also because during this time, their surroundings become irrelevant. The guru and his circle belong to nowhere, conform to nothing. Hence, they are enveloped by a sense of unreality and disorientation. Sribilash, coming to the circle from the outside with deep scepticism, remains conscious of this disconnect. Sachish, who has chosen to come and stay with the guru deliberately, remains wilfully entranced. Had the two men come to the villages with Jagmohan, their true leader and father-figure, these would have, in all probability, been real places with real people, where they would have found plenty to notice and do. Towards the end of the novella, Sribilash remembers,

We had completely forgotten that in this world, people have to build a home, protect the home, or at least rent a home; we only knew that homes were there to live in.  

This is a description of comfort and security, and is not specifically rural or urban; it is a category of its own. In significant contrast to this comfortable travel is a rural journey that Gora, the eponymous hero of Tagore’s earlier novel, undertakes. Although in their unflinching pursuit of ideals, Gora and Sachish resemble each other, Gora, unlike Sachish, observes village life closely while living in village homes.

This was the first time that Gora saw what our country is like, outside civilised society, educated society and Calcutta society. How isolated, how narrow and how weak this secluded, vast rural India is — how unconscious she is of her own powers and how completely unaware of and indifferent to her own welfare — how earnest her social differences every ten to fifteen miles — how impeded she is by self-created and imaginary obstacles for moving in the wide working arena of this world — how large she knows triviality to be and how immovably hard any and every custom is to her — how dormant her mind, how slight her life, how feeble her efforts — there is no way Gora would have been able to imagine it had he not lived among the villagers like this.

This awakening to the everyday lives of our rural brethren was a part of Tagore’s personal experience. In his 1928 essay ‘Palli-Prakriti’ (City and Village), Tagore admits,

I am an urban creature, city-born. My forefathers were among the earliest inhabitants of Calcutta and my childhood years felt no touch of the village, and then goes on to elaborate:

Living in the villages of Shelaidah and Patisar I had made my first direct contact with rural life. Zamindari was then my calling. The tenants came to me with their joy and sorrow, complaints and requests, through which the village discovered itself to me. On the one hand was the external scene of rivers, meadows, rice-fields, and mud huts sheltering under trees. On the other was the inner story of the people. I came to understand their troubles in the course of my duties.

Christine Marsh, writing about Tagore and rural reconstruction, notes that Tagore’s emotional engagement with rural people and their plight changed him as a creative artist and thinker, to such an extent that his son reported that his literary output was ‘at its maximum during the years at Shelidah.

Tagore’s engagement with this world helped in his individual development, increasing his zeal and activity — the kind of influence that a happy married life in Calcutta exerts in Sribilash’s later life. But before that, Sachish — as well as Sribilash — completely bypass the grim, non-romantic features of rural India that Gora observes with dismay, precisely because they do not live among the villagers so intimately and do not give their surroundings their close attention. They drift along with the guru, casting their eyes, if at all, upon the ‘external scene’ only, living in blissful ignorance of the inner story. For, this is the time in their lives when they are supposedly seeking enlightenment elsewhere — in theories and discussions, not among peoples and places. Uma Das Gupta writes

Tagore has put on record how these revelations [rural misery juxtaposed with rural beauty] stirred him to abandon the wistfulness of a poet’s life and get down to practical work.9

Jagmohan, the teacher who inspired them to practical work, was dead and gone.

Leelananda Swami was a would-be substitute only; and a failed substitute at that. Had he been involved in real, social work in the villages, he may have earned Sribilash’s respect. But then, that would have made him a different figure altogether, perhaps like Jagmohan, and one suspects that following Jagmohan’s death, Sachish was deliberately seeking someone very different.

In *Chaturanga*, people draw other people to other places, or drive them away. When Sachish’s father and uncle had put up walls to divide the ancestral house, Sachish had, as a matter of course, left his emotionally alienated father to go and live with his uncle. Sribilash had joined Leelananda Swami solely because of Sachish. After a while, Leelananda Swami decides to go to Calcutta because his urban followers urge him to. That the rural setting is not essential for the guru’s so-called *sadhana* is confirmed by the fact that one of his chief disciples had bequeathed him his Calcutta house, hoping that the urban residence would become the main pilgrimage centre of the community. It is on their return to Calcutta that Sribilash describes his conflict in a passage which captures beautifully the urban-rural dichotomy of this text. He writes,

> When I had been wandering around villages, enraptured, it had been in a particular mood. In Calcutta, it became difficult for me to maintain that state of intoxication. Till then, I had been living in a world of rasa [...]. The cow-grazed rural fields, the banyan-shade in the riverbanks, middays entranced with leisure, and the stillness of evenings trembling with the song of the crickets had all been filled with that music. As if I had been walking in a dream; nothing had stopped me in the open sky. Then my head bumped into hard Calcutta; I stumbled into the crowd of humanity – the spell broke. Once, in this very Calcutta, inside a mess, I had worked day and night at my studies, at Goldighi I had mulled over the country with my friends, volunteered at political conferences, came near to being imprisoned for trying to stop the unjust exploits of the police; here, I had answered Jyathamoshi’s call and taken the vow that with all my might I shall fight the robbery of society, that I shall free the minds of my countrymen from the web of all kinds of servility; here, with relatives and non-relatives, acquaintances and strangers cussing me, as a sailboat proudly flows upstream, so have I travelled among the people ever since my first youth; in Calcutta, where people go around in circles – of strange troubles of hunger and thirst, pleasure and sorrow, good and evil, I tried my best to keep alive the wonder of tear-dimmed rasa. [...] When I look at Sachish, I find no sign on his face that the city of Calcutta exists at any part of the world’s geographical description. To him, all of it is a shadow.  

Sribilash is, what one might call, a reliable narrator. He satisfies the criterion that,

> A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth.

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He is a participant in the drama, yes, but he is reassuringly honest about his own feelings and weaknesses; in addition, his words have a refreshing clarity, and this is something the other young man in the story seems to lack, even if he comes across as more charismatic. Sribilash strikes one as being a sensible young man, with his feet firmly in the ground — both idealistic and practical, sensitive and critical, much like Binay, Gora’s close friend. The above passage is one of the instances of Sribilash’s reliability as a narrator. Sachish’s arguments often sound convoluted — to his best friend as well as the readers. He is able to dismiss the whole world into a shadow; to blur all identities and realities in his quest to find a deeper truth. Sribilash is, fortunately or unfortunately, more aware of, more influenced by and more connected to the world around him. He begins by calling Calcutta ‘hard’.

Used almost affectionately, the word here means ‘real’. Here, he comes close to being imprisoned; he is ‘cussed’, here there is hunger, thirst, sorrow and evil, but it is here that he has found a life worth living. It is here that he had friends, a leader, a purpose and the zeal to work towards fulfilling that purpose. The city is materialistic, as cities are notorious for being, but for Sribilash it holds the materials for an active, meaningful life. Thus in this passage, Sribilash establishes the city as the idyll with which the villages, even with their cow-grazed rural fields, banyan-shade in the riverbanks, middays entranced with leisure, and the stillness of evenings trembling with the song of the crickets cannot compete. The rural has beauty, but the urban has a purpose. The rural may offer rest, but rest must necessarily be temporary; a life only restful is a life wasted, at least in Sribilash’s book. Rest, when not relieved by work, becomes relentless and tiring — the very opposite of rest.

In ‘Palligrame’ (1893), Tagore has written how, on receiving news clippings while staying in a village, his subsequent thoughts reminded him that the meek (here meaning the simple villagers) shall inherit the earth. Again, in ‘City and Village’, he writes how the town can tower over the village:

There is ever-fresh creativity in the fields of knowledge and work, and the sphere of wisdom is enlarged by the influx of the cultures of diverse peoples and countries. And so in the town, where the pressure of the community is relaxed, the individual mind gets a chance to rise superior to the low uniformity of the mass mind — ‘rustic’ is everywhere a synonym for the mind’s narrowness.

Yet the ‘uniformity of the mass mind’ is precisely what the city can also represent — an
‘urban anonymity’\textsuperscript{18} that another writer has seen as detrimental to inner equilibrium. In an essay on the urban-rural continuum in Tolstoy’s novels, Harold K Schefski writes:

Imbued with a total awareness of life’s insignificance on an individual level, the urban environment contrasts with the idyllic country atmosphere which is free of the conflicts of civilization and characterized by the harmonious relationships of the single family unit. In view of this duality, it is not surprising that the greatest moments of spiritual ecstasy and internal harmony in Tolstoy’s work occur in a clearly defined rural habitat.\textsuperscript{19}

This preference for the country is not only opposite to how Sribilash seems to feel, but also to what Tolstoy himself felt at another point of time, when he wrote about St Petersburg in a letter,

Somehow one cannot be idle; everyone is occupied and active; one cannot find a man with whom one could lead an aimless life.\textsuperscript{20}

Yet, the country tends to remain the default idyll; when the idyll is subverted to eulogise the city, it brings in an element of novelty, of surprise. Writing about the American urban ideal, James L Machor notes,

Both Michael Cowan and, more recently, Bernard Rosenthal have argued cogently that for American romantics the city was as important as the garden, not merely as a check against pastoral delusions but as a valuable factor in individual and national development\textsuperscript{21}

and that

our best writers, however, have not been opposed to cities per se; instead, they have directed their censure against a particular type of city: the overcrowded, unsanitary, hypercivilised urban monster which crushes bucolic hopes.\textsuperscript{22}

In the context of \textit{Chaturanga}, it is not so much pastoral delusions that are checked by Calcutta as are delusions bred deliberately in a pastoral setting. The individual development of Sribilash and (initially) of Sachish do take place in the city. The urban monster that is the uglier side of the coin may remind one of what \textit{The Guardian’s} art correspondent has called

\textsuperscript{19} Harold K. Schefski, ‘Tolstoy’s Urban-Rural Continuum’, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p. 30.
‘Charles Dickens’s London of dirt and despair’. And yet, Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, writing about the ‘anti-pastoral bias of *Martin Chuzzlewit*,’ observes how

Returning to England, he finds his spirit soaring at the sight of ‘Home’, and discovers beauty even in the pall of smoke hanging over London. Clearly, then, the old pastoral dichotomy of town and country is somewhat skewed by the dystopic vision of Eden, and the glamorized vision of London that Martin entertains on his return. And indeed Dickens even goes so far as to uncover pastoral values in the most unpromising urban landscape later in the novel.

The first line of this passage almost mirrors Sribilash’s emotional reaction to Calcutta. For both Martin and him, the magic word is ‘home’. The heart is where the home is; the smoke, dirt or despair can only make the city endearingly real, not repulsive. Also comparable between *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Chaturanga* is the role Ruth and Damini play in their respective novels, endowing the city with beauty and grace for the men who love them. For Sribilash, the urban idyll is confirmed upon his return to Calcutta, where, this time, he finds a beauty more personal and moving than anything any of the villages could offer him. It is in the intended pilgrimage centre in Calcutta that he meets the disciple’s widow, Damini. Here, the focus shifts from the rural-urban to the inner-outer chambers of the same house.

When, from the invisible world on the other side of the wall little signs of life came and touched us like the sundered petals of a flower, then I could realise in an instant that there was where the sphere of rasa lay – where, tied to the ends of that Bami’s [another woman in the house] sari a bunch of keys make music, where the kitchen is filled with the aroma of cooking, where I can hear the floor being swept clean, where everything is trivial but everything is real, where everything tender and sharp, blunt and delicate mixes together – therein lies the heaven of rasa.

Damini’s appearance marks an extremely important turn of events in *Chaturanga*. Although Sachish does not return her love, it is she who manages to break him out of his self-imposed trance. Her presence as well as her absence, her love as well as her fury succeed finally in turning Sachish away from the guru’s company. This passage where Sribilash writes of his own first moments of attraction, sets the tone of how Damini is about to upset the men’s abstract house of cards with her smallest realities. They are all in the same house, but it is on the other side of the wall that the house feels like a home, and that is what captivates Sribilash — the human motif.

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There is one non-urban setting that Sribilash describes with reverence: the unnamed seaside to which he, Sachish and Damini accompany Leelananda Swami. As a place both outside cities and villages, a borderline between water and land, the seaside offers them a respite from the sense of conflict that has been haunting Sachish and Sribilash ever since Jagmohan’s death—the conflict between the past and the present, the dead and the alive, the real and the unreal. It acts as the backdrop for two important scenes. The first takes place during the journey with the guru. The guru sings a song which, for once, touches Damini, as it seems to bring out her own sorrow. In fact, Leelananda Swami seems to be just the vehicle for their transportation to this place. They are obliged to spend the night inside a cave. The second chapter of the novella, the one titled ‘Sachish’, ends inside this cave. I have explored the significance and the uncanniness of the cave in greater details elsewhere, where I argue that it symbolises Sachish’s unconscious. Inside the cave, the narrative voice switches to that of Sachish. The solitude of the seaside allows him to delve deeper into his mind, even if he is almost terrified by the experience. He feels trapped and panic-stricken; the darkness of the cave seems to him to be a live, primitive beast. When Damini comes to him in the darkness, at first, in his half-asleep, half-awake state, Sachish thinks she is the terrifying beast and hits her blindly. The second important scene that takes place on this seashore is the very last one in the novella. Damini wants to go back there with Sribilash, now her husband, when they know that her end is near. Here she tells him that she wants him in the next life too, and here he closes the narrative. Little wonder then, that this seashore becomes something of a sacred place to Sribilash.

After returning from the cave, chapter three starts with everyone living on the first floor of a house in a village. Here, Tagore keeps comparing Damini to the flowing of winds: ‘the wind of her temper was blowing uncertainly’, ‘Her very non-appearance pushed us different ways like a stormy wind’, ‘Damini left like a sudden gust’. Here, ‘The short days of autumn swelled up with the wine of music and almost spilled over’. Autumn is a season of transition, as is spring. Autumn acts as the harbinger of winter, the end of the year, while spring precedes the bright, long days of summer. Spring will be mentioned later, when Sribilash is with Damini. At this point, the mention of autumn emphasises that we are in the third of fourth chapters; we are nearing the end, as is Damini; unknown to anyone, Damini has contracted an illness that is going to prove to be fatal. Sometimes mellow like a breeze and sometimes unsettling like a gust, eventually, she will pass away as gracefully as the wind does. Sribilash begins the final chapter, named after himself:

Once upon a time, there used to be a neel kuthi here. All of it is now in ruins, except a few rooms. On my way home after cremating Damini’s dead body, I took a fancy to this spot, and hence decided to stay here for a few days.
Indigo plantations of British Bengal are associated with tales of power and exploitation. Why would Sribilash take a fancy to a ruined factory with such a tainted history? The probable answer is that with his loss and grief so fresh in his mind, with his former life in ruins, he would find this place to be an apposite reflection. He describes the broken-down place lovingly, observing how life has raised its green head all over and among the wreckage, in the form of trees, bushes, moss, crops and even flowers. This is in keeping with his nature to take note of the smallest things around him and find something beautiful. He then goes on to reflect, without self-pity, but with some irony, on the impermanence of everything, not least of all of people and places.

I sit and think: this neel kuthi, which today lies like the carcass of a cow, was, once upon a time, full of life. The waves of pleasure and pain that it had raised around itself had made it seem as if that tumult would never calm down. But it did calm down, and Sribilash knows that so will the tumult caused in his life by Damini’s death. This is not the first loss he has suffered (Jagmohan died, Sachish changed) but it is presumably the deepest. His very philosophical comparison of pleasure and pain to ever-flowing waves show that the work of mourning has already started.

Mourning is one of the predominant themes of Chaturanga. In a way, Jagmohan decides the course of Sachish’s life, both alive and dead. In an essay on William Wordsworth, Kurt Fosso writes:

the poet, recalling his father’s death, tells how his narrative’s tears give his heart relief.

To pay the mighty debt of grief,
With sighs repeated o’er and o’er,
I mourn because I mourned no more.
Nor did my little heart foresee
She lost a home in losing thee.

No tears have been mentioned in the narrative of Sachish’s grief; they have been too well-hidden. Inscrutable as he is, it is difficult to know whether he found any relief in tears and sighs. It certainly seems, however, that he lost a home in losing his father-figure. Even when Sribilash comes back to Calcutta with Damini, Sachish asks them to live in Jagmohan’s house, but does not go there himself. Perhaps he is afraid that the home would have become only the ghost of a home — a ghostly home. And unlike Sribilash, he has not found a new love-object; he has rejected her.

__Before Sribilash and Damini find a home in Calcutta, and after they and Sachish leave__

33 Rabindranath Tagore, Play of Four, Chapter 4, Paragraph 3, Kindle edition
Leelananda Swami, they stay at a house by a river. While here, Damini goes looking for Sachish one day, to make him eat something. He is on the other side of the river. If the cave is claustrophobic in its confines, this place is bewildering in its empty limitlessness. The cave is primitive and black; this shore is primitive and stark white. The cave seems to Sachish to house a beast which ‘had neither eyes nor ears, but only a vast hunger’. Here, by the riverside,

it was as if a huge, dry tongue was holding out an appeal of thirst to the merciless, heated sky.\(^\text{35}\)

In such an apparently different yet basically similar setting, Damini once again gathers courage to approach Sachish, and once again, he turns her away. Tagore proves yet again that it is not the place itself that decides what role it will play or what impression it will leave, but the people in the place and their relationship to each other. He turns what could have been a poetically lonely riverbank to a desert-like expanse, as primitive as a black cave. The white here is not that of a canvas which is waiting to be drawn upon, promising possibilities; it is the white of erasure, resulting from the removal of colours and hope and life. ‘Only, beneath the feet, lay a ‘No’.\(^\text{37}\) No, he will not accept her. The final blow to Sachish and Damini’s relationship comes on a night alive with catastrophic storm and rain. It is in the aftermath of this night that Damini and Sribilash leave Sachish and return to Calcutta. Before returning to the city, Tagore uses the darker, grimmer and more alarming aspects of nature to highlight the unrest and the turbulence in his characters’ lives, showing again and again that there is more to nature or to rural environs than sweetness and peace.

Calcutta does not disappoint Sribilash; it continues to change his life for the better.

On many a mountain and river, on many a seashore have I travelled beside Damini. In the storm of tom tom and cymbals, the rhythms of rasa have set fire to the wind. ‘On your feet, in my heart, love has slipped the knot’ – the flame of this line has showered sparks in ever new letters. Still, the veil had not burnt.

But what is this that happened inside this narrow lane in Calcutta! Those crowding houses seemed to blossom like amaranth all around. Providence showed Her feat indeed! She turned these bricks and woods into the melody of Her song. And She touched an ordinary person like me with some philosopher’s stone so that I became extraordinary in a moment.\(^\text{38}\)

He has not forgotten the mountains, rivers and seashores; after all, he travelled there beside her. But the beauty of those places was experienced through the thin veil of sorrow because she did not love him then. The joy blossomed when she turned towards him and returned his love, making a paradise out of mundane, narrow, concrete spaces. Providence

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helps Sribilash by separating him from Sachish, so that he is no longer merely Sachish’s satellite. Damini is obliged to look him in the face, so to speak; obliged to notice him in all his down-to-earth glories, and she loses no time in falling in love with him. When their wedding is fixed, Sachish is not the only one excited about it. ‘when the group from Jyathamoshai’s Muslim neighbourhood got the news, they made such a song and dance over it that the neighbours thought that the emir from Kabul had arrived, or at least the Nizam from Hyderabad’. That sounds like a true homecoming. Like Damini, the city reciprocates Sribilash’s love.

I don’t have the poetic power to say in the right tune that this city of Calcutta is Vrindavan itself and the utmost hard work the rhythm of the flute. But the days that went by didn’t walk and didn’t run; they really danced away,

so writes Sribilash as Damini’s beloved husband. As always, he remains characteristically self-deprecating. Yet, Tagore has given this narrative voice power enough to make his point and poeticism enough to convince us that poetry and music, love and life can flourish in a Calcutta lane. Vrindavan is where Krishna and Radha are supposed to have been together; the flute is an indelible part of Krishna’s romantic figure. Love — or the lack of it — can transform any place into anything, upsetting any preconceived definitions of rural, urban or otherwise. Where the heart does not find a home, rest can become stifling; where it does, hard work feels like play; time transcends mere pace and acquires a unique musical rhythm.

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Ecotourism In and Around Santiniketan: Challenges and Potentialities

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Abstract

Santiniketan, Tagore’s ‘Abode of Peace’ is located in the western part of the state of West Bengal in India. The place is the site of Visva Bharati, a world renowned residential university as well as a Brahmacharya Asram (hermitage where a vow has been taken by the residents) established by Rabindranath Tagore himself. Santiniketan, in the Birbhum District of West Bengal and its environs provide ample scope for the development of ecotourism. It is a place where ecotourism and rural tourism go hand in hand. The place has an idyllic setting. Around Santiniketan, there exist a number of tribal villages inhabited by the Santhal tribe. Ecotourism combines nature tourism, wilderness tourism and agri-tourism. This form of niche tourism is essentially rural in character. It is a type of Special Interest Tourism that has emerged recently and has evoked concern among social scientists. Of late, ecotourism has become popular in the tribal villages around Santiniketan. A unique natural landscape here is formed by the khoai, a vast, desolate area with lateritic soil and gully erosion. Resorts have been built in the khoai by private entrepreneurs where tourists flock round the year. Ballavpurdanga, along with some other typical Santhal villages – Boner Pukur Danga, Mouldanga and Phuldanga, bordering the Sonajhuri forest in the khoai, have been brought within the Rural Tourism Scheme under the Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP) introduced by the Government of India in the early years of the 21st century. Tagore was a wayfarer. Although in his times, the concept of ecotourism had not emerged, the Poet was one with nature and one can say that he would have definitely advocated the practice. This paper studies the scope and sustainability of ecotourism in Santiniketan and seeks to find out the benefits it can provide to the host community and to visitors. The paper also attempts to investigate how ecotourism, as a practice, can serve actively in a rural reconstruction programme as envisaged by Tagore.
Keywords: Ecotourism, Santiniketan, Tagore, khoai, tribal villages.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore was a wayfaring poet, as exemplified in the title of the exhibition of photographs detailing Tagore’s travels, organised by Tagore Centre, London and the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs) in the Scottish Parliament in 2012. During his lifetime, he visited more than thirty-four countries, and paid repeat visits to some of them. ‘I am a wayfarer of the endless road,’1 he wrote. Tagore had an enormous interest in the cultural lives of the people residing in different parts of the world. The Poet was a genuine advocate of international understanding and conceived of a global village. He nurtured a bonding with nature through his travels. Tagore was essentially an advocate of ecological sustainability and development. He opined that nature and human life existed as integral parts of a single entity. In this sense, he was a deep ecologist.2 According to Tagore, eco-ethical human living should be a symbiosis between Man and Nature and between man and man.3 His views regarding eco-ethical living were deeply influenced by ancient Indian philosophy, mostly based on the Upanishads. Tagore viewed that in the modern age, this symbiosis between Man and Nature has been adversely affected by increasing consumerism, competition and commercialism, which would lead to disastrous consequences. Tagore inculcated within himself a refined sense of beauty and truth and an appreciation for the finer elements in one’s life. His philosophy was essentially based on humanism, which he believed should be considered the greatest aim of mankind. All his life he upheld the role of Nature in man’s well-being. Through his innumerable songs and poems, he expressed his love and dedication towards Nature. He established his school in Santiniketan out of his emotional response to Nature. Throughout his life, Tagore spoke of peace and global harmony. His ideas about internationalism also inspired his desire to travel and interact with cultures all over the world. Tagore aspired towards a society in which economic prosperity would go hand-in-hand with the growth of humanism. Such a society would be one in which men and women, at all levels, would be able to fulfil their basic minimum needs. He wanted to keep the path to development open in all respects. Tagore’s goal of social development was entirely divorced from political issues.

The main objective of this paper is to find out the potentialities and problems of ecotourism development here. In the process, it has been examined how closely ecotourism in this area is tied up with heritage tourism in Tagore’s university – Visva Bharati and how far ecotourism can help in rural reconstruction as conceived by Tagore. The research-work is both descriptive and analytical. The paper has been divided into two sections. The first

section defines and analyses ecotourism and the second looks at Tagore’s ideas in Practice in Santiniketan and Sriniketan before moving to considering ecotourism projects to conserve the locale and a whole way of life. Tourism involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas. The principle of sustainable development has been a subject of concern in tourism research since the early 1990s. An emerging concept in the field of sustainable tourism is ecotourism. Ecotourism is closely tied up with conservation of the environment at the tourist spot. Since the quality of the destination-environment plays an important role in meeting customer expectations and generating customer satisfaction, the state of the natural and cultural environment of the tourist destination should essentially be preserved.

**Ecotourism: An Overview**

Ecotourism implies ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.’ The Ecotourism Society defines it as purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and the natural history of the environment; taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem; producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of the natural resources beneficial to the local people. Thus, ecotourism is primarily inspired by the natural resources beneficial to the local people by the natural history and the natural landscape of a region. It focuses on biological and physical features. The concept of ecotourism developed in the 1970s and 1980s, as the environmental movement experienced a boom. Since the 1980s, ecotourism has been growing at a rate of 34 percent per year and has developed as the fastest growing tourism segment. It was in the 1990s that ecotourism became a buzzword and the stakeholders—the conservation community, the people living around protected areas and the travel industry realised their mutual interests in directing the growth of this form of tourism. Many of the underdeveloping nations identified ecotourism as an effective tool that served conservation and development goals simultaneously. Today, ecotourism is looked upon as a panacea to bring about conservation of nature, preservation of biodiversity, protection of fragile ecosystems, creation of environmental awareness, community development, showcasing indigenous cultures and fostering socio-cultural growth. Ecotourism has a scientific, aesthetic and philosophical approach. It helps to sustain landscapes and habitats. It incorporates ecologically sensitive architecture and land use designs; it counts heavily on infrastructure developed in harmony with the surrounding nature. It stresses on the conservation of energy, minimising the use of fossil-fuels and the protection and preservation of flora and fauna. A large percentage of the revenue earned

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6 The International Ecotourism Society.
from ecotourism is retained within the host country as the use of locally owned facilities and services is emphasised in this form of tourism. The concept of ecotourism has two dimensions: contribution to conservation and enjoyment of nature. In addition, it encourages motivation for travel, related to activities that contribute to the social, economic and physical environments, and at the same time, further environmental awareness and knowledge. Therefore, the most essential characteristic of ecotourism is sustainability.

As a subset of sustainable tourism, ecotourism seeks to promote economic and social development without compromising the state of natural ecosystems and biodiversity. Ecotourism is directed to minimise physical, social, behavioural and psychological impacts and to foster respect for nature. Since it is pre-conditioned by environmental consciousness of tourists, it entails a corresponding environmentally responsible conduct. The following chart indicates its beneficence.

Ecotourism

Protection of natural areas

Generation of Revenue Environmental education Local involvement

Conservation (Biodiversity and natural resources) Development (Economic infrastructural growth)

Stewardship Local control

Sustainability

Figure 1

Ecotourism is an alternative to conventional tourism. It may be looked upon as a form of Special Interest Tourism (SIT) and has been more popular in the Developing World countries such as Costa Rica, Nepal and Ecuador. Ecotourism involves travelling to exotic and remote places by nature-lovers. The major purposes of ecotourism are appreciation of nature and gaining authentic and first-hand knowledge about indigenous cultures. It has been found that ecotourists are generally affluent, well-educated, mature and environmentally focused. Most of these tourists belong to the high-income group and have tertiary education. They travel in small groups, with the desire to accomplish an in-depth study of nature. Ecotourism is a
form of niche tourism that aims at increasing the economic viability of marginalised areas, particularly in terms of infrastructure and income and improving living conditions in rural areas. The other objectives of ecotourism are to provide funds for ecological conservation by directing revenues for the purpose, to empower local communities and encourage local participation in decision-making. It also fosters respect for different cultures and human rights, positive experiences for both the host community and the visitors, memorable interpretative experiences to tourists, financial benefits for local people and private industries. Besides, it includes an educational component for both the host community and the tourist, as the host community can interact with the tourists, learn about their experiences and can adapt to their culture and the tourists get to know more about the area and its local culture. Thus, ecotourism embraces ‘nature tourism’, ‘wilderness tourism’, ‘low impact tourism’ and ‘sustainable tourism’. Ecotourism is essentially tied up with community-based tourism. This is because the community forms an integral part of the tourism activity. Also, the community is well aware of and has a historical understanding of how the region adapts to changes in response to tourism development and it is the community which is highly affected by tourism in an area. By participating in the tourism sector, the socio-cultural integrity of the community is promoted. Efforts towards the development of ecotourism in developing countries are often directed towards pro-poor tourism (PPT). In this way, ecotourism has the potentiality of integrating the conservation of natural resources along with the protection of the socio-economic interests of the local people. Thus, ecotourism denotes positive tourism-environment linkages. However, the tourism-environment relationship is extremely complex. While ecotourism is often able to maximise the productivity and utilisation of all kinds of resources such as forests, mountains and coastal areas, it may produce significant impacts on consumption patterns, the physical environment and social systems, especially in fragile areas. With increase in tourist activity, different types of visitors create contrasting demands and impacts upon the resources of the area. This causes the relationship between the host community and the tourists to develop from one of co-existence to one of conflict. Therefore, an intensely scientific approach must be taken in the development of ecotourism to make it sustainable in the long-run. As the environment is an integral part of the industry, it must be ensured that the environment is diligently conserved. Ecotourism should make optimal use of environmental resources, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve the natural and cultural environment. Each ecosystem has a threshold capacity for development and use, beyond which there would occur progressive deterioration in the environment, leading to its ultimate destruction. This ultimate enduring power of a tourist destination to withstand use is known as its carrying capacity. When the level of visitor use supersedes the environment’s ability to cope with this use within limits of acceptable change (LAC), negative impacts result. Therefore, it is essential that the use of an ecotourist destination compliments its carrying capacity.

8 The tourist becomes knowledgeable about the destination, while the host community comes to learn about the culture of the tourist community.

9 Nature tourism - Tourism that involves enjoyment of nature; Wilderness tourism – Tourism that involves travelling to remote areas; low impact tourism - Tourism that produces minimum impact on the environment; Sustainable tourism-Tourism that uses resources in a rational manner so that the resources are not completely depleted but can be used by future generations (My explanation).
Methodology

The economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts of ecotourism around Santiniketan have been determined through primary survey conducted in the field by the researcher. Interviews were held with the help of sets of questionnaires and the target population in this case comprised of the tourists as well as the host community. One of the challenges faced by the researcher throughout the study period was the procurement of authentic figurative data, as no record of tourist arrivals in this region is available from either the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal or the NGOs. Therefore, the analysis of data in the case of this research has been primarily qualitative. Photography and observation in the field form an integral part of the study. For obtaining secondary information, books and periodicals, news dailies, websites, pilot survey reports, dissertations, District Census Handbooks and the District Gazetteer were consulted.

Figure 2: Location of the study area within Bolpur-Sriniketan Block. Source: Author
Santiniketan, Sriniketan and Tagore’s concept of Rural Reconstruction

Located in the Birbhum District of West Bengal, within the Bolpur-Sriniketan Block, is Santiniketan – Tagore’s ‘Abode of Peace.’ The town and the villages around it are set atop a hard, lateritic crust, forming the water-divide between the Ajoy and Kopai rivers. In the early twentieth century, the Brahmacharya Ashrama here was conceptualised by Tagore on the ideals of Tapovan, a fact that still arouses the enthusiasm of thousands of tourists – domestic and international. The places around the Asrama provide an idyllic atmosphere with large, open space and scenic beauty. The entire Asrama is dotted with sculptures and murals – mostly the creative works of leading Indian artists like Ramkinkar Baij, Nandalal Bose, Binode Behari Mukherjee and K. G. Subrahniyam. Heritage buildings such as Udayan, Dehali, Santiniketan Griha, Talodhwaj, Cheena Bhavana and Dinantika exist all around. Classes are held under trees in the Amrakunja, Salbithi and Bakulbithi. Education amidst nature was the motto of Rabindranath Tagore and these classes bear testimony to this belief. The Visva Bharati campus is surrounded by a cluster of villages, mostly inhabited by adivasis. Agriculture had been the primary means of livelihood here until the famine of the 1760s. As a consequence of the devastating famine, very few households were left for tilling the land and the paddy fields were converted into a jungle. At this point of time, when the area was being plundered, the wave of industrialisation set in. More than a century later, with the establishment of Visva Bharati by Tagore, village industries were set up in the area and a programme of rural development was undertaken. In 1922, Sriniketan was established as the second contiguous campus of Visva Bharati. Sriniketan was set up by Tagore with the aim of rural reconstruction, in order to improve the quality of life in the surrounding villages. Cooperatives were formed to assist the villagers in their economic endeavour. One such cooperative was set up as a handicrafts unit in Ballavpur. In course of time, it became a society for rural development and came to be known as ‘Amar Kutir.’ Tagore’s concept of rural reconstruction stemmed from the love towards his country. He knew that a large percentage of the country’s population resides in the villages and therefore, the prosperity of this group of people would ultimately lead to the country’s development as a whole. The villagers should be educated and empowered adequately and they should be equipped with the minimum power to bring about a balanced social, economic, environmental and political growth of their surroundings. This would make them aware of the socio-economic and political situation around them and help them to adapt to it. Tagore based his idea of rural reconstruction on three, interconnected principles – self-empowerment, co-operative functioning and development. Empowerment is enabled through self-reliance. It is self-

10 Brahmacharya Ashrama denotes hermitage where a vow has been taken by the residents (My explanation).
11 A residential unit within the forest where students take lessons from teachers and render them certain services (My explanation).
12 Groves of Mango (Mangifera indica), Shaal (Shorea robusta) and Indian medlar (Minospa elegy) trees.
13 Tribal people, mostly Santhals here (My explanation).
14 ‘Amar Kutir’ is a co-operative set up near Sriniketan to revive rural handicrafts (My explanation).
reliance that helps a person to express the potentiality within him.

Ecotourism in and around Santiniketan

Under the ‘Endogenous Tourism Project’ (ETP) that was introduced in India in the early years of the twenty-first century, destination development pilot projects were undertaken at a number of rural sites within India. These villages were brought under the Rural Tourism Scheme and were supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). One such village in West Bengal is Ballavpur in the outskirts of Santiniketan. It is located in the Bolpur-Sriniketan Block of Birbhum District, under the Gram Panchayat Ruppur. The Ballavpur Rural Tourism site is a cluster of villages where ecotourism goes hand in hand with rural tourism. A unique natural landscape here is the khoai, a vast, desolate area with lateritic soil. It is marked by gully erosion, forming an extensive badland. Hence, the khoai serves as an interesting site for both ecotourists and geotourists. Here, resorts have been set up using indigenous raw materials to accommodate tourists, both domestic and international. The metropolitan city of Kolkata is only 160 km away and people from this city flock to Santiniketan with a desire for leisure tourism during week-ends and vacations.

Tourism products for ecotourists around Santiniketan

Tourism resources may be defined as all of those features, which draw people into a destination and form the essence of the location’s tourism appeal. Tourism infrastructure and services such as catering, tourist guides, travel agencies, etc. also form part of the tourism resource. A wide variety of tourism products has made Santiniketan and the region around it a hotspot of ecotourism as well as cultural and heritage tourism. The area around the Visva Bharati campus is essentially rural in character. The rural hinterland of Santiniketan is a unique selling point (USP) for the destination. As mentioned earlier, the villages here are inhabited mostly by adivasis, namely Santhals. The Santhals form one of the largest tribes of India and have zealously preserved in their age-old rituals and customs. As a result, their ethnic Santhali culture has not yet been overrun by the deforming forces of globalisation. The Santhals still engage in colourful group dances and folk songs, with the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments. The Santhal villages around Ballavpur form a major attraction for tourists visiting Santiniketan and add to the virgin charm of the area.

18 An administrative unit under which there are one or more villages.
Figure 3: Ballavpurdanga – an adivasi village in the outskirts of Santiniketan.

A large part of the khoai is adorned with sonajhuri plantations\textsuperscript{19} and eucalyptus trees. The sonajhuri forest in this area provides an ideal picnic spot. It is set in sylvan surroundings, with the Mayurakshi Canal beside it and not far away flows the Kopai River. The sonajhuri forest has seven rock nature sculptures of birds. A weekly market by the name of ‘Khoai boner annya haat’\textsuperscript{20} is held here every Saturday. The market is known for local handicrafts, made by the village artisans. Many of these are unique and display the impeccable taste of the craftsmen. The rural handicrafts include jewellery made of indigenous materials obtained from the forests, \textit{kantha-stitched}\textsuperscript{21} and embroidered clothes, \textit{dokra}\textsuperscript{22} and terracotta artifacts, hand-crafted tableware, different types of lanterns, glass paintings, ceramic pottery, bags and a host of decorative goods. \textit{Bauls}\textsuperscript{23} and Santhali dancers throng the haat and entertain the tourists with their songs and dances.

\textsuperscript{19} Plantations of earleaf acacia (\textit{Acacia auriculoformis}).
\textsuperscript{20} A different type of village market in \textit{khoai}.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Kantha} is a special type of quilt-stitch embroidery. It is indigenous to West Bengal and Bangladesh. This kind of embroidery is practised mainly by rural women.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Dokra} is a kind of metal work – a rural handicraft practised in the villages of West Bengal, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and some other states of India.
\textsuperscript{23} Bauls denote a religious cult of Bengal, singing folk songs in praise of gods and goddesses and the universe.
Nearby is Prakriti Bhavana, a nature art museum displaying natural sculptures in driftwood, dry wood and metal. The museum’s garden is also dotted with rock sculptures. Prakriti Bhavana bears testimony to the legacy of Tagore’s concept of linking man with nature through art.
Opposite this area is found the Ballavpur Wildlife Sanctuary, also known as Deer Park. At one time, it was famous for the *Krishnashar* or blackbuck, now only a few spotted deer exist in the sanctuary. Within the sanctuary is found a wide variety of trees such as sal, akashoni, minjiri, mahua. This is also a haven for migratory birds, particularly in winter, when bird watching becomes an additional attraction.

In Shyambati, there is a Nature Interpretation Centre by the name of Prakriti Bikshan Kendra. It encloses a nature museum with fossils, carbonised wood and pictures related to activities in the forest. There are three cottage accommodations for tourists within the campus.

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24 Shaal (*Shorea* robusta), Earpod wattle (*Acacia auriculoformis*), Yellow cassia (*Senna siamia*), Madhuca longifolia.

25 An area adjacent to the Visva Bharati campus.
A large number of eco-parks\textsuperscript{26} have been established around Santiniketan to entertain the tourists. One such destination of ecotourism is the Ballavpur Eco-Park, Ballavpur Eco-Park with picturesque natural surroundings located near Sriniketan. Within the eco-park, a number of cottages and a resort – ‘Natun Pata’ have been built.

\textsuperscript{26} Eco-park is a park meant for recreation for the public as well as for protection of the ecosystem.
Another eco-park near Santiniketan is Shayor Bithi, located between the Santhal villages of Phuldanga and Prantik in the Taltor mouza. Shayor Bithi has a children’s park with swings, statues and rocking cradles. Besides these, there are boating facilities in the lake adjoining it and a restaurant within the park. While Shayor Bithi is located in the north of Bolpur-Sriniketan Block, in the southern part there is Deul. This park also has a tank with boating facilities. The main advantage enjoyed by this destination is its proximity to the Ajay River. Another destination for eco-tourists is Amkhoi Fossil Park. The angiosperm27 wood fossils displayed in this park were collected during pond digging from Amkhoi village of Illambazar Forest. These specimens indicate that this area was covered by thick deciduous forests 15 to 20 million years ago. These forests were found in the highlands of the Rajmahal Hills and Chotanagpur Plateau to the northwest of Birbhum. It is presumed that the trees from these forests were carried by occasional floods of the river system flowing from northwest towards southeast in Birbhum, Bardhaman, Bankura and Medinipur Districts and were deposited under fine sand and clay to be transformed into wood fossils. The Fossil Park is an ideal destination for educational tourism and invites study tours. It also helps greatly in preserving the valuable fossil woods as a natural heritage of the Bengal Region.

27 Angiosperms are flowering plants.
Sabujbon is another eco-park, located in Rasulpur Village adjacent to Bardhamaan District. A large number of endemic species\textsuperscript{28} have been planted in the 150 acres of land in this eco-park, so that it serves as a botanical garden for tourists. Nearby flows the Ajay River. The concept of the plant museum in this eco-park is unique and probably the first of its kind in Asia. Within the greenery, clearings have been made, where cottages with thatched roofs and mud walls have been set up to accommodate guests. Organic vegetables\textsuperscript{29} grown within the complex are served as food. A large number of butterflies, birds and flowers are also found in Sabujbon, so that it provides an excellent site for nature photography.

\textsuperscript{28} A species indigenous to one particular area, a species that cannot be found in any other area.

\textsuperscript{29} Organic vegetables are vegetables that are grown by organic farming, i.e., without the application of chemical fertilisers and by applying techniques such as crop rotation, biological pest control, etc.
Figure 9: Endemic species of plants in Sabujbon.
A unique attraction here is the Kopai River. The Kopai has been made immortal in Tagore’s famous poem, ‘Amader chhoto nadi.’ The road to the Kopai is flanked by lush green paddy fields, with occasional palm trees. As revealed from primary survey, baul singers nowadays sit by the riverside to entertain passers-by. New tourist resorts are coming up in this area.

30 A poem in Sabaj Path, one of the children’s books written by Tagore. (See Appendix)
Based on ecotourism, a large number of attractive resorts have come up in the study area. Babli Guest House offers cottages with a wide range of tariffs. Babli is a rural-action project ten km from Bolpur, in the Dwaronda Village. Banalakshmi is another resort in Dwaronda, spread over thirteen acres. It has extensive farmland attached to it and fruit orchards with dense growth of mango, guava and coconut trees. A large variety of farm-based products including honey, squash, pickles, jam and handicrafts are sold from Banalakshmi. Another resort here is Udasin, which has received a certificate from the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, as ‘Incredible India, B&B Establishment’. About twelve km away from Bolpur is Moram, a site where a village development programme has been undertaken through art and craft. Rangabitan Paryatak Nivas is a resort near Amar Kutir. Originally, around 2010, Rangabitan was planned by the Birbhum Zilla Parishad under MGNREGA to develop a mango orchard. Subsequently, the Bolpur-Sriniketan Panchayat Samiti developed cottages here as guest houses. The Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal has taken up the task of developing Rangabitan as a resort for ecotourism. At present, there are about twenty cottages here.

Major findings from the study

From primary survey in the field, it was found that most of the tourists visiting Santiniketan are domestic tourists, although international tourism has developed to some extent. It was also found by the researcher that a large percentage of these tourists come from Kolkata and the remaining come from the surrounding districts. Most of them are motivated to visit Santiniketan by the attraction of Visva Bharati, which they consider a tourist spot in itself. Therefore, Santiniketan is looked upon by tourists more as a heritage destination, connected with the life of one of the world’s greatest poets – Rabindranath Tagore. Santiniketan, as such, has a wide variety of tourism products to offer. These are heritage buildings, murals and sculptures, aesthetics in the sphere of fine arts and performing arts, unique handicrafts, attractive folk culture, colourful festivals, scenic beauty and rural culture. Therefore, in and around Santiniketan, different types of tourism have developed including cultural tourism, nature tourism, educational tourism, festival tourism and rural tourism.

From a primary survey, it was found that tourists visiting Santiniketan are not ‘hard’ eco-tourists, i.e., they do not possess a high level of nature interest and environmental commitment. It has been observed by the researcher that tourists visiting the Sonajhuri forest, the khobai and the surrounding villages often travel by motor vehicles that emit carbon dioxide, thereby causing air pollution. Moreover, they stay in air-conditioned rooms and are not concerned about energy consumption. However, the lodge owners in
Santiniketan informed the researcher that there is very little atmospheric pollution in the area as the totos\textsuperscript{32} carrying tourists are battery-driven. Most of the eco-lodges\textsuperscript{33} in and around Santiniketan are casual eco-lodges or agri-eco-lodges. They serve ‘soft’ eco-tourists, i.e., tourists who tend to concentrate in well serviced, accessible areas and have a general, less informed interest in nature. In fact, a large percentage of the lodges can hardly be considered eco-lodges as they are equipped with air-conditioners and television sets and thus, do not meet the criterion of energy conservation. However, it has been seen that these lodges frequently serve organic food (including fruits and vegetables) from their own gardens, which they supplement with ingredients from outside. Also, these lodges have a limited number of rooms which restricts overcrowding and mass tourism.\textsuperscript{34} It has been observed by the researcher that the design of the lodges set up in the khoai, such as Baul Hut, Sakuntala Village Resort, Ram Shyam Village Resort, are seamlessly integrated with the natural surroundings and do not cause visual pollution. These structures have a vernacular architecture\textsuperscript{35} and are made of locally available materials so that the entire concept ideally matches with the rural ambience.

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\textsuperscript{32} A kind of three-wheeled vehicle found in the rural areas of India.

\textsuperscript{33} Lodges made of eco-friendly materials and meant for ecotourism.

\textsuperscript{34} A kind of conventional tourism in which huge crowds are involved, causing inconvenience for the host community.

\textsuperscript{35} An architectural style that reflects local traditions and is designed, based on local needs, with local construction materials.
The tourists who come to Santiniketan for enjoying nature tourism and rural tourism generally belong to the high-income group. That is why most of the resorts, although overpriced, show high occupancy rates. In general, the tourists who visit Santiniketan and the khoai, the Saturday market and the surrounding adivasi villages stay for a maximum of two to three days. Many of them have been found to be repeat visitors. Tourists visiting the khoai are highly interested in the Saturday market. Huge crowds gather at the ‘Khoai boner annya haat’ as the Saturday market is called, because it provides ample scope for shopping rural handicrafts and for enjoying baul songs and adivasi dances. Tourism in Santiniketan is a seasonal activity. The tourist season starts from October, reaches its peak in December-January and lasts till March. As most of the tourists are from Kolkata and October is the month of the Puja holidays in West Bengal, tourists flock to the resorts at this time of the year. The month of December coincides with the Pous Mela (the winter fair) in Santiniketan. Therefore, festival tourism attains its height at this time. Again, December-January is the time for the winter vacation. March is the month when the Vasantotsava is held in Santiniketan. This festival draws tourists from all over India. After March, the number of tourists falls as summer sets in. Some resort managers have reported that visitors arrive in the weekends even in summer as the resorts provide air-conditioned rooms. From all this, it can be concluded that Santiniketan serve as a perfect weekend destination, even in the summer months. The boom in ecotourism in and around Santiniketan has been found to benefit the local people. Although exact data on tourist arrivals over the years is not available, the local people affirmed that there has been an upswing in tourist inflow since 2012, particularly from 2014 onwards. This period coincides with the expansion of the Saturday market and the establishment of various resorts around the Sonajhuri forest. Hence, it can be concluded that the increase in tourist inflow in and around Santiniketan is strongly tied up with the development of ecotourism and rural tourism in this area. Ecotourism has resulted in a direct increase in the income of the toto drivers as the number of passengers moving about in totos

36 Spring Festival.
has gone up. In the resorts, more and more local people are being employed in cleaning the rooms, cooking traditional dishes and serving the guests. One of the resorts, it was found, employs only adivasi women to serve food, while the cooking is done by men. Some of the resorts are renovated every year before the tourist season and adivasis from the surrounding villages are employed in this renovation work. In fact, it is the adivasi women who help the masons in construction and renovation. Also, it has been found that the local bauls, Santhali dancers and other performers earn a considerable amount by entertaining the audience at the tourist resorts and at the Saturday market. Their performances are highly appreciated by the tourists, which gives them an incentive to preserve their indigenous culture. Encouraged by the prospects of having an income, the Santhali men and women have formed small groups of their own in order to present folk dances wherever they get an opportunity. The local artisans have reported that their income has also increased with a spurt in ecotourism and rural tourism. From the accounts of these people, it can be concluded that ecotourism in Santiniketan tends to be pro-poor.

Figure 14: Santhali dancers performing at the Saturday market.
However, the researcher has found that there is a lack of community participation in tourism in and around Santiniketan. The local people have almost no role in taking decisions regarding tourist activities although they are the ones most affected by tourism development in the area. Rather, it is the private entrepreneurs who profit most from ecotourism here. Again, it has been found from primary survey that in recent years there has been an enormous growth in the number of tourists visiting Santiniketan, which leads to all the detrimental effects of mass tourism. The host community considers the tourists invasive, exploiting the infrastructure of the place, particularly during festivals. Most of the domestic tourists are ignorant about the heritage value, the history of the place and the importance of the natural landscape as they look upon Santiniketan as any other tourist spot. Further, accommodating the ever increasing number of visitors and fulfilling their expectations becomes a Herculean task for the host community. It must be kept in mind that Visva Bharati is an academic institution. It is not therefore meant to manage tourists and cater to their demands at the cost of its academic activities. It has been noticed by the researcher that the host community today expresses open irritation against the arrival of tourists in Santiniketan, as they become the worst sufferers, particularly during festivals when there is a huge rush on the trains and traffic jams on the roads leading to Bolpur. In fact, the normal life of the host community is frequently disrupted by the arrival of tourists. An example of this may be cited in the fact that toto drivers increase their rates every Saturday as there is an excessive demand for totos by tourists travelling to the Saturday market. Considering Doxey’s Irritation
it may be said that the stage of antagonism has been reached by the host community in Santiniketan.

Figure 16: Butler’s Destination Area Life-cycle.

Due to the excessive pressure created by mass tourism on the natural and economic resources of this region, adverse effects accrue to the host community. On the whole, tourism growth in Santiniketan has almost reached the stage of stagnation, considering Butler’s Destination Area Life-cycle, but ecotourism still remains in a nascent stage.

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37 Doxey’s Irritition Index model suggests that host communities pass through a sequence of reactions as the impacts of tourism in their area become more pronounced and their perceptions change with time.

38 Butler’s Tourism Area Life Cycle explains the evolution of a tourism destination. According to Butler, a destination goes through the stages of exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, decline and finally, rejuvenation.
### Strengths

1. Convenient location and accessibility.
2. Location within the tourism circuit of Birbhum.
3. Scenic beauty and tranquility.
4. Excellent communication system.
5. Perfect rural ambience in the outskirts of Santiniketan.
6. A large number of tourist resorts.
7. Pollution-free environment.
8. Nearness to the capital city of Kolkata.
10. Large number of eco-parks, gardens, jheals (tanks) and rivers.
11. Availability of typical Bengali cuisine in the village resorts.
12. A wide variety of rural handicrafts.
13. Saturday market as a major attraction.
14. Folk culture with baul singers and Santhali dancers.
15. Colourful festivals, particularly the Vasantotsava and the Pous Mela.
16. Traditional art and culture as an additional attraction.

### Weaknesses

1. Lack of tourism infrastructure such as parking space, landscaping in the villages, etc.
2. Lack of trained and skilled manpower.
3. No community participation in decision-making.
4. Lack of commitment to eco-tourism on the part of the stakeholders.
5. Lack of home stays in the true sense of the term.
6. Seasonal nature of tourism.
7. Lack of statistical data regarding arrival of tourists.
8. Lack of attractive signages.
9. Poor marketing of tourist products. Marketing only by word of mouth.
10. Lack of websites, advertising the tourism products.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Opportunities</strong></th>
<th><strong>Threats</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Excellent scope for nature tourism.</td>
<td>1. Chances of mass tourism, putting excessive pressure on natural resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Can develop into a weekend getaway as it is only one hundred sixty km from Kolkata.</td>
<td>2. Stagnation in the tourism life-cycle.</td>
</tr>
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<td>3. Scope for shopping heritage handicrafts.</td>
<td>3. Under utilisation of potential tourism resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Scope for heritage tourism.</td>
<td>4. Antagonistic attitude on the part of the host community.</td>
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<td>5. Scope for sightseeing.</td>
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<td>6. Temples and <em>Sati-pithas</em> nearby. Hence, scope for pilgrimage tourism.</td>
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<td>7. Scope for successful development of rural tourism, including agri-tourism.</td>
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<td>8. Scope for nature photography.</td>
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<td>9. Scope for direct interaction with the village artisans and exchange of cultures.</td>
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<td>10. Nature walks and bicycle tours around the tribal villages and along the Kopai River.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Stimulation of other economic sectors through backward and forward linkages and cross-sectoral synergies with sectors like agriculture, horticulture, poultry, handicrafts and transport.</td>
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Ecotourism in Santiniketan: A SWOT Analysis
Proposals and suggestions for sustainability of ecotourism in Santiniketan

In the past few years, tourism development in Santiniketan has been rather haphazard. What is being promoted in the name of ecotourism is simply conventional tourism with a few, superficial changes, so that it has culminated in mass tourism. In fact, the consequences of mass tourism are offsetting the benefits derived from ecotourism. It should be kept in mind that ecotourism and mass tourism are extreme poles. Therefore, adequate planning is necessary to control mass tourism in Santiniketan and the area around it. Collaborative planning should replace traditional planning processes as collaborative planning leads to fair and equitable decisions relating to current participants. Such planning should focus on a balance between the costs and benefits of tourism in the best interests of the community. Strong policy measures are required to convert the place into a holiday or leisure destination. Private Public Partnership (PPP) is especially important in sustaining ecotourism and community-based tourism in developing countries like India, where awareness about eco ethical living is limited. Synergy between the private and public sectors and other stakeholders of tourism is an absolute necessity in the case of tourism development in Santiniketan. A plan should be chalked out to obtain public sector funding, which will, in the long run, encourage private sector investment in the tourism industry and promote ecotourism. In order to sustain ecotourism in the true sense of the term, identification of tourism activities that are compatible with the study area is absolutely necessary. By exploring alternative travel choice, the impact of tourism transport can be addressed. Nature walks and bicycle tours around the tribal villages are ideal in the context of the study area. Short distance bullock-cart tours, especially around the Kopai River, can make ecotourism more participatory and meaningful. Because of the seasonal character of the tourism industry in Santiniketan, the destination tends to have many times more inhabitants in the high season than in the low season. This problem should be dealt with by the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal as well as by private entrepreneurs. Non-fixed roof accommodations like tree-houses and tents and camping facility should be made available for ecotourists. Home stay arrangements are needed to enable substantial increase in the income of the locals and to make visitors more aware of the local culture and natural heritage of the place. Improvement of medical facilities is required urgently in the study area. Tourism marketing must be done effectively. For this purpose, colourful brochures, innovative websites, creative advertising and attractive signages are essential. Capacity building trainings should be imparted to the villagers in areas of tourism management and

39 Sati is the consort of Lord Shiva. According to Hindu mythology, after the death of Sati, the parts of her body disintegrated and fell in some places all over the Indian sub-continent. Sati pithas with temples came up in all those places. There are, in total, 52 Sati pithas – 51 in India and 1 in Pakistan.
40 Collaborative planning is planning that delegates responsibility for preparing plans directly to affected stakeholders.
41 A cooperative arrangement between two or more public and private sectors.
42 Home stay is a kind of accommodation in which tourists stay with the host’s family and are served food cooked by the host.
tourism products like gastronomy\textsuperscript{43} and handicrafts. Training on catering and housekeeping services, tour guiding skills and allied activities must be provided through workshops in order to build a skilled and trained workforce in the area. West Bengal Tourism along with the local panchayats should take a leading role in constructing well-built village roads and hygienic wayside amenities. The Tourism Department should take up the maintenance and archival of data on tourism. Periodic researches should be undertaken to assess emerging tourist trends and identify sustainable alternatives. Finally, it should be emphasised that commodification\textsuperscript{44} will render ecotourism unsustainable. Therefore, it is necessary to preserve the tranquillity, rural way of life and rural arts and crafts in the area so that they do not become victims of commercialisation.

**Conclusion**

Rabindranath Tagore was an ardent believer in rural regeneration through economic and social development of the masses. He advocated infusing self-confidence and self-esteem among them by means of self-reliance. Tagore’s dream of rural reconstruction through the well-being of the adivasis is today partially being fulfilled through ecotourism in Santiniketan. As mentioned earlier, the adivasis around Santiniketan are indirectly getting involved in activities related to ecotourism such as preparing Bengali cuisine, serving food, cleaning jobs and construction of resorts and in the process, are getting themselves empowered. The Amar Kutir Society for Rural Development is directly involved in the programme of rural reconstruction envisaged by Tagore. In the post-Independence period, Amar Kutir became a co-operative to rejuvenate and develop rural handicrafts, in accordance with the ideals of self-help and sustainable rural development advocated by Tagore. Villagers from Manoharpur, Dangapara, Ballavpur, Binuria, Rajabhuro and Sattore supply handicrafts including needle-works, batik and handloom to the showroom. These are sold to the tourists visiting Amar Kutir. The Amar Kutir campus encloses a leather craft unit where primarily local women are involved. This unit has been expanded recently. Under a Central government scheme, a craft development centre was opened in 1992. Tourists visiting Ballavpur flock to Amar Kutir for shopping, allured by the unique handicrafts of Santiniketan. Their purchases contribute to the income of the Amar Kutir Society, which, in turn, contributes to rural development. Thus, tourism in Amar Kutir provides the Society with income for rural reconstruction through revitalisation of rural handicrafts. Not only so, owing to the growth of ecotourism in the area, local handicrafts have come to be appreciated, thereby instilling a sense of pride and self-esteem among the village artisans, providing further impetus for the growth of household industries in Ballavpur.

\textsuperscript{43} Display boards used to direct tourists to a destination.

\textsuperscript{44} The cooking styles of particular regions.
In conclusion, it may be said that tourism in Santiniketan originated with heritage tourism centred on Tagore’s Visva Bharati. It was this heritage tourism that paved the way for the growth of ecotourism in and around Santiniketan in later years. The growth of ecotourism and heritage tourism in and around Santiniketan will immensely help in rural reconstruction in the area in the near future.

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Appendix

Our little river

Our little river flows in graceful loops
The summer heat dries her to a gentle flow,
Both cart and cattle travel across with ease
Her banks are high, her depths are shallow

The sand bed glitters, no trace of mud
The far bank shimmers with Kash flowers white,
where flocks of mynas chirp busily all day
And jackal calls arise at night

This bank shelters sleepy hamlets in the shade
Of ranks of ancient mango and palm tree
At bath times, children swim and play
Splashing water at each other in noisy glee

Each day as their bathing is done
They catch little fish in nets of cloth
Women take home their pots scrubbed clean
Their washing all done, they return to their chores

When the rains descend, the river swells fast
Rushing waters raise voice in happy uproar,
The muddy torrent spins in eddies and swirls
Both banks uniting in joyous clamour
Awake, to join in the festival of rain
A Spoken Silence: Rabindranath and the Ecology of Modern Consciousness

Aseem Shrivastava

Abstract

Rabindranath’s enormous corpus of varied work has been widely understood as that of a poet, a writer, a playwright, a musician and a man of letters. He has only rarely been interpreted as a philosopher, and almost never as an ecological philosopher. Preliminary research shows that he is perhaps India’s first modern ecological philosopher - at growing odds with modernity.
The essay argues that Tagore’s perspectives and insights are unique and his intellectual contribution in this area is indispensable to an understanding of the ecological and spiritual implications of technological, industrial modernity. There are few thinkers during the last hundred years anywhere more relevant when it comes to teaching us the significance of how we relate to the natural world (including, needless to add, our very own bodies) and what it tells us about ourselves and the way we have come to live.
The focus in this paper is on what we can learn about Tagore’s outlook on the natural world and our relationship to it from a set of letters he wrote to his niece during his years as a young man, looking after his family estate in East Bengal (now, Bangladesh).

‘Nature hides God, but not from everyone’ - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.¹

Today, when all the elements - air, water, earth and fire (if you think of climate change) - are being so rapidly, so severely poisoned, with a confidence and bravado only desperate vainglory can dare, it is more urgent than ever to draw on visions of human culture and ecology that might help us reflect anew on the conditions on which life has been given to humanity. It has become imperative to develop an ecological perspective on human society and economy instead of the other way around (wherein we normally view ‘the environment’ from the perspective of the economy, almost as an afterthought, as something cognitively and ontologically ‘outside’ of us, secondary to our desires). In this sense we need to see the world ‘right side up’ and refuse the customary cognitive inversion that a world obsessed with conquest, colonisation, and economic growth typically invites and seduces us to participate in. We are within nature, and nature is within us. This must be our starting point.²

In this task, Rabindranath Tagore’s varied contributions in multiple genres come to our aid. Viewing virtually everything from the perspective of the spirit, which involves, at once, seeing things sub specie natura, Rabindranath is able to see the culturally and ecologically destructive patterns of human life in modern industrial society. He expresses his concerns in a variety of registers. ‘The message of the forest’ is clear for Rabindranath. If we can learn to read it and look beyond ‘the reckless carnival of the present time’, human freedom may still be possible.³ Rabindranath’s enormous corpus of varied work has been widely understood as that of a poet, a writer, a playwright, a musician and a man of letters. He has only rarely been interpreted as a philosopher, and almost never as an ecological philosopher. Preliminary research shows that he is perhaps India’s first modern ecological philosopher – at growing odds with modernity. I will argue that Tagore’s perspectives and insights are unique and his intellectual contribution in this area is indispensable to an understanding of the ecological and spiritual implications of technological, industrial modernity. There are few thinkers during the last hundred years anywhere more relevant when it comes to teaching us the significance of how we relate to the natural world (including, needless to add, our very own bodies) and what it tells us about ourselves and the way we have come to live.

**The ecology of consciousness**

In this essay, what concerns me is not so much Rabindranath himself as what speaks through Rabindranath. For what speaks through Rabindranath – from time to time – is a potent life-force of nature which discovers its true voice when it is able to find itself in (natural)

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surroundings with which it resonates. Words are found to express the poetry of the natural world, even as they, at once, disclose the secrets of the human soul. It is as though the living intelligence of nature - *prakriti* - herself finds its protagonist in the form of Rabindranath’s pen, revealing on the same pages the beats and notes, hues and shades of her eternal lila (play). The ecology of consciousness that this essay refers to is manifest in what speaks through Rabindranath. The word ecology existed in Tagore’s time. However, it was not part of popular usage, outside the confines of the 19th century European discipline founded by German naturalist Ernst Haeckel, and certainly not so in Bengal, where Tagore grew up. As one goes through the vast oeuvre of his writings one finds that Tagore had ecology – in the sense of a balanced wholeness of perceptual grasp – in his instincts. There is no form of art, music, poetry, literature or some other medium in which Rabindranath expressed himself in which nature, and more significantly, our relationship to nature, does not play a central role.

For Rabindranath nature does not have to be ‘re-enchanted’. It was never disenchanted, to begin with. Nature is his ever reliable muse. Even his non-fiction or political writings make much more sense when one views things, with Tagore, *sub specie natura* and grasps the ecology of consciousness which speaks through the poet. Such an ecology of consciousness reveals itself not only in the patterns of thought emerging from a naturalist vision of life. It is also manifest in an understanding of the multiple drives of human consciousness when it works in a perverse direction. All this lends to Tagor-e’s words – especially his rich and evocative descriptions of his experience of nature – the appropriate perspective in which to absorb his vision and the ideas to which it gives birth.

Consciousness, for Rabindranath, is not merely human. There is an infinite metaphysical domain accessible to a particular human consciousness, when the latter is duly attuned to the divine. In the freedom of access to this lies spiritual liberation, in so far as Rabindranath is concerned. He is always interested in finding the infinite at the heart of the finite in the world in which humans find their three-dimensional existence. It is in the constant longing for a state of being which facilitates this awakening of consciousness, when the infinite reveals itself in its full glory, that man, as a spiritual being, finds his highest endeavour. And enlightenment consists of the abiding attainment of such a unified state of being and consciousness. This, for Rabindranath, is perfection itself. The presence of nature is essential, he finds, to the discovery of such a unity.

**Modern consciousness**

What about ‘modern consciousness’, another term used in the sub-title of this essay? According to Rabindranath, modern consciousness lives under the influence of a typically modern contagion, the virus of (a very worldly) power, and all that it plans, generates, oversees and reflects – or fails to reflect – upon. This consciousness is, thus, inhibited in its cognition at the very root. It longs for the infinite - which is what the endless proliferation of (marke-table) objects of *desire* in our consumerised age reveals. However, its unceasing tragedy lies in the fact that it can never actually find it this way, though it always seems to be, like the proverbial mirage, just over the horizon. Power can never find the infinite because it is unable to step out of its own way, which alone can disclose the infinite (to borrow a verb from Heidegger and Arendt). As Plato said, man himself stands in the way of the light which
There is a crisis in late modern consciousness which is rooted in the Promethean hubris of power, in the attempts of human desire to seek the infinite in directions and places from where the latter naturally shies away, almost as a child might close her eyes where the sun is too strong. This desperate vainglory, and the consciousness and global "zeitgeist" that goes with it, has precipitated in a very short span of time, perhaps less than a few generations, a planetary ecological crisis of cataclysmic proportions. This crisis has everything to do with the modern obsession with power, and thus, with warfare and the resultant barbarism. The crisis worsens every time there is a major world event – because every previous crisis has been handled symptomatically, without taking pause to reflect on the root historical and cultural causes of the disease of modern civilisation, which remain skillfully undiagnosed. Tagore has much to say to this 'modern consciousness', especially by way of contrast with the pristine potential consciousness of which it is a desperate parody. To excavate some of the key features of this pristine consciousness is the goal of the bulk of this essay.

Rabindranath’s notion of truth

Behind the myriad strivings in the life and work of Tagore is a single, unifying purpose: it is the quest for the self-realisation of humanity. This, and this alone, is the ultimate meaning of existence as far as Tagore is concerned. This would be his simple answer to Nietzsche’s anxiety ‘Why Man?’ Humanity exists in order to realise itself in truth.

This is expressed simply enough. But what does it mean in more elaborate terms? The way human life is normally lived - especially in digitally fragmented, twenty-first century modernity - lends to it an inescapable quality of separateness, alienation and estrangement, atomization and particulation. As human and other beings we are distinct from each other. This distinction is denoted by the appearance of each in a separate physical form with a distinct trajectory of life from birth until death. One might describe this ensemble of physical destinies as the discrete order of social reality.

However, appearances deceive, unless understood as reflections of the real. It is Rabindranath’s contention that this discrete order of seeming separateness hides a far greater truth which goes to make up the unity of all existence. At the ultimate level of a fully awakened consciousness, not only is all humanity One, existence itself is One. For Rabindranath the truth of the ultimate unity of being overrides all phenomenal appearances of disparate entities. If this great truth is normally hidden from our awareness, it is because the latter is normally subject to forces of the world which usually succeed in serving as a veil that hides the greater reality of the unifying order of consciousness.

How do the forces of the world obscure this truth? The world - and ever more in the 21st century – readily traps our minds in a tangle of shadows and illusions, desires and passions, half-truths and lies such that their mutual volley obscures the deeper spiritual truth of unity.

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We are unable to summon the psychic and psycho-somatic energy needed to apprehend the living unity of existence. Living in a human world like ours subjects us to a spell-binding phantasmic hypnosis whereby the contingent realities of time and space assume in our awareness the place of the greater truth of existence. Some vain ambition, greed, desire or lust saturates our awareness to hide the greatest of truths which alone renders life ultimately meaningful. As happens in a mesmerising theatre-performance, the shadow-play of everyday humanity – with its abiding habits and persuasive patterns – becomes all too real as the true depths recede into apparent oblivion, taking on the unbelievable guise of falsehood. In Tagore’s own words,

Man’s prime strength is in religion. Man’s prime humanity is spiritual. The physical and material in man is dependent on time and space, but not so the spiritual - which is eternal. The realisation that we are part of the eternal, that we are not just scattered little beings, is what makes for spirituality...it is not possible to cheat the eternal. The truth, the eternal, shall always be there. Lies are of man’s own making.5

What does truth mean to Tagore? He says ‘we have been taught by our sages that it is Truth that saves man from annihilation’.6 So what is truth? Rabindranath refers to it as “the Supreme Being” who permeates the world - ‘Satyam’.7 He writes that man, being a soulful creature,

follows his instinct for ultimate truth - for ultimate, not ulterior values. Our faith is in the infinite...8

The negation of ‘ulterior values’ is crucial to the stance Tagore adopts, for he makes a clear distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘fact’. ‘Evil instincts’, he suggests could be ‘facts’; but there is a truth deeper and greater than them. It is this truth which has ‘ultimate’ value and which ultimately interests him.9 This truth stands above him, above us, as the infinite to the finite. We can discover the infinite and be touched by it. We can be possessed by it, but we can never possess it. So the discovery of the infinite in the folds of the finite is what a true human life consists in. Along the lines of such a quest – inevitably involving an appropriate sacrifice - might lie true human freedom. All our true enjoyment is in the realisation of perfection. This can be reached not through augmentation, but through renunciation of the material for the sake of the ideal.10

Such a quest - beyond all ‘augmentation’, number and measure – can only redeem itself if it serves the greater truth: ‘the thing to do is to serve the supreme truth of goodness, of

7 Ibid, p. 147.
8 Ibid, p. 58.
9 Ibid, p. 58.
beauty and of love." The truth Rabindranath has in mind does not allow moral passivity. It generates an active conscience at once ethical and aesthetically sensitive. This conscience must find its moral energy to challenge the ugly facts of the human world from a source in the human soul which lies deeper than the origin of these facts. And this is why the distinction between facts and truth is all-important to Tagore. On a visit to China he reminds his hosts

Seek righteousness even though success be lost. I believe this not through the evidence of facts. Facts mislead and oppress you with mere numbers and quantity; but the world of personality surpasses facts on every side.\(^{12}\)

For Tagore, unlike for a lot of Western philosophy, questions of truth and value are inseparable from one another.\(^{13}\) The human personality is inescapably engaged, at once, in both truth and value. And while facts (with all the associated numbers and quantities) are contingent, truth is essential, and beyond all measure and number:

Truth comes from above, it is conscious of infinity and is creative. We have accepted and followed and venerated men who gave us such truth, and lost success. We need to hear this again and again, and never more than now in this modern world of slavery and cannibalism in decent guise: By the help of unrighteousness men do prosper, men do gain victories over their enemies, men do attain what they desire, but they perish at the root (Emphasis in original).\(^{14}\)

**The place of nature in self-realisation**

Humanity, Rabindranath feels, needs nature not merely for its material needs. We need nature as much for our self-realisation. Without such a realisation, humanity remains profoundly unfulfilled, since we are ultimately, Tagore points out, spiritual beings, who must either discover and live by such a truth, or be haunted by its absence. In late corporate modernity, this absence often wears the mask of the ‘private’. As Hannah Arendt, borrowing a page from the Ancients, has noted sharply, a life circumscribed by the private realm, as has rapidly come to become the global norm in our time, deprives humanity of its fullness of dignity and stature. Privatisation also implies privation. The increasing ‘privatisation’ of the human being steals from us some of the essentials of a fully human life - for humanity is fully free only when there is also a public life with authentic disclosure on all sides.\(^{15}\)

Torn and rendered remote from nature, living in highly processed man-made envi-
ronments (such as the global hardware - and software - of modernity effectively enforces to
today), humanity can never come into its own and be liberated from its illusions. Alienated
from the natural world, it becomes spiritually impoverished and will thus, in time, render
human cultures ecologically unsustainable. Rabindranath’s ecological ethics and aesthetics -
not to forget his epistemology, metaphysics and ontology - are founded upon such a realisation. In the Chinnapatrabali, on which most of this essay is based, Rabindranath, relying on
faculties of the heart, shares with readers vivid maps of his inner life. In poetic prose he
shares the thoughts and feelings that life by the river Padma inspires in him.

Tagore’s phenomenology of nature

To make nature - typically experienced by a utilitarian industrial society as mute, if not
also inanimate - come alive takes an awakening of the poetic faculty in us. This cognitive
faculty resides more in the heart than in the mind. Human consciousness must expand
and the mind must deepen, and ultimately surrender unconditionally, to find the cognitive
capacity to perceive the living universe that unfolds. In the profoundest sense imaginable,
this living uni-verse cannot reveal itself to human consciousness unless and until it is well-
understood that cognition is not only pre-analytic; it is also pre-discursive. The all-important
experience un-folds without words and thoughts. In fact, the absence of words and thoughts
is essential for an authentic experience of nature to transpire. In the Chinnapatrabali, we
find Tagore’s im-agination at full stretch, glorying in the natural splendour of a much vaster
Bengal (than of today), the great Padma bifurcating the lush countryside with its ample sway.
In a remarkable letter written on a winter day from his family estate at Shelaidaha in 1895,
Rabindranath clearly articulates his feeling for nature. He speaks of a “walking companion”
who accompa-nies him on his evening walks by the Padma, and who seems to understand the
inspiration for Tagore’s poetry:

I was explaining to him the particular way in which I look at the world, that I have a very
intense, intimate, real and living relationship with all of nature…He correctly in-tuited the exact
source of my intoxication with this world (Emphasis added).16

So this is the epistemic economy – circumventing the peril of intellectualisation -
with which Rabindranath apprehends the natural world. Sometimes there is a lament for
humanity’s blindness and insensitivity to the glory and grandeur of it all. He writes from
Shelaidaha on an asharh17 day in 1892:

All these colours, this light and shade, this silent splendour spread across the sky,
this peace and beauty that fills the entire space between earth and heaven - how much
preparation all of this takes!…Such a huge and amazing affair happening every day outside,
and we cannot find a proper response to it within us! We live at such a far remove from
the universe!…The world in which I find myself is full of very strange human beings - they are all
occupied night and day with rules and building walls; they carefully put up curtains just in case their

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17 A mid-summer season in the Hindu calendar.
eyes actually see anything - really the creatures of this world are very strange! (Emphasis added).\textsuperscript{18}

This is not merely a poetic expression of regret. By offering an elaborate account of his own aesthetic delight, Rabindranath appears to be driving at the manner in which human society routinely represses its feelings for nature to the point where they cease to exist in its consciousness. And insofar as it does this, he is quite clear that it suffers spiritual impoverishment. A landscape speaks to us only when we can find the sympathetic patience to ‘listen’ to it, and discern its ‘language’. This patience is possible only when time slows down and a certain minimum leisure is available. Rabindranath on his family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) finds just this. On a summer morning, he writes from Shelaidaha:

This \textit{boat} is like my old\textit{ dressing gown} – entering it one can enter a time of looseness and leisure - I think as I please, imagine what I please…\textsuperscript{19}

To bring his imagination into tune with the natural setting before him calls for reserves of patience, for, under the circumstances, haste would make much waste. There is a simple, yet difficult, lesson in happiness:

One can feel a certain motion in one’s imagination for quite a while. If you become greedy and hurry, you are deprived of that joy.\textsuperscript{20}

Having grown up in India’s largest metropolis of his day, Calcutta, Rabindranath is very much a restless city-bred creature. However, every visit to rural Bengal – and they are long stays when we compare it to more recent times – bring for Rabindranath the languor to immerse himself in the beauty of the world by the Padma. He is able to reflect upon and unload his metropolitan baggage and meet the rural landscape with the freedom of a poetic heart:

Calcutta is very polite, very heavy, like a \textit{government office}. Every day of one’s life seems to emerge in the same shape, with the same stamp, freshly cut, one after another in the mint - dead, lifeless days, but very civilised, and all of the same weight. Here I am an outsider and every day here is my own day - it has no relation with the wound-up machine of everyday routine (Author’s emphasis).\textsuperscript{21}

Outside, and yet, ever more inside. It is clear that it is not as easy to imagine, while living one’s daily life in the city, the rich nature and gentle pace of life in the countryside – even in those days – as one might assume.

Inner, mental changes are essential. Rabindranath has to free himself from the grip of words which ‘make the mind quite frantic’ producing ‘just the opposite effect of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Letters from a Young Poet} 1887-1895, Letter 55, pp. 131 - 132.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Letters from a Young Poet} 1887-1895, Letter 93, p. 184.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid, Letter 101, p. 195.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid, Letter 114, pp. 216 - 217.
\end{itemize}
meditation’. The poet-philosopher is able to dwell in the experience to a degree which permits him to feel an intimate kinship with his surroundings, so much so that by reflecting on them he is able to enter into his own ‘inner mystery’. It inspires him to contemplate the wonder of his own existence and its resonance with the natural world outside:

The deep, ancient relationship we have with this earth, this sea – unless we sit down alone in nature, face-to-face with it, how do we ever understand it or feel it within our hearts? When there was no soil on this earth and the oceans were completely alone, my restless heart of today would have rocked silently upon the waves of that desolate sea...Unless one sits down alone under a free sky or on the shore of a vast ocean, one cannot experience one's own hidden inner mystery properly... (Emphasis added).

In the presence of the river and the sky, the layers of his self reveal themselves to him like petals opening out to the morning sun. It is in this precise sense that the beneficent presence of nature is necessary, according to Rabindranath, for any authentic awareness of selfhood.

His realisation is that in our depths we are nature, if we can attune ourselves within to the right quality of consciousness. In many passages Tagore’s identification with the natural world is quite complete and trans-temporal. Writing from Shelaidaha in August 1892, he gazes at the Padma and recalls a time when ‘he’ was one with the world:

....the sunlight here makes those childhood memories of gazing at pictures come alive... it’s like a pulsating attachment with this vast earth – at a time when I was one with this world, when the greengrass rose on top of me, the sarat sunlight fell over me...I want to properly express the heartfelt affection and kinship I feel towards this world, but perhaps most people won’t understand it correctly - they may think it very weird. That’s why I don’t feel like trying (Emphasis added).

In the passage above, we get a glimpse of Rabindranath’s ‘somatic unconscious’. Matter and psyche become one in a single moment of experiential fullness.

The poet feels loved by the earth. A certain ease and comfort in nature follow. He is happily united with her. There is never a thought of separation and so, the fear that often arises from the anxiety brought on by impending separation, perhaps the birthplace in human consciousness of the impulse to dominate and control nature, is altogether absent. When description is poetic and precise, it has the power to make analysis redundant. Such is the

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24 Ibid, Letter 70, p. 149 - 150.
25 The notion of the ‘somatic unconscious’ is used here much like that of the subtle body (sukshma shareer - as against sthul shareer - gross body) in Yoga. In Western psychology, Carl Jung has used the expression, while reflecting on the thought of Nietzsche [Carl Jung, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 441.]
evocative capacity of Rabindranath’s descriptions. Nature intoxicates him. He gives way to the flood-tide of inspiration, voicing sentiments which do not merely reveal the living nature around him but, as much, the depths of the hidden heart and soul of the consciousness that experiences her. There is, on many an occasion a remarkable unity between the two, so much so that it often seems as though nature herself is making the poet paint her with words from human language. The experience in question is not merely aesthetic. It is also mystical and religious. Nature, for Rabindranath, is decidedly not an object, or even an infinitely large collection of objects, as it is for most of modern thought both East and West, including for most phenomenologists. For him, once and always, nature is a profoundly living intimate experience. He never looks at it as a scientific, or indeed any, observer might look at it - from the outside, as though that was even possible. There is barely any ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ when he is living or describing the experience. So often, nature is experienced as profoundly personified such as in this description of the Padma and its banks:

land and water approach each other slowly like two shy lovers – their timidity has almost overflowed, they are almost in an embrace now.

As a further instance along the same lines, consider this animated description of the swollen Padma one shraban morning; he paints a rich and vivid canvas whose poetry communicates an intuitive grasp of the balance of forces in nature, in addition to paying tribute to the awe-some power concealed in them.

a freshly bathed spiritual figure of light seemed to be rising from the mysterious depths of the water to stand in quiet beauty, and on the shore, black clouds that looked like a lion with waving manes were sitting quietly, frowning, paws stretched out over the rice fields, as if conceding victory to the beautiful celestial power, but not yet tamed – sitting in one corner of the horizon with all its anger and pride coiled up.

It reminds one of Nietzsche’s evocations ‘if our senses were fine enough, we would experience the slumbering cliff as a dancing chaos’. The intimacy with which Rabindranath experiences the natural and the cosmic worlds sometimes reveals to the poet the silent solitude of his own mind, even as he anticipates a familiar kinship with the evening:

today every liquid consonant of the gurgling river seems to be showering the softest affection on every part of my body - my mind today is very solitary and completely silent, and within me, a secret silence reigns stilly…I know that when in the evening I pull up the easy chair to the roof of the boat to sit there alone, that evening star of mine in my sky will appear before me like a member of my family! This evening of mine

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26 For instance, Husserl himself, or even Heidegger in most places.
27 Rabindranath Tagore, Letters from a Young Poet 1887-1895, Letter 102, p. 197.
28 The season of the Hindu calendar roughly coterminous with August.
29 Rabindranath Tagore, Letters from a Young Poet 1887-1895, Letter 139, p. 256.
on the Padma is a very old acquaintance…\textsuperscript{31}

Here, Rabindranath gives us a glimpse of his inner sanctuary which also reveals importantly – the sense in which nature is \textit{essential} to the deepest layers of human self-discovery. There is a further problem, he realises. It has to do with the limits of language in communicating this deepest of all self-discoveries.

We have two lives – one is in the world of men, and the other in the world of thought. Many pages of the life story of that world of thought have I written upon the sky above the Padma. I can see that writing whenever I come here, and whenever I can be alone. When I come here I understand I have not been able to accomplish anything in my poems. I have not been able to express what I felt. That is because language does not belong to me alone - it belongs to everybody, but what I experience with my entire temperament isn’t experienced by everybody, so their language therefore cannot express my experience with any clarity (Emphasis added).\textsuperscript{32}

This is almost a reversal of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s realisation: ‘the limits of my language are the limits of my world’.\textsuperscript{33} Tagore might respond to his European admirer thus: ‘my most intimate world begins \textit{precisely} where my language ends.’\textsuperscript{34}

As we know, we usually fail to realise how much our words use us, even as we vainly imagine we determine their purpose according to our own chosen requirements. Words have a (sometimes ghostly) life of their own. As Wittgenstein knew better than anyone else, language is always social property. There is no such thing as a private language. Speech already presumes the existence of at least one other person. This is why one sometimes feels that to speak to oneself in words is a little mad. Echoes of the same experience of coming upon the incommunicable within himself appear in yet other letters of Rabindranath. In one of them, again written from Shelaidaha in the month of \textit{shraban}, he shares an intimacy to reveal another instance of his experience of the larger mystery of life:

The sorts of feelings that arise in my mind when I am in the midst of nature seem to be beyond my own powers, my own character. That’s why I feel that I will never be able to explain it to anybody or make them believe it. All of my feelings have that ingredient of something that is more than me…\textsuperscript{35}

Does one get to know oneself better in the company of nature? Or does one get better acquainted with the awesome depth of one’s own ignorance – of oneself no less than of the natural world around us! – in her midst? Rabindranath looks at himself askance. One’s

\textsuperscript{31} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Letters from a Young Poet 1887-1895}, Letter 140, p. 257.
\textsuperscript{32} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Letters from a Young Poet 1887-1895}, Letter 140, p. 258.
\textsuperscript{34} Tagore was one of the few poets or writers Wittgenstein was fond of reading. See Ray Monk, \textit{The Duty of Genius} (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).
\textsuperscript{35} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Letters from a Young Poet 1887-1895}, Letter 144, p. 263.
One feels very apprehensive when one thinks about the boundless mystery that is within one’s self...After a lot of thought I have come to the conclusion that I don’t know myself at all. I’m like a living piano, with lots of wires and mechanical bits inside me in the dark; I never know who comes and plays it, and it is difficult to completely comprehend why as well, I can only know what is playing – whether it’s happiness or sorrow, soft note or sharp, in rhythm or not - just that much. And I know how far up or down my octave will extend. No, do I know even that much? I’m not even sure if I am a sympathetic grand piano or a cottage piano (Author’s emphasis).36

When we encounter the natural world face to face, our ignorance is no less. One afternoon in Bolpur, Rabindranath wonders at bird-calls and what they could possibly mean:

The cuckoo has outdone itself – nobody has yet been able to fathom why it calls so continuously – obviously it’s not just for our pleasure....37

Immanuel Kant would nod that we can never truly know ‘the thing-in-itself’.38 There are occasions when Rabindranath puzzles over our inability to know “everything”, or our inability to express ‘everything that’s on our minds’:

Sitting here alone, I cannot begin to express the boundless peace and beauty I see within all of this. There is one lot that becomes restless thinking, ‘Why can’t I know everything about the world?’ and there is another lot that is frustrated wondering ‘Why can’t we say everything that’s on our minds?’– in between what the world has to say stays within the world and the inner thought stays within...39

Overall, the poet is at peace with his sense of wonder. Speaking of our epistemic limits, they become yet more formidable when it comes to knowing other human beings - as much a part of nature, and even more like icebergs sometimes! A necessary leap of imagination is involved in coming to know even those closest to us. The full recognition of other human beings requires us to awaken to a sympathetic and imaginative discernment of their life (most of it inevitably invisible) - understanding their language, reading their faces, and, if possible, feeling what transpires in their hearts, the very content of what is normally understood by empathy or compassion. A precise and ethical imagination is required to see the full humanity of another. Consider what Rabindranath has to say on the matter:

39 Rabindranath Tagore, Letters from a Young Poet 1887-1895, Letter 22, pp. 82 - 83.
All those whom we know in the world we know like a dotted line; that is, there are gaps in the middle which we need to fill in as best we can. Even those we feel we know best have to be made complete by our own imaginative powers...

In light of passages that have been quoted earlier, it can’t be said, however, that for Rabindranath the imagined other is the real other, any more than the imagined self is the real self. The distinction between the real and the imagined is itself a real, not an imaginary one. It is thus all-important and sets Tagore apart from many contemporary strands of thought as per which all is imaginary. Perhaps a true test of one’s knowledge of the other is when one knows what is real – and what is imagined – for the other person. If it broadly concurs with that person’s own estimate of what is real and what is imagined, it could be said that one ‘knows’ the person. There is, of course, another dimension to Rabindranath Tagore’s understanding of these matters. His faith in the ultimate unity of existence suggests that he might be more comfortable viewing ‘the other’ as ‘another’.

Self-knowledge and the natural world

This brings us to the question of the self. Nature is not merely a lively muse for Rabindranath’s poetic imagination. It takes him well beyond the limits of his customary self, into the fathomless universe of the stranger within. He realises frequently that it takes the impressive surrounding presence of nature for a man to recognise himself:

This enormous earth changes its seasons every couple of months - then how do small men like us keep up an equitable display of politeness all twelve? The huge problem for man is that he goes against nature when he has to function according to the laws of society in exactly the same way all three hundred and sixty-five days of the year - ac-tually actually he has to shyly and fearfully hide the eternally new, eternally mysterious core that is within him and make himself appear exactly like a mechanical device driven by the daily operations of routine. That’s why men go wrong from time to time; become rebellious; that’s why men want to take shelter in literature in order to truly understand themselves; that’s why the workplace is a prison and the imagination a place of freedom (Emphasis added).

Liberated from his social limits, Rabindranath experiences – as so often before! – something much more than himself, the vastness – virtual limitlessness – of consciousness. Thus, the surrounding presence of nature is essential, according to Rabindranath, for us, as human beings, to ‘know’, to realise the limits of one’s knowledge, to experience the strangeness of everything, and wonder at ourselves. Only thus is a life of true significance possible. It is nature which inspires the ‘song, art, beauty’ in the absence of which ‘the soul is denied nourishment and remains neglected and starved’ and it becomes really difficult to bear our sorrows”. We are normally unconscious of this great need, and often realise it only once it is attended to:

People cannot even begin to believe that things like these are absolutely essential for anybody. I too slowly begin to forget that almost none of the roots that feed myself are getting any nutrition. In the end, when suddenly one day some little source of nourishment becomes available, and I feel the intensity of my eager heart, I remember that all these days I was starving, and that this is an essential requirement for my temperament to continue to live (Emphasis added).  

The space of solitude in the presence of nature is a necessary condiment in the food for Rabindranath’s soul. In a moment of frustration with unwanted company he writes:

As such by nature I’m uncivilised...Unless there’s a lot of empty space all around, I cannot completely unpack my mind, spread out my hands and feet, and settle down...  

Tagore was as fond of illuminating analogies as Wittgenstein (especially in his later writings), frequently coming up with them to communicate an insight. A meditation on the Padma in spate makes him realise something profoundly simple about the nature of human consciousness. It is his way, one might say, of grasping the nature of what philosophers call ‘the mind-body problem’. This is what he writes:

In the movement of humans, animals or plants, there is some movement and some rest, movement in some parts and rest in others. But the river moves from top to bottom – that’s why it’s possible to compare it to the movement of our minds, our consciousness. Our bodies move partially – the legs move the body – but our minds habitually move in their entirety.

The implication is that while bodies are divisible, minds are not, a conclusion that chimes – surprisingly – with Descartes’ realisation in Meditations. As the great physicist Erwin Schrödinger too noted astutely in his Oxford lectures in 1944, the number of minds in the Universe is just one.

The fatally crippled self

In his insistence that the surrounding presence of the natural world is essential to a fully conscious human life, Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps unique among modern thinkers. This affirmation of his found expression not merely in thousands of pages of his writings and his musical compositions. They find their clearest physical expression in the rural location and ambience of Santiniketan, the educational institution founded by the poet. Without daily

46 Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life? Mind and Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), Chapter VII.
instruction from nature, human education is crippled: this is the long-enduring message of Santiniketan, despite the incursions of the urban mind in its daily working. Today, all humanity is being invited to live a life that only the ‘privileged’ have been living hitherto, an antiseptic life in highly processed man-made environments, regulated by the global hardware and software of modernity. Is the divorce from nature sustainable? A time comes when a civilisation becomes an everyday insult to nature. It flirts casually with the elements themselves. When this time arrives, it is time to reopen Kalidasa and discarded volumes of epic poetry, for the elements themselves act in vengeful concert against such humiliation hurled by one of ‘nature’s grandchildren’. For global technological modernity that time has been here for a discernible long while, Rabindranath being one of the first harbingers of the catastrophe that awaits it. He is among the first to recognise that the consciousness of ecology – on which rests the future of the species – depends on the ecology of consciousness. To bring Tagore’s pantheistic philosophy of immanence into conversation with the imperilled twenty-first century, and especially with its pressing ecological concerns, has become very urgent.

References:


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Aseem Shrivastava

Aseem Shrivastava is a Delhi-based writer and ecological thinker. He holds a Phd in Economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has taught at universities in India and the US. He also taught philosophy at Nordic College, Norway (2001-05). Since 2005, he has been working independently, researching, writing and lecturing nationally and internationally on issues associated with globalization and its multiple ecological and other impacts. He is the author (with Ashish Kothari) of the books Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India (Penguin Viking, New Delhi, 2012), and Prithvi Manthan (Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2016) which offer critiques of, and alternatives to, India’s development strategy since 1947. He is presently at work on two projects. The first is a book on the ecological thought of Rabindranath Tagore, the other an aphoristic, philosophical examination of power and greed.
Section II:
Book Review

Gitanjali & Beyond
Edited by Bashaby Fraser & Christine Kupfer
BOOK REVIEW: TO WHOM I RETURN EACH DAY

POEMS BY JAYDEEP SARANGI
Allahabad: Cyberwit.net, 2017

Indian poetry in English has an extensive and rich tradition dating back to pre-Partition days. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio being the first poet in this lineage, Indian poetry in English has travelled far and, that too, quite successfully. It is interesting that Bengal being the cultural and intellectual hub of the country possesses an illustrious list of poets who made significant contributions in this genre of writing.

Beginning with Derozio there are poets like Kashiprasad Ghosh, Rajnarain Dutt, Soshi Chunder Dutt, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo who have left considerable impressions in this field of writing. Comparatively recent names include P. Lal, Sudeep Sen and Anuradha Bhattacharya. Contemporary poets with Bengali roots include diasporic writers like Basabi Frazer, Debjani Chatterjee, Sidhhartha Bose apart from poets like Sanjukta DasGupta and Jaydeep Sarangi who hail from Kolkata and have left indelible marks in Indian poetry in English.

These poets employ English to suit their needs keeping the Indian context in mind. ‘English is no longer the language of colonial rulers, it is a language of modern India in which words and expressions have recognised national rather than imported significances, alluding to local realities, tradition and ways of feeling. Such Indianisation has been proceeding for several generations’ (King).

Jaydeep Sarangi’s collection of poems To Whom I Return Each Day is a perfect example of this spirit of Indianisation of English language. The references and allusions to Indian epics and myths, for instance, “Yudhisthir” in ‘the Other Side of Silence’ or ‘Hanuman’ in ‘I Drink Your Face of Beauty, Kangchenjunga’ keep the poems linked with Indian culture.

Sarangi is versatile and deals with various themes in his poems, the most significant being his concept of the role of a poet. In several of his poems he emphasises that the poet’s ‘words are milestones for generations’ (“Translator of Hope”) and poets are the harbingers of peace in society.
Poets are humanists  
Who break walls  
......................
......................
They will pay you back  
In words, words and volumes of words  
For peace of the land and mind (‘The Trusted Army’)  
Time and again the poems bear witness to Sarangi’s focus on the importance of history and memory in shaping human psyche:  
My home is my lost home, I return  
To my home, each night (‘The Shrine of my Past’)  

This ‘return’, as the title of the poetic compilation suggests, is a return to history, a return to the fond memories on the shores of Dulung and a return to all the inspirations from different spheres of life who largely contributed in shaping the poet’s personality. He returns to them ‘after the busy hours of the day’ (‘Lord of Lords’)  

Being a post-colonial writer Sarangi searches for his identity through his poems: “I’m black, brown, white and yellow” (‘There was Light’) and invokes the poets across shores to be his inspiration:  

Will you be my body,  
A full stop? Even a dash?  
Can I work through you  
My dear poets? (‘I’m that Semicolon’)  

The poet’s range of images and rhetorical usage is commendable. There are several images drawn from nature as ‘rain’, ‘water’, ‘bird’ and ‘river’ while unconventional metaphors as the pen vomiting ‘indigestion of… mind’ (‘The Red Diary’) engages the attention of readers.  

Sarangi’s poems are infused with a spirit of indomitable optimism, a spirit that is a dire need in today’s world of cynicism and distrust. He dreams of a world full of peace and love, a society blessed with cultural amalgamation without any differences and prejudices:  

My friendship with other camp  
Keeps up hope for survival (‘Translator of Hope’)  

His choice of diction, diversity of images, profundity of thought and the philosophy of love and cultural harmony create a poetic world which is pure and uncorrupted,
a world that provides a beacon in the midst of the frets and worries of this world.

Reference:

Section III: Poetry and Art

Gitanjali & Beyond
Edited by Bashabi Fraser & Christine Kupfer
The Island

It is All Grass, all of it -
Nosing green, springing to lank, to waste,
bending to blast, blown buffeted,
nosing green again; last first, first last.

When his horse died Angus wove a harness
of stout grass and pulled the cart himself
to the peat bog. Laden, he it hauled it back
across the slack and sucking land.

‘duine mor såmhach,-they called him.
Big, quiet man.

It is All Wind, all of it -
ripping thatch
from roofs; earth from grass-roots;
scattering stacks
plucking fence-wire to a jangled
bent disharmony.
slicing the sky to tattered rag above
Corghadal, Hecla and Ben More.

He twisted muirineach to ropes
tugged from The Uist sands
spoke to it in its ancient tongue,
wove nets to tame wind’s snatch;
tether the thatch to earth, to stonework;
hung rocks to hold it down
harness his life to this sweet place.

It is All Sea, all of it -
grinding, shell and stone
her turquoise edge frilled
with their silver powdered bone
miles of it, arcing the shore-line
returning, always returning.
The Burning

As spiders haul their thread from stem
to stem to weave the light, what do they care
if all that skilful labour's lost when
wind unravels it – unpicking all their
careful artistry? As birds weave leaf
and stalk into their nests, abandoning
them to decay when fledglings leave -
only to build them back again in spring,
so Angus haunts the woodland hour on hour
labouring under branches, quiet, unseen
pulls buttercup, vetch, clovers - winding flowers
like wild embroidery into cloths of green -
makes mufflers; tailored jackets, sprouting hats
garments for a giant or a king
to stalk the hills and sport the finery that
he has wrought from his imaginings,
and then forgets; so all this fine attire
is left to rot and compost in the rain.
He watches gardeners rake them on a pyre
of autumn leaves: then crafts them all again
because he must; watches their ashes wind
up towers of smoke, soaring like elegies
to distant landscapes of the mind, making
of these most precious gifts, a sacrifice.
The Journey

‘f I weave a suit
I can go home in it
gentleman-smart on my arrival
with bunnet and belt and pointie hankie.
I will mak me a mufller and vest
to warm me with kemp
teased from the snagging
fence-wire that hems me,
pu rashes to mak me a coatie
against the big winds
that wait on the quay
at Lochboisdale to greet me.
Thigh-high must I weave the waders.
With no fare in my pocket
I must walk the long sea
by myself.
No trawler will take me,
their arts will transport me.
with harness of beech leaf
to tether my horse to the peat cart,
a peat creel stitched over
with violets and clover
to carry the peat to the hearth
of my homestead
which calls me, which calls me…

Only the grass made sense
and understood his conversation

‘pluck me and mak me
net me and plait me
prepare for your journey.
you are the seed, the stalk,
the root and the stone
of the Island that made me’.
The Finding

The bushes they look under hide
the dress of dreams;
playgrounds for worm and snail
the medication for a troubled mind
a special need
the iconography of loss
the therapy of hands,
a daily task
The Ice-Man’s cloak
the husk and seed
of myth and fairy tale
of ancient craft
learned by the finger-tips
the wardrobe
of a travelling man
majestic, monumental, ordinary
wings for a homing heart
left under roofs of beech
and elderberry,
or laid on banks of moss
like votive offerings –
an archaeology
of grass and flowers
a treasure trove trawled
from the collective memory.
An act of love. A legacy.
The Coda

If I should burn this poem
with the leaves
bury it delete it hide it
under the trees
if ash of it
flies in the moon’s face
if nobody finds it,
if it becomes the grass,
is sucked into ether
if words like the leaves
fall from the live tree
and scatter
where go the thoughts
that it fashioned
the heart-tools the head-tools
the fire at its centre?
The ink on the page?
The word on the paper?

It is All Grass,
Nosing green, springing to lank, to waste,
bending to blast, blown buffeted,
nosing green again; last first, first last…

From A’fighe le feur – Weaver of Grass
i.m. Angus MacPhee, by Chrys Salt.

Angus MacPhee (1916–1997) was a Scottish artist who spent his early years following his father’s work as a hired ploughman in the Scottish Lowlands. His family spoke nothing but English. At the age of eight, around the time of his mother’s early death, he and his three sisters moved with their father to the family croft to South Uist, in the Outer Hebrides where nothing but Gaelic was spoken. When World War 2 was declared Angus was mobilised to The Faroes with The Lovat Scouts but he became mentally ill and unfit for service. On a brief return to Uist, he grew increasingly disturbed. He was diagnosed with simple schizophrenia and hospitalised at Craig Dunain, a Psychiatric Hospital near Inverness where he remained for 50 years. Angus made his art by secretly weaving wonderful garments of grass, sheep’s wool, wild flowers and leaves in the hospital grounds. For 50 years he spoke very little, choosing to answer questions rarely and monosyllabically. Art Therapist Joyce Laing discovered Angus and his work in 1977, subsequently collecting as much as she could. It was exhibited to great acclaim across Scotland and elsewhere. In his early eighties and going blind Angus returned to his beloved Uist where he died in residential care close to his family and the croft.
Chrys Salt

Chrys is a trained performer and broadcaster as well as widely published and anthologized poet. She has performed at festivals across the UK in Europe, the USA, Canada, Finland and India and won numerous awards including a National Media Award (CRS). A New Writing Bursary (English Arts Council) Work Development Grant (Scottish Arts Council), a Fringe First from The Edinburgh Festival, has published seven books for actors (Pub: Methuen Drama) and nine poetry collections. In 2012 The Burning was selected as one of the 20 Best Scottish Poems. In 2014 her pamphlet Weaver of Grass was shortlisted for the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award, she received Creative Scotland Bursary to finish her penultimate collection Dancing on a Rock (Pub: IDP).

Her most recent collection, The Punkawallah’s Rope, rooted in her visit to India in February 2015 to appear at The Kolkata Literary Festival with transnational poet Professor Bashabi Fraser, was published by IDP in September 2017. She was in receipt of Open Lottery Funding to research material for her next collection about the Gold Rush and visited The Yukon last year for this purpose. Work for this is now in progress. In 2014 she was awarded an MBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List for Services to The Arts and is listed in Who’s Who.
Lesley May Miller is an artist and poet. She is a member of ‘Words on Canvas’, a group of writers attached to the National Gallery of Scotland. She combines her words and visual art in ArtistBooks, sculpture and in soundscapes. Her poetry is published in anthologies and magazines. She created a sculpture garden in the Scottish Borders. She now draws inspiration from living by the coast in East Lothian.
Sue Whitmore
The Dark Hedges: An avenue of very old beeches in Co. Antrim in Northern Ireland (my original drawings turned into etchings).
The whales

Like voyeurs,
we watch the Pacific’s heaving mass
for rolling flanks to breach its crushed grey satin.

They reward our patience with distant glimpses
of languid synchronised swells
and great fan tails
like geishas.

On our way back
I’m starting to feel queasy,
the waves are getting up,
we’re chilled by breaking spray.
Under an afternoon moon,
lilac through some quirk of the mist
the whales come close,
arching up to our inverted world
to people watch

almost too late for us
and for them.
The Jamaican house is set on the hillside in the Blue Mountains.
The hurdy gurdy

Skin wrinkles softly -
old balloon losing air.
There's no elixir in vitamins and super-foods.

Just one more Spring after another
each Easter Summer Christmas
turns the hurdy-gurdy year
whose monkey dances,
remembering in its dreams
a rainforest Eden
it has never known

and coughing in the car fumes
it tries to blow the entire works of Mozart
on its tin whistle.

In the breeze down the street
a lottery ticket worth half a million
sticks to the shoe
of the Romanian beggar eating a McDonalds.
Even the monkey is happier.

As the Thames shrinks back towards the sea
with the tide,
its muddy banks expose the clues to a city;
and the detectives of the past,
rummaging with curiosity,
play with little bits of history -
the little bits that history threw in the river.

We, of course, are leaving
our children's children's children plastic -
lots of it.

The tourist sits, hamburger in hand,
disconsolately far from home.
So much to learn
about our little blue glass marble in space,
she's learning to understand her huge discomfort
as the spotlight shines
on difference.

Some dreadful man
will shortly seize the marble for his game -
a man with a gun.
Justice grows thin,
the arm holding the scales grows tired -
soon she may have to drop it.
But with his gun
he insists she holds high
the arm with the sword.

The tourist sits on the fence -
on one side tigers
on the other unknown terrors
leaping at the wire.
She throws her sandwich into the pit.
where, like ravening beasts,
the audience of the Globe bay for more,
and gets on with playing her part
in her virtual reality,
her theatre
of the absurdly commonplace.
View from Moorish Castle
Path to Stella
Borgue beeches
Sue Whitmore

Artist and poet Sue Whitmore studied at art college in London and went on to read Philosophy at University College London and has had many exhibitions in Britain and abroad. She currently Chairs Greenwich Printmakers and convenes a London Stanza of the Poetry Society. In 2017 she launched a two volume collection of poems, drawings and prints, ‘Blood, Fish & Bone I & II’.

Her work is in the English landscape tradition with a particular love of trees, but she frequently works from the figure as well as the imagination. Her books continue a lifelong pairing of word and image.
Liz Niven
Elegy for the Lost Words from the Oxford Junior Dictionary

The free bird cries,'my darling sing the songs of the woodlands.

First they came for almond, blackberry, crocus.
Sing the songs of the woodlands.

Soon they came for catkin, cauliflower, chestnut.
The songs of the woodlands.

Then they came for wren, adder, kingfisher.
Of the woodlands.

Once they came for acorn, buttercup, conker.
Sing my darlings.

Next they may come for the Earth.
My darling sing the songs of the woodlands.

Ref the Tame Bird was in a Cage by Rabindranath Tagore
Liz is an award-winning Scottish poet. Collections include: Stravaigin, Burning Whins, The Shard Box (Luath Press, Edinburgh). Public art collaborations include text in stone and wood and she has participated in poetry Festivals across the world. Former teacher and Cultural Co-ordinator, she has facilitated poetry sessions to Scottish Poetry Library, London Poetry Society, Galleries and Museums. She has written a wide range of Scots education resources and is the author of Scots Dossier for European Bureau of Minority Languages. Awards include McCash poetry prize, Saltire/TESS and she is an Honorary Fellow of the Association of Scottish Literary Studies.
Prof (Dr) Tapati Gupta
SPRING/ECSTASY
PEACE/REPOSE
ASPIRATIONS/STRUGGLE FOR FULFILMENT
ELATION/YOUTH/ADVENTURE
Prof (Dr) Tapati Gupta

She is a Former Professor and HOD, Department of English, Calcutta University and has been visiting professor in Universities of Leeds, Vienna and Oslo. She has lectured on the art of Rabindranath Tagore in the Nehru Centre, London, SCoTS, Edinburgh, as well as Delhi, Jadavpur and Calcutta universities as well as colleges in Calcutta. Her areas of specialization include Shakespeare, Intercultural drama, Theatre Studies, Visual Arts, Translation. She has participated in many national and international conferences in India and abroad and published articles on Tagore’s art, art, theatre and literature and edited books on translation, literature and theatre. For several years she also did art criticism for Frontier (a weekly journal), The Business Standard (a daily newspaper) and Art & Deal (Monthly art journal published from Delhi)

The following are mood paintings based on apprehension of nature’s moods. Just as each morning as it dawns conveys a special message (based on personal sensibility, of course) so too the seasons have their moods. in fact even nature has its moods and these may correspond with our moods. Or our reading of nature’s moods may get into our creative work.

She says ‘I am unable to analyse my own paintings and I think much depends on the interpretation of the viewer. But there is of course an objective basis of the colours which correspond with the colours of nature. But in the ultimate analysis, nowadays I never aim at mimesis or naturalism. Nor narrativistic. But I believe in communicating emotion. I like to apply colour in the expressionist way. I am fascinated by movement which I try to capture through the brush strokes and speedy execution. These are all oil paintings. I am not comfortable with water colour.’
Ross Donlon
**Origin of the species – dawn chorus**

you wake
to massed voices rippling
a curtain drawn back
on a shared past
and dreams
you haul to the surface
through a membrane of memory

sky callers
early talkers
the first to wake
first to shrill at light
and us kindred
who also crawled out
deciding whether to walk or fly

they thrill each morning
as sun breaks
cons into sound
and you wonder
for a moment
what you are
My Ship

*(After the composition of the same name by Kurt Weill)*

Dawn trims the horizon near a sheltered cove & jetty where my ship is berthed; freshening sails beat like a drum as I board my ship.

Silver chevrons speed from the prow as the sun strikes; white triangles haul in sky; waves splash to the sound of two words: my ship, my ship.

A young mariner morning, flushed with excitement, tips the mast red; clambers aboard; spins streamers of gold spray in lines behind my ship.

Crests cut in a pattern of wings exhale the sea; it breathes while shape-shifter waves groom miles into time beneath my ship.

Ripples shimmer sounds into sea-wrought poems and songs which fill the sky, drive the furrowing spine of my ship.

Clouds stream west, drain time in filigrees of scattered days; cirrus fingers set asky-compass of time, north for my ship.

Evenings close the sun’s golden door with a click. Sea music clinks from the ruffled spire of my ship.

The moon’s frail skin, white leather stretching to break, spreads a pattern of lace on the passing ghost of my ship.

Glimmers of settlement fall away, dissolving like memory; a lone lighthouse sweeps doubt away from my ship.

How life’s voyage, long or short, catches & rolls like the sea. Cadences from a sweeping seabird rise then fall by my ship.

Islands rise through each night like passing thoughts, considered, discarded; the firmament charts a parallel path to my ship.

Calm on the surface, the unconscious thrives in the depths; six senses roam in the dark below the Plimsoll line of my ship.

Teeming kaleidoscopes of stars fracture the Milky Way; in the hull, the ballast of history moves inside my ship.
Beyond north, cold holds fast to ropes, wheel & sails;
frost mirrors reflect the icy silhouette of my ship.

At the peak of the world, the sun skips earth like a fish.
Above, another ocean waits, a sky-bound berth for my ship.

Some vessels pull against the incoming tide to eternity,
this seaman flies to destiny in the jagged kite of his ship.
Continental Drift

The children leave like continents
leaving Gondwana, the first continent.

The old world splits like an atom,
becomes Incognita, the unknown continent.

Climate changes. Oceans rise, drowning
memories of an aging continent.

Evolution turns another way. Land
bridges dissolve, marooning a continent.

Now where is landfall, with so much land fallen?
Will the horizon ever return to this continent?

Where they were the coast is not clear.
I tell the history of a dying continent.
**Winter Poem**

Air still as ice  
As many leaves on the ground  
As in trees, leeching  
Scarlet-Autumn to ochre-white.  
When they die and drop,  
Gravity still demands a last, fluttering waltz,  
So they spiral down,  
The smallest of birds.

Two eastern rosellas playmate  
Scarlet-blue on skeletal branches,  
An aberration in the dark  
An ‘aboration’, I think darkly  
And transform a line of trees  
Into grieving angels.

Crow commands a neighbour’s chimney,  
Legs braced, wings raised, dressed to kill,  
The Bird in Black  
Chanting spells fit for apocalypse.

If this poem were a gothic tale  
That family would be in a lot of trouble later tonight.  
A shadow would rap an unpleasant pattern  
On their claw-scratched door, and tomorrow morning  
There’d be four new leaves on the ghost bark birch  
About to fall.
Fairy Story in Autumn

Air still as ice
As many leaves on the ground
As in trees, all leeching
Autumn-red to ochre-white.
When they die and drop,
Gravity demands a last, fluttering waltz,
So they spiral down,
The smallest of birds.

Two eastern rosellas playmate
Scarlet-blue on skeletal branches,
An aberration in the dark
An ‘aboration’, I think
As trees change
Into a line of crosses,
Birds into totems.

Crow commands a neighbour’s chimney,
Dressed for Death and chants spells
Fit for the dying time.
If this poem were a fairy tale
That family would be in a lot of trouble later tonight.
The wind would rap an unpleasant pattern
On their clawed door, and tomorrow early
There’d be four new leaves on the ghost bark birch
About to fall.
Ross Donlon

Ross Donlon is an Australian poet widely published at home and in Ireland. Winner of two international poetry prizes, he has featured at poetry festivals in Australia, Ireland and England. His latest book is ‘Lucidity’ (Mark Time Books).
Usha Akella
The Sky’s Loom
(Terzanelle)

By the window the shadow’ melted mood on the sky’s loom,
Evening dissolves disparate tongues, the dance of forms,
Gone are the lengthy discourses on the street, the variegated hues.

Everything’s drying itself out, spent after the language of the storm,
Stillness settles strangely from a day coming undone,
Evening evens out disparate tongues, the dance of forms.

It pulls away from our grasp and we relinquish the retreating sun,
A tree grows silent, silently from a leaf-tip, a drop,
Stillness settles strangely from a day coming undone.

The cardinal flies branch to branch asking why the chatter stops?
A flying line of red tracing the introverted green,
A tree grows silent, silently from a leaf-tip a drop.

Greckos crowd overhead wires casting a black sheen,
The lone cardinal queries the silent lips of leaves,
a flying line of red tracing the introverted green.

Lilting, sprightly, and singing before, now the grass grieves,
By the window the shadows melted mood on the sky’s loom,
The lone cardinal queries the silent lips of leaves,
Gone are the lengthy discourses on the street, the variegated hues.
Breve  (Triversen)

In the corner is an empty bench
    broken as a harp
in a silent garden.

Once it seated lovers,
    its arms were full,
its strings quivered.

Now rain, like fingers tapping
    on the white keys of air
and the calligraphy of trees.

Showing the power of Time’s tides,
    its open and closed knots
its ascent and descent.

What option but to be
    patient like the meter of the leaves
and accept the unstressed syllables of time.

Hope like a butterfly is delicate
    like a crescent
in the dark trees.
Usha Akella has authored 4 books, scripted and produced one musical. Her most recent book The Rosary of Latitudes is published by Transcendental Zero Press with a foreword by Keki Daruwalla. She has won a few poetry awards such as the Open Road Review Poetry Prize, Egan Memorial Contest Prize, Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize and the Wine Poem Award at Struga Poetry Evenings. She was selected as a creative ambassador for Austin in 2014-15. She has been invited to many international poetry festivals in Colombia, Macedonia, Nicaragua, Mexico, India, Turkey, Slovakia, Slovenia etc. In August 2015, she organized the first South Asian Poetry Fest ‘MATWAALA.’ She is the founder of the Poetry Caravan in Westchester County, NY and Austin.
Jaydeep Sarangi
For More Distance
(Inspired by W.S. Merwin)

Images of my old dreams
Bring me an unfamiliar home,
To the threshold of soft touches, in the mind.

Spring breaks through cold winter nights
I return to my silent hours
Syllable by syllable, for more distance.
Between you and me, between two stars,
Between land and sea, mouth and a pen.

Holder of my heart delinks, present with past,
Kolkata divided into two spheres, North and South
Tree in Me

Each one of us
Is having different weather.

Wind pass through pores
Of our skin, quick and fast.

I become a branch of a tree
With green leaves, my acts.

I count each act of living
Words droop in silence.

I study a hibiscus bloom, my playmates
Rise up to the cause. I pluck juicy fruits.
I Go Green

Wherever I go, my little brother’s voice.
I carry, my green hopes.
I save his voice mails.
Long back. My plant was green
I had a shirt, banana yellow.
My inner, mango red.
My mind was fresh, lettuce green.

I survive with the shadow of my brother.
The kitchen goes green, tender petioles and shoots.
I’ve a more green way, green road ahead.
Global warming is a global warning,
All minds have door bells, alarm set.

May these exotic colourful Lilies I bring
adorn your crown, hues fresh. A green pool of thoughts.

Green ideas drum green ways.
The Red Diary

Between lines, I stop
I make gates and roads within.

There is a letter in a blue cover
Addressed to me, red in blood marks
From a voice I hear no more, may be

Someone who predicted my poems so many years ago.

The woodcutters knew my forefathers,
My soothing stream knew my mother
Carrying a fragile history of tribes,
And Brahmin settlers. My heart is red.

Now, as the sky had a turn
I'm a settler somewhere else
My back carries the wind.

The wind goes wild, sleepless
I roam with my discomfort.
An uneasy pen vomits
Indigestion in my mind.

My bones, mixed with matters
Prescribe for sugar free tablets.

I go sugarless, I write for all of you.
Jaydeep Sarangi

Jaydeep Sarangi is a widely anthologised poet with five collections in English, latest being: To Whom I Return Each Day (2017) which was released at the University of Udine, Udine Italy. He read poems in different shores of Australia, Europe and North America. His poems have appeared in many prestigious magazines like Indian Literature, Kavya Bharati, Muse India, WEC, The Asian Age, and CV. He has delivered keynote address in conferences/seminar on new poetry in different Universities in India and abroad and addressed /chaired sessions in Literary Festivals. He may be reached at: jaydeepsarangi@gmail.com
Zoe Bicat
Ravens

January sea

pulls to break against the granite teeth

of Penberth Cove.

Cut and flicked off course
where the stream glisters out its sheltered life
and meets the wind,
freshwater from the heath
finds its body
in a final drop toward the sea.

Down where the waves fight themselves in the harbour
a seal solves the riddle of liquid motion,
effortless,
floating in the conflict,
buoyed by it,
hours after we would have died.

In the gale
that stills my fingers on solid bone
two ravens circle
without moving their wings
and rise.
The gift

I was born in the bowl of the sea.  
Volcanoes belched and burst the waves apart.  
With the white hot blood of their heart  
they gave birth to me  

For days and years they pumped their gore,  
liquid rock plumed through the ocean.  
even the dolphins dared not approach them,  
and still there was more.  

At the surface, lava bulged and oozed and spat  
molten bubbles into the swell,  
it grounded them like soundless bells  
you could roll ashore and crack with a mallet.  

So I was caked in solid black, a brand,  
within my heart bright blood and stilling water,  
a twist of rock, a son of ocean, fire’s daughter,  
and serpentine I uncurled onto land.  

I cannot eat like you:  
my vessels always up-end, overflow.  
My below is above,  
my above, below.  

I watched when you first spoke, and crossed the sea.  
I grew through generations unperturbed.  
And now you unwind time towards my birth,  
you threaten to pluck the very root of me  

And set me down in a place below the smoke  
where nothing living can exist, where just your face,  
like Narcissus’ by his unearthly lake,  
stares up at us both.  

You cannot use your lathe to turn a storm.  
Your cup serves life only when broken.  
Let it crack so I can drink, let it come open.  
Lichens taste the air. Let me take form.
Your light frightens me.

Your walls do not protect me.

Show me the hole, the gap, the shattered pane, and watch me leap, my eyes ablaze,

Into the gift you have the power to give or take away.

ZOE BICAT
Dome

Rainwater for the willow poles,
nine inches down into earth, through
couch grass, thistle, bindweed, horsetail.
It wets the bark and floods the lead-punched holes,
streams from the overflow seek the tracks in trodden grass.
I pray for rooting, woodsmoke seals the prayer,
and charcoal crows pivot
their weighted heads toward the fire.
Sleepwalk

Without light I walked into the cold
and heard my soles on wood, sounding
notes that sucked hollows in the air and roused
a herd where they stood
on a field that sloped
and laid its side
on Symondsbury’s stream.

The grass was hard,
its blades, tight with frost,
broke as the cows transferred their weight,
backs rocked, haunches swayed,
smoking muzzles thawed the tips of plants,

dewlaps lapped the dew,
the night was cast
and I was filtered
through its net of stars.

Sleep waited in the summer house
newly sloughed
still with its phosphorescence on my limbs.
The curving-bellied, heavy-headed cows
wore it
like a perfume on their skin.
Zoe Bicat

Zoe Bicât is a self-employed writer, physical therapist, and Tai Chi Qigong teacher, whose poems featured in the University of Oxford Environmental Change Institute’s event ‘Climate Culture: Making the Anthropocene’ in 2016. She was a contributing author of ‘Making Pictures: 100 Years of European Cinematography’, awarded a Special Commendation in the 2003 Krazna-Krausz Moving Image Book Awards. Zoe is a published singer-songwriter whose work has been used internationally. In 2010 she made an album, River, and has worked with producers Rich Thair and Jake Williams. Among other roles, Zoe previously worked as a bushcraft instructor, having studied with Ray Mear’s company Woodlore.
Beth Junor
**Facing The Other Way**

They all face the same way,  
sparrows on the wire observed  
from mum’s kitchen in Canada.

Nature’s antidote to the chaos  
of our urban lives:  
calm, order, synchrony.

Back in term-time, the little boy in school  
tiptoes into the vast assembly hall,  
sits when prompted, facing the other way  
since there are patterns to perceive,  
more alluring than the flock.  
An invitation to see the world afresh.
Kirk and Loch

At Duddingston, the year’s last service
closes with a Celtic blessing

The love and affection of the angels be to you.
May Spirit fill you on every slope,
on bill and on plain.

Go, now, to sit among the swans,
necks as strong as anacondas
bent in calligraphic curves
as they poke and preen their myths
and down, gleaming in this late-rising sun,
brightness stored from Siberian snow.

Inspiring fear with fascination,
such an obvious choice for Zeus’s incarnation.

Suddenly a signet leads the way.
Into the Loch the seven flow,
gliding towards the Sunday children
distributing communion
from bags of thin sliced white.
Beth Junor lives in St Andrews, which in the 1930s was the cultural centre of Scotland. Here she has an art gallery, called the Junor Gallery, where the relationship between the visual and literary arts is a feature. She has published a collection of poetry, *A Full Moon Cycle, Callander* (2001), and has another on the way. She co-edited the anthology *The Souls of the Dead are Taking the Best Seats: 50 World Poets on War* (2004) with Angus Calder, and edited *Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts: The Letters of Valda Trevlyn Grieve to Christopher Murray Grieve* (2007). Her non-fiction publications include *Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp: A History of Non-Violent Resistance* (1995) and *Greenham: Non-violent Women -v- the Crown Prerogative* by Sarah Hipperson, (2005.) and a translation from the French, *I Am Special: A Workbook to Help Children, Teens and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders to Understand Their Diagnosis, Gain Confidence and Thrive* (2013) For the past 12 years beth has carried a small volume of *Gitanjali* constantly with her. [https://junorgallery.scot](https://junorgallery.scot)
Mario Relich
An American Visitor at Abbotsford

When Sir Walter Scott met John James Audubon he recognized his American visitor’s ornithological accuracy in the way he drew so many kinds of birds from the New World. He rendered all the splendour of their plumage, and strategies for camouflage in the forests, mountains and plains of North America, a continent still barely explored, and like the Highlands and Islands writ large, before Culloden so wild and untamed, but the USA was hardly unknown territory to one who was himself nicknamed ‘The Great Unknown’.

Alluding to Audubon’s parentage, Scott was emphatic in his Journal that ‘he was less of a Frenchman than I have ever seen – no dash, or glimmer, or shine about him’. More favourably, he praised his drawings for accurately portraying every species of bird that he encountered: a flamingo so tall, he had to draw its neck bending down to the foot of the colour plate; a bald eagle tearing at the belly of a dead, upturned catfish; also the ‘animated depiction’ of a snake attacking a bird’s nest. But he felt obliged to add that such ‘extreme correctness rather gives a stiffness to the drawings’, thereby lacking a sense of soaring, unrestricted palpitating life, the naturalist, according to Scott, ‘having no knowledge of virtu’, his word for a spark of artistic and decidedly manly vitality.
Mario Relich, who lives in Edinburgh, is Secretary of the Scottish Pen Board. His book of poems *Frisky Ducks* (Grace Note Publications) appeared in 2014. His poems have been published in the (Glasgow) *Herald*, and various periodicals, including *Southlight*, the *Antigonish Review* (Nova Scotia), and *Northwords Now*. He writes literary articles and reviews for *Scottish Affairs*, *The Dark Horse*, and *Scottish Review of Books*. His essay on translations of Baudelaire by Robert Lowell, Roy Campbell and James Robertson was published in *Critical Insights: The Poetry of Baudelaire* (2014), ed. by Tom Hubbard.
Sam Smith
No more an indoors enclosed by drips
    a damp that clings
no more a dull gazing out at
    woven threads of drizzle

After an age of overcast days
morning’s blue sky feels strange
    swallows, martins too
    gone high, to feed on midges

Underfoot
in the green-tunnelled lane
    is almost dry
clay path still soft
Each sloping furrow
    of a plough-turned field though
    has small rain-made canyons
    in its cracked and pitted slabs

Breathing garlic in a ramson-trampled wood
naturalist manqué notes the deeper colours
of rainy season blooms, campions’ red unfaded
how bright the bluebells...

    From seeming nowhere
a spattering shower comes driving between trunks
Naturalist manqué bends along with
    the soft architecture of ferns
    his bulk giving momentary shelter to
the dotted seedheads of trembling sedge

Sunshine glares yellow again
and he finds the lane blocked by sheep
all squashed together between tall green hedges and
unattended now by either belly-down dog or
quad-bike farmer
    In their move from overchewed pasture
the flock seemingly forgotten yet

every single ewe still facing forward
  with between their back legs
a dark green line of fleece-held droppings
  a clutch of upside-down
exclamation marks

On town’s outskirts the returning naturalist
pauses to make further note - of three jackdaws’
ponderous air of ownership
  as they walk along
  the roof ridges and chimney ledges
of part-built and
abandoned houses
Our Silent Bedlam of History
(Edward Thomas : The Lie of the Land)

From the diseased and
abandoned plantation
a way has to be picked

through and over

trees fallen or felled
trunks moss-clad
ground uncertain

The bare hilltops are scraped by
a sharp blue and vapour-lined sky
lark shrilling high

A heel drag back here
through the thin grass and pale moss
reveals black spoil

with scattered about
rounded lumps of orange clinker and
occasional snake-lengths of cable

Necessary within valley bottom houses
to bend close to the window
to see the sky
Sam Smith

Sam Smith is editor of The Journal (once ‘of Contemporary Anglo-Scandinavian Poetry’), and publisher of Original Plus books. He has been a psychiatric nurse, residential social worker, milkman, plumber, laboratory analyst, groundsman, sailor, computer operator, scaffolder, gardener, painter & decorator working at anything, in fact, which paid the rent, enabled him to raise his three daughters and which hasn’t got too much in the way of his writing. Now in his 70s he has ended up living in South Wales. He has several poetry collections and novels to his name, his last two collections being Speculations & Changes (KFS Publishing) and Local Colour (Indigo Dreams Pamphlets); and his latest two paperback novels Marraton (Indigo Dreams Publishing) and The Friendship of Dagda & Tinker Howth (united p.c. publisher).
https://sites.google.com/site/samsmiththejournal/
Celia Purcell
Seagull

He took one left-over chip in his beak,
spread his wings as if he might take off somewhere
only to side step where old pavements dipped.

He was the seagull squatting on a roof five
storeys up, which had grown its own grass plot,
where gutters were never dry.

Every day, he would sky dive down
to infiltrate market stalls of fruit
and bomb a man who sat profoundly deaf -
who had no need to wave the bird away.
Other gulls flew in dense clouds,
dull eyed from canisters already spent -
their residue spilt through streams.
For boys out of school, it was fried cod at 5pm,
a customary soak of red vinegar through socks –
more talk of how they would leave here yet again,
and when the two page spread on ‘Brexit’
took off, they let it go, not seeing
the shape in exquisite Origami, our seagull
hard capping against the wind
full force against a fisherman’s shoulder.

Or how he flew well above harbour, eyes
salt ridden, but knowing his way by instinct -
multitudes of boats beneath him,
until the wind failed, as our seagull stalls too,
his turn around back to town a show
that holds no promise he will get through.

There is nothing left in him –
his land drop heavy as lead, his glare
stalking lost remnants of a path
strewn with paper cups, wet rope
and underneath the bench, a chicken leg.
Our seagull pounces before his flock arrives -
tearing at flesh, the count down to how fast
he must demolish what he always thinks
for reasons of his own, will be his last.

And then he falters, head upturned in fear,
a mad beak open and soundless.
Isn’t there anybody near?

The waves are so sonorous at high tide.
A bone in his throat cannot be dislodged.
This is the town at dusk. One seagull is dying.
Celia Purcell

Trained in Ballet and worked as a dancer in both London and Calgary, Canada. Has taught widely both in Classical and Contemporary Dance at all levels and also began one of the first Creative Dance and Music sessions for the elderly. Celia has run an art gallery from home for many years and continues to hold exhibitions on occasion. Now published as the author of two novels for Young Adults and also as a poet in various literary magazines. Mandy
On not seeing a tiger in the Sundarbans

If we had seen a tiger
would we have thrilled to
‘Crocodile! Crocodile! Crocodile!’?
Would we have known
the mystery of Irrawaddy dolphins,
grace of eagles, falcons, ospreys,
secrets of monitors, boar and deer?

If we had seen the royal cat
would we have appreciated
the regal bearing of adjutants
the kingfisher’s iridescent blue?
A tiger is not pure egret white.

A tiger may have interrupted
the perfect symmetry of chevroned banks.
It may have tarnished
the peace of mangrove, mud bank, creek,
the slow tidal ebb and seep,
or broken the silence
welling up when the engine’s putt-putt’s cut.

If we had seen a tiger
would we have looked so lovingly
or watched so well?
Would we have learned to trust in Bon Bibi
whose forest grows legs and dances,
sinks and swims?
Could we have relinquished the wish,
come simply
to be
in this liminal place

if we had seen a tiger?
Sundarbans

The moon scribes a laborious ode, letter by letter, in ancient regular form. Her reflection in the river improvises a Bangla song.

An epic is etched across the mud in a cuneiform of footprints. Mangrove trees tell forest sagas in runes and ogham.

Long lines are scribbled by rivulets, punctuated by pugmarks. An alphabet of ducks drafts overhead.

An egret is semaphoring on the river bank. The current responds with a swirling script of leaves.

My pencil adds a few leaden letters but the real writing is out there beyond this poem.
Mandy Haggith

Originally from Northumberland, Mandy Haggith has lived in Assynt since 1999 where she combines writing with sailing, environmental activism and teaching literature and creative writing at the University of the Highlands and Islands. She won the Robin Jenkins Literary Award for environmental writing in 2009 and in 2013 was poet in residence at the Edinburgh Royal Botanic Gardens. She has three published poetry collections (letting light in, Castings and A-B-Tree), a poetry anthology (Into the Forest) and a non-fiction book (Paper Trails). Her novels include The Last Bear, Bear Witness and, most recently, The Walrus Mutterer, the first of a historical novel trilogy set in the Iron Age, which she wrote mostly at sea.
SECTION IV:

Gitanjali & Beyond
Edited by Bashabi Fraser & Christine Kupfer
The Ocean-Cradle of Birth and of Death – An Appreciation of Tagore’s Sea Poetry

Mandy Haggith

Abstract

This essay is an appreciation of Tagore’s poems about the sea, interwoven with reminiscences of a sailing trip off the south coast of the Isle of Skye, in Scotland, and a boat voyage among the mangrove-fringed islands of the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal, India. At the heart of the essay is rumination on the poem ‘Snatched by the gods’, written by Tagore in the late 1890s, in which adverse wind and tide provide the context for a tragic drowning of a young boy and an old man. The sailing trip mirrors these sea conditions. The Sundarbans visit draws reflection on the real threat posed by wind and tide to the lives and livelihoods of people in Bengal and the increasing risks caused by climate change. The paradoxical wonder and danger of the ocean runs through Tagore’s representations of the sea, and the essay explores both this paradox and some of the many instances of the sea in his poetry as a metaphor for death, for the final release of the soul, for religious fervour, for work and time and even for poetry itself.
During a month’s sailing from home in the far northwest of Scotland down to Northern Ireland and back, I woke on the morning of Friday 25 May 2018 to the following inshore weather forecast for the Minch: ‘Wind, north or northeast four or five, increasing six at times. Sea state slight or moderate. Weather mainly fair. Visibility good, occasionally poor.’ The boat was at anchor in Loch Bracadale, on the southwest shore of the Isle of Skye. Our plan1 was to sail to Mallaig on the mainland, skirting the southern coast of the island, heading mostly east. Consulting the tidal atlas, the tidal stream would be in our favour initially, then turn against us later in the morning. We set sail at seven o’clock, putting one reef in both the main- and fore-sails, but before then, I read some poetry. I always read poetry first thing in the morning; it can be calming, and with a force six in the forecast, I was already a little nervous. I had brought Rabindranath Tagore’s Selected Poems with me for the voyage and had been enjoying his many references to the sea. I turned to the next poem in the book and found myself reading ‘Snatched by the Gods’2, Tagore’s powerful narrative poem about a tragic pilgrimage by boat. It left me in a state that I can only describe as dread. I’m not a superstitious person, but I couldn’t help wondering if this deep and disturbing poem was some kind of omen.

‘Snatched by the Gods’ tells the story of a woman, Moksada, who is going with her grandfather Maitra on a pilgrimage to the mouth of the Ganges. Her unruly son, Rakhal, insists on coming along despite his mother’s best judgement, and when Maitra grants the boy permission to join them, Moksada, in her frustration, says, ‘The sea can have you!’ She immediately regrets her outburst, but on the return journey, using the north-going tide to travel back inland, a strong northerly wind builds up, threatening the boat’s survival. In the ensuing drama Maitra claims that Moksada’s words were an unkept promise to the gods, and the storm is an expression of their fury, at which the crew and passengers of the boat throw Rakhal overboard to appease them. The spluttering boy is swallowed by ‘frothing waves’ before ‘the black depths claim him.’3 Maitra, repenting his harshness, dives in to save the boy, but they both drown.

This poem contains some of Tagore’s most potent language about the sea. Through the eyes of the boy Rakhal, it consists of ‘endless expanses of water’.

‘Sleek and glossy, dark and curving
And cruel and mean and spiteful water,
How like a thousand-headed snake it seems,
So full of deceit, greedy tongues darting,
Hoods rearing, mouths foaming as it hisses and roars
And eternally lusts for the children of Earth!’4

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1 There were two of us on the boat: myself and my husband Bill.
3 Ibid, p. 66
4 Ibid, p. 64
A striking thing about this poem to a sailor is the accuracy of Tagore’s description of the tide and wind. The boat has anchored to wait for a favourable tide, and when it turns, the poem comes alive.

’Suddenly the still waters stir,
Awaking both banks with hope of departure.
The prow of the boat swings round, the cables
Creak as the current pulls; gurgling,
Singing, the sea enters the river
Like a victory-chariot – the tide has come.’

Even more compelling is Tagore’s capture of the situation that occurs when the wind is against the tide. A strong ‘northward-racing stream’ of tide encountering a wind from that direction sets up a dangerous sea state of short steep waves that endanger the stability of any boat, or as Tagore puts it, ‘a fierce / Seething battle breaks out between the scurrying / Tide and the north wind.’ Anyone who has sailed in a contrary wind and tide will recognise this description: ‘Everywhere, whipped-up water claps / With a thousand hands its own mad death-dance.’

The poem is reminiscent of Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, with its drama driven by the need to make reparation for an unwitting sacrilege against spirits or deities of the sea. However, Tagore’s rendering is far bleaker: the crime was merely a slip of the tongue by Moksada, unlike the Ancient Mariner’s killing of the albatross, and there is no blessed forgiveness at the end. Yet Tagore’s poem is a much more realistic characterisation of the price the ocean can charge for an error made on a boat.

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According to the ship’s log, as we sailed past the mouths of lochs on the southern shore of Skye, the northerly wind mounted from a steady 16 knots until, by the time the tide turned against us, gusts of 35 knots were screeching out of the Cuillin mountains, heeling the boat over at a treacherous angle. The sea boiled around the boat, and we had to reef the sails as far as we could to ride the tossing, jabbling water. Tagore’s words were still ringing in my ears.

I was reminded of other poems where he uses the sea as the site of the end of everything. ‘Death-wedding’ concludes with this: ‘I shall go where your boat is moored, / Death, Death, to the sea where the wind rolls / Darkness towards me from infinity…. I shall pass silently, unswervingly / Across that red storm-sea, Death, Death.’

_Gitanjali_ contains many references to boat passage as the end of life. ‘Early in the day it

5 Ibid, p. 64
6 Ibid, p. 65
7 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, _Lyrical Ballads_ (London: J. & A. Arch, 1798)
8 Tagore, _Selected Poems_, p. 71
was whispered that we should sail in a boat, only thou and I... In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words... Who knows when the chains will be off, and the boat, like the last glimmer of sunset, vanish into the night? He refers to death using the phrase, ‘when I give up the helm’ . He uses the image of a ferryman, drawing to mind a crossing of Lethe or perhaps, as in Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, a route towards a higher spiritual existence. ‘I know not if I shall come back home. I know not whom I shall chance to meet. There at the fording in the little boat the unknown man plays upon his lute.’

That Friday in May was a beautiful, sunny day, I must point out, but that was no comfort because here, in ‘Highest Price’, is Tagore’s setting for the final release of the soul: ‘Along the sea-shore the sun shines, the sea breaks and rolls’. On that shore, a child plays with shells, but as we know from *Gitanjali*, Tagore saw the innocence of beach play as marginal to death. ‘On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous... Death-dealing waves sing meaningless ballads to the children... Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships get wrecked in the trackless water, death is abroad and children play.’

It is not only body and soul that can be swallowed up by the sea. In ‘Sea-maiden’, Tagore has the entire Indian civilisation shipwrecked by a storm, presumably on the Indian Ocean. ‘Waves reared, a storm blew up fiercely / Salt-water filled my boat, / And it sank with its cargo of jewels in the dark night.’

Both ‘Sea-maiden’ and ‘Snatched by the Gods’ contain an element that recurs throughout Tagore’s work in his characterisation of the sea: a paradoxical blend of calm and fury, gentleness alongside ferocity. In ‘Sea-maiden’ this is represented by the lover gods Siva and Parvati, ‘Light and shade, played in the waters of the sea’ . This blending of beauty and power is deftly painted as the protagonist washes up on the shores of Bali, ‘lit by the restless festivity / of the surging melee / of moonlight dancing in the sea’. There is peace even within the turmoil of a storm.

In ‘Snatched by the Gods’, immediately after Rakhal has seen the water as ‘cruel and mean’, Tagore inserts a passage of praise for the Earth as ‘speechlessly loving’, giving us a serene and beguiling perspective on the sea, into which the sun will set.

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10 Tagore, *Gitanjali*, p. 119
12 Tagore, *Gitanjali*, p. 94
13 Tagore, *Selected Poems*, p. 73
14 Tagore, *Gitanjali*, p. 80
15 Tagore, *Selected Poems*, p. 95
16 Ibid, p. 95
17 Ibid, p. 95
‘...Your invisible
Arms embrace us all, day and night,
Draw us with such huge and rapturous force
Towards your calm, horizon-touching breast!’

During the storm, Tagore places the raging sea at odds with the placid motion of sun through sky. It ‘jeers at the sky in the furious uprush / Of its foam’\(^{19}\), and ‘Ravenous, gluttonous, murderous waters / Swell in insolent rebellion against the calm / Setting sun’\(^{20}\). Tagore clearly delights in a Keatsian ‘negative capability’\(^{21}\) in his conception of the sea, playing frequently with a bipolarity of light and dark, storm and calm, murderousness and creativity. In ‘Earth’ he paints a picture of the planet ‘Rapt in meditation in the silence of a ring of mountains / Or noisy with the roar of sleepless sea-waves,’ or more simply, ‘gentle and fierce, ancient and renewing.’\(^{22}\)

As we met the challenges that the weather and sea threw at us that May morning, I found myself, as I often do, reflecting on my good fortune. Today, writing this on 14 June 2018, while storm ‘Hector’ tosses fully-leaved trees to the ground across the country, I am reminded that one of the things we can expect as a result of climate change is an increase in extreme weather events. As always in these situations I remember that the people most likely to be adversely affected and least able to defend themselves from this change are those in the global south, particularly in low-lying places like the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal, the huge delta where the great Indian rivers disgorge into the Indian ocean. Storms like the one that Tagore describes in ‘Snatched by the Gods’ are happening more frequently, more ferociously and, as sea levels rise, with more devastating consequences.

I first encountered Tagore’s poetry in 2009, when I went to Bengal as part of a delegation of Scottish poets to the Kolkata Book Festival. An Indian friend told me I would love the city, because ‘every other person you meet is a poet’. I thought he was joking, but two days into my visit I had been driven in a taxi by a poet, welcomed at reception of my hotel by a poet, served food in a restaurant by a poet and had had read poems read to me on a bus. I went to change currency and asked the bank teller if she wrote poetry. She shook her head ruefully, then gestured to the colleague sitting at the next desk, who, sure enough, was a poet. Everyone in Bengal seemed to revere Tagore, both as a lyricist and as a champion of ordinary people. I feel sure that were he writing today, he would be penning poems about the threats to the people of the Sundarbans in the face of climate change.

After the Kolkata festival, I went to the Sundarbans and travelled by boat around mangrove-fringed islands. I was ostensibly looking for tigers, which hunt there on land and in the sea, but I was content with pug marks, because the wealth of other wildlife – crocodiles

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18 Ibid, p. 64
19 Ibid, p. 65
20 Ibid, p. 65
22 Tagore, Selected Poems, p. 99-101
and monitors, kingfishers and adjutants, monkeys and dolphins – was magnificent. The tidal ebb and flow among the mangrove forest makes for a magical and ever-changing habitat. I was enraptured by this idyllic place, and yet, in a paradox that Tagore would no doubt recognise, it also broke my heart.

The Sundarbans islands are tragically threatened. I stayed on an island the highest point of which is less than a metre above the level of the highest tide. The image that stays with me from there is of a tall, elegant man, lifting a basket of mud above his head at the shore and carrying it up to the bund that was the island’s meagre defence against the encroachment of the sea. The local people must constantly try to reinforce this embankment. A storm on a high tide is a devastating threat: if the salt water breaches the wall and inundates their fields within, no crops will grow for years. Many neighbouring islands have been contaminated by salt water and their inhabitants, no longer able to subsist, have become refugees. Kolkata and its surrounding suburbs are full of people who have had to flee from flooded islands. As sea level rises, the risks of a high-tide storm increase.

So when I read of the drowning of the old man Maitra and the young boy Rakhal, snatched by the gods in the Bay of Bengal, I think of the loss of culture and of hope that is happening when wind and tide conspire against the people of the Sundarbans. The mother, Moksada, lying ‘senseless’ in the boat, reminds me of my own feeling of impotence and incapacity in the face of such tragedy.

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Tagore uses the sea as a metaphor in many, often beautiful, ways. In ‘Flying Man’ the sea blends with bird flight: ‘In the great peace beneath the immense sky, / The dancing wings of birds quiver / Like wavelets rippling by’.

In *Gitanjali*, the seabird is a key metaphor for his religious fervour. ‘My adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea’ and ‘The morning sea of silence broke into ripples of bird songs’.

In *Gitanjali*, Tagore uses the sea as an image for work, for example in passage 5: ‘My work becomes an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil’. In ‘Railway Station’, commuting hordes move tidally, and after reading ‘Snatched by the Gods’ it is impossible not to think of the tragic potential of the river mouth: ‘Down-trains boarded, up-trains boarded, / Ebb and flow like an estuarine river… Eastwards, westwards, rapid as storms’.

Right up to the end of his life, Tagore wields the sea and tidal waters as metaphors for time. Passage 92 of *Gitanjali* captures both the temporal metaphor and the central paradox of the sea with this gorgeous phrase: ‘Hours heave like sea waves casting up

23 Ibid, p. 112
24 Tagore, *Gitanjali*, p. 18
25 Ibid, p. 65
26 Ibid, p. 21
27 Tagore, *Selected Poems*, p. 114
pleasures and pains’ 28. In ‘Recovery – 10’, Tagore is ‘Lazily afloat on time’s stream’ in which all ordinary people ‘go on pulling at oars, / Guiding the rudder’ 29. Once more he gives a political dimension to the ocean as he foresees the end of British rule: ‘I know that time will flow along their road too, / Float off somewhere the land-encircling web of their empire’ 30.

Even language itself is compared to the sea by Tagore, and in his delightful late poem, ‘On My Birthday – 20’, words are ‘kin to the wild torrents / that pour from the mountains’, then run away to sea to create poetry.

‘Sometimes they slip like robbers into realms of fantasy,
Float on ebbing waters
Of sleep, free of barriers,
Lashing any sort of flotsam and jetsam into metre.’ 31

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Eventually on that May sailing day, as we approached the Sound of Sleat, the wind abated, then died away completely. The sea became glassy. Gannets dived, plummeting into the water with explosions of white spray. Dolphins played around the boat. We made our way to Mallaig safe, chastened, but ultimately exultant at the sheer power and overwhelming beauty of the ocean.

The next day, of course, we were impatient to set off again. Tagore expressed just how that feels in passage 21 of Gitanjali.

‘I must launch out my boat. The languid hours pass by on the shore … The waves have become clamorous… Do you not feel a thrill passing through the air with the notes of the far-away song floating from the other shore?’ 32

We had survived the ominous start to the day before, and that day’s forecast was north-easterly force four or five, perfect to carry us southwards. We cast off once more to be ‘rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow’ 33.

28 Tagore, Gitanjali, p. 112
29 Tagore, Selected Poems, p. 121-123
30 Ibid, p. 122
31 Ibid, p. 124
32 Tagore, Gitanjali, p. 37
33 Ibid, p. 89
Bibliography


