

## Halakaršana

### Rabindranath Tagore

#### An Introduction

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On 14th July 1928, (12 Bhadra 1336) Rabindranath Tagore spoke on what was to be the first of many *Halakaršanas* at Sriniketan. His address first appeared in print in the Aswin 1336 BE number of the periodical *Prabasi*. The event and Rabindranath's thoughts on it, are significant insights into how Rabindranath on the one hand romanticized about farming being the first communal activity yet resisted a retrogressive mythologization of it. He had perpetually argued about the necessity improve the awareness of the cultivating community before any true development is possible. To grasp what he was attempting here we must look at the greater historical context and Rabindranath's position in the contemporary debates on agriculture and land reforms.

Sriniketan was the site where, the experiments with the rural reconstruction that Rabindranath started at Selaidaha, became more wide ranging. What Sriniketan meant to Rabindranath is visible in the fact that he addressed the workers either during the anniversary of Sriniketan or on the day of *Halakaršana* almost every year.<sup>1</sup> The term rural reconstruction was first employed by Rabindranath in a letter to Lady Abala Bose in 1908.<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath saw *Halakaršana* or ploughing as the chief activity of the village economy hence sustaining the core of an emerging nation. Rabindranath was of the belief that farmers need to be trained in better farming practices before they can become self-reliant and achieve any kind of progress. This view was controversial, and it can very naturally be read as Rabindranath's inability to divorce himself from the class privileges of a zamindar. It was the crux of his response to Pramathanath Chowdhuri's 1926 treatise *Rayater Katha* (the story of tenants). Rabindranath agreed that land belongs to the cultivators, and not the zamindars. Although he was against altering the conditions of tenancy and argued that the farmers had to be made self-reliant

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<sup>1</sup> See Dikshit Sinha, *A Poet's Experiment in Rebuilding Samaj and Nation: Sriniketan's Rural Reconstruction Work, 1922-1960* (Bolpur: Birutjatiao Sahitya Sammiloni, 2019), p 163.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p 2

before the zamindars can retreat.<sup>3</sup> However, merely pinning it to his class position diminishes the complexity of the argument.

In a letter to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobish, written a few days before delivering the address, Rabindranath explores the significance of this ritual. He invokes Balarāma,<sup>4</sup> in the earlier iconographic form of the agricultural deity. Rabindranath sees the alcohol loving mighty god with the plough in hand, being a possible parallel for the European civilization with its love of the drink, physical strength, and superior technology. He believes that the better aspects of the European civilization must be accepted. Refers to a newspaper report that laments the deplorable condition of the farmers in Bihar. Whose perilous condition, the reporter thinks, is due to the machinery farming equipment employed by the British. Tagore disagrees, for him European technology must be embraced not rejected.<sup>5</sup>

In another letter to Nirmalkumari, written a bit over a year after this (19<sup>th</sup> October 1929), Rabindranath further develops this idea. He states that the Mahatma has done great disservice to the nation by involving the farmers, who form three-fourths of the country, in his insistence spinning of the innate Charka. He would rather have them yield more crop and believes that initiating a discussion on farming practices would have been a much greater service to the nation.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting that though Tagore is critical of the mechanized weapons of the modern age, he was ready to embrace technology when used properly. He was repeatedly raising alarm about the fact that the cultivators or tenants, however, romanticized are not at present equipped by themselves to improve their conditions. In this address, Rabindranath has read the *Ramayana* as an allegory of the agrarian Aryans fighting for their exclusive knowledge of the plough, hence the abduction of Sita in the hands of the Rakshasas, the non-Aryan tribes

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 299.

<sup>4</sup> Balarama, in Hindu mythology, the elder half brother of Krishna, with whom he shared many adventures. Sometimes Balarama is considered one of the 10 avatars (incarnations) of the god Vishnu, particularly among those members of Vaishnava sects who elevate Krishna to the rank of a principal god. He may originally have been an agricultural deity, for as early as the 2nd–1st century BCE he was depicted holding a plowshare and a pestle, with a snake canopy above his head. Among the earliest Brahmanic gods to be given sculptural representation, he is always shown in paintings with fair skin, in contrast to Krishna's blue complexion. The stories associated with him emphasize his love of wine and his enormous strength. (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Balarama". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 Feb. 2015, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balarama>.)

<sup>5</sup> Rabindranath Thakur, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati-1986) vol. 14, p 848.

<sup>6</sup> See Sinha, p 464

symbolizes a theft of that sacred knowledge and the subsequent victory of Rama, therefore, stands for the retrieval of that knowledge.

## Halakarṣana

(Delivered at the *Halakarṣana* in Sriniketan on 14 July 1928 / 12 Bhadra 1336)

Translator: *Parantap Chakraborty*

When the earth emerged from its aquatic bath and became able to sustain life the first home of that life was the forest. Thus, the primeval life of human beings was as forest dwellers. The *Puranas*<sup>7</sup> tell us, the lands which are now large deserts, burning in the heat of the summer, were in the past great forests like Dandaka, Naimisha, Khandava.<sup>8</sup> The Aryan colonists found their first shelter in these forests and found life in the fruit of these forests and in the deep solitude they took the first steps towards self-awareness.

In the first stage of their existence the early humans were hunters of animals. They were then revolting against the life sustaining mother earth. In this age of barbarism, the idea of *maitri*<sup>9</sup> had eluded these people. This savagery was inevitable.

The depth of the forest would impede the path of human beings. It was a shelter on one hand, and an impediment on the other. Those who attempted to traverse this inaccessibility were forced to form small groups and dwell within their limits. Each group was constantly suspicious and hateful of the other. It is this mindset that made their religious rituals designed to take human

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<sup>7</sup> Purana, (Sanskrit: “Ancient”) in the sacred literature of Hinduism, any of a number of popular encyclopaedic collections of myth, legend, and genealogy, varying greatly as to date and origin. Traditionally, a Purana is said to treat five subjects, or “five signs”: the primary creation of the universe, secondary creation after periodic annihilation, the genealogy of gods and patriarchs, the reigns of the Manus (the first humans), and the history of the solar and lunar dynasties. There are traditionally 18 Puranas, but there are several different lists of the 18, as well as some lists of more or fewer than 18. (Doniger, Wendy. "Purana". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 Jun. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Purana>.)

<sup>8</sup> All three ancient forests were often referred to in Puranic Literature as well as the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

<sup>9</sup> Maitrī, (Sanskrit), in Buddhism, the perfect virtue of sympathy. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. ("Maitrī". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Jul. 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/maitri>). Rabindranath Tagore often referred to this concept. In “Nationalism in Japan” (1917) for example, he states ‘The ideal of ‘maitri’ is at the bottom of your culture, – ‘maitri’ with men and ‘maitri’ with Nature. And the true expression of this love is in the language of beauty, which is so abundantly universal in this land. This is the reason why a stranger, like myself, instead of feeling envy or humiliation before these manifestations of beauty, these creations of love, feels a readiness to participate in the joy and glory of such revelation of the human heart.’ See Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1917), p 92.

life. Human beings became the most potent enemies of themselves, an enmity that is yet to end. The constant battle was to deprive the other of such isolated homelands and cattle grazing areas. The other animals that exist on earth do not practice such destruction of its own kind.

It was in these early settlements encircled by the inaccessibility began early human life full of thuggery and cruelty and this ferocity was celebrated in song, dance, art and religious rites. Then at some point, human beings fortuitously discovered their path of progress. The first step in this direction was the discovery of fire. The remarkable power of fire that influenced nature was experienced in that era by humans. Still fire in its many forms is the carrier of civilisation. It was this fire that provided the first *mārga*<sup>10</sup> of religious rites for Indian Aryans.

Then arrived agriculture. It was through agriculture that human beings bonded with nature. It kindled the creative power hidden in the womb of the earth. Before this, food was required in small amounts and by chance. It was controlled by a small number of people and therefore it promoted selfishness and encouraged violence. It also gave rise to morality and ethics. It was agriculture that made cooperative possible. Because, what holds a large number of people together when the congregate is *Dharma*.<sup>11</sup> It is the duty of *Dharma* to suppress the hatred and awaken the sense of good harmony. As livelihoods get easier it becomes simpler for *Dharma* to establish the bond of unity. In truth it was agriculture that laid the foundations of righteousness in the human civilisation. Agriculture immediately followed fire in the stages of civilisation. It was through agriculture that human beings developed kinship with the land, and it formed a major era. This facilitated the primacy of the bond of friendship in human society.

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<sup>10</sup> Marga, (Sanskrit: “path”) in Indian religions, a path toward, or way of reaching, salvation. The epic *Bhagavadgita* (or *Gita*) describes *jnana-marga*, the way of knowledge (study of philosophical texts and contemplation); *karma-marga*, the way of action (proper performance of one’s religious and ethical duties); and *bhakti-marga*, the way of devotion and self-surrender to God. In the *Gita* the god Krishna praises all three means but favours *bhakti-marga*, which was accessible to members of any class or caste. (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Marga". Encyclopedia Britannica, 19 Feb. 2015, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/marga-Indian-religion>.)

<sup>11</sup> Dharma is a polysemous word and exceedingly difficult to pin down to one translation.

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: In Hinduism, dharma is the religious and moral law governing individual conduct and is one of the four ends of life. In addition to the dharma that applies to everyone (sadharaṇa dharma) — consisting of truthfulness, non-injury, and generosity, among other virtues — there is also a specific dharma (svadharma) to be followed according to one’s class, status, and station in life. Dharma constitutes the subject matter of the Dharma-sutras, religious manuals that are the earliest source of Hindu law, and in the course of time has been extended into lengthy compilations of law, the Dharma-shastra.

The forest-dwelling society of ancient India was divided into many branches. Its rites were designed to pray for the good of one faction or another. They imagined special powers to specific mantras which were given prestige as they believed it would help them to gain money and defeat the enemy. However, because the goal of this was an outward outcome, it was geared almost entirely towards materialistic goals; the narrow competitive mind-sets were valued. It did not see the release of the greater sense of unity.

Then came an era that we may call the age of the Rājārṣi Janaka.<sup>12</sup> It saw the advent of two kinds of knowledge. On the practical side agriculture and on the spiritual theology. Agriculture freed society from the chains of narrow selfish goals and made possible the unity of larger populations through the same livelihood. And theology made the spiritual declaration – *ātmavat sarva-bhūteṣu yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati*<sup>13</sup> (those who understand the other as themselves have truly perceived their selves).

We see semblances of the importance of agriculture to the Aryans in the *Ramayana*. It was from the furrow that Sita was born, and it was the unploughable land that Rama made ploughable.<sup>14</sup> It is this ploughing that connected the north and south of India traversing forests and mountains.

Much effort had to be given to defeat the rakshasas, who were the archenemies of the Aryans, and to protect and rescue their newfound knowledge from them.

Humans were overcome by greed while inheriting the gifts of the earth. The agricultural fields won over the forests and eventually developed a monopoly and gradually started replacing it. The earth was being rendered naked by the culling of trees for various purposes. They turned the

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<sup>12</sup> In the epic *Ramayana*, Janaka, is the father of Sita. The Historical Janaka was an ancient Indian king of Videha (in Mithila), approximately in the 8th or 7th century BCE. The rulers of the Videha kingdom were called Janakas. It is difficult to ascertain if the two Janakas are the same. See Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India*, (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2006.) pp 42-51.

Rājārṣi is an epithet that denotes sage-king (*rāja* king, and *ṛṣi* a saint).

<sup>13</sup> *ātmavat sarva-bhūteṣu yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati* is a Sanskrit śloka.

<sup>14</sup> Sita was raised by King Janaka; she was not his natural daughter but sprang from a furrow when he was ploughing his field. Rama won her as his bride by bending Shiva's bow. (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Sita". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 29 Mar. 2018)

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sita>

air warmer and nearly depleted the fertility of the land. The Aryavarta<sup>15</sup> that has lost the shelter of the forest is now faces unbearable sunlight.

Keeping this in mind we had organized the Vṛikṣaropan,<sup>16</sup> only a few days earlier, it is the sacred festival of replenishing the wasted treasure of the mothers by prodigal children.

Today's ritual is not about arithmetical balance. We will perceive it as a revival of the happy memory of the beginnings of agriculture, which holds the central thread of human existence, human beings coming together as one, the granary the world being one.

After the age of agriculture came machinery. Its iron hands have sometimes caused mass murder and on other occasions have filled life with things to be consumed. The unbridled greed of human beings now knows no limits. Once when the livelihoods of human beings were of a limited nature, and they were cruel rivals of each other. They were always ready to strike with weapons at that time. That striking ability has now increased manifold. The boost of wealth is also lead to the growth of greed, and society has been contaminated by weapons. In the old days people murdered each other out of greed, but those weapons were weak, and the amount of death was minimal. Otherwise in this long era would have created a mass grave spanning the breath of the earth from one sea to another. Technology has handed human beings with many weapons of mass destruction, and the death toll at the end of a war exceed several hundred. The suicidal human race has become an enemy of itself and set sail on the flood of destruction. Human beings started with primeval barbarity; they were motivated by greed. The last stage of human existence is also disastrously barbaric; here too it has found itself in the jaws of greed. A huge funeral pyre has been lit, and along with human beings their morality, their knowledge, and their fine arts will ascend it.

Today we will remember that day when the earth served its children limited food with her own hands, which was enough for their health, and their satisfaction — which wasn't so abundant that the human beings with their ugly greed could forget their true selves and engage in violence on its pile.

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<sup>15</sup> Āryāvarta (Sanskrit), lit. "abode of the Aryas". Traditionally regarded as the between the Himalaya and the Vindhya ranges, from the Eastern Sea (Bay of Bengal) to the Western Sea (Arabian Sea)

<sup>16</sup> Vṛikṣaropan (lit. Tree Planting) is another festival started by Rabindranath to plant saplings in and around the university campus.

12 Bhadra 1336

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