

The Unity of All Things

Foreword

We stand at the crossroads today at a critical point of time in human history, as scientists tell us that the pandemic which is having a devastating effect on human populations across the world, is the result of thoughtless planetary degradation which has accelerated climate change. We are guilty of depleting our green mantle and exhausting the earth's resources through unmitigated economic growth and development. We have read about a world where an invisible enemy stalks the planet, bringing destruction in its train in dystopian literature, but now this has been translated into our real world, as people are told to self isolate, work from home and not meet friends or family in person. Children have been introduced to the virtual classroom and playgrounds are off limits. The joy of student community activities, of classroom debates at universities have been taken away from university life and replaced by blended learning. We have read in history about fearful times when the plague struck, and the effects of Spanish Flu as it swept across countries – an experience which remains close to our living memory. And more recently we have encountered the dangers imposed by SARS, Ebola and MERS, but these now seem either in the recent past or limited to some regions and hence not as terrifying as SARS COV 2 with its global reach and disastrous effect. As lockdowns continue in different countries at different stages and international borders close to countries reeling under a second wave of a new variant, we concede that these are unprecedented times.

We have heard many writers acknowledge that they have found it difficult to write during the lockdown. Yet some have found themselves responding to these times and what has emerged are lockdown pieces. Artists have expressed their inner turmoil and/or searched for a peaceful core, bringing back meaning to a life which seems to have receded beyond our grasp. When we contemplated this issue, we asked ourselves how Rabindranath Tagore would have responded to this new transformed reality. We believe he would record his thoughts and views in his writing, his paintings, his lectures, talks and letters, as he always did at every critical moment in his life. He would not turn away from this grim reality and with his authorial integrity, he would have spoken his mind without glossing over the facts, propelled by the powerful imagination of the writer philosopher and pragmatist.

Two years after World War I in August 1920, when Rabindranath was in London, a letter arrived addressed to 'Sir Rabindranath' from a mother who asked the Nobel Laureate where she could find a poem by Rabindranath which her son had recited to her before he left for the battle front, the lines of which the mother found written in his pocket book which was returned to her after his death. The poem was 'Parting Words' and the quoted lines were:

When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.

The poem referred to is from *Gitanjali* (1912) and the writer of the letter is Susan Owen, mother of the poet Wilfred Owen who died seven days before the armistice. This is an example of one great poet recognising the power of poetry by another great poet. And Rabindranath's urgent message to us today would be to value and protect this 'unsurpassable' world. Owen has said, 'All a poet can do is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful', which is why rather than write about the glory and heroism of dying for one's country in a War, Owen has written about the pity of War in his poems. Owen's words are reflected in Rabindranath's work. Rabindranath too feels that writers and artists have a crucial role to play in society, especially in critical times. They cannot stand apart as mere observers and remain disengaged from the current reality. They are a society's conscience and voice.

Alan Wald in his review of Enzo Traverse's *Fire and Blood* (2016) has said

We are in an exceptionally new situation, but elements of older experiences may clarify our vision if one finds the proper means of access'.¹

So what role do writers and artists play in these exceptional times? Do they stand apart or do they engage with the times and reflect on 'older experiences' to 'clarify our vision' in order to understand how we have come to this or does the imaginary give them a window of opportunity to look to the future and ponder what lies ahead and consider how we can shape our future?

In 'The Religion of the Forest', Rabindranath says,

We stand before this great world. The truth of our life depends upon our attitude of mind towards it.... For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our own selves in it through expansion of sympathy, not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.²

His friend and educational collaborator, conservation architect and environmentalist, Patrick Geddes, shares a similar view when he says,

...the conservation of Nature, and...the increase of our accesses to her, must be stated more seriously and strongly than is customary. Not merely begged for on all grounds of amenity, of recreation, and repose, sound though these are, but insisted upon. On what

¹ Alan Wald, Review of Enzo Traverse's *Fire and Blood* (2016) in *Solidarity*, July-August, 2016.

² Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Religion of the Forest', in Ed. Sisir K. Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), Vol 2; Also see Eds. Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen, *A Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and the Environment* (Edinburgh: Luath Press 2017; Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Press, 2017).

grounds? In terms of the maintenance and development of life; of the life of youth, of the health of all....’³

Writers and artists have responded generously to a call from *Gitanjali and Beyond* to contribute to a special issue dedicated to the ‘extraordinary’ times we live in – to commemorate our global suffering, lest we forget. The response has been like a flock of starlings arriving on our horizon like so many missives of truth, hope and freedom – endorsing all that we hold precious, which writers and artists give ‘voice’ to in work that will stay beyond these strange times. In their pieces they have confirmed that we can renew and retain this planet and life on it through the ‘expansion of sympathy’ to ensure the ‘conservation of Nature’ in a new consciousness that proposes ‘The Unity of All Things.’

This issue comes with five sections: Prose, Poetry, Drama, Art and Reviews - albeit from a wide range of perspectives, which nevertheless share a deep concern for the sanctity of life. The Prose section includes memoirs, both of personal and professional experiences, a short story, and a translated text which are all reflective and moving in their honesty and originality. The poetry has flowed here in a steady stream that carries the ‘truth’ of poets’ responses to the past year and a continuing consciousness of a new reality, and reading them has been both exhilarating and restorative. The play with its multi-media approach is refreshingly innovative. The art work, which cannot be done full justice to in digital copies, still speaks for itself – being expressive and meditative in its visual appeal. The reviews that conclude the issue are of significant publications that have been published during these times when in-person book launches or readings have not been possible – so these critical analyses, with the creative pieces, affirm the power of words and images, for which we remain immensely grateful. We hope that this issue will prove to be enriching, enjoyable and restorative for all readers as it has been for us.

Bashabi Fraser, Chief Editor

Special note

We perceive the world by our senses, but it is in our mind and heart that we understand and feel it. Issue 5 of *Gitanjali and Beyond* explores this realisation creatively, at a time when humanity is caught in the cobweb of crisis ushered in by the Covid 19 pandemic. This issue, The Unity of All Things, brings together writers and artists expressing their perspectives in revelations which are illuminating, reinforcing Rabindranath’s idea of self-realisation that humanity is capable of. This issue shows that merely expressing concern is not the solution, as an underlying ethos

³ Patrick Geddes, ‘Ways to the Neotechnic City’ in *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (1915, Creative Media Partners, LLC., 2018); Also see Eds. Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen, *A Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and the Environment* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2017; Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati Press, 2017).

propels writers and artists to confront a crisis and protect culture in a celebration of the power of the imagination. This issue reinforces the need for an inclusive humanism that recognizes humankind as part of a continuum which, if jeopardized, brings peril.

Rabindranath Tagore in ‘Dharma’ states the need of the human soul is to be at one with the Supreme soul through which one can experience love – the love of universal-man in this universal human world.⁴ In a world wrecked by instances of hatred, Rabindranath would have understood the true meaning of ‘spiritualism’ which is love and fellowship, which helps us to know the ‘truth’. As an Associate Editor of *Gitanjali and Beyond* I feel this issue will touch every individual who wants to look forward to a better tomorrow as ‘whenever we see the welfare of man in any society, there is spiritual power behind it...[truth] has to be acquired through spiritual means’.⁵

Saptarshi Mallick, Associate Editor

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Essays on Aesthetics*. Trans. Amitabha Chaudhury (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2017), p. 263.

⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Pather Sanchay [Gleanings of the Road]*. Trans. Somdatta Mandal (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018), p. 15.