

## **Rabindranath Tagore: A visionary of future ‘sustainable development’**

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### **Abstract:**

Rabindranath Tagore’s concern for nature is well-discussed but his practical experience and experiments are not properly known. Tagore’s praise and worship of nature and natural objects, even the minute ones like dust particles (*dhulire dhanya karo*) are born out of a deep spirit of togetherness and feelings of a creational bond between human and nature. Nature is not a separate entity of human civilization rather we are all co-creatures in the world of creation. It is obvious that to forward life and make it richer, healthier and more educated there is no other way but to resort to technology and science. But Tagore wanted science to be taught along with India's own spiritual and philosophical knowledge, not just borrowing and copying from the west. Tagore cautioned against the unusual speed of industrialization, over production of consumable goods and rush for more higher standard of living, exploiting earth’s resources without adding value to the human soul. He urged that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthen and we are to assimilate them for our own sustenance. He introduced tree-plantation, afforestation in the form of festival at a time when there was no contemplation of nature conservation, green alert or ‘World Environment Day’ as now is propagated by United States. This essay attempts to explore how Tagore, visioned man and nature relationship for increasing the sustenance of human civilization which now is theorised as sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, sustainable development, environment, ecosystem

The term “sustainable development”, which gained prominence during the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently became a ubiquitous topic of discussion in various spheres of global discourse, has had a profound and enduring presence within the rich cultural and historical heritage of the Indian civilization. The notion was deep-rooted in different forms in our religion, rituals, folk culture, religious rites. In contemporary times, environmentalists continue to document the presence of tree species within sacred groves located in indigenous tribal habitats, species

previously declared extinct. This preservation is notably attributed to tribal practices that strictly prohibit the cutting of these trees.

The formal integration of sustainability as a mandated factor in public policy-making emerged in 1980 through the publication of the ‘World Conservation Strategy’ by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This first approach was not all pervading and was criticized for focusing on the preservation of habitats to the detriment of conjoined human activity. After 7 years in 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.<sup>1</sup>

A century ago, Rabindranath Tagore envisaged a perilous future marked by the looming imbalance in ecological systems because of the unbounded pursuit of human-made luxury and technological advancement and cautioned in his own way. He referred to the great civilizations in the West as well as in the East, which have flourished in past because, in his own words, “they produced food for the spirit of man for all time”,<sup>2</sup> these civilizations thrived on a foundation of faith in enduring ideals, a faith that possessed a profound creative essence. Tagore’s anxiety and fear of impending destruction found expression in the following lines:

These great civilizations were at last run to death by men of the type of our precocious schoolboys of modern times, smart and superficially critical, worshippers of self, shrewd bargainers in the market of profit and power, efficient in their handling of the ephemeral who presume to buy human souls with their money and throw them into their dustbins when they have been sucked dry, and who, eventually, driven by suicidal forces of passion, set their neighbours’ houses on fire and are themselves enveloped by the flame.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *UNO Sustainable Development Goals* <https://www.un.org/sustainable> [Accessed 1 July 2023]

<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Can Science Be Humanized?’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 164 – 165 (p. 164).

<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Can Science Be Humanized?’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 164 – 165 (p. 165).

Tagore's vision for Santiniketan as well as Sriniketan in terms of an integral structure for the well-being of the village and villagers as a societal unit carried towards what is now considered the four pillars of sustainable developments – environmental, economic, social, and cultural. He wrote:

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 rare suicide.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay I aim to explore Tagore's thoughts regarding sustainable development, a century before, not only academically but also through practical works or movements, he endeavoured.

Rabindranath Tagore was born and brought up in affluence and urbanity. His involvement with the sustainability of the river, the villages, the village folks, and the environment as a whole took a turn when at the insistence of Maharshi Debendranath he had to take over the management of the family estates at Shelidah, a small village on the bank of the river Padma in the district of (then) Nadia (now Bangladesh), far away from madding urban society. It remains intriguing as to why Maharshi selected his youngest son at early age (1890). Nevertheless, Tagore not only carried it out successfully what was asked on him, but also implemented a comprehensive system of community development within the villages under his supervision.

The river-centric life of India is a living cultural continuity since our ancient past. Our civilization is marked by the intricate interplay between the rivers, lands and the rhythmic existence of humanity built around its natural environment. Natural resources have been intimately entwined with the ebbs and flows of life's struggles and joys in this region. However, such vitality, began to face disruptions with the advent of initiatives for development. Eastern Bengal Railway, solely motivated by commercial interests, began laying railway tracks, inadvertently puncturing the fabric of village life, disrupting harmony and encroaching upon the riverine landscapes and ecosystems in and along the, adjoining areas of the rivers Gorai and Kali Ganga, a vital branch of the river Padma.

In particular, the Eastern Bengal Railway wanted to transport commodities from distant villages to the river docks for further conveyance to European markets. However, in doing so, they

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<sup>4</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Introduction' to Elmhirst's address, 'The Robbery of the Soil' in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

opted for solutions that satiated only their commercial needs. Rather than constructing river bridges over the river, that would preserve the natural flow, they ended up obstructing the flow of the river Kali Ganga by constructing an earthen dam on it, which ultimately choked the river.<sup>5</sup> It was Tagore, who initiated a historical protest against this destructive project towards the river, land, man and nature and developed a systematic documentation of the process, full of data, drawings, plan and maps as “Gorai Setu Kali Ganga Nathi” and submitted it to the British administration as a scheme – alternative, for better river-land management and preservation of ecology.<sup>6</sup> Although the British administration, for vested interests, ignored such an environmental scheme, this document was perhaps the first ever Indian river-environmental document for protecting river, land, and ecology.

Tagore's play, *Muktadhārā* (*The Waterfall*, 1922) though published decades after this, was the extreme expression of the jeopardy of the life of the river and it's hitting back towards an environmental as well as economic and human misery. Tagore held a deep appreciation for scientific progress, yet, he harboured reservations regarding the mechanized civilization that seemed to stand against nature and a balanced human-nature relationship. The disquieting consequences of this so-called development is expressed in the following lines of *The Waterfall*, translated by Tagore himself.

Messenger from the Crown-prince said that people of Shiu-tarai cannot believe that any man can deprive them of the water, gift of God...

Bibhuti: I had not the time to trouble my mind about what would happen to some wretched maize fields of some wretched cultivator in some place or other...My mind is occupied with the contemplation of the majesty of the Machine...when labourers became scarce in Uttarakut, I had all the young men of over eighteen years of age from every house of Pattana village brought out by the king's command, and a great number of them never returned to their homes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arunendu Banerjee, *Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes*. (Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2005), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Banerjee, 2005, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Rabindranath Tagore. 'The Waterfall' in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. II, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014), pp. 163 – 207 (p. 167).

Tagore cautioned the future generation through his two politically symbolical plays *Muktadhārā* and *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleander*, 1924) against the exploitation of earth's resources: the first one on damming river while the later on digging mines. Ananda Lal writes,

It is chastening that, though Tagore raised these issues nearly a century ago, only in recent times has the world begun to rethink the value of massive dams and to realize the havoc caused by open mining.<sup>8</sup>

Tagore wrote,

What I object to is the artificial arrangement by which foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind, and thus kills, or hampers, the opportunity for the creation of a new thought – power by a new combination of truths. It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthened, not to resist the western culture, but truly to accept and assimilate it; to use it for our sustenance, not as our burden; to get mastery over this culture, and not to live on its outskirts as the hewers of texts and drawers of book-learning.<sup>9</sup>

Tagore's creativity in sustainable development at the backdrop of man-nature relationship and unique experiment of rural welfare in Santiniketan is well-discussed. But, an account, not so well-known, is what motivated him to plan an experiment of rural reconstruction in a remote corner of Bengal, Shelidah and Patisar, single-handed with his own resources is worth mentioning.

The land around Patisar was inundated every year and only paddy could grow under such conditions. Tagore was anxious for improving agriculture. His concerns are evident from the letter he wrote to his officer at Patisar,

Please encourage them to grow in their homestead land, on the boundaries of the fields and wherever possible, pineapple, banana, date palm and other fruit trees. Good and strong fibres can be obtained from the leaves of pineapples. The fruit is also easily marketable. Tapioca

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<sup>8</sup> Ananda Lal. 'Rabindranath Tagore Drama and Performance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 102 – 130 (p. 106).

<sup>9</sup> Rabindranath Tagore. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. II, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014), p. 565.

can be grown as hedges and the tenants should be taught how to extract food material from its roots. It would be profitable if they could be induced to cultivate potatoes. Try again to sow the seeds of the American maize which have been kept in the office.<sup>10</sup>

Tagore took an active part in the political movement during the partition of Bengal, composed songs, poetry, delivered lectures, contributed a series of essays in the monthly magazine *Banga Darshan*. But at the core he was not a political leader, but a thinker of creative personality, and realized that the best way to combat an alien political power would be to ignore it and to establish a self-governing community in the villages. Key to *swaraj* lay in improving the economic condition of the masses living in the villages of India. With this motivation he took the following measures:

1. Scientific method of agriculture (Is this not surprising that a century back when affluent Indians were sending their sons abroad for achieving degrees in ICS, bar-at-law, Rabindranath Tagore sent his son Rathindranath Tagore and his friend Santosh Majumdar to study agriculture at the University of Illinois, USA)
2. Establishing and maintenance of schools and dispensaries
3. Constructing roads
4. Filling up stagnant pools and excavating tanks
5. Rescue the trapped village folks from the clutches of money lenders

Tagore concentrated his efforts at Patisar, headquarter of Kaligram Paragana which consisted of an area of nearly 70 sq. miles (150,000 *bighas*) with 60,000 - 70,000 people living in 125 villages.<sup>11</sup> Tagore, for an efficient management, divided the estate into three zones (*bibhagas*), each with a self-governing organization but federated to a central administrative body called the *Hitaishi Sabha*. He introduced three elected posts: village headman, *Pradhan* and *Pancha Pradhans*. To meet the expenses, a general fund was made from the compulsory levy of 3 pies for every rupee

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<sup>10</sup> Rathindranath Tagore. 'Father as I knew him', in *A Century Volume: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1961*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986), pp. 48 – 58 (p. 55).

<sup>11</sup> Rathindranath Tagore. 'Father as I knew him', in *A Century Volume: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1961*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986), pp. 48 – 58 (p. 53).

paid as rent by them, later this ‘self-imposed betterment tax’ increased to 15 pies per rupee. Tagore also started an agricultural bank at Patisar to sustain the bankrupt cultivators.

Tagore writes to Lady Abala Bose from Patisar around 1908 after establishing *Hitaishi Sabha*:

Arrangement has been made so that the villagers should be able to undertake welfare measures themselves by repairing roads, removing the dearth of water, settling their disputes by arbitration, establishing schools, clearing jungles, providing against famines by setting up *Dharma-golas* (grain bags), etc. and in every way to contribute their own share in the welfare of the village in which they belong.<sup>12</sup>

Sustainability, to Tagore, was inter-disciplinary, focusing on every sphere of life, be it religious, cultural, or spiritual. He reminded us several times that the problem of poverty is only second to the ever-growing needs of humankind, which leads to overall unhappiness. “It is the problem of unhappiness that is the great problem”.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Tagore did not deny the necessity of wealth, but at the same time he reminded us that search for wealth is the synonym for the production and collection of things, if used ruthlessly “can crash life out of earth”<sup>14</sup>. Happiness may not compete with wealth, but it is creative and has its own source of riches within itself. To bring happiness, rather, “to flood the choked bed of village life with streams of happiness”<sup>15</sup> he called for the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists, as well as the scientists to offer their contributions to make a world, self-sustaining, independent, rich with ever renewing life.

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<sup>12</sup> Rathindranath Tagore. ‘Father as I knew him’, in *A Century Volume: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1961*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1986), pp. 48 – 58 (p. 54).

<sup>13</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Introduction’ to Elmhirst’s address, ‘The Robbery of the Soil’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

<sup>14</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Introduction’ to Elmhirst’s address, ‘The Robbery of the Soil’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

<sup>15</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Introduction’ to Elmhirst’s address, ‘The Robbery of the Soil’ in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 181).

Tagore was in favour of cottage industry for economic growth. He observed that the tillers of Patisar remained busy with agricultural works for a few months only, at that time, paddy was the only crop. He wished to introduce handicrafts so that they can earn during the idle months. He, first, started a weaving school at Patisar and later undertook several projects like pisciculture, pottery, making of umbrella etc. what today we call ‘environment-friendly’ and of course sustainable for both nature and man. It is a pressing concern of present day that heavy industries not only displace thousands of people from their places of origin, leading to an increase in marginalized populations, but also contribute significantly to global warming. Recent media coverage has shed light on how the lives of hundreds of migrant labourers were ruined while coming back to their homes during the pandemic. This phenomenon is not confined to pandemics alone, but this encompasses a broader trend where rural communities are compelled to seek employment in the city, primarily as labourers in ambitious construction projects. Despite labour regulations in place, some never return, and we, as modern individuals, akin to Bibhuti, the royal engineer, fail to pay due attention to this complex issue.

Tagore’s love for the river is well known and expressed in his songs and poems. He was mesmerized with the greatness and beauty of Padma, Ganga, Meghna, and when leaving these riverine lands and settled in Santiniketan, he equally appreciated the wild beauty of the dry ravine, known locally as Khowai (eroded tract) and rivulet Kopai:

Ekhan amar pratibeshini Kopai nadi

Prachin gotrer garima nei taar

Anarya tar naam khani

Kato kaler santhal narir hasya mukhar

Kala bhasar sange jarito

I have for my neighbour the tiny river Kopai

She lacks the distinction of ancient lineage

The primitive name of hers is mixed up with the loud laughing prattle of the Santhal



women of countless ages.<sup>16</sup>

The environmentalists are now appreciating the importance of the little streams and rivulets in carrying forward the ecological as well as economic development of the vast rural India.

Tagore scientifically identified the very fundamental environmental function of a flowing stream,

The river flows-all its waters are not used up in our bathing, drinking, and in growing our autumnal rice. The largest part of its water is meant to keep the river flowing ever on. Even without carrying out any other tasks, there is great significance in maintaining its flow.<sup>17</sup>

Today scientists are talking of ecological imbalance and its impact on changing of the weather and atmosphere. In this regard Tagore wrote,

Streams, lakes, and oceans are there on this earth. They exist not for hoarding of water exclusively each within its own area. They send up the vapour which forms into clouds and helps in a wide distribution of water.<sup>18</sup>

Sustainable development in Tagore's views is all encompassing, not only environmental or economic, it also cultural, social, and religious development. Tagore himself composed around 2500 songs and assimilated and improvised musical tunes and notes from traditional songs (like kirtans, folk songs (even Scottish folk tunes are found in Rabindra sangeet) and others and gave a unique orientation. He was much influenced by the *bauls* and the *baul* songs. Music is one of the components of our culture and tradition. Tagore affirms,

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<sup>16</sup> S. P. Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore and the World*. (Kolkata: Sadesh, 2006), p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> S. P. Das Gupta, 2006, pp. 129 - 130.

<sup>18</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Introduction' to Elmhirst's address, 'The Robbery of the Soil' in *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and Environment*, ed. by Bashabi Fraser, Tapati Mukherjee and Amrit Sen. (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2018), pp. 175 – 181 (p. 180).

In the centre of Indian culture which I am proposing, music and art must have their prominent seats of honour, and not to be given merely a tolerant nod of recognition.<sup>19</sup>

He emphasized to study the different systems of music and different schools of art which lay scattered in the different ages and also in different provinces of India and in the different strata of the society. In Santiniketan, he introduced art school and various art forms for students, invited famous artists like Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Bej, Kasahara, whose art works still remain there. He introduced ‘dance within Bengali culture’, revived and started Manipuri dance classes along with other dance forms.

Viswa Bharati campus architecture is also the landmark of Tagore’s innovation in environmental, art and architecture. This not only revived Indian architectural heritage but also environmentally sound economical and locally available but strong and simple in aesthetic expression. The buildings, *Udichi*, *Shyamali*, *Udayan*, *Mrinmoyee* are unique in nature and visual expression. There are some wonderful examples of mud architecture, conversant with climatic conditions, low-cost functional interiors. These houses represent the blend of the Mughal art, oriental art and architecture, Indian traditional architecture including Buddhist pillars and traditional mud houses.

Earlier we have referred to the four pillars for sustainable development, environmental, economic, social, and cultural. Tagore’s innovative ideas, practical experiment, and overall, his love and passion for a holistic and joyful life not only inspired his literary works but also led him to initiate projects that were eco-friendly and conducive to sustaining life. The festivals he initiated in Santiniketan, *halakarshan*, *briksharopan*, or *poush parbon* – exemplify his commitment to social responsibility towards the preservation of nature’s ecosystems, use of renewable resources and focus on sustainable development. These initiatives were not perceived as mere tasks but were imbued with love, expressed through music, poetry and dance, reflecting Tagore’s dedication to a harmonious connection with the environment.

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<sup>19</sup> Rabindranath Tagore. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* Vol. II, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014), p. 567

Before his demise in May 1941, his addresses were full of agony but with the hope of new world,

As I look around, I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet, I shall not commit the graver sin of losing faith in man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere is rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice. Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the east, where the sun rises.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> S. P. Das Gupta, 2006, p. 167.

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