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Tagore's

APPROACH TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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Dr. SASADHAR SINHA

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PREFACE

“Tagore’s Approach to Social Problems” has grown out of a long essay I wrote in 1942 for a symposium on Rabindranath Tagore which was to have been published in England. My principal aim in writing this book has been to bring together his leading ideas on contemporary social questions in order to throw light on an important aspect of the poet’s personality. My other purpose is to trace a basic pattern of his social philosophy which makes it a harmonious whole. The wide sweep of Tagore’s mind is well-known, but unfortunately the pioneering character of much of his social thinking has not yet received adequate recognition from our people. He went deeply into the roots of many of our social evils and brought a keen historic sense to bear on them. By viewing the problem of India’s freedom in its historical and social context Tagore thus gave our struggle for national emancipation a new direction and purpose which had previously been lacking in our leaders. The essence of his social philosophy lies in his insistence on rationality

lity which is also the basis of his belief in science and scientific methods. Unlike others, he was convinced from the outset that the formidable social impediments to our national progress could be removed only by approaching them scientifically. The appropriateness of this approach to India's many social problems in this reconstructive phase of her evolution will impress all serious minds. And finally, Tagore set before the country a national ideal to overcome our social and economic backwardness. It was an ideal of perfection through creative effort.

Calcutta,
October 18, 1947.

Sasadhar Sinha.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BACKGROUND

THE life of Rabindranath Tagore spans the whole epoch of modern India. The main phases of the new awakening are reflected in his personal development. A correct understanding of his social philosophy thus assumes an adequate knowledge of the recent history of the Indian people. By epitomising and anticipating in himself the significant moods and tendencies of his age, Tagore has given meaning and direction to the national evolution. He is one of the principal architects of the Indian renaissance. No other Indian symbolises its spirit so completely.

The poet was born within a few years of the Indian Mutiny. This was not only the first open revolt against foreign rule, but also a turning-point in the life of his people. It was the Great Divide which had shaken India to its foundations. Notwithstanding the violence of

the revolutionary situation and the demoralisation consequent upon defeat, a radical change had come upon the country. It was a slow change and its full potentialities have still to unfold.

For the first time after a lapse of centuries, Indians once more felt conscious of their national identity. This feeling has brought to them, with the shock of a revelation, the consciousness of their great past as well as pride in their own powers.

The first great Indian to understand the implications of the New Age was Raja Ram-mohan Roy. From his earliest contacts with the West he had come to realise that if India was to play a worthy part in the contemporary world, she must not only remain true to her great past, but she must also move with the times. His love of liberty, religious liberalism and advocacy of modern education, as well as the cause of women were all integral to his unique personality. He looked at the Indian problem in its total aspect and to this comprehensive vision all great modern movements in India owe their beginning.

As elsewhere, the new spirit began with

religion and has gradually spread over the whole of Indian life. In the words of Tagore, Rammohan Roy

“tried to open the channel of spiritual life which had been obstructed for many years by the sands and debris of creeds that were formal and materialistic, fixed in external practices lacking spiritual significance. * * * People who cling to an ancient past have their pride in the antiquity of their accumulations, in the sublimity of time-honoured walls around them. They grow nervous and angry with some spirit, some lover of truth, who breaks open the enclosure and floods it with the sunshine of thought and the breath of life. Ideas cause movement, and all movements forward they consider to be a menace against their warehouse security.” (*My Life*—a lecture delivered in China in 1924.)

The great movement for religious reform inspired by the Raja was revolutionary in its significance. Its vehicle was the *Brahmo Samaj*, led for many decades by the poet's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. It was a society of Hindu protestants who admirably combined in themselves the militancy of the scientific outlook with a deep reverence for the purer tradition of their own culture. Out of

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this happy marriage between tradition and progress arose a galaxy of Indians who have laid modern India under their debt. The pre-eminence of Tagore and the significance of his genius lie in the fact that he carried forward the synthetic outlook of Rammohan Roy into the modern period and built it up on a broader foundation. He was the great creative link between the old and the new.

The second half of the nineteenth century had seen the rapid disintegration of the old Indian society. Until the advent of the British, its autonomous rural fabric had lent it security and stability. In the past changes of sovereignty did not involve a change in the economic structure of the country. This indeed provides the key to the unbroken continuity of India's civilization and cultural tradition. The rise of industrialism in the West, its superior technique of production had given the Western countries, particularly Great Britain, a tremendous aggressive strength which finally encompassed the political and economic overwhelming of India. Political conquest and economic disintegration of Indian society went hand in hand. The first organised effort to

arrest this process found expression in the great Sepoy Mutiny. Its failure, however, did not mean the end of national self-assertion. The basis of the struggle had changed and its technique called for readjustment to the new situation.

The rise of Indian nationalism, the movements for religious reform, the birth of new Indian literatures, the changed outlook on education and economic development—all reflected the deeper material and spiritual changes that had overtaken Indian life. At the beginning, these currents of thought and activity followed their separate independent channels. They were still inchoate and hesitant, lacking a unifying principle. Few people realised that this steady quickening of activity in diverse directions arose from the same fundamental urge for national self-expression. Tagore's life and writings provide a singular example of this unity of theme and purpose of national life and effort. True to the tradition of Raja Rammohan Roy, he was never an exclusive votary of the Muses. His all-embracing vision surveyed the whole of contemporary life.

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The poet grew up in a family which was at once ancient and modern. Its modernism was tempered by the deep religious and cultural tradition of its Indian past. To this blend of the old and the new, Tagore owed the poise of his personality, his detachment, the ability to accept the modern age without being overwhelmed by it. Indeed, what he once wrote about Raja Rammohan Roy is equally true of himself :

“Ram Mohun Roy could be perfectly natural in his acceptance of the West, only because his education had been perfectly Eastern—he had the full inheritance of the Indian wisdom. He was never a schoolboy of the West, and therefore he had the dignity to be a firm friend of the West.”
(*Letters to a Friend.*)

The strong conservative trait in his character is thus as much a part of himself as the modernity of his spirit. He was the essential liberal who saw the need for change, but only in the shape of reform. This may be accounted for partly by his own position in the social hierarchy and partly by the influence on him of European liberalism, exercised chiefly through English literature. But in a large measure this outlook

was undoubtedly the outcome of a definite philosophical attitude. No change, in his opinion, is creative and enduring which does not follow from a change of human psychology. "Any teaching concerning man," he says, "must have human nature for its chief element. How far it will harmonise with human nature is a matter of time." (*Rashiar Chithi.*)

True, the romantic temperament of a poet had sometimes led him to indulge in revolutionary fancy, but his innate conservatism soon got the better of a passing aberration. Fundamentally his genius was constructive, not destructive, even when destruction meant the first essential step to construction. Tagore was a liberal and not a revolutionary.

His social philosophy was thus an evolutionary philosophy. It conceived of social change as gradual, the result of slow adaptation. At the same time it was a synthetic philosophy which viewed life's processes as a unitary phenomenon embracing the whole range of human activity. He was fully conscious of the contemporary evils of India—ignorance, poverty, disease, social degradation and above all political subjection. And with his natural keenness, he

had brought his mind to bear on every one of these problems. In social matters his analysis was always original, often deeply penetrating, but, as was to be expected, his conclusions rarely overcame the limitations set by his basic approach to social problems.

Three consequences followed from this social philosophy. Tagore's main emphasis was always on social evils. Unlike the other leaders of the national awakening, he held these as primarily responsible for India's political and economic backwardness. Having correctly diagnosed that India's social disintegration was due to the break-up of her age-old institutions, he had drawn the necessary conclusion that the remedy must be found in the resurrection of the country's rural economy—the foundation of India's social life.

Education came next in his scale of emphasis. The ignorance of the vast masses of the Indian people provides a glaring contrast to the peoples of the West. From his personal observations of the countryside in his young days, he had derived a close view of the immense sufferings of the villagers. These were often caused by their superstitious ignorance and lack of mutual

co-operation. The removal of ignorance by education thus became one of the main passions of his life.

The third consequence was that in spite of his early association with the political struggle of his country, politics did not claim his major attention. Throughout his life, however, he never ceased to take an active interest in all contemporary political events.

CHAPTER TWO

SELF-CRITICISM

The uniqueness of Tagore's contribution to Indian social thinking lies in the fact that he was one of the first moderns to engage in self-criticism. "Charity begins at home" was not an idle precept with him, although it must be admitted that in this matter he began with an advantage. The protestant atmosphere of his own home gave his mind an objectivity on social questions which his less fortunate contemporaries wholly lacked. Profoundly religious himself, he was completely free from religious superstitions. He was only too conscious of the havoc they had wrought in his countrymen. With all his powers of persuasion and invective he has therefore laid bare the traditional social order of Hinduism. To the merciless flagellation of his tongue and pen he has exposed those of his countrymen who misuse their talents to resurrect outworn social forms and customs by the aid of science. For, it must never be forgotten, this is by no means a negligible factor in the persistence of social

conservatism in India. In the awakening of the country, the two trends are clearly discernible : one radical trying to break down all obstacles in the path of social progress, and the other clinging to outmoded social norms and usages, justifying them by pseudo-scientific interpretation. Religious revivalism everywhere shares this characteristic.

Undeniably, economic and political backwardness and administrative indifference, peculiar to India, have largely contributed to this retrogressive outlook, but some responsibility must also lie with the religious revivalists. For this reason, the poet, although an advocate of rural rehabilitation, had a wholesome loathing for every form of rusticity, which is another name for meaningless ritual and customs.

“When I wish our villages to revive,” he wrote from Russia in 1930, “I never wish for the return of rusticity. Rusticity is a species of superstition and education, intellect, belief and activity, which is unrelated to anything outside the village limits. It is not only distinct from the spirit of the modern age, but opposed to it.”

Thus, while respecting the classic virtues associated with the Hindu social organisation,

he was a severe critic of the caste system. It is, in his opinion, an anachronism. Caste has lost its social function. The great need for India now is inner cohesion which the old caste organisation has failed to achieve.

“In trying to avoid collisions she (i. e. India) set up boundaries of immovable walls, thus giving to her numerous races the negative benefit of peace and order but not the positive opportunity of expansion and movement * * * Therefore Life departed from her social system and in its place she is worshipping with all ceremony the magnificent cage of countless compartments that she has manufactured.” (*Nationalism*.)

His views on inter-religious or communal issues were for the same reason marked by a breadth of vision which contrasts refreshingly with those of the orthodox leaders. To Tagore's mind religion is a reconciler, not a divider, and he was wont to hark back to medieval India for inspiration. In a letter to his friend C. F. Andrews he wrote :

“Love of God in the hearts of the mediaeval saints of India—Kabir and Nanak—came down in showers of human love, drowning the border-lines of separation between Hindus and Mussulmans.”

Again :

“Formalism in religion is like nationalism in politics ; it breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution. Our medieval saints, through their light of love and inner perception of truth, could realize the spiritual unity of man. To them, the innumerable barriers of formalism had no existence. Therefore, the mutually antagonistic creed of Hindus and Muhammedans, irreconcilable as they seemed, did not baffle them. Our faith in truth has its trial in the apparent difficulty of its realization.”

(*Letters to a Friend.*)

In a remarkable Foreword to Professor Kshitimohan Sen's "Medieval Mysticism", the poet wrote :

“But India has a *sadhana* of her own and it belongs to her innermost heart. Throughout all her political vicissitudes its stream has flowed on. A wonderful feature of this has been that it does not glide along any embankment of scriptural sanctions, and the influence of scholasticism on it, if any, is very small. In fact, the *sadhana* has mostly been unscriptural and not controlled by social laws of any kind. Its spring is within the innermost heart of the people whence it has gushed forth in its spontaneity and broken through the barriers of rules, prescriptive as well as proscriptive. Most of

the persons from whose heart this spring has come forth belong to the masses and whatever they have realised and expressed was not 'by means of intellect or much learning of the sacred lore' (*na medhaya na bahuna srutena.*)

He realised that religious problems assume political importance only when the foundations of social life had been disturbed. That is why Tagore never tired of reminding his countrymen, both Hindu and Muslim, that a fundamental readjustment of their relations was not to be sought in mutual segregation nor in the exercise of special privileges, but in finding, as of old, a basis on which all Indians could meet for one common social purpose. In his presidential address at a Conference held in Calcutta on July 15, 1936, he discussed the Communal Award in the following terms :

"This is the first red signal of danger presaging a fatal collision between neighbouring communities whose duty it is to create a comprehensive life of common welfare.....But any biased treatment from an alien source that is not expected to have natural sympathy and unselfish concern for the country can only emphasise these differences into a mortal mischief. Let us have the far-sighted wisdom to know that concessions acquired through

a prudent patronage are always demoralising, both for those who are fortunate and those who are deprived. They will create complications that will perpetually irritate each other and in the long run never serve those who have been helped to an easy path of profit. We, who belong to the same soil, must for the sake of a civilized existence and ultimately for bare self-protection cultivate mutual friendliness, and both the parties should rise above all immediate provocations and allurements, and should distrust the elements, foreign and indigenous, that sow living thorns in their path of fellowship."

These prophetic words, uttered over a decade ago, are now being tragically borne out. The poison tree of communal patronage is yielding its deadly fruit. Bitterness between the communities has reached a point at which their co-existence becomes increasingly difficult. The perpetual irritations, of which the poet spoke, have not only broken up Bengal, the home of Indian nationalism, but also frustrated the ambitions of "those who have been helped to an easy path of profit." The success of unprincipled opportunism often blinds those who are its immediate beneficiaries, but to Tagore social laws are immutable. They have a fundamental moral basis and any departure from it must sooner or later have its revenge.

“Let us have the far-sighted wisdom,” he truly said, “to know that concessions acquired through a prudent patronage are always demoralising, both for those who are fortunate and those who are deprived.” Herein lies the true pathos of the situation in Bengal. Her social life has been cruelly shaken. Demoralisation has overtaken all strata of society. Frustration has become endemic, which makes it impossible for the people of this province to make any significant contribution, politically or otherwise, at a time of supreme national crisis. “We, who belong to the same soil must,” as Tagore had warned the country, “for the sake of a civilized existence and ultimately for *bare self-protection* (italics ours) cultivate mutual friendliness, and both the parties should rise above all immediate provocations and allurements, and should distrust the elements, foreign and indigenous, that sow living thorns in their path of fellowship.” In retrospect, this warning assumes a melancholy significance which will not be lost upon the Bengali people as a whole.

India's history, the poet insisted, was essentially a history of race reconciliation and the meeting of faiths. It was the history of the

world in a miniature, and the process of unification is still not at an end. In the past, Hinduism attempted this synthesis by the device of the caste system, an organisation of social hierarchy. It had sought extension at the cost of inner cohesion. Indeed, even the coming of Islam, a rival religion, into India had not seriously challenged the old social order. As long as the economic organisation of Hinduism held together a basis of mutual accommodation was soon discovered.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEW CHALLENGE

But to-day the challenge is of a different order. With the main pivot of the former stability gone, society is in decay. The forces of disintegration are thus to be found not only in inter-communal differences, but also in differences within the communities, in the conflict between men and women. With his maturing mind Tagore had come to understand that maladjustment of all human relations arose from the same root—the loss of social balance.

It is interesting to observe that the poet's instinctive sympathy for women, shown with such tenderness and passion in his writings, at first lacked any definite intellectual stand, but gradually grew into a positive outlook. The element of pity was the dominant note in his early works, which idealised women, sympathised with their sufferings, appealed to man's sense of justice, but never really questioned the underlying assumptions of society in regard to woman's position. The complementary character of women in the social arrangement

was stressed, but it was still the passive role, not the active partnership claimed by modern women.

It is not improbable that his vision was at times blurred by what he believed was happening in the West. There undoubtedly exists a latent as well as an open opposition between men and women in the Western world. This often leads to confused thinking. Equality claimed by Western women sometimes ignores the complementary social functions of men and women; it assumes a false identity of their roles, which has destroyed or at any rate undermined social harmony.

"And thus," writes Tagore, "there where co-operation is natural has intruded competition. The very psychology of men and women about their mutual relations is changing and becoming the psychology of the primitive fighting elements, rather than of humanity seeking its completeness through the union based upon mutual self-surrender. For the elements which have lost the living bond of reality have lost the meaning of their existence. Like gaseous particles forced into a narrow space, they come into continual conflict with each other till they burst the very arrangement which holds them in bondage." (*Nationalism.*)

The truth, however, is that far from decrying

the demand for the equality of woman with man, Tagore advocated a further broadening of its basis. In one of his more recent essays he wrote :

"I feel that a new age is upon us. For a long time the guidance of human civilization was in the hands of man. While he was building up its political, economic and social structure, woman remained in obscurity, busy with her household duties. This is a one-sided civilization in which the riches of the human heart have suffered an eclipse * * * In this exclusively man-made civilization, lack of harmony constantly threatens it with a calamitous end ; * * * violent earthquakes shake the foundations of the old order. The causes of its disruption have been accumulating for ages ; nothing can stop its disintegration. It is a matter for great reassurance, however, that at the end of an epoch, women everywhere are getting ready to take up the task of creating a new civilization." (*Nari*, an address in Bengali, written for the All Bengal Women Workers' Conference, 1936.)

A similar observation may be made in his attitude towards the masses of the people. He had always felt for them, pitied them and taken the upper classes to task for neglecting their duties towards them. Indeed, he had even tried to bring his own share of contribution to

improve the lot of the underdogs in society. But never having questioned the basic social arrangement, he had found no satisfactory solution for their problems. True to his own inner development, however, he began to recognise the fact that no permanent good could be done to them by mere charity.

“But the trouble is,” the poet significantly remarks, “that nothing permanent can be built up on charity ; to try to do good from without is vitiated at every step. Only from equals can one expect real help. I have not been able to think it all out satisfactorily, but to assume that progress can be maintained only by keeping down the bulk of humanity and denying them their human rights is a reproach to the mind.

“Man cannot do good to those whom he does not respect. No sooner is one’s self-interest at stake than a clash arises. A radical solution of this problem is being sought in Russia.” (*Rashiar Chithi.*)

As already mentioned, Tagore’s interest in economic problems arose primarily from his own early experiences. When through the accident of family circumstances he first came into contact with the rural population, the old village economy still retained its traditional character. The age-old dichotomy of India’s political and social

organisation was thus borne in upon him through personal knowledge. As he says :

“ * * * the seat of life of different civilizations is differently placed in the body politic. Where the responsibility for the welfare of the people lies, there beats the heart of the nation ; and if a blow should fall thereon, the whole nation is wounded unto death. In England the overthrow of the State would mean the destruction of the nation. But disaster can only overtake our country when its social body, its *samaj*, is crippled. That is why we never staked our all to resist a change of sovereignty, but clung with might and main to the freedom of our *samaj*.”
(Swadeshi Samaj, in *Greater India*.)

It was a pluralistic conception of society which stood between the State and the Individual. The autonomous village communities at once gave the individual economic security and protection against the State.

The advent of British rule in India connoted a violent break with the past. For the first time the monistic conception of the Western State was superimposed on Indian society placing the Individual and the State in direct opposition. This signified a revolutionary change in the entire legal basis of individual and social relations. The village communities became atomised

and the individual lost his former political and economic safeguards. On the other hand, the reversal of the older economic relations between Britain and India also dealt a mortal blow to the balanced character of the Indian rural economy. A far-reaching change took place in the system of land-tenure in the country. The actual tiller of the soil forfeited his independence. The land no longer belonged to him. Between the demands of the landlord, the State and the money-lender, the impoverishment of the peasantry grew apace and increasing numbers of peasants swelled the ranks of landless labourers.

At the same time, the absence of industrial development has resulted in the overcrowding of agriculture, while foreign competition has killed village handicrafts. Mass destitution, hunger and backwardness provide the background of the rural India of today.

As a *zemindar* himself, the poet had first-hand knowledge of the hardship and helplessness of the country people. He was aware of the causes at work as well as of the fact that the clock of history could not be put back. He was not content, however, to sit back and throw up his hands in despair. Hence from the earliest

days he directed his public efforts mainly towards linking the economic problems of the countryside with the political struggle of the Indian people. The solution of the agrarian problem was the crucial task for him.

For this pioneer thinking, Tagore received no gratitude from his contemporaries, although today it is the commonplace of all serious politics among Indians. As President of the Bengal Provincial Conference in 1908, he voiced the needs of his people thus :

“In this connection I would appeal to *xemindars*. Unless they put their hearts into the matter of giving fresh life to the village the work can never be thoroughly done. Let them not be afraid that the returning strength of the *ryot* will be a menace to their self-interest. To seek to remove all obstacles in the way of irresponsible dominion is like carrying dynamite in one's pocket,—when chaos comes the arm of oppression smites back the carrier. Let the *ryots* be strong, so that even the temptation to oppress may not exist. Is the *xemindar* a shopkeeper, that he should calculate only his petty takings? Unless he sedulously cultivates his ancestral privilege of giving he will soon find the remnants of his power departed.” (The One Nationalist Party, in *Greater India*.)

This was the beginning of his interest in

the idea of co-operation. Like the Irish poet George Russell (AE), Tagore also firmly believed that the poverty, disease, depopulation, joylessness and backwardness of the rural areas could and should be removed by co-operative efforts.

“The time has come,” he wrote in this period, “when co-operative methods must step in and prevent the results of our labour from sliding down that inclined plane which leads into the foreigners’ granary. Modern labour-saving appliances must be freely utilised and this cannot be done without combination.”

This was a completely new and constructive note at a time when the economic and political activities of the Indian national leaders largely consisted in verbal agitation. In the essay *The way to get it done*, he wrote as early as 1905: “Where getting depends, not on the earning of the recipient, but on the generosity of the giver, it is twice accurst—it spoils him that takes and him that gives.” To this view he remained loyal to his dying day.

At Sriniketan (the Institute of Rural Reconstruction) connected with the Visva-Bharati, co-operation forms the corner-stone of its activities. “I pray for the victory of the

co-operative principle," the poet wrote from Soviet Russia in 1930, "for it recognises human nature in not scorning the desire and opinion of the co-operators. Nothing succeeds by antagonising human nature." One may or may not agree with his definition of "human nature", but there is no gainsaying the fact that co-operation is bound to occupy a foremost place in India's economic rehabilitation. It should be observed, however, that Tagore was under no illusion about the so-called co-operation sponsored in India by an alien government. Such co-operation, in his opinion, is a kind of glorified money-lending, which scarcely touches the main rural problems. "The regrettable thing is that until now co-operation in Bengal has lost itself solely in money-lending ; * * * it has been of no service to the task of production and consumption." (*Rashiar Chithi.*) This remark receives added significance when one recalls the fact that co-operative credit reaches only one per cent of the total agricultural population of India, and that too the relatively wealthier section ! Co-operation passes by the poorest and the neediest.

Neither the provision of cheap credit nor

the principle of sound banking was the chief interest of Tagore in co-operation. His principal pre-occupation was the educative principle of co-operation—its moral aspect. The encouragement of self-help and mutual trust among the ignorant masses were for him the supreme test of successful co-operation. Thus he says :

“We must perhaps shamefully admit that the qualities which make co-operation easy are lacking in our character. Mutual trust is feeble in those who are themselves weak. Indeed, absence of self-esteem is the basis of disrespect for others. Loss of self-respect from long servitude has culminated in this degradation. They will accept with bowed head the rule of their masters, but cannot tolerate the guidance of their own class. * * * However difficult the solution, there is no other way ; nature must be corrected by creating opportunities for combining the forces of mind and body. It is not by granting co-operative credit but by combined effort, thereby making the villages co-operation-minded, that we shall save the villages.”

The ideal that he held before the rural communities was one modern in spirit and co-operative in activity. “Villages must be infused with life which is neither trivial nor narrow ; which neither dwarfs human nature nor

keeps it in darkness. * * * I want our villages to enjoy full human dignity and wealth instead of being content with the leavings and surplus of the towns." This is one of the reasons why he so hopefully looked to the Soviet efforts to do away with the artificial separation of the town and the country.

It is evident that, although the advocacy of collective action did not meet with immediate response from the public, his ideas have exercised a deep influence on recent Indian developments. The economic problem is thus no longer an agitational issue with responsible Indian leaders. The entire struggle for national liberation is now conceived in terms of the economic freedom of the toiling masses.

On visiting the USSR in 1930, he exclaimed with delight: "The vain picture of national education, our heart's desire, which I dared not draw even on the canvas of mirage is here a reality stretched from horizon to horizon!" In the eyes of the poet, education was the great liberating force to which all others were subordinate. For this reason, he looked upon it first and foremost as a personal matter, a problem of individual development. But as his experience

grew, he came increasingly to recognise its social significance, its value as a vehicle of progress. "In the absence of education, weakness becomes immobile" was his characteristic way of expressing this idea.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KEY TO SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

Originating with his unhappy school days, education constituted in his later life the essence of his social philosophy. He had propounded no startling theory nor novel method. His ideas on education were essentially the intuitive response of a highly sensitive mind to life's problems, which stood above all for a rounded personality.

In 1901, when he founded his school at Santiniketan, his first object was to spare his own children and those of his friends the misery he had endured in his schooldays. "And I know what it was," he was to write later, "to which the School owes its origin. It was no new theory of education, but the memory of my schooldays." (*My School.*) Thus, although ostensibly he advocated no new theory of education, he did have a theory and a method, which have set Indian educationists on new trails.

Indeed, his first educational discovery was that the human child abstracted from his natural surroundings could not grow into full manhood.

The fragmentary nature of his development is therefore not only a derogation of his personality, but also a source of social disequilibrium. Hence the first duty of an educationist is to restore the child to Nature, for like the human mother she supplies both nourishment and sympathy.

“The provision has been made for infants to feed upon their mother’s milk. They find their food and mother at the same time. It is complete nourishment for them, body and soul. It is their first introduction to the great truth that man’s true relationship with the world is that of personal love and not that of the mechanical law of causation * * * Therefore our childhood should be given its full measure of life’s draught, for it has an endless thirst. The young mind should be saturated with the idea that it has been born into a human world which is in harmony with the world around it.”

From this follows the second discovery that sympathy is the ultimate basis of true education. The over-emphasis on the mind or the body to the exclusion of the child’s emotional needs dwarfs his faculties. For its proper functioning and development, the child mind requires the alchemy of love for the created world as well as a sympathetic understanding between the pupil and the teacher. In the words of the poet :

"We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fulness by sympathy. The highest education which does not merely give us information but makes life in harmony with all existence. * * * From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature, and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginnings of our days. Thus the greatest of educations for which we came prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. * * * He was born into the human world but is banished into the world of living gramophones, to expiate for the original sin of being born in ignorance."

With the background of nature and sympathy as the main elements, Tagore thought that education should be a spontaneous process. Children would imbibe education as they imbibe food without suffering the consequences of forcible feeding inherent in the present-day education. His main emphasis was on the subconscious in child education, for he believed :

"That children have the subconscious mind more active than their conscious intelligence. A vast quantity of the most important of our lessons has been taught us through this. Experiences of countless generations have been instilled into our nature by its agency, not only without causing us any fatigue, but giving us joy. This subconscious faculty

of knowledge is completely one with our life. It is not like a lantern that can be lighted and trimmed from the outside, but it is like the light that the glowworm possesses by the exercise of its life-process."

Much of his own education was the product of the rich and varied influence of his own unusually cultured family. The provision of a cultured background to his school thus became his first task. This constitutes his third discovery. As he says: "I had only this experience of my early life to help me when I started my school. I felt sure that what was most necessary was the breath of culture and no formal method of teaching."

Anything that helped both understanding and imagination was therefore a vital element in child education. Hence the poet's eagerness to treat children as responsible agents, not fundamentally different from the grown-ups. He was totally opposed to the idea of diluting knowledge for the special benefit of children. The following passage from his *Reminiscences* shows his keen insight into child psychology:

"The watery stuff into which literary nectar is now diluted for being served up to the young takes full account of their childishness, but none of them as

growing human beings. Children's books should be such as can partly be understood by them and partly not. In our childhood we read every available book from one end to the other ; and both what we understood, and what we did not, went on working within us. That is how the world itself reacts on the child consciousness. The child makes its own what it understands, while that which is beyond leads it on a step forward."

The poet carried this idea into practice at his own school. His songs, plays, essays, short stories and novels are the very stuff of the school-life of Santiniketan. And the remarkable way in which the boys and girls enter into the spirit of his writings has received testimony from Tagore himself :

"With all the anxiety and hypercritical sensitiveness of an author about the performance of his own play," he writes, "I have never been disappointed in my boys, and I have rarely allowed teachers to interfere with the boys' own representation of the characters." (*My School.*)

This is creative education at work.

And lastly he made the discovery from his own life that no education could be creative unless it was given to the child in his or her mother-tongue. Indeed, much of the

extraordinary success of his own mental and literary development he attributed, and no doubt rightly, to the fact that he had received his childhood instruction in his own mother-tongue—Bengali. The following significant lines occur in his autobiography :

“It was because we were taught in our own language that our minds quickened. Learning should as far as possible follow the process of eating. When the taste begins from the first bite, the stomach is awakened to its function before it is loaded, so that its digestive juices get full play. Nothing like this happens, however, when the Bengali boy is taught in English.....While one is choking and spluttering over the spelling and grammar, the inside remains starved, and when at length the taste is felt, the appetite has vanished. If the whole mind does not work from the beginning its full powers remain undeveloped to the end.” (*My Reminiscences*)

For the model of his school he harked back to ancient India. In the forest hermitages of old lived the greatest teachers of the land with their families and pupils came to live with them in order to imbibe “their lessons of immortal life in the atmosphere of truth, peace and freedom of the spirit”. (Tagore’s Introduction to W. W. Pearson’s *Santiniketan*—the Bolpur

School of Rabindranath Tagore.) These forest colonies, in the words of the poet, were :

“Neither schools nor monasteries in the modern sense of the word.....Though they (i. e., the teachers), lived outside society, yet they were to society what the sun is to the planets.....Thus in ancient India the school was there where was the life itself. There the students were brought up not in the academic atmosphere of scholarship and learning, but in the atmosphere of living aspiration.” (*My School.*)

Following the ancient tradition he called his school an *ashram* and tried to recreate its ideal in terms of modern experience. From a small beginning, it has now grown into a place of international importance. Its object, as the poet viewed it, is to bring up the children in an atmosphere of freedom, peace, beauty and love. In the following lines Tagore has magnificently summed up the ideal of his school :

“It must be an *ashram* where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature ; where life is not merely meditative, but fully awake in its activities ; where boys’ minds are not being perpetually drilled into believing that the ideal of self-idolatry of the nation is the truest ideal for them to accept ; where they are bidden to realise that man’s world is God’s kingdom, to whose citizenship they have to aspire ; where the sunrise and sunset and the

silent glory of stars are not daily ignored ; where nature's festivities of flowers and fruit have their joyous recognition from men ; and where the young and the old, the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life."

In India education became for the first time a national issue during the high-handed partition of Bengal. Most thoughtful people in this province then became conscious of the fact that education as imparted under government auspices was one of the principal agencies of political domination by an alien power. This, as is well-known, led to the boycott of the government schools and the opening of national schools throughout Bengal. Tagore, as was to be expected, was in whole-hearted sympathy with this new popular consciousness and assumed the leadership in formulating the basic ideas on national education. But, unlike others, from the very beginning he warned his countrymen against the danger that national education which was a mere imitation of the existing system could not succeed.

"We should not entertain the idea for a moment," he insisted, "that we have undertaken this task against the British Government. The truth is that in the

heart of the country there is somewhere a real feeling of want ; the country hungers for something to be done and we are here to do it," (*Siksha Samasaya*—The Problem of Education.)

At the same time he repeatedly pointed out that in Europe education was part and parcel of the manifold social activities of the people ; it was rooted in their national life. In other words, education was a positive idea with them instead of being a form of negative protest. The following words written in this period of *Sturm und Drang* still retain their significance :

"But where the school is not at one with the entire social life, where it is an imposition on society, it is dry and lifeless. What we learnt from it is learnt with difficulty ; and when the time comes for its application we cannot use it adequately. We learn our lessons by rote ; they have no relation to the people around us, no relevance to life. Our school-learning finds no echo at home or among friends ; on the contrary, it is often looked upon with hostility. In such circumstances, the school is only a machine, a a manufactory of matter without life." (*Siksha Samasaya.*)

The poet's remedy for this inadequacy lay in the projection of his main educational ideas and experience on the national plane. In short, he

not only underlined the close identity of individual and social problems but also the organic nature of education. A truly creative national education must not only grow out of social needs and endeavour, reflecting social aspiration, but also harmonise with the world-wide fellowship of human knowledge.

“Knowledge,” he says, “is the greatest factor of unity among human beings. The Bengali boy who pursues his education in his quiet corner has far more in common with the enlightened peoples of the West than with his ignorant neighbours. Through knowledge one becomes conscious of human unity, which transcends differences of time and space. Leaving aside its utility, no one should be deprived of the joy that issues from the consciousness of this unity.” (*Sikshar Bahan*—The Vehicle of Education.)

It is commonly agreed to-day that the use of a foreign language has been a factor principally responsible for the general backwardness and uncreative character of Indian education. Hence Tagore's insistence on the importance of the national language and literature in popular education. This is a recurrent theme in many of his educational essays.

“Whatever the West has to offer,” he writes, “Japan has already made her own ; the main reason is

that western learning has been made available to her people in her own language....Must the Bengali boy go on paying the penalty because his mother-tongue is Bengali?...Needless to say, we must learn English, French and better still German. At the same time, it must be recognised that most Bengali boys will never learn English. How can we acquiesce in the idea that for this reason millions of these boys must remain on a starvation or semi-starvation diet of education." (*Sikshar Bahan.*)

Indian education is not only quantitatively meagre but also qualitatively barren. Thought and imagination, the two elements which make learning creative, are well-nigh absent from Indian schools. This is of course not surprising since the so-called English education in India arose out of the administrative needs of the new rulers. Utility was its chief hall-mark and it has remained so even to this day.

To learn a foreign language is always difficult, but when its acquisition depends on teachers who themselves know it but imperfectly the prospect is far from being reassuring. Apart from the waste of time involved in it, learning by rote becomes for most the line of least resistance, and a general distaste for knowledge assumes universal proportions. The whole educational

structure of India thus stands on highly unstable foundations.

“As we read we do not think,” observes Tagore, “with the result that while we are piling up a heap of matter, we are not creating anything. Bricks and mortar, joists and beams, lime and sand rise sky-high ; and all of a sudden the University ordains that an extra floor must be built. At once we climb over this mountainous pile and for two whole years apply ourselves to beating down on it a plane surface ; it assumes the appearance of a floor. But can it at all be called a building ? Can light and air find their way into it ? Is it possible for Man to find a habitable life-long refuge in it ? Can it protect him from the inclemencies of the outer world ? Where can one find order, beauty and harmony in it ?” (*Sikshar Herfer—The Vicissitudes of Education.*)

. This is a picturesque description of higher education in India built on the quicksand of existing elementary and secondary education in the country.

How intensely conscious Tagore was of the limitless possibilities of education in India can be seen from his reaction to the educational experiments undertaken by Soviet Russia in a similar background. He was immensely impressed by their vigour, liveliness and underlying sympathy.

He was greatly struck by the novelty and ingenuity of their methods. Some of his remarks in this connection may be quoted from his *Rashiar Chithi* :

“But the machine alone is of little use unless the machinist himself is a man. The cultivation of the land advances with the cultivation of the mind in Russia. Here education is living. I have always insisted that education must be reconciled with life. Unconnected with it, it belongs to the larder, but does not become food for the digestive organs.

“Here I find education has become vital, because the boundary of the school does not separate it from daily life. They do not teach in order to prepare pupils for examinations or to produce scholars, but to make all-round men. We have schools in our country, but the mind is greater than education, vigour greater than information ; under the weight of the printed word, no energy is left in us to make use of our minds. How often have I tried to draw our boys into discussion, but found that they had no questions to ask. The link between the desire to know and knowledge itself has been severed in them. They have never learnt to want to know ; from the very beginning information is constantly doled out to them in a cut and dried fashion and they collect marks in the examination by repeating what they have been taught.”

The poet's visit to Russia also convinced him of

the supreme value of a concrete approach to educational problems. In the study of history, geography, economics and social subjects generally, it is not enough to have a theoretical knowledge. Knowledge of these becomes complete only when learning has been brought down from the realm of abstraction to the world of concrete experience. "Regional study," says Tagore, "extends all over Russia.....Past history and present economic conditions are studied at respective local centres ; the productivity of soils analysed and minerals searched. The spread of education by means of museums attached to these centres is a heavy responsibility. The widespread regional study and the museums connected with it are some of the chief means of progress in the new era of education that has dawned in the Soviet State."

He wanted similar methods followed at his own school and their dissemination throughout India. "Kalimohan," he writes, "has done some amount of similar work in the neighbourhood of Santiniketan, but with little effect, as our students and teachers were not connected with it. To prepare the mind for enquiry is not less important than to reap its fruit. I heard that

Prabhat had with the students of the Economics Department of the College laid the foundations of such studies, but this must be done more generally ; the boys of the School Department too must be initiated into this work and a museum of all provincial objects established."

Another fruitful idea which took shape in Tagore's mind during his Russian sojourn concerned the value of travelling as a means of education. In a vast country like India, this has, indeed, wider uses as in Soviet Russia. "I noticed," the poet observes, "enormous developments in travelling facilities for the public of Soviet Russia. The country is big and her inhabitants belong to diverse races. In the reign of the Tsars, there was hardly any opportunity for them to know one another. Needless to say, in those days travelling was a luxury, possible only for the rich. Under the Soviet rule the effort is to make it possible for everybody." Discussing the importance of peripatetic schools in India's scheme of educational reconstruction, the poet remarks :

"One of the means of learning by seeing is travelling. You all know how long I have entertained the idea of travelling schools. India is so large

and so varied in every respect that it is impossible to know her fully by reading Hunter's Gazetteers. At one time it was the custom of our country to go on pilgrimages on foot ; our holy places were scattered in all parts of India. That brought home to us the unity of India. If with the object of education only, children could be taken all over India for five years, their education would be complete.

“When the mind is active it can easily imbibe and digest the subjects of study. Over and above regular fodder, cows have to be allowed to graze ; similarly, in addition to regular doses of instruction, education by travelling is essential for the mind. The mind's health cannot be maintained on the ration of books served up in motionless classes within the prison-walls of the static school. Books cannot be entirely dispensed with ; the scope of knowledge is so vast for man that it is impossible to glean it all on the field ; a large part of it has to be taken from the store-house itself. But if the pupils can carry their school of books with them as they go through the school of nature, nothing more remains to be desired.”

The scope of educational tours is bound to grow with the spread of education in India, but they should not remain confined to sight-seeing only. They should be so conducted that they are consciously dovetailed into the school curricula and the teaching of history,

geography, biology and other cognate subjects becomes endowed with flesh and blood instead of remaining the dry bones that it is today. Rabindranath Tagore's approach to educational problems was the artist's intuitive approach to them. It viewed them in their infinite nuances.

By the end of the first world war, the poet had already developed through the individual and national phases of his educational thinking. He had come to the conclusion that it was neither possible nor desirable for the individual to remain in his educational ivory tower. The education of the individual, as at his own school, he thought, must therefore broaden out into a national system of education which contained all the elements of progressive education of other countries. The war with its colossal destruction of lives and the unleashing of hatred among the nations made him, at the same time, conscious of the need for furthering the cause of inter-racial understanding. This was to him the chief responsibility of educationists everywhere. Meanwhile the growing economic crisis in his own country and elsewhere convinced him that true education must have a sound economic basis.

The founding of the Visva-Bharati, the international university, in 1921, and the Institute of Rural Reconstruction, almost simultaneously, are in response to these twin trends of thought. In pursuance of his original theory that the resuscitation of the rural economy must be the basis of India's economic rehabilitation, Tagore tried to give it a concrete shape by bringing education to the aid of rural reconstruction. The co-operative idea was to be the key to this educational experiment.

"It must," he said, "co-operate with the villages round it, cultivate land, breed cattle, spin cloth, 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. Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial activities carried out on the co-operative principle, which will unite the teachers and students and villagers of the neighbourhood in a living and active bond of necessity. This will give also a practical industrial training whose motive force is not the greed of profit." (An Address by Tagore, Visva-Bharati, April, 1924.)

Being a true child of the modern age, the need for international understanding, particularly between the East and the West, has been the

leading thread of his teachings. As early as 1909, he had written :

“Of late the British have come in and occupied an important place in Indian history. This was not an uncalled for, accidental intrusion. If India had been deprived of touch with the West she would have lacked an element essential for her attainment of perfection.” (*East and West in Greater India*, “Greater India.”)

Again, in a letter to the late C. F. Andrews in 1920, he wrote :

“Ram Mohun Roy was the first great Indian in our age who had profound faith and large vision to feel in his heart the unity of soul between the East and the West. I follow him, though he is practically neglected by his countrymen.” (*Letters to a Friend*).

In looking for the methods to bring about this reconciliation, he at once rejected politics, because it lacked disinterestedness, the essential quality of true fellowship.

“Through different modes of political co-operation India has assumed up to the present an attitude of asking boons from others. I have been dreaming of some forms of co operation through which she would be in a position to offer her own gifts to the world. In the West the mind of man is in full activity. It is vigorously thinking and working

towards the solution of all the problems of life. This fulness of intellectual vigour itself gives its inspiration to mental vitality. But in our own universities we have the results of this energy, not the living velocity itself. So our mind is burdened and not quickened by our education. This has made me realise that we do not want schoolmasters from the West, but fellow-workers in the pursuit of truth.

My own aspiration for my own country is that the mind of India should join its forces to the great movement of mind which is in the present-day world. Every success that we may attain in this effort will at once lead us directly to the unity of Man. Whether the League of Nations acknowledges this unity or not, it is the same to us. We have to realize it through our own creative mind.

The moment we take part in the building up of civilization we are instantly released from our own self-seclusion—from our mental solitary cell."

Knowledge and mutual appreciation of each other's culture were for him the only real foundation for a proper and durable understanding between the eastern and the western worlds. This he tried to achieve in two ways: first, by providing a centre which would focus the entire cultural heritage of the East, and secondly, by making this centre a meeting place of all cultures.

He realised that, unlike Europe, universities in modern Asia were not yet the true centres of culture ; in most instances they were only pale imitations of their proto-types in the western countries. "For," as he points out," the mind of Asia is not yet focussed. It has not yet been brought to a centre. It cannot be said to be one, in the same way that the mind of Europe can be called one." This he considered "a great weakness in the presentation of learning of the East." (*The Visva-Bharati Ideal* by Rabindranath Tagore.)

His choice fell on India as the true focus of Asiatic culture, for "very nearly all the cultures of Asia sprang originally from India, or came into India from the outside in the course of her long history." Geographically also, perhaps, India suited the purpose admirably. No other country in Asia is so ideally placed to serve as a link between western and eastern Asia. In fact, India's cultural evolution is a true reflection of her strategic importance in the nexus of Asiatic life.

His second idea was to enlarge the Visva-Bharati into a seat of international learning. To quote his own words again :

“The fuller idea of the *Visva-Bharati* now included the thought of a complete meeting of East and West, in a common fellowship of learning and common spiritual striving for the unity of the human race. The stress was now to be laid on the ideal of humanity itself.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PLACE OF POLITICS

It has already been mentioned that notwithstanding his comprehensive outlook on life, politics found only a minor place in Tagore's social philosophy. True in the early years of the century he gave himself up completely to the rough and tumble of the political upheaval that shook Bengal on its ill-fated partition, but his real sympathies were also elsewhere.

"It is not true," he once wrote to C. F. Andrews, "that I do not have any special love for my country, but when it is in its normal state it does not obstruct outside reality ; on the contrary, it offers a standpoint and helps me in my natural relationship with others. But when that standpoint itself becomes a barricade, then something in me asserts that my place is somewhere else. I have a great deal of the patriot and politician in me, and therefore I am frightened of them ; and I have an inner struggle against submitting myself to their sway." (*Letters to a Friend.*)

As a typical product of the nineteenth century liberalism, his interests remained mainly intellectual.

As observed before, Tagore was always pondering over the causes of India's downfall,

the decay of her social organisation and her general backwardness. Having thought deeply over these questions, he wrote a number of pregnant political and social essays in the troubled days of 1905-10. In a very real sense, these mark the beginning of social thinking in modern India. The main burden of these writings is that emotional outpourings are not enough for achieving social and political ends. Thought and service are the essential prerequisites of constructive social action. By thinking boldly and acting selflessly India could be rescued from her present degradation.

“The true way of self-defence,” the poet argued, “is to use our inherent powers. The policy of protection by imitation of the conqueror is a self-delusion which will not serve either,—the imitation cannot prevail against reality—the only way to stem the tide of waste of heart and taste and intellect is to become our true selves, consciously, actively, and with our full strength.” (*Swadeshi Samaj*.)

Inevitably the poet went to the social roots of the problem. In this he showed a truly remarkable grasp of the issues involved. From the outset he warned his people against the futility of political mendicancy inherent in the so-called

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constitutional agitation. For, he insisted, India's genius was not primarily political; it was in the social sphere that she had made her maximum contribution.

"In our country it was the King who was comparatively free and on the people was cast the burden of their civic obligations. The King warred and hunted,—whether he spent his time in attending to matters of State, or to his personal pleasures, was a matter for which he might be accountable to *Dharma*, but on which the people did not leave their communal welfare to depend..... This shows that the seat of life of different civilizations is differently placed in the body-politic." (*Swadeshi Samaj*.)

From this contrast to western historical development, Tagore drew, within limits, the correct conclusion that political work in India must concern itself mainly with constructive activities among the rural masses. His advice to his fellow countrymen was thus to make use of the numerous social institutions like *melas* (fairs) and *jatras* (village theatricals), to take but two instances, in order to bring education, joy and the idea of collective effort to the village people.

"If the leaders of the country will abjure politics, and make it their business to give new life and

objective to these *melas*, putting their own heart into the work and bringing together the hearts of Hindu and Muslim, and then confer about the real wants of the people,—then will the country awake into new life.

This was a radical approach to politics, especially at time when politics for most educated Indians consisted chiefly in petitioning and phrase-mongering. Indeed, long before any other Indian of note recognised the absurdity of parliamentary politics in India, Tagore had poured scorn upon it.

“But we have learnt that in Parliament they debate ; one party replies to the other party ; and the winning party rejoices in its victory. So we cannot get rid of the idea that success in debate is final. There the two parties are the right and the left hands of the same body, and are both nourished by the same power. Is it the same here ? Are our powers and those of the Government derived from the same source ? Do we get the same shower of fruit when we shake the same tree ? Please do not look into your text-books in answering this question. It will be of no avail to know what Mill has said, and Herbert Spencer has said, and Seely has said. The book of the country lies open before us, and the true answer is there.

And yet in this impotent country of ours, what possesses us to think that constitutional agitation will

serve with our all-powerful Government? Agitation may raise butter from milk, but not if the milk be in the dairy, and the agitation at home. Granted that we are only asking for rights and not favours,—yet when the rights are barred by limitation, that means the same old begging from the person in possession.”

And further :

“The Englishman is determined to maintain his hold upon India at any cost, so that whenever he finds anything working loose he is bound to hammer in a nail or two, promptly and vigorously, in order to fix it firmly again. Merely because we speak good English, or chop subtle logic, he is not likely to give up this very business-like habit of his.”
(*The Way to Get it Done*, 1905-6, “Greater India.”)

The poet's way was the way of self-reliance—the cultivation of India's own powers. The effect of this new outlook on political and social questions was not at once felt among Indian leaders. But with the growing economic crisis and the failure of constitutional methods to solve it, a far-reaching change had come upon the country in the last two decades. Tagore's ideas found a concrete application to India's struggle for liberty under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Latterly, what the

poet had intuitively thought and felt in the early part of the century has gained in clarity and understanding, as well as confirmation in the light of scientific analysis and a greater knowledge of the country's social history.

The soundness of the core of Tagore's social philosophy has been demonstrated, although probably not all his views. The under-estimation in his writings of the political factor in modern Indian life, for instance, as well as the artificial differentiation of the eastern and western modes of social development is clearly untenable. Thus when he exhorted his countrymen to base their political action on the needs of the masses, he was undoubtedly right. For not only is this view in keeping with modern thought, it is also the only method of salvaging politics from the barrenness of mere political agitation. Obviously what Indians require most is a knowledge of their own historical past and an understanding of the causes of their social decadence. But at the same time to make this the major premise of political action without taking into account the revolutionary changes that have taken place in India's social

economy is palpably futile. His insistence that man becomes strong by undertaking responsibilities upon himself is certainly correct. But, as he himself recognised, self-help alone could not solve the tremendous political, economic and social problems of the Indian people.

Politics has thus inevitably assumed overwhelming significance in India. Firstly, because the social disintegration, of which the poet was keenly aware, is itself the result of the vast economic and political transformation brought about by the assumption of power by the English. Unlike the previous changes in sovereignty, the interests of the new rulers have been fundamentally opposed to the basic assumptions of the time-honoured social institutions of the country. Indeed, the only way in which the British imperial structure could at all be built and consolidated was by sweeping away the old social edifice of India. This could be done, in the main, by bringing the entire country under unified political control and by transforming it into one large market for British manufactures, as well as a profitable field for unrestricted investment of British

capital. In other words, the contradiction between India's political subjection to imperialist rule and comprehensive social reform could not be easily solved.

Secondly, the crucial issue has to be faced, whether or not India's economic and social problems can be solved by rural reconstruction alone. Thus to press for rural rehabilitation without taking due account of the urgent problem of agrarian revolution and industrialisation not only falls short of the country's needs, but may, in certain circumstances, become a hindrance to progress altogether. The twin problem of land tenure and landlordism, for instance, has not received any serious attention from the poet, although in their present form both have originated with British rule and are unquestionably at the root of India's dire poverty.

"The landlord extorts rent," complained Tagore, "but does not make the prosperity of the tenants his concern." (*Great and Small*—an essay.) Here, as elsewhere, his accusation is directed against the landlord's failure to discharge his obligations rather than against the institution of landlordism itself.

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This inability to face basic questions was partly due to his imperfect understanding of the social processes at work under imperialism, but largely to his unwillingness to call the existing order into question. Being essentially a reformer, his social philosophy, in its relation to British rule, did not therefore meet the whole case.

CHAPTER SIX

NATIONALISM OR IMPERIALISM ?

During World War I, the problem of national antagonisms profoundly exercised the poet's mind. He knew that the war itself was the outcome of a clash of interests. The fratricidal conflict among the European peoples deeply shocked him. He held nationalism responsible for some of the major evils of the present age and looked upon it as a peculiar product of European civilization. In his opinion, it is an artificial creation, a negation of man's social instincts, of which the main element is greed and jealousy. Thus according to him :

“A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideas of life in co-operation with one another.” (*Nationalism.*)

There is much in this definition of “Nation” to merit attention, but all the same it remains

an abstraction, unrelated to historical developments. It is not correct, for example, to say that it is a mechanical growth ; for a nation has grown in the process of social enlargement to meet fundamental economic needs as naturally as any other social development. And much of this will apply equally to all social phenomena. The primary purpose of national evolution is social integration on a new economic basis. Aggression becomes a dominant trait of nationalism only in so far as it undergoes certain important economic changes, as illustrated by the history of modern capitalism.

Modern capitalism at a certain stage turns into imperialism and makes use of the national state as its political instrument. Imperialism and monopoly capitalism are in this sense interchangeable terms. Monopoly capitalism feeds on imperialist exploitation of the subject peoples in the colonies and other weaker races and is the source of modern wars between rival imperial groups. It is thus obvious that the underlying assumption of Tagore's views on nationalism is based largely on predatory imperialism. In other words, nationalism and imperialism are not interchangeable terms.

From this misconception has arisen much confusion of thought and misdirected criticism.

Nationalism is a universal phenomenon in contemporary life and had the poet been alive today he himself would have borne testimony to the immense vitality of national sentiments everywhere. Nationalism in itself is neither good nor bad ; its justification is purely functional.

The misunderstanding of the nature of nationalism led Tagore to claim a predominantly social destiny for India. "Our problem in India is not political. It is social." This is a constant refrain in his essays on Nationalism. Nor can the following be called a true description of the extraordinary national awakening that has swept over India in recent years. Writing on "Nationalism in India" he observes :

"We never dream of blaming our social inadequacy as the origin of our present helplessness, for we have accepted as the creed of our nationalism that this social system has been perfected for all time to come by our ancestors.... This is the reason why we think that our one task is to build a political miracle of freedom upon the quicksand of slavery."

Further on :

"When our nationalists talk about ideals they

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forget that the basis of nationalism is wanting. The very people who are upholding these ideals are themselves the most conservative in their social practice. Nationalists say, for example, look at Switzerland where, in spite of race differences, the peoples have solidified into a nation. Yet, remember that in Switzerland the races can intermarry, because they are of the same blood. In India there is no common birthright. And when we talk of Western Nationality we forget that the nations there do not have the physical repulsion, one for the other, that we have between different castes. Have we an instance in the whole world where a people who are not allowed to mingle their blood shed their blood for one another except by coercion or for mercenary purposes? And can we ever hope that these moral barriers against our race amalgamation will not stand in the way of our political unity?" (*Nationalism.*)

Clearly, the above is not an argument against nationalism nor against the desirability of political freedom. What the poet undoubtedly implies is that political freedom and social progress must go hand in hand. This is universal experience and not peculiar to India. Moreover, it must be emphasised that racial unity and nationalism are not synonymous, and too much stress on the former may have the

quite unexpected result of raising it to a cult, as recent developments in Europe have only too tragically demonstrated. It is not improbable that some of his ideas on these matters were unconsciously coloured by the writings of European race theorists. (Cf. *Bharatbarsher Itihasher Dhara.*)

The enemies of India have used the diversity of races within her borders as a permanent argument against her claim to national freedom. And Tagore himself was not unaware of the harm it had wrought on India's recent history. Undeniably this is a pernicious argument and unless one has a firm grasp of the permanent trends of human history one is apt to accept the nineteenth-century evolution of Britain as the pattern of universal history. The idea is particularly dangerous for India where through the mental subjection of English education, many Indians have been brought up to consider the outside world as mostly Britain. Besides, it should be obvious by now that India's final political freedom must largely depend on the growth of her national consciousness, based not on race but on the community of tradition and interests. Nor is it possible to achieve any social progress, as the poet desired, without

political freedom. Thus in spite of its many merits, Tagore's book *Nationalism* is one-sided, and lacks the comprehensiveness one usually associates with his views. In fairness, however, it must be added that he wrote this during the first world war when India had not yet entered upon the most significant phase of her national struggle.

Tagore's conclusion that "India has never had a real sense of nationalism" is a historical truism applicable to all countries at certain stages of their growth. Nor does it serve any purpose to say that "from the earliest beginning of history India has had her own problem constantly before her—it is the race problem." The question of racial animosity and racial fusion, however, is not peculiar to India, neither can it be solved except by radical and economic changes. To state that "in Europe....peoples had their racial unity from the beginning" is therefore an oversimplification. The idea of the "great European" cherished by many eminent Europeans is still an unrealised ideal as is evident from the unrelieved monotony of wars among the peoples of Europe throughout recorded history.

Dwelling further on the racial theme, he

drew a parallel between the United States and India. "This problem of race unity which we have been trying to solve for so many years has likewise to be faced by you in America." (*Nationalism.*) This is certainly true, but at the same time American nationalism is also a fact. Besides, how a successful political, economic and social adjustment can bind peoples of many races together in a feeling of common nationhood has been seen nowhere better than in the U.S.S.R. The failure of racial understanding in America only proves by contrast that the final social adjustments among her various races, in particular between the Negroes and the European races, have yet to come. Similar considerations apply to India.

"Each nation must be conscious of the mission," he says, "and we, in India, must realize that we cut a poor figure when we are trying to be political, simply because we have not yet been able to accomplish what was set before us by our Providence." (*Nationalism.*)

The use of the word "Nation" in this context is surely odd, if not contradictory, especially as the poet was fond of calling India a "country of No-Nation." But leaving aside the verbal contradiction, the claim of an exclusive destiny

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for India cannot be historically justified. In spite of the local differences of detail, the fundamental pattern of social evolution is similar in every country. It is a variation of the same theme. .

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE IDEAL OF HUMAN UNITY

Having seen the excesses of European imperialism and the apparent failure of the political movement in India, Tagore turned away from nationalism altogether. He sought a solution for the subjection of India as well as for national conflicts everywhere in international understanding. This became the consuming passion of his later life, although its strong humanist appeal was never absent from his writings. Early in the century he wrote :

“So, in the evolving History of India, the principle at work is not the ultimate glorification of the Hindu, or any other race. In India, the history of humanity is seeking to elaborate a special ideal, to give to general perfection a special form which shall be for the gain of all humanity ;—nothing less than this is its end and aim. And in the creation of this ideal type, if Hindu, Moslem or Christian should have to submerge the aggressive part of their individuality, that may hurt their sectarian pride, but will not be accounted a loss by the standard of Truth and Right.

We are all here to co-operate in the making of Greater India. If any one factor should become rebellious and arrogate to itself an undue predominance that will only interfere with the general

progress. The section which is unable or unwilling to adapt itself to the entire scheme, but struggle to keep a separate existence, will have to drop out and be lost, sooner or later." (*East and West in Greater India*, "Greater India.")

The poet returned to this theme again and again, showing his awareness that India could achieve her fullest development only through international contacts and co-operation. How this vision affected the thinking of the country's leading personalities can be expressed in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru :

"Rabindranath Tagore has given to our nationalism the outlook of internationalism and has enriched it with art and music and the magic of his words, so that it has become the full-blooded emblem of India's awakened spirit." (*Golden Book of Tagore.*)

In his intuitive way, the poet had reached the conclusion that international understanding and collaboration were the supreme task of the Age. This was for him the easier, because the view is in harmony with the age-long Indian tradition ; and in the second place, because he had probably despaired of an independent political destiny for India. In other words, negatively he looked upon nationalism as futile or at best a menace ; and positively

he pinned his faith upon internationalism. The war of 1914-18 reinforced this belief and the passing success of his appeal to war-weary Europe strengthened him in his faith. His writings of the inter-war years are thus glowing with hope for the future of humanity, and he looked upon himself as a reconciler of the nations.

In 1921, he wrote to his friend C. F. Andrews from New York :

“We are beginning to discover that our problem is world-wide, and no one people of the earth can work out its salvation by detaching itself from others. Either we shall be saved together or drawn together into destruction.

This truth has been recognised by all the great personalities of the world. They had in themselves the perfect consciousness of the undivided spirit of man. Their teachings were against tribal exclusiveness, and thus we find that Buddha's India transcended geographical India and Christ's religion broke through the bonds of Judaism.

To-day at this crucial moment of the world's history, cannot India rise above her limitations and offer the great ideal to the world that will work towards harmony and co-operation between the different peoples of the earth? Men of feeble faith will say that India requires to be strong and rich before she can raise her voice for the sake of the

whole world. But I refuse to believe it. That the measure of man's greatness is in his material resources is a gigantic illusion casting its shadow over the present-day world—it is an insult to man. It lies in the power of the materially weak to save the world from this illusion ; and India, in spite of her penury and humiliation, can afford to come to the rescue of humanity.

The sunlight of love has the freedom that ripens the wisdom of immortal life ; but passions can only forge fetters for ourselves. The Spiritual Man has been struggling for its emergence into perfection, and every true cry for freedom is for this emancipation. Erecting barricades of fierce separateness, in the name of national necessity, is offering hindrance to it. Therefore in the long run it is building a prison for the nation itself. For the only path of deliverance is in the ideal of humanity." (*Letters to a Friend.*)

The internationalism of Rabindranath Tagore, however, was no vague cosmopolitanism nor was it the internationalism of many European leaders whose vision does not stretch beyond the western world. It was no mechanical device for achieving specific ends, neither was it a particular concept of racialism. His vision of humanity was as wide as the whole human race. Thus, for instance, although he felt intensely for the oppressed peoples of Asia and

Africa, he was no believer in the doctrine of "co-prosperity" sponsored by Japan. He bore genuine love for the Japanese people, but was at the same time bitterly opposed to Japanese aggression upon China. When the Japanese poet, Yone Noguchi, asked him to act as a mediator between Japan and China, glorifying Japan's Asiatic mission, Tagore answered him in two classic letters :

"But surely judgments are based on principle, and no amount of special pleading can change the fact that in launching a ravaging war on Chinese humanity, with all the deadly methods learnt from the West, Japan is infringing every moral principle on which civilization is based. You claim that Japan's situation was unique forgetting that military situations are always unique and that pious war-lords, convinced of peculiarly individual justification for their atrocities, have never failed to arrange for special alliances with divinity for annihilation and torture on a large scale.

Humanity, in spite of its many failures, has believed in a fundamental moral structure of society. When you speak, therefore, of 'the inevitable means, terrible it is though, for establishing a new great world in the Asiatic continent'—signifying, I suppose, the bombing of Chinese women and children and the desecration of ancient temples and Universities as a means of saving China for Asia—you are ascribing

to humanity a way of life which is not even inevitable among the animals and would certainly not apply to the East, in spite of her occasional aberrations. You are building your conception of an Asia which would be raised on a tower of skulls....The doctrine of 'Asia for Asiatics' which you enunciate in your letters, as an instrument of political blackmail, has all the virtues of lesser Europe which I repudiate and nothing of the larger humanity that makes us one across the barriers of political labels and divisions." (*Poet to Poet—Full text of correspondence between Yone Noguchi and Rabindranath Tagore on Sino-Japanese Conflict.*)

The ideal of co-operation that the poet sought for the peoples of Asia can be stated in his own words :

"And though we speak as members of a nation that is humiliated and oppressed and lies bleeding in the dust, we must never acknowledge defeat, the last insult, the ultimate ruin of our spirit being conquered, of our faith being sold. We need to hear again and again, and never more than in this modern world of head-hunting and cannibalism in disguise that : 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.

It is to this privilege of preserving, not the mere body of our customs and conventions, but the moral

force which has given quality to our civilization and made it worthy of being honoured that I invite the co-operation of China, recalling the profound words of Lao-tze : Those who have virtue attend to their obligations ; those who have no virtue attend to their claims. Progress which is not related to an inner ideal, but to an attraction which is external, seeks to satisfy endless claims. But civilization, which is ideal, gives us power and joy to fulfil our obligations.” (*China and India*, Nanking and Santiniketan, 1938.)

Tagore was a bitter critic of western imperialism, but he never wavered in his ultimate faith in Man. The achievements of the West, in the realm of science in particular, always evoked his highest admiration. This was one of the reasons why his mind could never accept the idea of non-co-operation. It was pre-eminently the creative artist’s reaction—anything negative detracted from the perfection of creation—which is, indeed, the essence of his whole philosophy of life.

In the historic controversy between the poet and Mahatma Gandhi during the “Non-co-operation Movement” in the twenties, Tagore argued :

“...but the science and art of building up Swaraj is a vast subject. Its pathways are difficult to traverse and take time. For this task, aspiration and emotion

must be there, but no less must study and thought be there likewise. For it, the economist must think, the mechanic must labour, the educationist and statesman must teach and contrive. Above all, the spirit of enquiry throughout the whole country must be kept intact and untrammelled, its mind not made timid or inactive by compulsion, open or secret."

Referring to the burning of cloth he wrote :

"Consider the burning of cloth, heaped up before the very eyes of our Motherland shivering and ashamed in her nakedness. What is the nature of the call to do this? Is it not another instance of a magical formula? The question of using or refusing cloth of a particular manufacture belongs mainly to economic science. The discussion of the matter by our countrymen should have been in the language of economics.... But far from this, we take the course of confirming ourselves in it (i. e., the habit of eschewing precise thinking) by relying on the magical formula that foreign cloth is 'impure.' Thus economics is bundled out and fictitious moral dictum dragged into its place."

He concluded by warning his countrymen of the dangers of narrow nationalism :

"From now onward, any nation which takes an isolated view of its own country will run counter to the Spirit of the New Age, and know no peace. From now onward, the anxiety that each country has for its own safety must embrace the welfare of the world.

In this morning of the world's awakening, if only in our own national striving there is no response to its universal aspiration that will betoken the poverty of our spirit. I do not say for a moment that we should belittle the work immediately to hand. But when the bird is roused by the dawn, all its awakening is not absorbed in its search for food. Its wings respond unweariedly to the call of the sky, its throat pours forth song for joy of the new light. Universal humanity has sent us its call to-day. Let our mind respond in its own language, for response is the only true sign of life." (*Ethics of Destruction.*)

The poet's appeal to reason and insistence on clear thinking are obviously as urgent to-day as they were in 1921. If India is to make the most of her present opportunities, life, here as elsewhere, must be conceived in terms of modern progress. Issues must not be confused, for in the long run irrational impulses have a habit of recoiling on those who encourage them. The dangerous aftermath of emotionalism is clearly visible in the present period of transition in this country and unless a constructive turn can be given to the mood of the people serious difficulties will have to be faced in the future. At no period of India's history have the national leaders been confronted with such a formidable problem. "For this task," as the poet said over

twenty-five years ago, "aspiration and emotion must be there, but no less must study and thought be there likewise." Tagore's prophetic vision saw the problem of India in its true inwardness and never was his warning to his countrymen more appropriate as at this turning-point in the nation's life.

Clearly, however, Tagore's formulation of the national problem, as set out in his essay "Ethics of Destruction", was one-sided in its emphasis and was apt to give a false picture of the Indian National Movement. The extracts quoted below from an article by Mahatma Gandhi in reply to the poet will place the matter in its correct perspective :

"I must confess that I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore sinful. Thus the economics that permit one country to prey upon another are immoral. It is sinful to buy and use articles made by sweated labour. It is sinful to eat American wheat and let my neighbour the grain-dealer starve for want of custom. Similarly it is sinful for me to wear the latest finery of Regent Street, when I know that if I had but worn the things woven by the neighbouring spinners and weavers, that would have clothed me, and fed and clothed them. On the know-

ledge of my sin bursting upon me, I must consign the foreign garments to the flames and thus purify myself, and thenceforth rest content with the rough *khadi* made by my neighbours

I venture to suggest to the Poet, that the clothes I ask him to burn must be and are his. If they had to his knowledge belonged to the poor or the ill-clad, he would long ago have restored to the poor what was theirs. In burning my foreign clothes I burn my shame. I must refuse to insult the naked by giving clothes that they do not need, instead of giving them work which they sorely need. I will not commit the sin of becoming their patron but on learning that I had assisted in impoverishing them, I would give them a privileged position and give them neither crumbs nor cast-off clothing, but the best of my food and associate myself with them in work.

Nor is the scheme of Non-co-operation or Swadeshi an exclusive doctrine. My modesty has prevented me from declaring from the house-top that the message of Non-co-operation, Non-violence and Swadeshi is the message of the world. It must fall flat, if it does not bear fruit in the soil where it has been delivered. At the present moment India has nothing to share with the world save her degradation, pauperism and and plagues....Before, therefore, I can think of sharing with the world, I must possess. Our Non-co-operation is neither with the English nor with the the West. Our Non-co-operation is with the system the English have established with the material civilization and its attend-

ant greed and exploitation of the weak. Our Non-co-operation is a retirement within ourselves. Our Non-co-operation is a refusal to co-operate with the English administrators on their own terms. We say to them, 'Come and co-operate with us on our own terms, and it will be well for us, for you and the world !...Indian nationalism is not exclusive, nor aggressive, nor destructive. It is health-giving, religious and therefore humanitarian. India must learn to live before she can aspire to die for humanity. The mice which helplessly find themselves between the cat's teeth acquire no merit for their enforced sacrifice.

True to his poetical instinct the Poet lives for the morrow and would have us do likewise. He presents to our admiring gaze the beautiful picture of the birds early in the morning singing hymns of praise as they soar into the sky. These birds had their day's food and soared with rested wings in whose veins new blood had flowed during the previous night. The human bird under the Indian sky gets up weaker than when he pretended to retire. For millions it is an eternal vigil or an eternal trance. It is an indescribably painful state which has to be experienced to be realised. I have found it impossible to soothe suffering patients with a song from Kabir. The hungry millions ask for one poem—invigorating food. They cannot be given it. They must earn it only by the sweat of their brow.' (*The Great Sentinel.*)

As already told, Tagore tried to fulfil this

task of international understanding primarily through his educational experiment at Santiniketan. On the other hand, his world-wide travels—two of the last journeys he undertook were to the U.S.S.R. and Iran—his lifelong active interest in all important international problems and above all a stream of essays and lectures kept internationalism always in the forefront of his countrymen's consciousness. His influence on Indian political thought was in this way truly profound.

It must, however, be added that although Tagore had correctly diagnosed the need of the times, his approach to international as to domestic questions remained at bottom emotional or even sentimental. It was a moral and a humanist approach rather than a scientific grappling with intricate problems. His knowledge of international relations was not based on any deep study of the political, economic and social issues underlying them. One must nevertheless concede that his mind remained open to new ideas and movements to the last.

Shortly before his death, the poet summed up the hopes and disappointments of his long life in an extraordinary survey of the world's

affairs. In a reference to the Soviet experiment he told the members of his educational colony at Santiniketan :

"I have also been privileged to witness the unstinted energy with which Soviet Russia was trying to fight disease and illiteracy. Her industry and application has helped Soviet Russia in steadily liquidating ignorance and poverty and abject humiliation from the face of a vast continent. Her people have not observed distinction between one class and another. They have spread far and wide the influence of that human relationship which is above and beyond everything petty and selfish. Their astonishingly quick progress had made me happy and jealous at the same time." (*Eighty Years*—an address delivered by the poet at Santiniketan on the eightieth anniversary of his birth.)

Contrast this with the disillusion he felt in the rulers of India for whom in his youth he had conceived a profound admiration through the study of their literature.

"How could I help thinking," he said, "that it was India that had kept replenishing the coffers of the British people? Such travesty of the human ideal, such aberration in the mentality of the so-called civilized races, such criminal and contemptuous indifference to the *crores* of helpless Indian people I could never have imagined. I had associated the

highest conception of civilization with the character of the English race which I had come to respect through its literature....

One day I saw the English as a healthy nation, full of youthful vigour ever ready to come to the help of those who needed it, and to-day I see them prematurely old, worn out by the plague of evil that has surreptitiously robbed the nation of its well-being.

It is no longer possible for us to retain any respect for that mockery of civilization which believes in ruling by force and has no faith in freedom at all. By their miserly denial of all that is best in their civilization, by withholding the true human relationship from the Indian, the English have effectively closed for us all paths to progress." (*Eighty Years.*)

In national as in international affairs, facts speak more eloquently than mere faith. Indeed, Tagore himself would have admitted that no fundamental social change had ever taken place through a simple act of faith. But his basic liberalism always remained a barrier to the complete realisation of this truth. It prevented him from having a real appreciation of the need for dynamic changes in the political structure of the world.

To take the example of his dual attitude to the Soviet experiment. He was a genuine admirer of the many fine achievements of the

U.S.S.R., but lacking real knowledge of the Russian revolution he could not reconcile himself to its politics. He would never admit that revolution was as much a fundamental social process as evolution, and that when slow changes could not deal with a situation violent changes were inevitable. In fact, he himself lent countenance to this argument : "It is not improbable that in this Age Bolshevism is the treatment, but medical treatment cannot be eternal ; indeed the day on which the doctor's regime comes to an end must be hailed as a red letter day for the patient." (*Rashiar Chithi*). As a liberal, Tagore always remained an individualist. "The strongholds of greed in society must be conquered and controlled, but who will protect society, if the individual is to be banished for good ?" he wrote. Needless to say, this opposition between individual and society is largely irrelevant and based on a misunderstanding of Soviet society.

Like many well-meaning European socialists, Tagore always remained a believer in what has contradictorily been called a "revolution by consent." There is no historical precedent to show that a firmly entrenched social order has ever given way to a new system without a struggle. The international structure that the poet

wished to see established could, indeed, emerge through conflict and violence. It would come only when the present possibilities of compromise and reform had been completely exhausted. It would come when economic and political changes made it imperative. The need to-day is to further those factors which favour fundamental social, economic and political transformations, even though they involve the disappearance of one's own familiar world.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMING UP

Before concluding it may be useful to try to bring the poet's social philosophy into final historical focus. It is, indeed, necessary both to indicate the chronological landmarks of his creative life and to trace the evolution of his ideas. Born in a protestant family, as has already been noted, Tagore was never completely detached from the social upheaval of his time ; his keen mind was profoundly affected by the stirring events of his youth and in a sense it was fortunate that he was not personally involved in them too early in life. The freedom from prepossession with social questions in the most formative period of his intellectual development gave him the leisure and opportunity to ponder deeply on contemporary social problems. His complete familiarity with the English literature of the nineteenth century, replete with references and discussions on current social questions, and the consciousness of his Indian heritage endowed his mind with a poise which few of his contemporaries possessed.

His concern for social questions, however, did not crystallise into active interest until he was nearly forty years of age. With the turn of the century, he had outgrown his purely literary vocation and come increasingly to play the role of a leader, guiding the nation's thoughts. His social criticism and ever-growing preoccupation with the educational, economic and political problems of the day filled the latter part of his crowded life. At the same time, man as an individual ever remained his main interest—hence his unshakeable faith in education—but always in the larger context of society, nation and humanity. This in short marks the evolution of his social philosophy through the social, national and international stages. This aspect of the poet's many-faceted genius can be set forth in three chronological periods :

1. 1900—1910. In this patriotic phase of his development, the poet was drawn into the whirl of activity which followed the great awakening of his people. In 1901, he founded his school at Santiniketan, took a leading part in the great Swadeshi Movement (1905-1910), and at the same time wrote and spoke incessantly

on political, social and educational problems. In this way he came to impress a distinct stamp on the social thinking of his countrymen.

The essence of his teaching was twofold. Politically he brought a new seriousness to bear on the national movement which was previously altogether lacking. For the first time, he demonstrated the need to view India's struggle for freedom primarily in its social context. It was, he thought, neither a question of constitutional changes nor of ridding the country of foreign rule. The problem was deeper. It was, in fact, a question of finding a new basis of social integration which had been destroyed by the impact of the industrial civilization of the West. The social implications of India's political slavery were clearly brought out in the essays he wrote in this period and he showed the way to a fresh approach to the country's economic and political problems. In a real sense, therefore, this may be called the beginning of the constructive phase in India's national struggle. By stressing the paramount need for the rehabilitation of the rural economy of India, he not only gave proof of his keen historical acumen, but also helped to bring

into relief the crucial importance of one aspect of India's social structure which held the key to the solution of the country's future. In analysing the causes of India's mass poverty, Tagore showed the true genius of his mind, and subsequent happenings revealed the correctness of his social diagnosis. He warned his countrymen from the very beginning against relying too much on constitutional agitation for the achievement of freedom from foreign domination. His insistence on mass contact, the need for co-operative activities for the solution of India's grave economic problems, the utilisation of traditional rural institutions like *melas* and *jatras* for the rousing of popular consciousness and mass enjoyment were at one time looked at askance by his fellow countrymen, but in the light of later developments Tagore was proved right. Thanks to Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, the whole emphasis of politics in India has shifted from the towns to the villages where the bulk of the country's population live. The originality of the poet's political thinking, however, has not yet received adequate recognition, but in retrospect his claim to this honour rests on solid foundations.

The poet's interest in education, as has been seen, was always more than academic. He had already taken a hand in the moulding of the country's educational theories by his notable experiment at Santiniketan. In its genesis it was, of course, an individualist attempt to grapple with a personal problem, but the Swadeshi Movement was soon to drag Tagore to wider fields of educational activity. From his own experience as an educationist, the poet had seen the limitations of a purely personal approach to education and was looking for an opportunity to broaden its scope so as to embrace the whole nation. He realised that the human child abstracted from his social background must always remain ill-adapted to his surroundings. The leading part that he took in formulating national ideals of education in the formative period of the nation's history was unique for many reasons. He never took a narrow view of the country's educational problems. He deprecated the idea of multiplying schools which were national merely in name but were in no other way different from the existing schools. He looked upon education as a vehicle of national progress and wanted it to be based on the real

education in vogue. The poet, of course, raised his voice of warning at that time against this needs of the country in the same way as education is conceived in the advanced countries of the world. Unfortunately, however, the other leaders thought differently, and the national school movement, in spite of its seminal possibilities, came to nothing. The fact that the Jadavpur Engineering College is the only institution which has survived from the "partition days" is an illustration of the soundness of the poet's contention that in the struggle for existence only those educational institutions, which were of some service to the people, could stand the test. This does not mean that Tagore took a merely utilitarian view of education. On the contrary, he believed that the main purpose of education should be the development of personality, but education which neither developed personality nor made an individual adequately self-reliant was bound to give way to one which did. The national school movement in the Bengal of the early years of the century thus failed because its primary orientation was political and not educational. It arose chiefly in protest against the system of

government in the country and only remotely against the inadequacies of the system of misdirection of energy, against the confusion of aims, but it was, as was to be expected, drowned in the noisy demonstration of patriotic fervour. He was obviously in advance of his times. His views on social problems were still looked upon as those of a visionary, not deserving to be taken seriously by men of affairs.

2. 1911-14. This was a brief interlude for further inner consolidation. The onset of the violent phase of the national struggle was the signal for his withdrawal from public life ; henceforward he devoted himself almost completely to his school and literary pursuits. During a short visit to England in 1912, he translated some of his poems into English. This brought him immediate recognition in the West and in 1913 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The international recognition of the poet's genius was a supreme event in his life as well as that of the nation in an important, psychological sense. It freed him from those inner hesitations, almost bordering on inferiority complex, which made him shy of public criticism and at the same

time established his authority among his own people. From now on his influence was to spread throughout the country and his views on important social questions began to receive a hearing which they had not had earlier. The growth of his international outlook also may be traced to this period. His educational ideas, too, experienced a further enrichment of content through an ever-growing circle of international contacts.

3. 1915—1941. The next twenty-five years were spent in extensive travel to all parts of the world, including China and the U. S. S. R. In this phase of his creative life, he gradually emancipated himself from all narrow national ties. His lectures on Nationalism delivered in Japan during the first World War and the publication of *The Home and the World* were symptomatic of the growing international outlook. In response to this new orientation, in 1921 he founded the Visva-Bharati, which was to become a centre of international culture. The visit to China in 1924 had made him conscious of the unity of Asia and the sojourn to the U. S. S. R. in 1930 brought him face to face with a new world order based on the common

heritage of man. His collection of letters from Russia (*Rashiar Chithi*) gives a glimpse of this new experience. The writings, and lectures of this period kept the idea of a co-operative world constantly before the mind of his people.

It has already been shown that the poet's internationalism is both an emotional reaction and an idea. The growth of this outlook was rooted in his temperament, but it gradually matured into an intellectual conviction through life's experience. Being a poet of the highest order, he was a born humanist. Man was a subject of constant preoccupation with him. His universalist sympathies came to him as naturally as his love of beauty. The traditions of his family and the influence of Raja Rammohan Roy, the pioneer internationalist of modern India, confirmed him in his early, inchoate leanings. Indeed, Tagore always claimed his intellectual lineage from Rammohan Roy. The third and perhaps the most important single factor in the evolution of his universalism was the influence that English Liberalism exercised on his mind in the most crucial formative period of his life through English literature. This was

a deep and abiding influence and his life-long friendship for England, and derivatively for Europe, was undoubtedly first laid in the message of freedom that the English literature of the nineteenth century brought him.

The natural catholicity of his mind, it is interesting to observe, was reflected in his conception of Indian history. Looking upon it primarily as a history of race reconciliation, he welcomed even the coming of the British to India as an essential element in the synthesis that Indian history had been seeking throughout the ages. "If India had been deprived of touch with the West, she would have lacked an element essential for her attainment of perfection," he said.

This openness of mind could be seen also in his attitude to national education. Thus although he was always a bitter critic of the system of education in vogue in India, was intimately connected with the reorientation of educational ideas in this country. At the same time, he was opposed to narrowness in any form and wanted India to appropriate all that the West could give her. The gift of science, for instance, was one which never ceased to hold

his interest. He firmly believed that the final social and economic salvation of India would come through the inculcation of the scientific spirit and employment of science in the service of the people.

A turning-point in Rabindranath Tagore's internationalism was reached on the eve of the first World War. This may be called the beginning of that intellectual maturity in his international outlook which made it a conviction with him. His temperamental inclinations were now to become a deeply rooted idea to which he devoted the rest of his life. The early failures of the national movement undoubtedly made him reconsider the whole basis of the struggle for India's national freedom. He began to look for its solution in international co-operation, while the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 turned him away from nationalism altogether. His lectures on Nationalism delivered in that period exercised a profound, albeit short-lived, influence on the defeated countries of Europe. His popularity in Germany in the twenties and his subsequent obscurity in the same country a decade later provide a significant commentary.

Meanwhile the poet's energies were wholly absorbed in the task of translating his conception of international co-operation into durable practice. The idea of transforming his school at Santiniketan into a seat of Eastern learning, in the sense that a European university is a focus of Western thought and aspiration, was soon given up in favour of a truly international university which would bring the East and West together in common fellowship. Tagore had great faith in the psychological approach and he felt that international understanding must be based on mutual appreciation by the peoples of the world of one another's culture, for no permanent understanding is possible except on the foundation of a complete change in their mental assumptions. The poet's efforts were naturally welcomed by the intellectuals of all countries but they were not actively emulated in any part of the world. The re-emergence of violent nationalism in Europe and Asia was soon to swamp all ideas of international co-operation.

Undaunted by the apparent failure of his efforts, he went ahead with his work of international understanding. Meanwhile a more

intimate knowledge of contemporary social and economic problems gave him a deeper insight into the causes of racial antagonisms. He came gradually to realise that the psychological approach to international relations was not enough ; it had to be supported by far-reaching economic and social changes in the domestic sphere as well as in the relations between peoples. At the end of his life, Tagore's internationalism was no longer a vague cosmopolitanism, but a profound conviction born of a true appreciation of the issues involved. His internationalism never degenerated into a particular racial concept. For this reason, he opposed Japan's "co-prosperity" doctrine as strongly as pan-Europeanism or pan-Americanism. He recognised the danger humanity was facing and was fully aware of the need of international understanding if human civilization was to survive. Tagore believed in the idea of "One World" long before it was made popular by the American statesman, Wendell Willkie. It was to be founded on racial equality and social justice. It was to be a co-operative world in which the units were free and strong, for without their freedom and

strength, co-operation would always remain an idea instead of becoming a reality. Freedom for India was thus an integral feature of his international outlook.

It is clear that the lesson of Tagore's teachings was never more necessary for India than now when she is on the threshold of a new era in her history. India's future lies not in isolation, but in international collaboration both for her own advantage and for that of the world.

In this appraisal of Rabindranath Tagore's ideas on social problems, the aim has been to trace a basic pattern. This reveals two or three leading threads which make the poet's social philosophy a harmonious whole. The first of these is his comprehensive vision of life. He conceived life as a unity; hence all questions affecting life, whether individual, social, national or international, had to conform to the same principles of growth and judgment. It was a spiritual conception of life which did not admit of a double standard of morality. It judged life in terms of the creative growth of the individual, which is the true end of social development. Goodness or badness of human

action is therefore to be judged by its ultimate reference, as to whether or not it furthers or retards this development. The second thread consisted in his aversion for expediency as a basis of action. He wholeheartedly opposed the idea of subordinating ends to means. Opportunism found no place in his views on social problems. Thus when he advocated a national system of education for India, he was thinking primarily of the fulness of individual and social growth of the Indian people, not merely of a revolt against alien rule in India. He wanted India's freedom for the same reason. Slavery in any form or anywhere connoted for him a derogation of the human personality and of the ultimate purposes of human unity. More positively he wanted humanity to achieve a livelier consciousness of its unity through self-knowledge, mutual understanding and co-operation. This constituted his ideal of internationalism. The deliberate fostering of a national ideal is the final thread to complete the pattern of his social teachings. It was an ideal of perfection through creative effort. The essence of this ideal has been immortalised in his poem on "Freedom":

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high ;

Where knowledge is free ;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls ;

Where words come out from the depths of truth.

Where tireless striving stretches its arm towards perfection ;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit ;

Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening thought and action—

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."


A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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