

ROOTS OF PARTICIPATION AND SELF-RELIANCE THINKING AND ACTION RESEARCH IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents, first, the thoughts of India's poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore on the mission of Man and nation-building that may be viewed as the roots in this sub-continent of Participation and Self-reliance thinking that has developed into a school of thought and social action in recent times.

Human creativity, self-reliance and collective economic and social action that are the central concepts in the "Participatory Action Research" (PAR) school were the cornerstones of Tagore's own philosophy of humanhood, nationhood and development. Tagore viewed human beings fundamentally as a species that seeks fulfilment in creative acts. Atmoshakti (self-strength) was a foundational concept in his development thinking that was fervently against waiting upon deliverance of any need from external agencies. Tagore viewed the very concept of a "nation" as one that is created by people's atmoshakti uniting them into a sense of nationhood - a mental rather than a legal concept. He fervently advocated self-reliant collective village development initiatives to apply and realize people's atmoshakti. Tagore viewed the fundamental task of leadership as of inspiring people to engage in such initiatives, not as a task to await formal independence or a social revolution, but as a very assertion and realization of humanhood at any stage of people's life and history.

The paper also traces Tagore's own pioneering experiments in applying these thoughts in action research in village development, first in his estate in East Bengal and later in Sriniketan as a part of the Visvabharati University founded by him.

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INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore (Nobel laureate in literature, 1913) is perhaps more well known in the world as a poet, lyric composer and artist than as a social development philosopher and social action researcher. Little of his voluminous contributions to the discourse on the meaning of independence of India from the point of view of its economic and social development, are known to the wider world. These writings present a remarkably unified and consistent philosophy of Man, society, nation and economic and social development that sharply challenged contemporary Indian thinking. They also provide a deep articulation of participation and self-reliance thinking in which a school has been developing since around the seventies or so, about three decades after his death (1941). Human creativity, self-reliance and collective economic and social action that are the central concepts in what is known as "Participatory Action Research" (PAR) today were the cornerstones of Tagore's own philosophy of nationhood and development. Humanist Tagore went on relentlessly invoking these concepts as his anxious and passionate contribution to India's independence struggle, in his voluminous writings and speeches from the early twentieth century through the late twenties. He was a very lone traveller in this still to be born 'paradigm' of development and social action in his days, and even clashed uncompromisingly with Gandhi on the *mission of Man* notwithstanding very deep mutual respect these two great philosophers held for each other.

Tagore not only gave original and profound articulation of the above concepts; he also applied his thinking in practical experimentation with village development as a *zamindar* (landlord) in his estate in East Bengal and also as an educator as a part of the programme of the Biswabharati University founded by him in *Shantiniketan*.

This paper presents (1) translations by the present author of selections from Tagore's writings on the mission of Man and nation-building that resonate with views of the Participation and Self-reliance school of modern Action Research and may be viewed as the roots of such thinking in the Indian subcontinent. The translations are organized around central themes and with brief thematic introductions. (2) a summary account of Tagore's practical experiments with his ideas.²

A. THOUGHTS OF TAGORE ON SELF-RELIANCE AND RELATED QUESTIONS

1. The nature of humans

Tagore viewed human beings fundamentally as a species that seeks fulfilment in creative acts, doing what has not been done and daring to do the impossible. He saw thus "feeding the mind"

² underlynings for emphasis are the present author's, and his elucidations where it has been felt they might be helpful are given within the parenthesis [].

as more important to the human than feeding and clothing the body that are regarded as the "basic needs" of the human in modern development discourse.

"In his experiments with creating life the Creator suddenly becomes quite daring when he comes to creating human beings. He does not confine the freedom of its soul. Outwardly the species is thrown naked, armourless and weak in all respects while its soul is freed to fly. Elated by the joy of this freedom it cries out: *'I shall do the impossible!'*, meaning I shall not accept that what has been happening all the time will continue to happen – what does not happen will also happen" He is not attached only to what is near at hand, he is bringing under his hand what is not near at hand...In his labour he seeks not only success, but labour itself is pleasure to him; he seeks constantly to reach deeper than the surface, from the seen to the unseen, from the easy to the difficult, from dependence to self-reliance, from following the instinct to pursuing reason. This is how he has been victorious. If some say that 'this is what our forefathers did, and, therefore, if we seek to do something else we shall lose our indigenous identity', then ... they may preserve what they call their indigenous identity, but they lose their greatest identity – their humanhood. [such people] are slaves to the surroundings, have no sense of independence in their mind...they do not at all know that a human has to accomplish the impossible by one's own strength; he will not be confined to what has happened - he will advance toward what has not happened... (Tagore 1921, 321-322)

"All great civilizations of the world are creations of daring. Daring of human strength, intellect, desires. Humans have moved on crossing oceans and mountains as their strength refused to acknowledge any obstacle; their intellect transcended the apparent truth and moved on proudly by tearing the spells of blind prejudice, from the great to greater truth, from the atoms to sub-atoms, from far to farther, from the near to the nearest; the aspirations of humans have not regarded any ailments, poverty and wants as invincible and have not sat idle giving up efforts to overcome them, and have gone on trying repeatedly....

"In this daring there is great inconsideration. This inconsideration is working today in those who are crushing on the ground from airplanes and dying. Those thousands who one day vowed to cross the sea and drowned, were driven by this inconsideration. It is that fierce excitement of this

inconsideration which even today is driving humans to conquer now the north pole and now the south pole beating the ice-demons...(Tagore 1914a, 257-258)

primacy of mind over body

"If we want to eradicate the external poverty we have to rouse the inner strength that lies in intellect, knowledge, and comradeship that promotes cooperation.

"One may say, external work also stirs the mind. It does so, if the work itself insinuates processes of thinking in the mind. This does not happen in clerical work as all clerks in the country know. In narrow habitual work only external skills grow, and the imprisoned Mind keeps encircling around the habitual path like the blinded bullock. This is why, people in all lands have looked down upon work that is mainly a repeated recitation of some particular physical activity. Carlyle has preached the *dignity of labour* in very loud voice; but through ages people of the world have testified to the *indignity of labour*. Those who work as labourers make themselves machines in dire compulsion...to feed the stomach sacrificing the mind, as they are on the point of dying of hunger. But to console him/her as having *dignity* by sacrificing one's more important half, is nothing but ridiculing him...Mind is the wealth of the human, [and] no external respect can save one from the intense ingloriousness of mindless labour. (Tagore, 1925a).

2. *atmoshakti* (self-strength) and nationhood

***Atmoshakti* (atmo = self; shakti = strength) - by way of one's own creativity, knowledge, intellect, labour, love and service - was a foundational concept in Tagore's development thinking. He wanted to see fulfilment of people's *atmoshakti* in the realization of their material, cultural and spiritual aspirations, and was fervently against waiting upon and demanding deliverance of any need from external agencies such as the government, whether it be people's own or foreign. He stood firmly on the concept of *atmoshakti* in discussing both the meaning and tasks of nation as well as the tasks of (village) community. In his view people do not get their nation just by gaining independence, but have to *create* their nation by applying their *atmoshakti* in working for its development. The concept of "nation" to Tagore was a mental concept³, to be gained by a people applying**

³ In developing this concept he was influenced by the writings of French philosopher Ernest Renan, to whose thinking he referred in his own writings.(Tagore 1901b)

their *atmoshakti* together to fulfil common needs, and uniting in such process into a sense of nationhood, shunning favours both from the state as well as from foreign powers.

"Starting with Buddha all those Sadhus and Saints of India of the middle ages, whoever has come bringing some great message, have all opposed unmindful mechanical external rituals. They had defied all obstacles to talk to the soul of humans. They did not say, like the miserly, like the calculative wise men, that first the external, then the soul; first food and clothing, then fulfilment of *atmoshakti*. They gave tribute to the human by demanding big from her/him; and it was in response to that big tribute that their hidden inner wealth expressed itself in diverse ways in literature, music, manifold arts, and thereby enriched society. They had given light to men and women, given them awakening, i.e. gave them realization of their own soul – in such giving all is given". (Tagore 1925a, 404)

nationhood

"The claim that it is my nation because I have been born here – this is the word of those who are involved with the external features of the world. But because the true character of humans is his/her inner character of *atmoshakti*, that is why the nation that one creates by one's knowledge, intellect, love and labour is truly one's nation. In 1905 I had called the Bengalis and told them this, that 'create your nation from within by your *atmoshakti* because it is through creation that a sense becomes a truth'. The creator finds himself/herself in his/her own creation. To get a nation means to realize (discover) one's very own soul in all its dimensions within the nation. We find our soul truly within the nation only when we are engaged in building the nation ourselves by our thoughts, labour and service. Our nation is a product of our very soul, this is why our soul is spread out over the nation, expressing itself.(Tagore, 1921, 323-324)

" Animals are born in particular lands, but the land does not become theirs just because they are born there. Humans create their own land themselves. In that act of creation and care for maintenance of that creation the ties between them become deep, and they are able to love that land of their creation more than their lives⁴. People of our land are only being born on the land, but are not creating it; this is why they have no occasion of uniting with each other, they do not have any sense of harm if the land is harmed. We have to inspire them to gain their nation by creating it. This act of creation is diverse, and

⁴ Tagore viewed the pleasure of creation as an end in itself, and once gave the following illustration from the work of *Sriniketan* discussed subsequently: "in a neighbouring village one of our girl trainees made a beautiful design on a cloth. Her trainer thought that if they bought that cloth with a good price the girl would find encouragement and would be [economically] benefitted. At the proposal of buying that cloth the girl said, "I am not going to sell this". Shall we ignore this joy of the mind in creation whose value is the highest of all?" (Rabindrashango 2, 277). On another occasion he said: "creation of beauty is the greatest nature of humans"

requires diverse energies of the people. We feel ourselves as a part of the nation by applying our diverse energies in diverse paths with a single goal. ..(Tagore, 1925b, 421)

"...We have to win over the nation not from the hands of others, but from our own lack of engagement, from our own indifference. When we bring ourselves to the door of the British for any task of development of our nation we have by that act only deepened our own lack of engagement. This is because what the British government does is not our doing, so that despite how much we gain by such doings of the British from the outside we lose our nation to the same extent, i.e. we achieve success at the cost of our soul. When we know that the nation is my very soul, and that is why the nation is so dear to me, then we can never bear looking up to others to build our nation...."(Tagore, 1921, 323-4)

"nation is a living entity, a mental concept": It is a sense of union derived from "memory of glories of the past and vision of future with similar glory – to suffer together, enjoy together, hope together – these are the main thing...to suffer together has been mentioned because the bond of pain is stronger than the bond of joy"(Tagore, 1902b, 518).
"How can union between people be achieved? This can be achieved only by working together – there is no other way of achieving true union." (Tagore 1905a, 612)

foreign favours

a song on national atmoshakti by Tagore

*mother, will you send your son to the alien's door?
they slight us, throw stones at us seeing our beggar's bowl.
we have humbled ourselves chasing him,
hoping he will give me something in slight.
shall we go on chasing him,
leaving what our own mother has bestowed on us?*

*we have no strength of our own?
this is a mighty lie,
our strength has not yet died –
we shall pour our own strength and our devotion
at your feet, O mother!*

"The sole ultimate purpose of political work is to unify the soul of the nation. But in our hapless nation organizing manifold ways of attracting the heart of the foreigner only, forsaking the language and culture of the nation, has become the fashion in viewing the task of political work." (Tagore 1903a, 535)

"Receiving favours from others is the true sign of a pessimist, of hopeless poverty. I shall never agree that we have no way out except to beg from others – I believe in my own land, I respect *atmoshakti*... I know for sure that...if the foundation of the fulfilment for which we are eager today rests on others' fleeting pleasures, if it is not specially India's own, then it will keep failing again and again. (Tagore 1903a, 535)"

3. community self-rule

Tagore regretted deeply the decline of community self-initiatives in Bengal as British rule consolidated and people started asking favours from it instead of solving their own problems themselves. He fervently advocated self-reliant collective village development initiatives to meet village needs for economic, cultural and social upliftment. He saw the relation between community and state as not of the state as the deliverer of needs of the community, but as a respectable relation between "two strengths", with the community giving its utmost to itself and to the nation and negotiating with the state for specific services from a position of strength and equality.

"Independence of communities is independence of India in its true sense. (Tagore 1903b, 553)

"The village whose people have united in all ways to provide education, health care, earnings and joy to each other - that village has truly lit the lamp on the path of independence of India." (Tagore, 1925b, 422)

"the flow of the human heart is no less important than the flow of river. This flow had always kept the villages of Bengal healthy and joyful [but] now the flow of the Bengalees' heart has become dissociated from the village. That is why its temples are emaciated – there is none to repair them; its ponds are polluted – there is none to clean the mud; the mansions of the elite are abandoned – one does not hear the joy of festivities there. Today My Lord the State is the Master to give us water; My Lord the Sate is the Master to provide health care; one has to go and kneel before the state for provision of education as well. The tree that used to blossom its own flowers is spreading all its shriveled branches in petitions for a shower of flowers from the sky. (Tagore 1903a, 527)

"In ancient India the state was in the form of the kings. Those who were in the position of the society's guardians took charge of giving education and religious education to the whole country without remuneration. It is not that the king did not have the responsibility

of supporting and rewarding them – but this was partial support; actually this responsibility bestowed upon every household. Education and religious education in the society would not be totally jeopardized if the king stopped his support or if the nation suddenly became kingless. It is not that the king did not get ponds excavated – but he contributed in this the same way that any well-to-do person in the society did. The jar of water of the nation did not get empty if the king got unmindful.

...the king might be morally responsible whether he would go to war, go hunting, would do his kingship duties or spend his time in enjoyment – but the people would not vitally wait upon him for their welfare – the tasks of the society got distributed upon every person in society in diverse and splendid ways.

"In such a system what we understand by moral obligation circulated throughout the whole of society. Each one had to sacrifice one's personal interests and practice abstinence. Each one had a moral obligation to society.

It should be evident from this, that the life force of different societies is situated in different places. The heart of a nation lies wherever the responsibility for the welfare of the ordinary people is concentrated. The whole nation gets vitally hurt if that centre is hit. In Europe the whole nation faces destruction if the King's power is devastated. This is why in Europe politics is such a serious matter. In our nation serious crisis truly arises only if the society (community) becomes disabled. This is why so far we have not staked our lives for independence of the nation but have tried in all ways to save independence of the society....

"...In recent times we have learnt by studying in the British schools that the greatest duty of the people is to pester the government to gain its attention irrespective of the nature of our needs. We have not understood that we do not treat the ailments of our own bodies by constantly [poking] in others' bodies.

...

"...The very heart of our existence is lying uncovered and unguarded today...This, and not shortage of water, is what our crisis is today.... Today we need either charity from the state, or need to press our demands to it...

"Without further hesitation we must take over in our own hands the self-administration of our village. We have to rouse our own *panchayet* (association for village self-administration) before the fist of the state-created panchayet presses in the throat of our village. We ourselves shall protect the peasant; we ourselves shall educate their children; we ourselves shall accomplish village development, arrange for health care, and we ourselves shall save our zamindars and *prajas* (subjects) from the destructive hand of litigation. We should never think of taking the help of the king in these matters – because to take help in these matters means to invite and institute the powerful in the midst of the independent rights of the weak." (Tagore, 1905a. 616)

"In our country the source of social welfare lies within the society (community). It lies all over our society as a sense of morality... Hence independence of the community is in truth independence (freedom) of India. Because freedom to do good, freedom to protect values (morality) is what freedom is."

"The way for us to live is to rouse our own strength in all respects. Our glory does not lie in sitting idle and consuming the wealth of our forefathers; when we shall feel throughout the society that we are spreading this wealth, only then we shall truly respect ourselves and come out of the spell." (Tagore, 1903b,555-556)

"We must prove, before we gain independence [by engaging ourselves with our *atmoshakti*], that we shall be able to undertake the tasks of an independent nation." (Tagore 1919, p 437)

"[Let] our descendants be able to say with pride that these are all ours, it is we who have built these all. It is us who have made our land fertile, purified our water reservoirs and our air; extended our learnings and enbraved our hearts. Let them be able to say that this very beautiful land – this motherland giving us its fruits and water and the cool breeze – thus established with morals and labour, standing on its valour, it is our creation – anywhere we look everything is filled with our thoughts efforts and soul, resounding with our joy-songs and vibrating with the tireless footsteps of travellers on paths of ever-new hopes" (Chakravarty, 57).

community self-rule vis-a-vis government

"Let no one understand that I do not want to have any relation with the government at all...I am saying the contrary. I am saying that we should seek to establish a [gentlemanly] relation with the government. Gentlemanly relation implies freedom. A relation that does not wait for my own desire or otherwise is a relation of slavery, it is bound to keep decaying and get severed one day. But a relation of free give-and-take gets progressively more intimate.

"Many of us imagine and say also that if the government gives us everything that we are demanding then our joy and love for it will be boundless. Such thinking is totally baseless. One party will go on wanting, and the other party will go on giving – where will the end of such process be? ...the more we receive through such a donor-recipient relation the more does the demand from generosity rises, and the amount of dissatisfaction keeps skyrocketing. It is as bad for us as it is uncomfortable for the donor in a relation where what I get does not rest on our own strength.

"On the other hand a relation of exchange, of give and take, is good for both – here the quantum of demand naturally tends to be fair, and differences assumes the possibility of being resolved through negotiation. The only way to attain such a state of decency in the country is to establish the nation's independent strength in the service of the society. A relation between two strengths is what is decent and lasting, the source of joy and respect...

"This is why I was saying, that our nation can get upto the last bit of what is possible to get, if we can give to the nation the last bit of what we can give. The more we shall give the more will a relation of receiving be strengthened.

...

"Our right to self-rule is lying on our doorstep – none has snatched it and none can snatch it. We can provide education in our villages, health, road development, everything, ourselves, if we desire it, if we unite for this. For this there is no need to wear the belt of the government. But we do not desire it, we do not unite...

...

"We are getting upset at the failure of each of our demands because we have made our demands our principal assets. We are identifying this excitedness with our patriotism. We are not only seeking consolation in our weakness but also taking pride in it! (Tagore 1904, 572-575)

"Whether we beg with folded arms or with red eyes, it is not so easy to earn glory thereby– whatever we can do ourselves by our own strength for the country benefits us in two ways – one is gaining the fruit of this, secondly to work ourselves is a gain by itself which is even greater than gaining the fruit...The ingloriousness of begging is that even if we gain the fruit we are deprived of the fulfilment of doing the work ourselves. (Tagore 1905b, 581-2)

4. The primacy of literacy

Tagore's deep concern for the urgent need for universal literacy saw literacy first and foremost as a means of uniting people by giving them a means of communicating and linking with each other.

"It is of the first importance that people see a connection between themselves. In other words, it is necessary to have a road between themselves. If it cannot be a big avenue it should at least be a lane. Literacy is that lane. If we say knowledge, then one will argue that our peasants know, and are ahead of all in knowledge ...

But I am asking for very little – only ability to read and write. There is no great gain from it by itself – it is only a lane, that also the muddy lane of the village. For the time being this is enough, for without this lane people are confined in their respective corners...they are unable to realize that one is not alone, one's connection with others is not merely a mystic connection, it is a great living connection.

"It is only when the link between the distant and the near, the absent with the present, is spread unobstructed throughout the nation that the sense of nationhood will spread. The more the mind can travel, the greater becomes

the human being. If people are to be given strength they have to be linked far and wide.

"I say this today, what people will learn and how much is secondary, but that one will hear others oneself and will communicate one's own words to others, that one will thus find the greater humanity within oneself and find oneself within the greater humanity, that one's awareness will spread in all directions, this is more fundamental.

...

"Until arrangements are made to make people literate we are not doing something that is right, and we all are suffering from this wrong – until we admit this we shall achieve little just by opening a few night schools here and there.... literacy will really be worthwhile when it will spread throughout the nation. (Tagore, 1914b; 266-268)

5. leadership

Tagore saw the role of (political, national) leadership as integrating with the people and inspiring and mobilizing them to engage in ever-new creative tasks to prove their *atmosakti*. He had fervently hoped that Gandhi as a leader with his extraordinary ability to integrate with the people would fulfil this role; but he was intensely disappointed to see Gandhi give the call to all only to spin the *charka* (spinning-wheel), a mechanical repetitive act unworthy of creative humans.

For a long time our political leaders did not look beyond the circle of people who just read English, because their nation was an entity read about in the books. That nation was a mirage made of English clouds, in which floated the hazy figures of Burke, Gladstone, Matsini Garibaldi. In this there was no real self-sacrifice or true feeling for people of the nation. At this time *Mahatmaji* (Gandhi) came and stood at the door of crores of the poor of the nation, in their very own attire, and talked with them in their very own language. This is something very real – it has no parallel in the book. For who else has seen so many of the people of India as one's very own? The

store of energy that exists in the soul opens at the very touch of the truth. As soon as true love came and stood by the locked door of Indians the door opened. None had any hesitation, i.e. truth awakened by the touch of truth...Thanks to *Mahatmaji* we have seen what tremendous power truth has. ... this love that has been roused in the heart of the nation by love, this is not unreal – it is this that is freedom, it is the nation finding itself... this love is self-expression, this is "yes" – no "no" goes to argue with it, because it leaves no room for arguments.

This wonderful inauguration of the soul of India at the call of love, some music of it, had reached my ears across the ocean. Then I had thought in great joy, that we all would be called in this inauguration of India, the diverse strength that is hidden in the soul of India would all be revealed. For this is what I call liberation of my nation – liberation is nothing but revelation...

Who can call the diverse energies of the nation and put them to self-engagement? It has been tested again and again that the nation does not respond to just any call. We have continued to lose time so long as none so far has been able to mobilize all energies of the nation in creative work for the nation. That is why I have been waiting all these days for him who has truly the right to call the nation, to put all in exercising their *atmoshakti*....

Destiny has given the strength in the voice of *Mahatmaji* to give this call, because he has truth in him. Hence this was indeed our great opportunity. But he gave the call only in a very narrow area. He called everyone to spin the *charka* (spinning wheel), to weave the cloth.... Is this the call for the great creativity of the new epoch? When nature called the bees to live the narrow life of making bee-hives, hundreds of thousands of bees responded to that call only to make themselves impotent; in this self-sacrifice by which they belittled themselves they moved away from the path of liberation [which is nothing but revelation, as Tagore said in another place in the same essay (p 329)]. A nation the majority of whose people do not hesitate to make themselves impotent responding to some enticement or rule are imprisoned in their own hearts. To spin the wheel is in one sense extremely easy, and that is why it is difficult for all humans. The call of the easy is not for humans, this is a call for the bees. Humans can reveal the wealth within themselves only when their supreme strength is invoked... Isn't Europe making humans impotent in its army establishments and in its factories; cutting the humanity of humans to the size of dwarfs to satisfy greed and such other designs... Humans can be dwarfed both by large as well as small machinery, by engines as well as by the *charka*. Where the *charka* is natural it does not do any harm, rather it does good – but because of the richness of the human mind the *charka* damages the mind more than it damages the cord where it is not natural. And the mind is not less valuable than the cord.(Tagore,1921; 328-334)

"If we reduce our demand from the Mind then the Mind becomes lazy and listless. To glorify the *charka* in welfare thinking for the nation is the way to make the humiliated Mind idle... Those in the world who have made great sacrifices for their land, for humanity, have visualized the welfare of humanity by their mind's eyes. If we want the sacrifices of people we need to assist in this visualization. Great quantities of cord and *khaddar* [a coarse variety of cloth spun by the *charka*) are not big images of glory of the nation. This is the picture of the calculative person who cannot rouse that great uncalculative force which is not only prepared to embrace pain and death in the joy of thinking of the great, but is also unmindful of rejection by others and even of failure." (Tagore, 1925b, 419)

"Some may say that spinning the thread is also an act of creation. This is not so. The reason is, in working with the *charka* people become a part of the *charka*; i.e. they do what could have been done by a machine. He makes it spin. The machine has no mind and hence it is alone – it has nothing outside it. Likewise the person who is spinning the thread is also alone; the thread of his *charka* does not link him with anyone else. He has no need to know that he has a neighbour...He is a machine, lonely, isolated....But even if the person who is working to drive away a disease from the village has unfortunately to work fully alone, yet the beginning and the end of his work are intimately linked with thinking for the whole village. Through this very work he feels an intimacy with the whole village. He feels conscious joy in creating the village. Indeed, in his work is the beginning of self-rule of the village. Then if people of the whole village put their hands together we understand that the village is advancing toward truly finding itself by creating itself. This finding is what is truly gaining self-rule...(Tagore, 1925b, 421-22)

"We have to give evidence before we get self-rule, that we shall be able to self-rule after we get it in our hands. There is wide space for giving this evidence. Expressions of love for our nation through service to the nation does not wait for any external change of situation, it rests only on earnestness. If we see today that that expression is idle and indifferent, then I do not believe that this lethargy will disappear if we only get formal independence as a favour of others. I do not believe in such self-deception that first our external impediment will be removed and then our love for the land will overcome resistances from the mind and will manifest itself in service of the land. The person who says "first the fountain pen and then I shall write the epic", we have to understand that his fascination is for the fountain pen and not for the epic....(Tagore, 1929, 443-444)

6. state revolution

The above could as well have been said by replacing the word "self-rule" by the word "revolution". Tagore lamented the ultimate sacrifices young radicals of Bengal had made for making the "revolution" before Bengal had been created as a nation through constructive

self-engagement of its people, and before such a nation as a whole urged for its own liberation . On these young radicals and on "revolution" he had the following specifically to say:

"During those days of "divide-Bengal" a set of youth tried to bring epochal change in the nation by a state **revolution**. Whatever else happened, they did sacrifice themselves in this fire, and for this they are to be saluted by all not only in our country but in all countries. Even their failure shines by the light of their soul. [But] they have learnt clearly from ultimate sacrifice and ultimate pain that to try for state revolution when the state has not been created [by the exercise of *atmoshakti*], amounts to walking on the non-road – the non-road is shorter in length than the road, but one cannot reach the goal by following it, and in the effort the feet get badly wrenched. If one does not pay the full price for something then one only wastes what one gives and does not get the desired. The gallant youth of that day had thought that they would achieve state revolution by self-sacrificing a few of them on behalf of the whole nation; this was a calamity for them, but for the nation this was cheap. Liberation of a nation awakens from the inner soul of the whole nation, not from any fragment of it...

The call for making the nation one's own by one's own creative strength is a very big call. It is not a call for some outwardly rituals. (Tagore, 1921,326-7)...

B. Action Research to promote self-reliant village development⁵

In 1890, at the age of thirty, Tagore was assigned by his father responsibility for running the family estates (*zamindari*) in the district of Pabna, basing himself in *Shilaidaha*. Humanist Tagore established deep contact with the villagers and village life, and soon started developing ideas and making experiments with self-reliant village development in accordance with his philosophy of *atmoshakti* and service to society. He advocated, in writing and through his speeches, the formation of one or more village communities (*pallishamaj*) in every village to take charge of co-operative-based self-reliant village development, which would among other tasks take charge of literacy for all, development of local industries, community health care and recreation, safe drinking water, model farming, collective paddy stores, domestic industry-based work for women, campaigns against drinking of liquor, developing fellow-feeling and solidarity among the villagers, and collection of demographic, economic and social statistics on every village. He

⁵ The accounts in this section have heavily relied upon Chakravarty (1998) and Bandopadhyay (1995).

initiated experimentation on self-reliant village development In three places – *Shelaidaha*, *Kaligram* and *Sriniketan* –that were forerunners of such experiments anywhere in the sub-continent.

He was manifestly unsuccessful in this effort in *Shelaidaha* where he himself was the chief "animator", with a typical response by the villagers: "*are we so stupid? we shall give our hard labour to make the well and Mr. Zamindar will get the credit for this?*" This failure in animating village self-reliance by Tagore himself has never been analyzed in depth, and the present author suspects that here the "animator's" overwhelming personal status and enrobed presence and styles (unlike Gandhi, Tagore is not known to have ever taken off his shirt in public to integrate with the peasants!) were the negatives that caused the failure of this effort. More successful was the effort in *Kaligram* Pargana (subdistrict) where the chief "animator" was an outstanding worker and teacher, Atul Sen. Under Atul Sen's leadership villagers of this Pargana established the Kaligram Welfare Society which initiated a lot of community activities in the villages. These included the establishment within a very short time of three health care centres, more than two hundred primary schools including night schools, three middle English schools and one high school, and the building of quite a number of roads, water tank repairs, clearing of forests, etc., followed by the setting up of an agricultural bank and a community paddy store.

Financing of these activities was done jointly by the Kaligram Welfare Society and the estate of the Tagore family. The subjects of the estate paid 3 paisa per Taka of estate rent to the fund of the Welfare society, and the estate paid an equal amount to the fund. In special cases for construction of school rooms etc. Tagore used to make additional contribution. Disputes among the subjects used to be settled by *shalish* (people's dispute resolute forums) organized by the Welfare Society⁶. As a result for many years not a single case of dispute went to the court, a phenomenon that was mentioned in government reports of the time.

Tagore introduced the system of loans to poor peasants who were traditionally burdened with heavy debt to the village money lenders. In perhaps the first known such loan programme for poor peasants in the subcontinent, he introduced a system of lending to them from the estate in Kaligram at low interest rates against mortgage of their harvests: the harvest was to be deposited to the estate from which the loan was to be repaid and the peasants would take the surplus harvest home. There was provision for writing off the interest if the harvest was poor for any debtor.

By village development Tagore did not mean only economic development but sought to promote joyful unions of villagers and cultivation of culture and beauty by them as well as environment care. He sought to promote tree plantation festivities by school children on special days; festive spirits in community road construction projects; and flower gardening in the peasant households, preaching that "cultivation of beauty is an imperative for the nation."

⁶ Often, however, Atul Sen himself settled such disputes, showing, as discussed subsequently, the weakness of the programme in failing to develop internal leadership.

Unfortunately, this pioneering "action research" by Tagore in Kaligram got into trouble when underground "revolutionary" terrorism gained ground and many social activists all over Bengal came under suspicion from the authority. Police arrested and jailed Atul Sen and many of his co-workers suspecting them as terrorists. From hindsight today the great drawback of Tagore's village development effort was a lack of attention to the development of internal leadership from among the villagers who could replace external leadership in the effort. The effort in Kaligram gradually faded out as the external leaders were jailed. But at that time Tagore's basic idea of community self-rule and self-initiatives for village development were miles ahead of development thinking of the time oriented toward delivery of development by the authorities.

Tagore, the creative social philosopher and experimenter committed to people's collective self-rule, never stopped experimenting. In 1922 he founded the Biswabharati university and, as a part of this university, *Sriniketan* as an action research institution, putting it under the charge of an idealist British young man, Lenard Elmhurst as its first Director. Another idealist worker, Kalimohan Roy was Elmhurst's principal associate in village work. Tagore himself did not personally involve himself in the work of the centre but was of course the "Guru" behind this effort.

The motto of *Sriniketan* was put in a bulletin issued by the centre, containing words like the following:

"we shall do our own work ourselves, we shall not wait upon others to do things for ourselves, self-reliance and cooperative work are the two mantras for our life. we belong to the village and the village belongs to us, our good is in the good of the village. We shall develop our village; this is not the task of any one alone, this is a task for all of us. We are taking charge ourselves of advancement of our agriculture, our industries, our business, our health, our education, our joy, everything."

Sriniketan inspired and assisted community initiatives for village development in numerous villages. The work included adult and child education, clearing of jungles and turning them into farming plots and vegetable gardens, road construction, experimentation with cooperative farming, collective paddy stores, livestock production, promotion of cottage industry, malaria eradication by cleaning villages and improving drainage systems, setting up people's health care centres providing cheap medical service and medicines funded by villagers' contributions⁷, welfare work for indigenous people, village socio-economic surveys, tree plantation, research on village economy, and many other such initiatives. The project moved in typical action research style, involving villagers in exploring what they could do together for their economic and social advancement without any predesigned development agenda. The workers of *Sriniketan* integrated closely with the villagers, 'animated' them in taking self-development initiatives as well as worked themselves in these initiatives, gave or arranged for training the villagers in different activities, and helped them in dire difficulties. Tagore emphasized solidarity (in his words, "unity of the hearts"), among the villagers and

⁷ The community health care initiatives under the *Sriniketan* programme were particularly noted by outside observers as exemplary. See numerous newsreports on *Sriniketan* collected in Bandopadhyay (1995).

between the villagers and workers of the project, as a central value in his effort. His greatest emphasis was on literacy for all, with the philosophy he expounded in his writings presented earlier, to repeat, that what one learns is secondary; what is primary is that literacy is a road for travel of the minds of the people to each others' minds for interaction with each other, and thereby find the greater humanity within oneself and oneself within greater humanity.

The work spread in quite a number of villages. Adult education centres – a number of them night schools - grew up in a number of them, where not only literacy but Baul and Kirtan singing, story telling from the mythical classics, and lectures and discussions on health care and other essential subjects were also a regular feature. In several villages quite a number of health cooperatives as well as general village development societies were formed. Bulletins on social education were printed and distributed as a regular feature. Under the initiative of Sriniketan a number of "service-brigades" of youth were also formed to orient school-going youth in village service as part of their overall development. Along with sports and physical exercises these brigades participated in initiatives to clean bushes and drains, repair roads, distribute quinine, nurse the sick and such other social services.

Tagore's emphasis on the need for cooperative work in the context of the state of economic development in Bengal at that time is exemplified in his address at a provincial conference in Pabna in 1908: " In Europe and America labour-saving machinery of many types have been invented which we cannot use because of our poverty – it is not possible to use them on small pieces of land and meagre resources. Modern machinery can be used to reduce expenses considerably and facilitate farming if all in a village got together and put their land together for cultivation. If they collected all the sugarcane of a village for threshing in one machine then they will gain and not lose buying an expensive threshing machine; by combining all jute plots they can themselves press them in a machine; if all milkmen joined hands they can produce milk butter and ghee etc. at a lower cost and better; if weavers get together to bring the weaving machine in their village and work with them then they will all gain from the higher cloth production;...hence if the villagers themselves get together to use relevant machinery and raise their employment status staying where they are, they can gain in all respects. In addition, this is one way to indoctrinate people in the principle of unity." (Chakravarty, 50).

Tagore's thinking on the introduction of machinery in the village economy of India can be subjected to critical scrutiny from the point of view of labour displacement in a country with growing population pressure, which would have perhaps warranted a more carefully selective introduction of machinery. Sriniketan experimented also with agricultural credit cooperatives but the field record of repayment from these cooperatives was not very satisfactory, and over time most of these credit cooperatives were closed down. But Tagore was the first known development thinker to talk of the co-operative principle for village development that early in the history of development thinking in India, as an economic rationale in its own right and also as a way of uniting people for collective self-development combining economics and culture, and to promote fellow

feeling among villagers.⁸ This was the meaning to him of *independence (swaraj)*. As he had said once earlier, "*Swaraj can become a truth upon the firm foundation created through the exercise of collective self-rule, through its manifestation, through the spread of pride in this among the people. When this foundation is lacking in the villages, in the heart [of people] and outside, and when this lacking becomes the cause of lack of food for the people, lack of education, lack of health care, lack of joy, then the idea that some external ritual can establish swaraj in this country is totally disrespectful.*" (Chakravarty 1998)⁹

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⁸ Tagore did not consider land reform *per se* to be a solution of the plight of peasants, and said that "giving land rights to the peasant will result in the very next moment in transfer of land to the money lender. This will increase rather than decrease his misery." (Chakravarty, 50).

⁹ The work of *Sriniketan* has continued to this day under *Biswabharati*. A full-scale review of this work to date is beyond the scope of this paper.

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