

**Rabindranath Tagore, the 'myriad-minded man'**  
**- a call for social activism**  
**- Md. Anisur Rahman<sup>1</sup>**

**I.**

**Someone once remarked that Tagore was a 'freak' of nature, because this phenomenon cannot be easily explained even by the theory of random occurrence. In one person he embodied frontline brilliance and creativity in an astonishing variety of subjects. In most of these subjects considered individually there have been others who may be judged to have made comparable contributions; but none can be cited to have shone in one body in so many directions. A 'myriad-minded man', indeed, as he was cited by the Oxford University.**

**Tagore was a person who ran away from formal schooling in any subject, and this explains the free flow of his extraordinary innate creativity in anything that he touched. His achievements and contributions, the full range of which may not be known to many, may be briefly summarized as follows:**

- 1. a prolific poet of world stature;**
- 2. author of gems of poems and other writings for children with whose psychology he identified so easily; also inventor and writer on educational methods for children for learning with enjoyment;**
- 3. father of Indian short stories ranking among the great short story writers of the world like Maupassant, Tolstoy and Chekhov;**
- 4. a novelist who gave new direction to Bengali novel;**
- 5. a prose writer of 'great beauty' as Yeats observed, with original reflections on nature, life, society and morality;**
- 6. a prolific correspondent of great literary quality whose published letters number over 10 thousand in Bengali and more than a thousand in English;**
- 7. a profound and original literary critic;**

---

<sup>1</sup> Former Professor of Economics, University of Dhaka, and Co-ordinator of a Programme on People's Participation in the International Labour Office in Geneva. Currently a Founding Member of the Board of Director, Research Initiatives (RIB), Bangladesh.

- 8. a dramatist composing poetic, lyrical, allegorical and symbolic dramas depicting deep social themes, also presenting wit and humour plays, and directing, choreographing and acting himself on the stage;**
- 9. a writer on science and astronomy with brilliant clarity;**
- 10. a prolific writer on politics, society and education with original thoughts challenging contemporary thinking and social norms;**
- 11. a social philosopher of original thinking preaching unity of all humanity and nature, collectivism in social life and advocating women's role in co-piloting the world;**
- 12. composer of more than 2200 art songs uniting words and melody with matchless tone paintings, and a leading tenor singer himself in his early days;**
- 13. an original composer of dance style liberating dance forms from traditional Indian classical influence, focusing on expression of emotions and beauty of movement of the human body rather than following dance rules; and a dancer and dance choreographer himself;**
- 14. world pioneer of action research with villagers to promote self-reliant cooperative development particularly of the socio-economically deprived people, with original thinking on grassroots and national self-reliance also writing volumes on this subject;**
- 15. creator of a school and university with innovative thinking and experimentation integrating formal education with interaction with nature and social service;**
- 16. pioneer in bringing women of a conservative Bengali society out in the public, introducing co-education for the first time in Bengal, and daring to put women dancing on public stages in the conservative province, riding bicycles and learning *ziu zitshu*;**
- 17. a natural painter also never schooled in painting, starting with turning erasures into designs and ending up with more than two thousand drawings and paintings of absolutely original style;**
- 18. an ardent advocate of the flourishing of human creativity as the goal in life; clashed with Gandhi's call for everyone to spin the *charka* challenging it as a mechanical act unbecoming of creative humans;**
- 19. original thinking on poverty which he viewed not in material terms but in terms of lack of opportunity for creative self-expression, considering 'mindless labour' an intensely undignified act challenging**

**the conventional notion of 'dignity of labour' irrespective of the opportunity for creative self-expression;**

**20. a person who argued with Einstein at the deepest intellectual level in support of elements of quantum theory that Einstein had difficulty in accepting.**

**21. believe it or not, also a homeopath doctor who treated villagers for hours while land-lording his family estates leaving unfinished writings of poem, novels etc. to which he would return and pick up the threads as if in a continuity;**

**22. a person who stood above all sectarian religions, proclaiming that 'humanity is my religion asking for my services', with writings in language of biblical beauty on humanism and love;**

**23. a person with an astonishing ability to cope with death of his most beloved ones that struck him again and again, remaining ever-creative through these agonies, refusing to give his personal grief to others, seeking to realize the meaning of death and one's duty through loss of beloved ones, showing a sense of spiritual order and continuity in the universe with death as punctuations in the eternal flow of life, and a philosophy that pain brings one closer to the 'divine', like pain bringing a child closer to her caressing mother.**

**Such a person, naturally, was very lonely, except for Kadambari, his sister-in-law as his muse whom he lost very early – his philosophy of life being so unusual as to baffle sharing with others.**

**A 'freak' of nature? Or was he not an expression of the 'ever wonder of the boundless' as he wished in the birthday song he composed for himself?**

## **II**

**But why are we commemorating his 150th birthday? What does he mean to us today so that we have to disturb his peace in his 'grave'? His songs, yes, are everlasting, but only to a fraction of middle class Bengalis. But why remember him like this in world gatherings? I suggest that just to remember him today is not enough. Can we live**

**him actively, seeking inspiration from some of his best thoughts and embracing or taking off creatively from them in our own actions to improve the world?**

**The world is facing today two crises of the first order, one threatening the destruction of the physical environment (ecology with a narrow view) and the other the global social order. The threat to environment is a fact borne out by hard science, acknowledged by leaders of the world including the head of the UN. The threat to the world social order is less recognized, caused by denial by world capitalism of the fruits of so-called 'civilization' (objectively speaking, technological progress) to the vast majority of the world's population, the downtrodden of the world. This is causing growth of criminalisation and fundamentalist suicide squads, a no less serious global crisis. The world is today on the edge of precipices in both these directions, and it is up to the heavens as to which of these two may blow it up first. What were Tagore's thinkings in these regards, with value today for this dual crisis of the world?**

**While world scientists and establishments view the ecology as a physical entity for sustenance and enjoyment of human life that is being seriously depleted and heated up to threaten our habitat, Tagore belonged to those who viewed the ecology as an organic part of human life itself. As he wrote in one of his songs, '*pain of the separated lover is entwined in the green grass trembling with the breath of its blades.*' **Destruction of the ecology would thus destroy a vital part of human awareness itself and not merely the physical support of human life. And he sought to launch social movements for going back to nature to renew and strengthen this bond between humans and nature. Whether everyone identifies or not with this world view of the relation between humans and nature, it cannot be overstated that this deep-ecology view of the world only strengthens the sense of urgency for the ecology to be saved.****

**But who will save it? And who, for that matter, will save humanity as well as the ecology from destruction in the hands of anti-social forces? On this question Tagore counted on three forces:**

**First, a value of collectivism in social life.**

**As I have said, Tagore was a collectivist in his social philosophy. Apart from his grassroots experiments with cooperative development particularly for betterment of lives of the downtrodden in which he wanted to see all villagers materially rich and poor join hands, he wrote two essays spelling out his philosophy on this question – 'the consequence of individualism' and 'the ego'. His thesis was that humans are born to serve humanity. For this one must acquire personal knowledge, expertise and wealth, so that one may have something to give to others, and this justifies individualism. But the ultimate fulfillment of life is not just in acquiring but in giving for humanity what one acquires, and this is collectivism as opposed to individualism. Those who deviate from this principle inevitably invite destruction.**

**Second, a view of women as the ultimate liberator of humanity.**

**While on the question of collectivism Tagore intersected with Marx in seeing this as the ultimate emancipation of humans he did not subscribe to Marx's theory of class struggle. Instead, he ascribed the ravage of nature as well as of humanity to male aggression and saw women as the liberator on both fronts. In supporting women coming out of the confines of their families and joining males to co-pilot the world, he hoped that women would in this role retain their nature-given tenderness. He dramatised this philosophy in his most famous play *Rakta Karobi (Red Oleanders, 1926)* in which Nandini liberated not only the world from the material lust of the demon King but also the demon King himself helping him to discover his own humanhood. Tagore elaborated his thesis on the woman as the ultimate liberator in his essay 'nari' (the woman) he wrote later, in 1936. This thesis of his has as yet gone unattended as one of his deepest philosophical messages – *Rakta Karobi* is staged all over the world and repeatedly in both the Bengals just as an art-play without taking inspiration from its message in active social life, and his essay 'nari' is hardly ever cited, even by women's movements.**

## **Youth**

**Finally, a view of youth as an agent free from the pressures of established social life eager to respond to the call for service undaunted by obstacles. This view of the youth appears forcefully in Tagore's poems and songs and also guided his efforts to mobilise the youth in social service in his experiment with his university in Shantiniketan.**

**I suggest that the world crisis – of the ecology and humanity– we are facing today calls for reflecting on these three elements of Tagore's philosophy, not necessarily to agree with them exactly as he formulated them but as a base in our own search for a direction to stop the world from falling over the precipice.**

**The first element - collectivism in social life to which individualism must surrender – is manifestly an unrealistic, utopian dream that few would take seriously, although there is a tangential recognition of this principle in the Universal Declaration of Human rights which ordains that every individual should engage in some community service. Interestingly, Tagore's viewpoint on collectivism as the ultimate fulfillment of individualism has been echoed by another great person – Nelson Mandela – in explaining the South African Bantu philosophy of *ubuntu*, when he said: *'Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?'* **But both are in the genre of moral preaching that many would not take seriously.****

**There is, however, another profound indigenous Bantu philosophy of human relations that should be difficult to argue against. This is the philosophy of '*uakana*', meaning to develop each other. In this one concept individualism and collectivism unite organically with each other without asking for the sacrifice of either. I cannot imagine Tagore disagreeing with this concept of which he was perhaps not aware. Many popular movements all over the world have embraced this philosophy in their work in recent times, and I invite you all to**

**reflect on the depth and evocative power of this philosophy in the search for a unifying philosophy of social life and action in our hour of dire crisis threatening the survival of human life and environment on this planet.**

**The second element in Tagore's philosophy – the expected role of women in taming male aggressiveness and even liberating the demon in the male – is one that invokes women's movements of the world to be concerned not merely with equal gender rights but with something more fundamental than this in our concern for bringing out the best in the human. This invocation women's movements of the world have not yet taken up seriously. While Tagore did not say this explicitly, this role that he expected from women involves both co-piloting the world as well as parenting, insofar as women of today are, overwhelmingly in the world social culture, the first teachers of the citizens of tomorrow to give them values for or against humanity. Mothers of the world are not widely known to be concerned with giving to their children values of service to humanity as distinct from personal career-seeking values. Without absolving male parents from this responsibility, it is time that women seriously take up this responsibility as well in order to contribute to the creation of citizens of the future with greater dedication to humanity than we have been traditionally showing.**

**The third element in Tagore's philosophy - seeking to inspire the youth to work for humanity and to unite humankind with nature - can hardly be questioned. The ravage of humanity and of nature in the hands of ruling elders makes this even more imperative today than ever before. This is all the more so because it is the youth of today who, once again, are the citizens of tomorrow to suffer from what we elders have been doing to their future, and will also themselves become the guardians of humanity tomorrow, to give to the future what values they grow up with.**

**These, I suggest, are the implications of Tagore's concern for a better humanity in a more practical light than this utopian philosopher himself articulated. And this calls for social action, and social movements all**

**over the world, not just digging out the old man from his 'grave' on his birthdays only to adore and to remember him. He was himself far from being at peace seeing the plight of humanity, and died with his last song invoking the arrival of the 'Mahamanab' – the Great Human – which I suggest could be none other than the best Human Values to save humanity.**

**I have discussed these thoughts more elaborately elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, and I ask here, humbly: Are we ready for such activism? Else, should we not let the old man rest in peace and not pointlessly stir him up in his 'grave'?**

**I shall end by singing a song of Tagore invoking the youth to give the call of the new:**

***bandh bhengey dao***  
***(smash the barrier)***

**smash the barrier, smash the barrier**  
**smash the barrier – smash!**  
**let the captive soul and mind burst forth out of sight!**  
**let the violent humour of the deluge of life**  
**inundate the barren river –**  
**sing the trumpet song of rupture!**

**let the emaciated and shriveled float away,**  
**float away, float away!**  
**there, we have heard:**  
**'fear not, fear not, fear not' – the call of the new!**  
**fear we not the unknown –**  
**dash, at the bolted gate, at mighty speed!**

---

<sup>2</sup> Rahman, Md. Anisur, *The Social and Environmental Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore in the light of post-Tagore World Development*. Bangla Academy. Dhaka. April 2011.