

Translation of a Few Leaves from the Letters/ Diaries of Rabindranath Tagore

RAJAT DAS GUPTA

Literature of Tagore along with his songs is a vast ocean with inexhaustible treasures in it where paramount aesthetics, spirituality, philosophical insight, cosmic perception, etc abound. Very reasonably, this should not be a benchmark to assess Tagore's letters and diaries behind which there was no creative goal; neither these were primarily for the public eye. Yet, the poet's sparkling wisdom in scores of these letters/diaries is worth sharing even today when they have hardly lost their relevance. So far, about 4200 of the poet's letters both in Bengali and English have been classified, besides the numerous others lying in heaps in Visva Bharati (Tagore's University at Santiniketan, West Bengal). 'Shrayan' is a bi-annual magazine running for last 8 years. The January-June'03 issue is a compilation of a bevy of Tagore's letters and diaries. In the compilation stress has been given on the letters which voice the question, how should we survive in this genocide-afflicted world, which process had a great upheaval in early 20th century and is snowballing alarmingly even today. No letter has been produced in full. Only their extracts have been presented which have been found serving the purpose of the book. The editor of the magazine Mr Pathik Basu has done this hard work with amazing dedication which has made these invaluable documents handy to us. One might opine, these documents, though originally meant for consumption at personal levels, their publication will give opportunity to all and sundry to have a

glimpse of the poet's brilliant mind, though somewhat less than his creations which are purely literary and aesthetic. It is my pleasure to translate a few selected passages from Basu's 343-page book, at his desire into English, hoping these will reach worldwide through *Bulletin*, the monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. Here follow a few samples.

1) Wisdom above science

. . . . What we call science is inherent in man always. Now, we have isolated it from the other human faculties and become conscious of it with a special appellation. The reason is, modern man is hell-bent on harnessing natural forces for his 'convenience'. Cultivation of this 'convenience' has outgrown his other endeavours. But whenever man had hammered rock, shovelled earth, loomed cloth, his instinct for convenience roused. There he was victor. But never did he sing on his tools, which he did with his sword, not as a tool to convenience homicide, but as a relevance to his valour which has an ultimate value, but not as a means to an end. Man's music revealed wherever he touched this 'ultimate'.

A beautiful jar is not precious for its utility, but it is so because it is priceless, transcending all utilitarian haggle into an aesthetic glory. . . . However amazing 'efficiency' may be, it never provoked music in man's mind; implements have made man wealthy, but never inspired him. Where a perfection is

in itself plenty, or rather, where it has reached infinity, there it has turned man into a poet, a creator. Man is prepared to lose to his fiancée, but not to the implements of a mechanic. Today, in this worldwide market of 'convenience' man has built enormous implements, which were not there at the time of Plato or Esquil, yet want of those never dwarfed humanity. Aided by scientific instruments, man's limbs have enlarged and multiplied to grow him into a 'giant' but never 'great'.

The scope for mundane utilitarianism is not nobler than man's 'personality'. So, with our factories no modern Dante is writing 'Vita Nuova' as there may be 'Nuova' in it but not the 'Vita'. When man first lit up fire, he hailed it with his hymn, not because it was convenient for his cooking, but for its inherent ultimate mystery which is missing in his axe and shovel. Where we encounter the atomic theory amazed by its ultimatum, we hail that absolute with our awe. But where steam runs the rail engine. . . there we enter a workshop, not in the mysterious temple of creation. There ugliness is unabashed, the inchoate is nude, the muscles are inflated, but where is the grace? There we observe the blunt, not the ineffable. There we applaud, but without rhythm. Before the massive workshop of today, the entire Earth's populace in fright or greed applaud in chorus, but never genuflect as this does not fount from their reverence. Building up of new temples has not followed the ruthless iconoclasm. [To Amiya Chakraborty, 28 March 1925]

2) Thoughts of welfare in social problems

On earth there are two sects whose religions are aggressively opposed to others', which are Christianity and Islam. Their satiety is not merely in observing their own religion, but they are at daggers drawn. So, there is no means to integrate with them except by adoption of their religion. One

advantage with the Christians is that they are modernists, not captives of medievalism. Religion has not engulfed their life intimately. So they do not keep others at bay with their fence of religion. European and Christian are not synonymous. 'European Buddhist' or 'European Muslim' are not self-contradictions. But 'Muslim Buddhist' and 'Muslim Christian' are impossibilities. On the other hand, Hindu as a nation, is akin to Islam, ie religion engulfs both closely. The external difference in case of the former is that theirs opposition to other religions is not active, theirs is 'non-violent non-cooperation' with all non-Hinduisms.

A Hindu's religion is a heritage and ritualistic and, hence, its fences are more rigid. Islam permits equating others with the Muslims which passage to Hindu is also narrow. Muslim customs do not reject other communities, where also Hindus are cautious. So, on Khilafat, etc the Hindu participation drawn by the Muslims cannot be reversed by the Hindus. Customs are the bridges for human relations where the Hindu has raised his fences at every step. When I had first engaged in my estate work, I noticed in my office that the Muslim subjects [are] being offered seats on the floor, removing the carpet thereon (least the carpet meant for the Hindu subjects would be defiled).

There is no greater hurdle for combining humans than treating others' customs as unholy. India is so fated that the two communities like Hindus and Muslims have assembled here. Resistance of Hindus is not harsh on faith, but on rites it is, whereas with Muslims it is the other way. One's door open on one side but closed on the other juxtaposes the reverse order of the other. So, how they will combine? Once upon a time India was open to free mixture of the Greeks, Parsees, Shaks et al. But mind you, it was in the pre-Hindu stage.

The Hindu era has been one of reaction,

when Brahmanism solidified with impenetrable walls of rituals, indifferent of the truth that if you stifle a living being fool-proof, you murder it. On the whole, soon after the Buddhist era Hindus drew close the Rajputs and such aliens to solidify their protection from 'foreign' influence. Thus the Indians developed Hindu religion enclosed in fences, whose inherent nature is prohibition and rejection. Nowhere on earth resistance to human union has been built with such skill. This resistance is not merely confined to the Hindus and the Muslims. People like you and me, who want to preserve our freedom in pursuit of our customs, are also split up and hurdled. The problem is right here but where is the solution? It is in change in our ethos and a change in era.

The way Europe made its transit to modern era leaving past the medieval one through cultivation of truth and knowledge, Hindus and Muslims also must similarly set out of their boundaries. To turn religion into a sepulchre to rest the nation in postmortem is no way to progress, neither to come close to others. If we cannot dispel the obstacles in our ethos, we shall get no liberty. We have to put right our root by education and dedication, overhaul our heredity that we should be reverent to the cage rather than our wings, only after that our welfare will follow. Integration of Hindu and Muslim is awaiting a change in era. Yet, this should not be reason for our apprehension, as in other countries man has changed time by dedication to emerge into the new era stretching their wings breaking through their egg-shells. We too shall follow suit cutting through our mental blockage; if we won't, there is no other way. [To Amiya Chakraborty, Santiniketan, 21 June 1922]

3) He—from dust to universe

My heart holds the perception of the life of a tree, which I can confess because I have

been a human. But why the tree alone, perception of the entire inanimate world is imbibed there too. All the vibrations of the Universe pass me the thrill of camaraderie—within my heart, the *Anandam* (heavenly joy) of the trees and plants mute over ages has found expression—else, when today the mango buds are wild on the trees, on whose invitation do I go forward to organize the spring festival! There is an enormous *Anandam* in me which is within the land, water, trees, birds and beasts here also.

When I have seen through the open window of my boat the sunrays falling on the saffron soil of this ancient earth, my entire body stretches to the remote border of its dust and green there. When at some holy moments my feel is deep that I am integral with all the soil, rock, water and all here, my body and soul delight up in a clear music of an all-pervasive existence. This is my nature and not a mere fancy, from which founts my poems, songs and stories. This does not inhibit me. A man I am and so I am everything which is my glory. In my senses the world's history illuminates, there culminates the existence of all animate and inanimate. That is why the waves of my blood rhyme with the sea's, but the sea waves don't know me so, my euphoria delights up combined with the trees, but they don't know me; I am not within their subconscious.

[To Ramendrasundar Tribedi, from Selaidah (Bangladesh), 29 February 1912]

4) The beauty of commerce

In the animal world, competence of man does not lie in his physical excesses. Man's skin is soft, his muscles feeble and the power of his senses too falls short of the animals'. Yet, he has acquired such a strength which is not visible, not occupant of space, not based on a mass of soil, yet it is omnipotent all over the Earth. Man's strength has dodged the boundary of his physique and has

become powerful invisibility. Bible says, he who is modest will conquer the world. This means, strength of modesty is not external, but internal; less it hits more victorious it is. It does not fight in a battlefield, but earns its victory by accord with the powers in the world.

The demon of commerce too must one day be humanistic by restraining its demonic havoc. This commerce has little brain and no heart, so it is only increasing its burden on Earth. It is aiming victory by extending its occupied area with its deadly resolve. But that which will be victorious one day, is humble in size with its simple procedures, that accepts Man's heart, his aesthetics and religiosity. It is modest and not shamelessly greedy. Its stability is in its inner order, not in its external size. It achieves stability not by depriving others but through its harmony with all. Of all the human razzmatazz this commerce is the ugliest. It has brought fatigue on Earth by its own weight, deafened it by its noise, blighted the Earth by its garbage, and wounded life by its greed. Coronation of this greed on the world's throne and endorsing our slavery to this worldwide ugliness, this revolt against all beauty, aesthetics and human heart, is daily lashing the noblest human undoubtedly. This chess game, mad about 'profit', with man as its pawn, how long will it continue? This game must be aborted—where in greed of 'profit' man is losing himself continuously.

[On voyage to Japan, on board Tosamaru, May 1917]

5) Introversion of Indian religion

Dear Rani,

Our ship will go round two isles. So two days' journey will elongate to three. Here Viswakarma's (god of engineering) holed bags have let out soil to scatter over the sea to form many an isle. Those are under Dutch command. The isle where our ship is an-

chored now, is known as Biliton. Population is sparse. There are tin quarries manned by their managers and labourers. It is a wonder how they are milking the entire earth. Once upon a time these people sailed off in swarms into the unknown seas. They had gone round the earth to be familiar with it, to measure it. That history of familiarization is long and hazardous. I ponder, when they had first lowered their sail here at these coasts, far away from their homes, how full were those days of apprehension and expectation as well. The greenery, animals, humans here were all strange to them. But today, everything is known and vanquished!

They have defeated us, why, I ponder. The main reason is, we are static, they are dynamic. So they could go round easily and that is why they have known and their appetite for knowledge has been further whetted. That appetite is feeble among us because of our stagnation. Even our knowledge about our neighbours is vague, neither we have urge to know them better because our home encloses us too much. Those, whose vigour for knowledge is low, so is that for their survival. With the same vitality that enabled them to earn all rights over Java, is the dedication of their archaeologists to explore this island. Yet, like this island, its archaeology too was totally alien to them. We are indifferent to knowledge of our neighbourhood while their urge to know the distant is limitless. Not only by muscle, but by vitality of their quest they are conquering the ins and outs of this world. But, we are intensely domestic. This means, we are mere components of our family, trapped in a thousand bondages. Our responsibility for a livelihood is entangled with that for the rituals, the redundant load of which has almost crippled our genuine duties. From caste related obligations up to the funeral rites, all the duties have burdened us throughout our mortal phases and thereafter, have made our movement impossible and is

only siphoning out our vitality. The offspring of such homes are bound to be lashed by others, which we are feeling inwardly.

.....But, if it is easy to demolish age-old orders, how long will it take to build the foundation for the new ones? About duty and non-duty, each society has habituated itself to certain principles, based on which the populace keeps going. By argument and logic, only few can remain righteous. But it is not easy to replace one habitude with another. All our habitudes are for cohesion of the myriad rooted in our family life. It is easy to learn from the Europeans their science, but not their social habits.

[Letter to Rani Mahalanobis while on the way to Java, September 1927]

6) Islam and Mahabharata

Dear Amiya,

My visits here are nearly over. It was my wonder to observe their people's theatre, clumsily integrating Indian fragments. I had written you before how Ramayana and Mahabharata are animated in their life. Because it is living, it is not a prototype of any documented literature. It had drastic metamorphosis through thoughts and imaginations of the people here. They did not get in store any scriptural sermon all the principles of life, but had those embodied in the characters of these two epics. The yardsticks to judge good and bad in the humans are these characters. So, with dynamics of life its prerequisites have changed variously. It is like oral transformation of Vidyapati and Chandidas' (poets of medieval Bengal) compositions relayed down by the Bengali musicians from age to age. Yesterday we went for a shadow show. Its typed story was given to us. I'm sending it for your eye. Translate it into Bengali and judge it vis-à-vis the original Mahabharata. The distinction of the story is, there is no Draupadi (the central polyandrous female character of this epic having all the

five Pandava brothers as her husbands) in the story. The neuter Brihannala of Mahabharata has been named 'Kenobordi' as a female. Kitchaka was beguiled by her beauty and fell victim to Bhim (the 2nd Pandava). This Kitchaka is enemy of the fish-king in Javani Mahabharata. Pandavas, by exterminating him, earned the gratitude of the King Birat.

The balcony of the palace of the king titled as 'Monkunagro', where I am sitting now to write this letter, abounds with Ramayana stories beautifully drawn on silk to be seen all around on the foundation pillars. But, they are Muslims by religion. Yet, they know the ins and outs of the Hindu deities. They have taken as their own all the ancient streams of the Indian narratives. In fact, there is nothing wrong in it, as the characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata in abstraction are roaming around in their land. Rather, they do not have such all-pervasive camaraderie in our country, where they do not figure in all their festivals as at every home here.

[Written to Amiya Chakraborty while on Java trip, 17 September 1927]

7) About songs

For sometime, the debate on relative positions of 'word' and 'music' in a song is going on. I am not a maestro, but my common sense says this subject is not exclusively for a debate, but is very much inherent in Creation with its frolic. The high hand runs its steamroller on a fixed track to protect our rules and destinations. But, in the meantime, the Creator showers His creations in a myriad branches, where 'words' go alone and so does 'music' and, again, they go entangled too. In both this 'isolation' and 'entanglement' flowers joy. Those who advocate a 'communal' divide between the two, my appeal goes to them, to stop from hoisting these 'class banners' thus standing on the way of the creative streams only as a nuisance at

the cost of peace. [Written to Dhurjoti Prasad Mukhopaddhay on 8 October 1937.]

✱

I am inclined to equate the daytime with the Western music, a big medley of harmonized music and mal-music clubbed up in bits and pieces, and the night with our Indian music, an immaculate solemnity of unpolluted pathos. Both move us, though paradoxically. But what to do? There is an inherent contradiction in Nature, with splits between the King and the Queen, day and night, varied and homogeneous, spatial and infinite. We Indians live in night's domain. We are obsessed by the indivisible and eternal. Ours is a solo in solitude. Europe's is the song for the public place. Our song transcends the listeners beyond the boundary of their daily weal and woe to transport them to a solitary land of recluse, whereas European music makes one dance variously through the endless ups and downs of life.

[Selaidah (Bangladesh). *Chhinnapatra* (stray letters) 10 August 1894]

✱

You were talking about senility of Hindustani music. What happened is, it has turned classic, which means an immaculate perfection, steadfast in format. Such fulfilment is suicidal. Fulfilment, along with accomplishment, brings stagnation. But this is a stumbling-block which can never crave liberation of art. So, you'll find in history that catastrophe occurs when our fastidiousness beguiles us to this classicist archaism.

[To Dilip Kumar Roy, a renowned musician of Tagore's time, Baranagar (Calcutta), 26 March 1938]

✱

I have changed my opinion umpteen times. If the Creator also had not done so, today's musical soirées would be classic

dinosaur's roar with samba of the tusked mammoths which would be so frightening that even the votaries of muscular rendition of dance/music would retreat from its venue. If my flair for changing my opinion remains unimpaired till my last day, I'll know that I still have hope to survive, else, my funeral should be arranged at the marble landing of the Ganges where, in our country, is the maximum crowd.

[To Dilip Kumar Roy, 6 February 1938]

✱

[Translator's note: It may be claimed, Tagoreana comprises the Earth's most sophisticated music and dance, wording the ineffable, which had a spell on the Bengali culture for decades and rightly accepted at least by a large number of them as the ultimate of aesthetics. Now, the apprehension goes that this has only been a passing phase for Bengali culture, which is being fast overtaken by the earlier crudity along with the upstart mod culture from the West. The music and dance which nowadays dominate the Bengali stage are no less frightening than [that apprehended by Tagore.]

8) Form and value of literature

Values are of three types. One is for market-place, the second for religion and the third for aesthetics, being purely personal. From the last intellect is not banished, but it is secondary. Here the main architect is the person building the image, who can observe form and shape it. Form does not merely mean that which has area, weight and outline. Here, form attaches some aesthetics which provokes unnecessary interest. Unnecessary, because this interest is the ultimate goal without any more 'why' and 'what'. In this world a 'person' is that type, his/her reality is my very own and no other verbiage is above it. My curiosity about a 'person' is entirely naive – beyond question and last an-

TRANSLATION OF A FEW LEAVES FROM THE LETTERS/DIARIES OF
RABINDRANATH TAGORE

swer to all questions.

So I say, creation of form is art through which with inane inquest I perceive the form of a good song; in rotation of music and rhyme it casts such a spell which from my heart I feel as truth; but don't feel this 'wall' as such. What provokes this perception of truth is that form has various components, the main being 'emotion'. Because, through 'emotion' our consciousness knows 'self' deeply. Even 'immaculate perception' as propounded by the yogis is one of *Anandam* (divine joy), or an emotion so to say. 'Thoughts' also may be components of creation for art, but they do not upraise one to truth. But, thoughts may be so arranged that will generate a nuance beyond 'arguments' and turn it into an aesthetic to give us *Anandam* without reason, else those would be rabid elephants in a lotus garden. Words and sentences shape literature. In words there is sound and meaning, both needed in literature, but not for the sole purpose of 'information'. 'Information' will of course be there, but as a subordinate. If it gives a picture and aesthetics, then only it helps create an art. The word 'empathy' does not offer any music, picture or aesthetic. But somehow the word 'compassion' is accepted. Yet, on intellectual judgment 'empathy' is appropriate, accurate and explicit, ie to be one with others to feel

alike with them, which definition goes with the word. Yet, it did not work, as it has explanation but no form. Form embraces a 'totality' beyond analysis and does not get into your mind in isolation.

If you want to build literature placing the intellectual bricks one upon another, each brick cannot contribute to it more than its own quantity. But in a tree with life, each segment is superseding itself, possessing a charm which at once manifests the totality. In a literary work, if every word possesses such 'form', then the totality is available in each segment. This is called creation. [To Sudhindranath Dutta, from Santiniketan, 11 July 1928]

9) Eternal amidst ephemeral

On this earth there had been so much violence, so much weal and woe, union and estrangement, arrival and departure; these myriad frolics everyday are all lost in my amnesia. Yet, this autumnal green reigns on this widespread earth every year for ages. Its solemn peace and beauty, its immaculate aesthetic have gone unscathed. When I think of this, I look at the sky ahead when that disembodied receptacle of tranquillity absorbs all my lifelong grievances into its own infinitude.

[To Ranu Mukherjee from Santiniketan; September 1918] ■

NOTES

Courtesy: Dr N. D. Batra, Professor of Communication, Norwich University, Vermont, USA vide website <http://corporatepower.blogspot.com> published in parts from November 2006 to May 2007.

* Rajat Das Gupta is the author of a few books including *The Eclipsed Sun*, a translation of Tagore's poems and songs.