THAT has come to be known as environmental thinking today is not a recent phenomenon. though the discourses on environment, generating in most cases what may be called ecological angst, may be attributed to the fifties when Rachel Carson's controversial Silent Spring was published.

Carson used the images of silences and absences to make a case for the experience of horror in spring - a season of crudities, cruelties and indifferences experienced in terms of absences of so many things - trees, grass, and even air, light and life. The kind of ecological inferno that Arthur Miller, the American playwright, outlines in Death of a Salesman in the sixties comes to mind: Willy Loman, one of the central characters of the play, tellingly illustrates his predicament damned in an environmental inferno thus: "There's not a breath of fresh air, you can't raise a carrot in the backyard... Remember those two elm trees out there?" For Miller here, as it is for Carson as well, environment can be read as a text of absences, among other things. In fact, one of the most interesting examples of environment-as-a-text-of-absences is Eliot's The Waste Land, a work which considerably deals with environmental degradation and pollution in the images and idioms of absences: "Here is no water . . . ", or "And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief", or "Drip drop drip drop drop

no water. Here, the point that I intend to make through citing examples from Eliot, Carson and Miller is that most of the western discourses on environment in this century appear to be largely dominated by the ideas and images of absences, which have also gone into the kind of discourses being undertaken today not only in the west, but also in this part of the world.

drop drop drop/ But there is

Of course, there are scores of practical and physical reasons for such concerns with

ABINDRANATH Tagore, the youngest son of Ma-A harshi Devendranath Tagore was entrusted, in 1891, to look after the Tagore estate which spread over to Patisar-of Rajshahi, Shahjadpur of Pabna and Birahimpur of Nadia districts of Bengal. Of these areas, Rabindranath had chosen Shelaidah as the centre from where he conducted adminis-

trative affairs of the estate. It was not understood why Rabindranath Tagore was assigned to look after the zamindary of the Tagore estate is the first place, as he was known to be a soft-spoken, kind hearted personality with a literary bend of mind. One story went like this, complaints against administrative staff of Tagore estate and different types of discontent were piling up from amongst the tenants of the Tagore estate. In this context, news used to be published in Gram Barta Prakashika of Harinath Majumdar of Kumarkhali which was part of the Shelaidah estate. It was found that Devendranath was a regular subscriber of Gram Barta Prakashika. The unhappy sit uation of Tagore estate was reflected in the book of accounts maintained by no less a person than Devendranath himself. According to one account, taxes paid from three Parganas stood at 50,000 rupees. This also shows the size of the es-

It was really a difficult assignment for Rabindranath Tagore to manage. Initially, he was asked to inspect and report back to his father the affairs of the estate. In this connection, a letter written to Rabindranath by his father is worth taking note of. In this letter his father had instructed him to inspect from sadar kachari the receipt of taxes, realisation of unpaid taxes, expenditure and also to take note of all letters relating to exportimport. "I will advise you for taking further action on receipt of your report every week. On being satisfied of your activities and efficiency. I Muffashil."

Rabindranath held his father in high esteem and, to an extent, was scared of him too. Here I would like to quote from Rabindranath himself: "Although my grandfather had handed over the management of the estates to my father, he himself controlled the expenditure. He was a strict disciplinarian. On the second of every month the accounts had to be brought and read out to him. He would remember every figure, and ask awkward questions whilst the report was being read. Father used to be afraid of this day of trial.

Rabindranath Tagore and His Ecological Spiritualism

by Azfar Hussain

environment as absences incarnate, given the extent and nature of environmental degradation people have been experiencing globally. But, such concerns, most of the times, uneasily teeter on the verge of disproportionate horror and meaninglessness, inviting now and then a kind of environmental nihilism. Prakash Sarengi, an ecosociologist, justly observes: "If you just look at the statistics on environment being brought to notice today, you would feel that statistics themselves have the Kafkaesque undercurrents of the infernal and the terrible!" In fact, environment, as it is textualized brings to us that very question once posed by William Faulkner: "Every moment the question is, when will I be blown up?"

Against such discourses and

concerns saddled with ecological angst, one can certainly look at Rabindranath Tagore's environmental - rather ecological - sensibility and consciousness which he almost consistently exhibits not only in his works, but also in a number of action-oriented programmes he undertook, one of them being the creation of Shantiniketan itself, which shows Tagore's profound interest in the spirit and philosophy of tapavona - the forest hermitage of the patriarchal community of ancient India. In fact, Tagore's concerns with, reflections on, and attitudes towards, environment can be read as oriental discourses strong, powerful and stimulating to the extent of putting a viable stay against ecological angst that the western discourses tend to breed and circulate. Tagore's discourses, as we would see shortly, are not at all accommodative of the ideas, idioms and images of ab-

sences in the Western sense: but, they are integrative, holistic, and Buddhistic at times, edging close of the zone of the Upanishadic ananda, instead of angst and anxiety.

OTH as a poet and as an activist, Rabindranath Tagore has dwelt on the question of environment, both indirectly and directly. For example, while he speaks of Kalidasa, the Sanskrit poet, in his "A Poet's School", Tagore actually indicates the need for an environment which helps bloom creativity and nourish life in perfection: "What was the image in which his desire of perfection persistently appeared in his poems and dramas? It was tapovona ...' Now, this image of tapavona, taken from Kalidasa, brings to the fore the principle of harmony which, again, brings together both the musician and the poet in environmentalist Tagore, intertextually. For Tagore, as he himself indicates, the built environment is like a poem; it has always been more than the sum of its parts. That is to say, Tagore speaks of an environment where unity matters - a unity which is not only an external and physical form, but

spiritual one at that. Tagore, almost consistently in his poetry and songs, locates the very site of this unity, this spiritual experience, which is nature itself. In Religion of Man, he says: "The first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with nature." In fact, Tagore's concern with environment, as a site and space for the manifestation of unity experientially spiritualized, largely amounts

also an experience within, a

with nature. Tagore's environmental sensitivity is greatly dominated by his consciousness of nature, as he himself clearly indicates it in Jiban Smriti. Here, Tagore mentions that his contact with nature has always been a living and harmonious one, and that nature, as a companion, has always been conversing with him. One may move on to detect an echo of Wordsworth in Tagore's feelings about nature. but then he certainly moves beyond Wordsworth in that Tagore does not end up attributing living, human qualities to nature, nor does he only take, Wordsworth-style, nature as a shaping and organising principle. In fact, Tagore also considers nature as a means of building such an environment where the world in its entirety can be glimpsed and lived, without breaking the essential cosmic harmony and rhythm. Indeed, it is the harmony of environment which Tagore emphasizes through sustaining an active, living contact with nature. What lies at the core of the whole idea of Shantiniketan is this principle of harmony, this sense of unity, much of which is energized by

to his intimate relationship

his internalizing the Upanishadic spirit: Jadidang Kincha sharbang pran ejati nisritam (whatever emanates from absolute life goes into life, and whatever emanates from life goes into absolute life). But, what is this harmony of

environment? Does it only mean living in an active contact with nature? Answering this question would help identify one of the characterizing qualities of Tagore's environmental thinking - a quality which is absent in most of the western environmentalists to-

day. According to Tagore, the harmony of environment certainly depends on the harmony maintained without, the harmony one sees in terms of one's intimate relationship with nature - with earth, air, fire and water. Keeping trees and grass, flora and fauna alive certainly means keeping the environment alive: But, this is not sufficient for Tagore. For him, the harmony of environment, equally importantly, depends on the harmony within - a harmony which can be sustained through an internal restraint and a spiritual economy, through a stay against the sin of excess, through resistance to all crude forms of hedonism and epicureanism. True, man lives both in concert and contest with nature, and one can see that Tagore very much subscribes to this dialectic of living. But, then, for him, to conquer nature does never mean mindlessly consuming it for selfish purposes. In fact, thus, Tagore underscores the need for maintaining a harmony between tag and bhog through controlling the probritti. And this principle of harmony, which rests on restraint, adjustment, modulation and resistance, strikes, inter alia, the keynote of Tagore's ecological

spiritualism. Thus, it is evident that Tagore's environmental thinking and consciousness do not remain confined to nisarga only, though his concern with nisarga provides the startingpoint of, as well as dominates, his environmental thinking. In fact, the space that Tagore inhabits and traverses in the realm of cosmic harmony is both internal and external.

Now, while speaking of internal harmony, Tagore also comes up with the idea of

Chief rent-collector and

other Hindu officers were sur-

prised to witness that all

tenants having removed bed-

sheets and chairs sat on the

carpet together and

Rabindranath took his place in

the middle. Rabindranath was

so generous that he invited the

chief rent-collector and other

officers to sit with the tenants

and requested them to with

draw their decision to resign.

It was an unprecedented get

together of all people irrespec-

tive of caste, creed and reli-

gion and the chain of class dis-

crimination was broken from

the day of assumption of his

assignment as zamindar of

Tagore estate. But a seed of

discord among the money-len-

ders and administrative offi-

self to save and protect the

Muslim tenants from the

clutches of money-lenders who

were predominantly from the

Rabindranath's determination

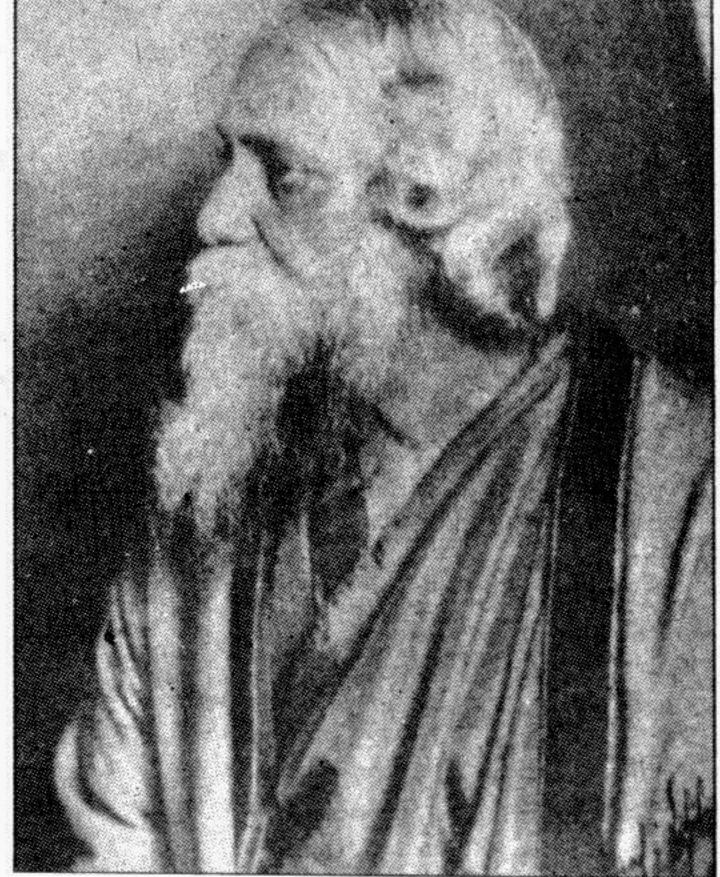
community.

Rabindranath pledged him-

cials was sown.

Hindu

belong to you."



sense-training which, in fact, he made compulsory for the students of Shantiniketan. Tagore himself maintains in his education-policy of the asrama: "Students must be helped from the beginning in improving their senses and sense-perceptions. One whose sense is untutored remains uneducated." Indeed, for Tagore, educating one's senses means sharpening and heightening one's responses to the undercurrents and overtones of all forms of life and reality on the one hand, and preventing such senses from misuse, on the other. Tagore also indicates as an environmentalist that what can certainly degrade or destroy environment is the lack of sense-control, or

One can certainly go on and on to cite examples, from Tagore's poetry, of his naturecentred (nature which is both

for that matter, sense-training. effect of mutation of a name. The zamindar added the equivalent amount of money to the collected amount under Kalyan Britti which were spent for the construction of roads. schools and Madrasas and reconstruction of mosques and

temples. It was also used for the tenants when they were in dire need of money. These amounts was then spent by Benevolent Council constituted with the elected representatives by the tenants themselves. Therefore, it is clearly evident that extra taxes realised by Rabindranath were meant for the welfare of the poor taxpayers of his locality. He did not spend as much for the welfare of his own family nor he spent extravagantly like other feudal lords. Apart from development of

the villages, Rabindranath concentrated mainly on the educa tion and health sectors, Primary schools in each villages, minor schools in three divisions and a high school in sadar kachari area were set up jointly by him and his tenants. From the exchequer of the estate, however, students dormitories were built. In Shelaidah Maharshi Charitable Dispensary was set up. In this dispensary treatment was meted out in homeopathy, allopathy and traditional Hindu medical science systems. The rural poor were treated in this dispensary. A big hospital was established in Patisar and three doctors were employed in three divisions of Kaligram

Pargana. Rabindranath also extended his hand of cooperation to the development of cottage industry. One weaver was despatched to Srirampur and another Muslim weaver from Shelaidah was sent to Shantiniketan for training in *handloom. Simultaneously, Tagore opened weaving and pottery schools at Shelaidah. This demonstrates how he was determined to improve the standard of living of his tenants to gradually become

self-sufficient. That Rabindranath was an efficient and successful landlord was reflected in the writing of a British ICS, C. Malley, in the Rajshahi district gazetteer in 1916: "It must not be imagined that a powerful landlord is always oppressive and uncharitable. A striking instance to the contrary is given in the settlement officer's account of the estate of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet, whose fame is worldwide. It is clear that to poetical genius he adds practical and beneficial ideas of estate management, which should be an example to the

local zamindars."

internal and external) environmental consciousness and thinking which draw elan and energy from the Kalidasian image and idea of the tapovana in the Vedic age, from the Upanishads, and occasionally from Chinese Taoism (one finds in Tagore's reflections on nature and environment the Chinese spirit of ju shen which means unity through entering into the entity) and certainly from his understanding of, and empathy for, man. Indeed, Tagore's nature is not mere nisarga as already indicated: it is never devoid of men and women. For Tagore, nature without man is incomplete, and at the heart of his envi-

ronmental thinking, there lies nothing but man - man only. The centricity that Tagore attributes to man unmistakably lends a strongly humanistic colour to Tagore's environmental sensibility. Indeed, his anthropocentric ecological spiritualism never advocates asceticism and hermeticism. which, as Tagore says, are not the ways to salvation and redemption. Instead, as Tagore maintains, the key to salvation for a man lies in man only; it lies in the very spiritual act of establishing a direct contact between man and man, between man and nature, between man and God, between man and society. In fact, Tagore's ecological spiritualism is not only anthropocentric, but it also constitutes a whole of interconnected entities and objects intended to improve the quality of life of man. Thus, Tagore's concerns with environment are nothing but his characteristic concerns with man's physical and spiritual development - in fact, with his all-round development. This is why Tagore's environmental thinking traverses an unusually wide range of issues and concerns, such as self-development, sense-development, rural development, cooperatives, agriculture, education and literacy, social development, and so on. Even political thinking of Tagore is very much part of his environmental thinking. In fact, one can say that Tagore's vision of the whole is his vision of environment, and ecology. It is possible to see in Tagore's poetry that his unremitting search for unity and the whole tends to blur the so-called binary dichotomy between physical and human environments.

AGORE is not only a visionary with regard to his environmental thinking: nor he is a mere idealist Continued on page 11

Two Poems of Rabindranath Tagore Translated by Kazi Fazlur Rahman

(নির্ভয়: আমরা দুজনা স্বর্গ – খেলনা গড়িব না ধর্ণীতে)

The Undaunted A toy paradise we shall not build on this earth Resonant with enchanting yet wailful melodies Nor my beloved, we shall make up our bridal bed with sweet sorrows of Cupid's arrows; Never shall we with hearts atremble beg favours from Fate; We fear not as we know for sure you and I are forever together We shall hold high the banner of our love on the steepest of mountain peaks; Hard shall be the task, yet swiftest shall be our pace. Together we shall hear the anguish of the harsh days;

Yet never shall we beg for tranquility, Nor seek consolidation. As we cross the river of life The rudder may get lost, the riggings snap: Yet we shall defy Death, — Because we know you and I

are forever together. We gazed deep into each other's eyes And found there lay our universe. Together we endured the pains of the burning desert; Mirages we didn't run after Nor beguiled ourselves with delusions: This shall be our glory

And let this be our proud declaration, O my love! "Your and I shall be forever together"

for all our days on this earth

অনন্ত প্রেম: তোমারেই যেন ভাল বাসিয়াছি শতরূপে শতবার The Love Eternal

It's you I loved in countless ways and hundreds of times, In many incarnations spanning eons without a break. Through eternity, my enchanted heart Kept on weaving garlands of my love. and always you did accept my offerings, And put those around your neck, -Eon after eon in many manifestations.

I listen to the tales of the past, And of pangs of ancient loves. . Of stories to the partings and meetings in the days long gone; I peer back into the past without a beginning. And your image pierces the darkness of time.

Shinning as the lodestar of remembrances.

From the heart of the time without a beginning You and I floated together in the river of love. In the love of countless lovers, we loved Their tears of separation and blushes of union, we shared; Overs is the love eternal in ever new incarnations

That eternity of love reached its end On this day As my offering at your feet. In it are all the joys and sorrows, And all the loves of this universe. Commingled in this one love Memories of all loves of all ages. In it are there all the songs Of all the poets of times past and future.

Rabindranath Tagore as a Benevolent Zamindar

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain



Rabindranath among the tenants at Shelaidah. like a school boy going for ex-

amination". This was the period when Rabindranath was on probation.

Having served a year or so as an apprentice. Rabindranath earned the confidence of his father who was a real hard task master as far as zamindary was concerned. On taking over the assignment of managing the estates, Rabindranath had broken the rigid age-old tradition of self-landlord relationship and established rapport between zamindar and tenants

which was hitherto unknown. It is true that Rabindranath Tagore wrote profusely during his stay in Shelaidah. But it is equally true that he also proved his managerial skills as a zamender during the same period. In spite of his crave for creative writings, he paid apt attention to the managerial duties assigned by his father. will entrust you with work in Every morning staff members of the estate placed accounts before him which he scanned through, listened to reports briefed by them and disposed of official correspondences. However, the door remained open for tenants and he used to give patient hearing to the complaints. He did not rely on the staff alone for settlement of any dispute. Tenants were received by him with an open mind and they were free to discuss any problem including their personal affairs. He never signed any letter or document without scrutinizing them. No staff dared to stop any tenant

to approach Rabindranath di-

rectly. There were examples that he sacked his own staff members on hearing complaint from tenants. The staff knew it well that no amount of negligence, however small, would escape his notice. There was a tremendous amount of goodwill between the zamindar Rabindranath and his tenants.

If any tenant was not satisfied with the decision of the village panchayat he had the option to appeal to five pradhans appointed by the zamindar. They used to hear the appeals of the tenants. It is really amazing that no tenant filed a case in the Magistrate or Munsiff courts during the tenure of zamindary of Rabindranath. There is an interesting story one is tempted to recall: A ceremony on the occasion of an auspicious day was arranged. All formalities complete the zamindar would take his seat on a velvet chair placed on the rostrum According to the tradition, prayer was offered by the priest of Brahmo Samaj followed by Hindu Puja. The priest also gave a mark of sandal-paste on the forehead of the zamindar Rabindranath. On such an occasion the zamindar would normally offer new cloth, curd, fish and other gifts to his tenants while taxes would be paid by tenants at the same breadth. As per age old tradition Muslim tenants would occupy their places at one end of the carpet which was bare and on the other end of the carpet which was cov-

ered with bed sheet the Hindu tenants would sit and Brahmins would occupy the middle area while officers of sadar kachari and other kacharis would take their designated seats. This sitting arrangement did not satisfy the newly appointed landlord Rabindranath. He instructed the chief rent-collector of the sadar office building to dismantle the sitting arrangement and allow Hindu-Muslim-Brahmin Shudra (people from the low-caste) to sit together in a common sitting arrangement, The chief rent-collector argued with him and said there was no power on earth to change the age-old system particularly in connection with holding such ceremonial function. On hearing this Rabindranath became angry and said, "I do not understand the age-old system. There will be common sitting arrangement for all of them. This is my first order as zamindar." At this stage, a follower of the age-old tradition, the chief rent-collector and other Hindu staff raised their voice in protest and threatened that they would resign enbloc if the system was changed, but Rabindranath remained steadfast in his decision and addressed the gathering by saying that "the cordial relations should not be spoiled by creating discrimination in a joyous get-together. Dear tenants, please sit together by removing separate sitting arrangements and I will sit with you. I

in this regard had been cora roborated by Promoth Chowdhury who served as. Manager in the Tagore estate and added that all zamindars of Bengal were not like Rabindranath Tagore. Poet Rabindranath equally distinguished himself as a unique zamindar. There was a gulf of difference between the lardlord that he was and other landlords of Bengal. He neither distributed alms nor put pressure for taxes on the tenants and, on the other hand, zamindery bureaucrats were having a tough time. Rabindranath increased taxes only when there was a bumper-crop and production of crops showed an increasing trend following the introduction of progressive method of cultivation, but he exempted the needy from taxes. When he increased taxes, tenants became agitated and adverse publicity about autocracy in his zamindary system gained currency but Rabindranath did not pay any attention to such adverse publicity. Rabindranath, on the other hand, had spent substantially on the development of villages and for the welfare of the tenants from the extra revenue earnings derived from increased taxes. Kalyan Britti (welfare scholarship) was introduced by him under this system. The zamindar used to collect three pice per rupee from the tenants at the time of payment of outstanding dues. This was paid by tenants voluntarily. In one year five to six thousand Taka was collected. Money was also collected at

the rate of two and a half ru-

pees per 100 at the time of

leasing out landed property

and five rupees per 100 on the