



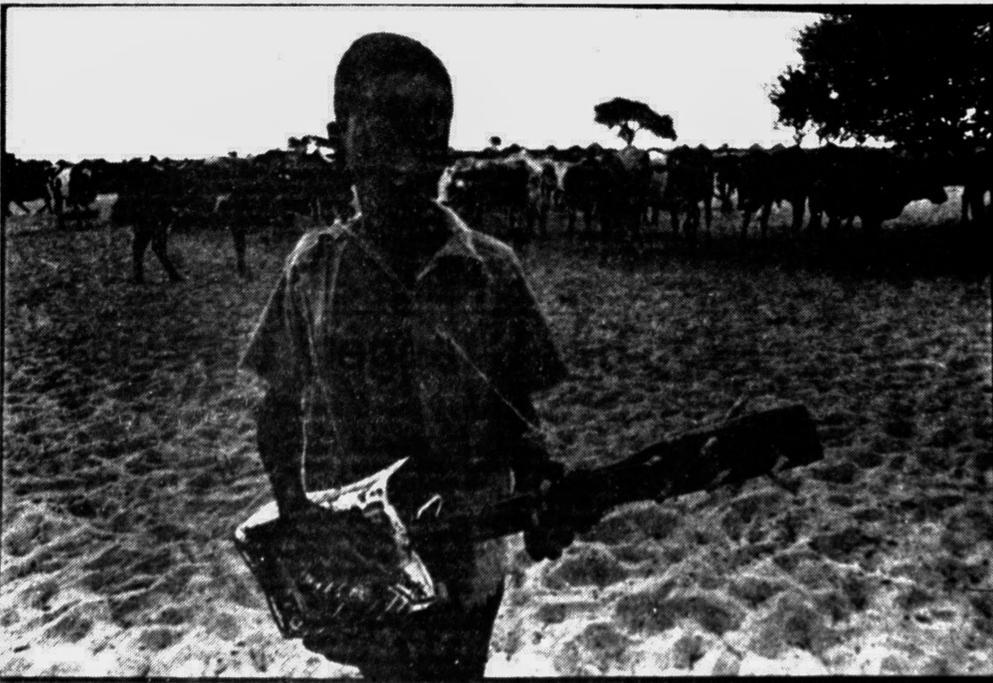
Apartheid Labour, Botswana



Basotho Homestead, Lesotho

Glimpses of Africa

by Anwar Hossain



One-man band in Kalahari, Botswana



School for the Disabled, Swaziland



Kalahari children, Botswana

The Relevance of Tagore Today

Kabir Chowdhury

There are elements in Tagore's writings which are universal and timeless. Naturally they are relevant today, too. Love of nature and beauty, patriotism, spiritual awareness, humanism — these are abundantly present in Visva-Kabi's works. They are as relevant today as they were in the past. But apart from these general features there are certain specific features in his writings which are particularly relevant in our time. An adequate realisation of and attention to them may, perhaps, help cure some of our current maladies.

What are the critical issues threatening the balance and peace of today's world? Rise of fundamentalism, narrow sectarian attitudes, ethnic strife, violence and terrorism, aggressive nationalist feelings, the predominance of the machine, the cult of pleasure, consumerist culture and the arrogance of naked power — these bedevil today's world. Tagore in much of his work warned his readers many years ago of these grave dangers. In the early 1930s he was on a visit to Iran. What he wrote in a letter from there is illuminating:

"No spiritual life-blood flows in any communal religion today. Rituals, customs, institutional practices and creeds of an age-long past are the props on which religious communities are still kept standing somehow. But all this is an imposition of the past on the present, holding back the current of history and practically reversing its course; communal religions are definitely remnants of the past." This, Tagore wrote when he was about seventy.

Three years earlier while speaking on Raja Rammohan Roy in 1928 he had highlighted the importance of adhering to the essence of religion and not falling victim to any narrow sectarian interpretation of the same. To quote a few lines from that address:

"The moment we narrow down the principle of unity that constitutes the essence of religion and give it a local form, it becomes a deadly weapon that cuts us out from the rest of the world. Storm, flood, volcanic eruption, plague — there are many kinds of natural horrors. But in the entire history of man we will find nothing that can compare with the horror that is religion. Man's religion was the greatest enemy of human unity; and it cannot be said that it has subsided yet." Strong words, indeed, from a sensitive mind!

Religious fanaticism, violent communal clashes in the name of religion, destruction of places of worship etc., have not disappeared. On the contrary, they have increased in some parts of the world. Look, for example, at the rise of the Jamat-i-Islam, Shih-Sena, B.J.P. Islami Chhatra Shibir in our subcontinent, the resurgence of fundamentalism in Iran, Algeria and Egypt, the passing of an anachronistic law like the Blasphemy Law in Pakistan.

Tagore was always upset by religious bigotry. In 1926 a vicious communal riot had broken out in Calcutta. The poet saw the atrocities perpetrated at the time with his own eyes. He wrote a letter to Pramatha Choudhury about it which reveals the distraught state of his mind: "I do not see where the solution of the Hindu-Muslim problem lies. There is no way out except that genuine education which will radically cure all religious fanaticism."

A few days later on his return to Santiniketan from Calcutta he addressed a gathering in the following anguished words:

"We pride ourselves on having made religion the basic principle of our life, and so we see that brutality in the

name of religion is widespread in this country. In the name of God Hindus and Muslims are killing each other like ferocious beasts. Straight forward rejection of all distortions of religion (by which Tagore obviously meant all communal forms of religion) is far better than this kind of blind and horrifying attachment to religion.... Apart from burning down all religious perversions in the fire of atheism and making a fresh start — I do not see any other solution".

For Tagore humanism, based on love, brotherhood, fellow-feeling and a sharing of both pain and joy, was the real religion of man. His heart bled at the sight of the suffering, tormented, humiliated humanity and he questioned God if He forgave those "who poisoned His air and extinguished His light."

Today when we find our world steeped in crises of all kinds Tagore appears to be not only relevant but also necessary. His words can act as a beacon and help us lift the veil of darkness cast by greed, intolerance and love of power, power acquired through the manipulation of money, machine and media. At the heart of Tagore's thoughts lies the question of the individual's rights and freedom. Today the individual's freedom of thought, expression and action, and his right to dissent are constantly curbed, sometimes by the state, sometimes by the convention-bound society.

In many poems, short stories, novels, plays, essays and letters of Tagore one comes across his impassioned utterances against those evils. One is easily reminded of such plays as *Rakta-Karabi*, *Achalayaton*, *Muktadhara*, *Bishorjon* and *Tasher Desh*, the novel *Gora*, essays like *The Religion of Man* and the *Crisis of Civilization*, *Letters from Russia*, and the comparatively little known but nonetheless remarkable sketch called *The Story of a Muslim Woman*.

Let me say a few words about the last composition, *Kamala* is a Hindu young woman. On her way to her husband's home after the wedding she falls into the hands of a gang of bandits and is rescued by Habir Khan, a man of piety and a noble character. However, Kamala's relatives refuse to take her back in their fold. Habir Khan accepts Kamala as his daughter and puts her in a separate house where she can pursue her life freely as a Hindu. But Kamala soon grows restless and, drawn by the strong natural currents of youth, falls in love with Habir Khan's son Karim. She approaches Habir Khan and says that she never saw the benevolence of God in a religion that deprived her of love all her life and threw her by the garbage dump. She further says, "I first found love at your home, father. I came to know that the life of even a wretched girl had value. I worship the God who gave me refuge with love and honour, and I worship him. He is my God; he is neither Hindu nor Muslim." Kamala marries Karim and takes the new name of *Meharjan*.

In *Rakta-Karabi* (Red Oleander) Tagore raises some questions which are extremely relevant today. In the first edition of the play (1924) he says in the preface: "I have a king in my play. I dared not give him, in this modern age, more than two hands and one head. Had I the courage and faith of the first poet (the reference is to Balmiki, the creator of the *Ramayana*), I would have. The heads, feet and hands of man have grown invisibly today due to the power of science. The king of my play receives and devours by virtue of that superfluous power — there is a hint of this in my play.... The thirst and hunger, the



hatred and envy, and the craving for luxury of our exploitative civilization are very much like those of a well-educated oge."

Tagore was not against science or industrialization, but he was strongly against a system or process of industrialization that turned people into robots and made workers mere instruments of production for the profit of their masters.

When Tagore visited Russia he was filled with admiration to see the amazing advances made by the Soviet Union in education, science and technology within a very short time. However, while praising the Soviet people for their success in these fields he did not hesitate to express his unambiguous disapproval of the element of force he detected in their methods. In his "Letter from Russia" he wrote:

"Where the desire to obtain results quickly is very great State leaders do not want to recognize the right of the people to have different views. They say, we shall look into those things later. For the present, let us achieve our goal. During those days a situation of war was prevailing in Russia. It had enemies at home and abroad. Frantic efforts were being made on all sides to frustrate by hook or crook the experiments that were being conducted there. So their leaders wanted to cement the base of their construction work as quickly as possible and did not hesitate to apply force in order to achieve it. But however great the need may be, force is a one-sided thing. It can break but not create. In the act of creation there are two sides. You have to bring the elements to your own side; not by force and beatings, but by recognizing their

own rules."

Today in many parts of the world dictators of various kinds, big and small, are raising their ugly heads, propelled by, among other things, hunger for power, illusions of ethnic superiority and desire for controlling chunks of the universe through new strategies of trade and commerce. In such a situation are Tagore's words irrelevant?

Let me wind up this article by recalling another statement of Tagore. In hundreds of poems and songs he had extolled patriotism and sang fervent praises of his motherland, but he was an inveterate enemy of blind, aggressive, jingoistic nationalism. In fact, with the passage of time, towards the later period of his long eventful life, Tagore had become a true internationalist. He said:

"How to be free from arrogant nationalism is today the chief lesson to be learnt. Tomorrow's history will begin with a chapter on internationalism, and we shall be unfit for tomorrow if we retain any manners, customs or habits of thought that are contrary to universalism. There is, I know, such a thing as national pride, but I earnestly wish that it never makes me forget that the best efforts of our Indian sages were directed to the abolition of disunity.... He who has realised the unity of man by identifying himself with the universe is free from ignorance and sorrow."

Is there any scope of disagreeing with the above sentiments in the present situation of the world?

[The Bengali version of this paper was presented by the author at an International literary seminar held in Calcutta on 14 December, 1995]

Not for Children Only..

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fairy tales breaking the *Magic Spell*, *Fairy Tales* and the *Art of Subversion* and his funny feminist anthology, *Don't Bet on the Prince*, usefully historicizes these "timeless tales" and loosens the hold of some powerful stereotypes.

On the other hand there are a number of intellectually powerful writers who are struck by the way in which the adult discourse of childhood works to disempower children, much in the way that the discourse of orientalism worked to disempower the colonized. Ashis Nandy and Krishna Kumar here in India and a number of critics working abroad — Nodelman, Rose, Wojcik Andrews — have all suggested that adults regularly "colonize" and trivialize children out of a need for control, and out of a fear of the potentially unruly subversive elements in the self. (It is worth noting that in the high ripe golden 19th-century discourse of childhood, childhood was regularly figured colonially as an undeveloped brand new contingent, ripe for

exploration and use by retrospectively adult).

The inference to be drawn from this child-colonizing argument is the need to find ways for children to represent themselves. Some critics, Beisel and Wojcik-Andrews for example, use a flat out class mode, urging children "to think of themselves as a class.... a powerful group that.... might construct a political agenda for economic, social, cultural and ideological change...." (There is a very modest precedent for this within the protected community of Janusz Korczak's children's homes in the 1920s and 1930s.) The desire to empower children also is related to a reviving interest in children's writing by children. I don't want to imply a false opposition, however, between those who wish to protect some mystified angel child and those who wish to empower some deconstructed politically-savvy child. In fact, the children's literature field remains largely the province of adult scholars who are, however, increasingly beguiled by

the desire to invent what Peter Hunt calls somewhat wistfully, a "Childist" criticism. Such criticism would be fully informed by the doubleness of Children's Literature; it would draw on reception theory and anthropology and sociology and child psychology to read Children's Literature with a conscious double vision, the vision both of historically situated child and historically situated adult. As one need not be a woman to be a feminist, no more would one need to be a child to be a "Childist." Such criticism has hardly been written yet because it has hardly been invented. But the fashioning of such a new discourse will probably be the work of the next decade within the emerging discipline of Children's Literature.

Children's Literature is a late-born discipline, coming only now to institutional status as part of the general decentering of literature that has brought once marginalized texts into the center of study. Belatedness is part of what it's about. Psychologically the study of Children's

Literature is belated since virtually all its practitioners, whether artists, writers, or critics, try as a condition of knowledge to do as Coleridge recommended and "carry the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood" and womanhood. This is a somewhat risky habit — the habit courts a disabling nostalgia — but inextricably linked to adult knowledge and commitment to the subject. But the belatedness of Children's Literature as a discipline is also linked to the vulnerable position of children and the problematic status of childhood. The nervousness of Children's Literature specialist about where to stand in respect to children; the anxiety about not damaging or coopting or colonizing childhood; the simultaneous will to create a disciplinary apparatus: these are all responses to a sense of both children and childhood in danger.

The writer, a Professor of English at the George Washington University, Washington, DC is currently a Fulbright Lecturer (Winter 1995) at the Centre of Linguistics and Literature, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.