

essay

Goethe and Tagore: An Evaluation and Inspiration

By Dr Martin Kämpchen

Following is the text of the lecture Martin Kämpchen delivered at the Goethe Institut, Dhaka on January 19, 2000.

IN Germany, there has been a dramatic built-up towards Johann Wolfgang Goethe's 250th birth anniversary which fell on 28th August 1999. Consumerism discovered a new target by re-inventing a classical writer about whom everything seemed to have been already said decades ago. Goethe scholarship has been meticulous, critical and broad-based throughout the last century. Several historical-critical editions of his *Complete Works* have been published and been reprinted. A host of serious scholars has dedicated his lifetime to Goethe and the Age of Goethe. What else was there to discover?

Alas, the books that have come out last year on Goethe in German language are legion. Several new novels on Goethe have been written by well-known contemporary writers. Books on the women around the poet, especially about his wife whom Goethe neglected pitifully, on his imbecile son August, on his life as a minister in Weimar, which was not without blemish, on his travels, his friends and visitors — well, books on every conceivable angle of his life have swamped the market, and especially books which attempt to demythologise the classical greatness of a great classical writer.

At the same time, strangely, the habit of reading books has sharply declined in Germany particularly among the youth. They prefer computers, the television and the Internet to a book. I still hear my teacher in College in the 1960s shout with zeal and enthusiasm that he will not allow anybody of us pass the *Abitur* (equal to a Bachelor Degree) unless we had fully imbibed Goethe's best-known drama, *Faust*. And we did read and study Goethe with a good measure of awe. Such hunger for classical literature is neither required nor extant today. The knowledge of the classics — for example of Goethe's principal works — has become no longer a matter of personal prestige, let alone a personal obligation to one's cultural heritage.

Should we, then, rejoice over this birthday rush of Goetheana as an opportunity for re-establishing classical education? Obviously one such the wave will not reverse a major trend supported by civilisational developments. And yet, a media-conscious population cannot be indifferent to such a massive dissemination of information and images.

But the point I wish to make here is a different one. Goethe's vision, his personality and his principal works were

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the foundation of a broadly based, universalised education which became the ideal of German education. I may claim that my generation was the last one to have enjoyed such a wide-ranging education. I studied fourteen subjects until *Abitur*-level which included three foreign languages (English, French and



Latin), German literature, the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology), music, art, history, geography, political science, sports and religious education. Today, only a fraction of these subjects are obligatory. Specialisation begins earlier and is left to the student's own inclination. Knowledge of the classics is considered an unnecessary luxury as it prepares the student for no particular profession.

Young people are not aware of what they forsake by missing out on a universal classical education. One of the deepest impressions of my first visit to Bengal in 1971 was a young farmer outside Calcutta who stood on his field and sang a song by Rabindranath Tagore to

me. He was semiliterate; I am sure, he could barely read and write, yet he was able to express his feelings through a voice that was more articulate and more aesthetically refined than his own — through Rabindranath's voice. Later, I have witnessed again and again how Bengalis, young or old, would quote a poem, or sing the line of a song written by Rabindranath in order to express a particular emotion or comment on a certain event. They made use of their classical education to cope with a given situation in their lives. Their knowledge of Rabindranath helped them to see that situation in a larger perspective, in a more balanced manner. In Germany, by contrast, we rarely find young people capable of quoting from Goethe's wisdom. Many lines by Goethe have entered the storehouse of proverbs, and yet they seem to be almost lost to a generation of computer games addicts.

It appears that most languages that have produced a significant literature have evolved their own eminent classical writer. It is William Shakespeare for English literature, Victor Hugo for French, Dante for Italian, Cervantes for Spanish literature. And it is Johann Wolfgang Goethe for German literature as well as Rabindranath Tagore for Bengali literature. Both Goethe and Tagore have not been merely isolated events in the history of their peoples, but they have given shape to an entire age.

Significantly, they have emerged at points of history which have many parallels and are broadly comparable. Goethe and Tagore lived in the transition period from an old world order to our modern age, and they themselves have contributed significantly to the formulation of what modernity means for their respective cultures. Basically, it was the transition from a feudalistic society to a society which attempted to be more egalitarian.

In Europe, the medieval dominance of a theological world-view was over once and for all. The ways of viewing the world became diverse. Mainly three

methods of explaining the world began to exist side by side: through theology based on biblical revelation, through systematic philosophy based on reason, and through the natural sciences based on observation and experimentation.

The word *Wissenschaft*, "science", assumed the meaning it has today: it deals with precise, measurable quantities and precise and constant Natural Laws. Alchemy changed into chemistry, and its principles and processes began to be utilised for serial production; industry began to blossom although the industrial revolution proper arrived in Germany several decades after Goethe's death.

In Europe, the starting point of these transitions was the period called the *Age of Enlightenment* and in Bengal the *Bengal Renaissance*. This period initiated a fundamental questioning of existing religious and social values. It witnessed a confrontation of these religious and social traditions with the power of reason and with the supposedly unalterable Laws of Nature.

In the field of literature the result was, in both countries, a strong movement towards a *realistic* presentation of social life. It was especially Goethe and Tagore who cut asunder the arcane, florid, labyrinthine literary language of the past and created a language which was closer to the spoken word and more lucid and direct. In Germany, the playfully allegorical theatre of the royal courts gave way to the powerful colloquial speech of the *Sturm und Drang* plays ("Storm and Stress"). They rebelliously portrayed social ills; especially they described the nascent bourgeois middle-class struggling against a feudal mindset. Goethe wrote his first significant drama *Götz von Berlichingen* in this vein.

Perhaps even more than Goethe in German culture, Rabindranath Tagore indeed "created" the language of modern Bengali literature. Here, the chasm between the spoken and the written word was wider than in Europe. In the sphere of religion, Bengali language has been subordinate to Sanskrit, and in the

sphere of governance, to Persian and then English. With Tagore's help the Bengali language came into its own.

Further, Tagore successfully brought to a conclusion the transition of a literature predominantly written in (lyrical or epic) verse to a stage where prose was sufficiently subtle and aesthetically appealing to be accepted as a form of literature.

Further, Rabindranath significantly widened, as we know, the *thematic scope* of literature. He no longer only indulged in variations of ancient religious literary topics, but he allowed the whole gamut of social life, including its sinister and unhappy aspects, to be included into literature.

Goethe and Tagore lived through the last political storms of an old order. Johann Wolfgang Goethe was a witness to the Seven-year War in Germany which began to dismantle the feudal medieval world-order; Goethe was a witness to the French Revolution which had written Equality, Brotherhood, and Liberty on its flags, along with Napoleon's rise to world dominance and his ignominious fall; during Goethe's life-time the War of independence was fought in North America, and Germany struggled to become a unified nation, a process which was finalised in 1870 by Otto von Bismarck. In a similar vein, Rabindranath Tagore was the contemporary of the Russian Revolution and of his own country's struggle for independence from colonial rule.

These political upheavals in the Age of Goethe and the Age of Tagore enforced a deep *cultural transformation*. Goethe was the driving force behind the German people who liberated herself from French cultural hegemony and moved towards the establishment of a self-assertive German national literature and culture. French court-life had engulfed the whole of Europe with its theatre, music, architecture and gardens. French had been the "official" language of the cultured, "elegant" strata of society. Goethe helped to instill a healthy pride in his German people's own heritage. He broadened the cultural per-

spective to include ancient Greek and Roman cultures as an equally valid European heritage of the German nation. In other words, Goethe championed a nationalism which was liberal and tolerant and which allowed influences to enter the cultural mainstream from all sides.

Rabindranath fulfilled a comparable obligation to his own people of Bengal and to undivided India. He fought against British cultural hegemony without ever disclaiming the great gift of modern liberal thought the British, and the Europeans, had brought to India. Rabindranath wanted his own people to absorb these influences without losing their own identity. Rabindranath was keenly aware that culture can remain vibrantly alive and creative only if it is in a constant flux. Culture must integrate ever new external material in order to continuously regenerate itself.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe was born in 1749 in the city of Frankfurt. I was not the Frankfurt know for its huge international airport, for its skyscraping bank buildings and its large annual Book Fair. It was a small medieval town of 36,000 inhabitants with crooked lanes and small, quaint houses and city walls whose gates were being locked each evening. The old masters of baroque music, Bach and Händel, were still alive. During Goethe's lifetime music and art developed from Baroque to Rokoko to Classicism to Romanticism.

Goethe's parents were committed to a liberal committed to a liberal, enlightened Protestant Christian world-view. The young Johann Wolfgang received a broad-based education in which the classical languages Latin and Greek as well as the modern languages, especially French and English, had a central place. He was taught to play the piano and saw young Mozart perform a recital in Frankfurt. He soon began to draw and paint, and for many years art became a major pre-occupation often taking precedence over literature. Only as an adult he decided that his literary talents were more marked. He studied law and for a short time he practised as a lawyer.

From his early youth, Goethe was in contact with the great minds of his time: writers, scholars, artists, philosophers. He travelled quite extensively for his time of horse-carriages. Yet, he never left central Europe with the two exceptions: his journeys to Italy.

To be continued

interview

Development Benefits Should Be Divided Equally Between Men and Women

By S Babran

NO country can achieve development, by ignoring women which make up 50% of population, said Raana Haidar, Bangladeshi sociologist.

"So, the benefits of development should be equally divided between the two sectors of society," she told IRAN NEWS in a recent interview.

Raana Haidar, who studied sociology at the American University in Cairo and is married to the Bangladeshi ambassador to Iran, is an authority on gender analysis and has published a number of books and articles on population, development and environment linkages and gender issues.

Her book, titled "A Perspective in Development: Gender Focus" which was originally published by the American University of Cairo Press in 1996 was reprinted with the new title of "Gender and Development" from Bangladesh.

About her main motivation to write this book, Raana who was in her country's delegation at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, said: "We have had a lot of international conferences that highlighted the prominence of development. There has also been a very high level of awareness of the aspects of development and linkages of development. When I was teaching a course in women and development in Cairo, I came to this conceptual idea that benefits of development have not affected the two sectors of the population equally, and that women have been marginalized."

She maintained that it is a real and common thinking that if a nation achieves development, all the population should benefit, therefore, "we cannot ignore 50 per cent of the population and expect to achieve proper development."

Two out of every three women around the world presently suffer from the most debilitating diseases known to humanity, and since women constitute a disproportionate number of the world's poor, the prevalence of ill health is greatest among women.

Raana added that the benefits of development on the macro level include material, health, education, and nutrition. Other benefits include access to training, credit, and land ownership, which so far have been different for the two genders.

"The study of women and development from the gender perspective is the re-examination of the myth that development is gender-blind; that the trickle-down benefits of development equally reach women and men; and the assumption that all household members enjoy the same benefits and the same constraints; that the intra-household unit is pervasive and manifests itself in the differential allocation of the benefits of cash, food, education, training, credit, land title and health care. Her book, gender and development, focuses on the relationship between availability of resources and accessibility to those resources," she emphasized.

Referring to the definition of development in today's world, she noted: "Global scarcity demands a re-definition of some of the salient concepts in development." Measures of data collection need to be re-defined, she said, adding that the definition of the head of household should be re-examined, also the concept of work requires broadening.

Health status has to involve care both before and beyond childbearing,

she maintained and added that in the area of migration it must be recognized that female migrants constitute a unique group. In summary, she said, there is an urgent need to bring conventional thinking into line with the changed reality.

She reiterated that her book analyzes the interrelationship between women and development, its manifestation on the lives of women in developing countries, and the underlying importance of empowering women for sustainable development.

"The book is envisaged as an introduction and further resource material for policy-makers, academicians, researchers and students of development," she said.

"Also, in this book I try to show the discrimination between genders through certain methods. For example, work is defined as formal sector employment in a cash economy. But women's work is far more diverse. In the informal sector often they are not paid in cash. So they are not counted in the national economy and certainly they are not valued. According to an eminent American economist, Kenneth Galbraith, 'What is not counted is usually not noticed.'"

She cited the following example to drive her point home:

"When a labour force participation survey in Syria asked men whether their wives worked, a large proportion

replied that they did not. When the question was rephrased, 'If your wife did not assist you in your work, would you be forced to hire a replacement for her?' the overwhelming majority answered YES."

According to UN statistics, while women represent 50 per cent of the world's adult population and one third of the official labour force, they perform nearly two thirds of all working hours, receive only one tenth of the world income and own less than 1 per cent of the world's property, she said and emphasized that: "We can see that it is only the men who are receiving the benefits of development, modernization, and technology, while women are left behind. Women are 'invisible', therefore their needs are not recognized and cannot be met. This process is very obvious in the Third World where in many countries 25 per cent of households are headed by females."

In another part of her book, Raana Haidar, who also worked at the World Fertility Survey (WFS) and Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) in London, refers to the poor status of women's health specially in the Third World countries, and says, "Women's health status conventionally refers to maternal health, concentrating on reproductive years and the reproductive system. Such a narrow definition ignores the pre-reproductive and post-reproductive years. Women have a unique

biological role as reproducers, and much of their poor health and nutritional situation is related to the long reproductive stage of their lives." However, what is often neglected is the crucial determining early years of their lives."

According to Raana, two out of every three women around the world presently suffer from the most debilitating diseases known to humanity, and since women constitute a disproportionate number of the world's poor, the prevalence of ill health is greatest among women.

She stressed that feminization of poverty and maternal mortality are in fact two sides of the same coin: "If development, meaning change in a positive context, has benefited mankind, then the previous discussions provide ample evidence to show that development has served mankind better than womankind. In the development crisis of today, women form the largest and most critical segment of victims of crises such as the 'feminization of poverty.'"

Pointing to another chapter of the book, "Women and Credit: A Catalyst for Development", Raana referred to the successful programme of Gramin Bank in Bangladesh as an informal source of credit for poor people, specially women, and said: "As a poverty-alleviation measure, the Gramin Bank was started in Bangladesh in 1976 on the basis of

providing credit for the rural poor. The collateral-free credit scheme today covers more than 1.5 million borrowers. Virtually all of its members are landless or own less than an acre of land. Women constitute a disproportionate share of the loanees (93 per cent), while the recovery rate is 97 per cent, a rate well ahead of commercial bank repayment rates."

She quoted Mohammad Yunus, managing director of Gramin Bank, as saying: "The overwhelming majority of Gramin Bank loanees being women accounts for the success of the programme. Money going through a woman to a household brought more benefit to the household than money entering the household through a man. Children get top priority from the mother. A man often has different priorities."

Most loans go towards traditional subsistence activities like, planting a crop, buying a cow, raising poultry, leasing land, paddy processing, etc.

According to Raana, loan recipients have been able to increase their incomes by 50 per cent over 3 years.

The Gramin Bank model has been promoted in some 40 countries, including Egypt, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Philippines, United States...

"The combination of credit, women's solidarity groups and awareness-raising is believed to empower women by enabling them to earn a cash income through various types of self-employment activities. Their enhanced contribution to their families' incomes is believed to strengthen women's bargaining position within the household, so that they are better able to make independent decisions as well as playing a more decisive role in joint decisions," she concluded.

— Courtesy Iran News