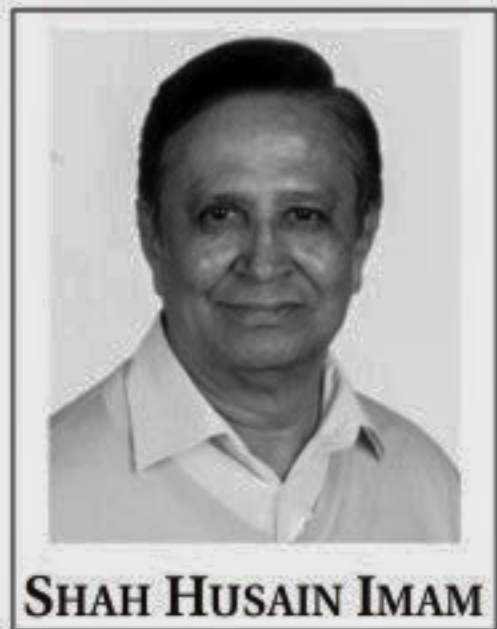


PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

The two statements . . .



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

CERTAIN recent observations of the opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia and former president and Jatiya Party chief Hussain Mohammad Ershad stand out in the prevailing highly charged political atmosphere. The irony is how quickly these have been muffled through the noisy shouting matches between politicians of differing hues. Although their remarks are materially and contextually different, they have a ring of familiarity or typicality about them raking up bits and pieces from the past.

Begum Zia made clear in USA that she would prefer direct relationship with that country rather than going through a via media. And on an entirely different plane, Jatiya Party Chairman H.M. Ershad has lately articulated his ambitious agenda amidst come-to-a-boil caretaker controversy that he would participate in the next general elections independently (of AL) if BNP boycotts it.

Those two statements speak volumes about their persona and predilections, struggle and ambition, and above all, their infinite capacity to surprise and startle their audiences.

Begum Khaleda Zia in her recent trip to USA, as some reports have it, indicated, if and when her party goes to power it would prefer to deal with the USA directly without going through a "third party." Although she

didn't specify what she meant by third party; obviously, it couldn't have been a lobby that she meant. The organisers of her visit reportedly employed one, and the government had resorted to lobbying with the congressional caucus to secure duty-and-quota-free access of our RMG products to the US market.

Therefore, the obvious inference one could draw from her statement is that it was in oblique reference to India. When pressed on the "third party" point in the post-visit press conference in Dhaka a party spokesman

The statements of Begum Khaleda Zia and H.M. Ershad speak volumes about their persona and predilections, struggle and ambition, and above all, their infinite capacity to surprise and startle their audiences.

purportedly soft pedalled it saying she emphasised direct Washington-Dhaka relations. That's all. If it is true, at least the delicacy of the matter seemed to have weighed in, however belatedly.

Begum Zia and her colleagues in the party never tire of touting India-AL connection, often even going to the extent of alleging that the AL was "selling the country" to India. Such a pre-disposition even at home has been considered impolitic, undiplomatic and tactless by many. For, the BNP in power had had to deal with India and she would have to do it again if the party is voted into power. So far as principles and national interests (enlightened) go, a particular party line to distinguish it

from another political party maybe understandable. But we cannot choose our neighbours, they are just there to have dealings with and the best way we can do so is through respecting each other's sensibilities. Burning all boats through a rigid positioning on India cannot be sign of maturity for a major political party. It can create more problems than solve through the cracks of miscommunication. In fact, it could stagnate relations ironically when South Asian countries are trying to unburden themselves of the past baggage and cooperate

economically as a prized goal towards common stability and prosperity.

One pair of bilateral relationship is distinct from another. The US' relationship with India and vice versa is based on their analysis of geopolitical and geo-strategic realities and mutual appreciation of each other's economic and technological interests.

Washington's ties with Dhaka are mutually valued and keep growing through a recognition of the resourcefulness of Bangladesh as an enterprising country bridging South and South-East Asia with borders adjoining India, China and Myanmar and opening out to the Bay of Bengal.

Now to the born-again optimist that former President Ershad never ceases to be. The implications of what he says are self-evident even allowing for an audacious pre-judging of how the political situation might pan out. In anticipation of a major political party dissociating from the general election, Ershad apparently harbours the intent of breaking out of the *Mohajote*. He wants JP to contest for all seats to parliament predicating his wish on the contention that "the country cannot remain captive to the two big parties and that time is ripe for a rise of a third political force (and JP is that force)."

Although the JP with its support base is a factor in politics insofar as its potential for tipping balance in the event of a hung parliament goes; in reality, its concentrated vote bank works against conventional wisdom of a countrywide participation in the polls. Incidentally, Ershad wanted to become the choice of the *Mohajote* government for the presidency, but the JP was given a cabinet post.

Actually, different political parties in power leveraged Ershad through the plethora of corruption and other cases hanging fire against him. At different times, Ershad's express support for one or the other political party helped him through all but three of the 22 cases lodged against him. He has to clear his name in the two-three cases, a process that seems to be in various stages now. Can he brave against the remaining odds and put them behind? That remains a question.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star. E-mail: husain.imam@thedailystar.net.

Tagore's thoughts on environment

ATIUR RAHMAN

NATURE runs as a consistent motif in all of Rabindranath Tagore's oeuvre. He was an environmental pioneer and sought harmony between progress and preservation. He had been eloquent about the exploitation of environment even a century ago. Tagore first became concerned about man's impact on the environment after seeing an oil spill at sea on his way to Japan in 1916, decades before an environmental movement emerged in the West.

The experience provoked him to write at length about his annoyance at the way modern man was failing to respect nature. However, Tagore did not simply look for a solution to the problem; he made something creative out of his environmental campaign. Today, when we have begun year-long celebrations to mark his 150th birth anniversary, many are calling for a focus on his deep sensitivities for the environment.

The Nobel Laureate poet depicted his intense affection for the nature and its beauty in his literacy works, for example "*Chander haashi baandh bhengechhe, uchhle pore aalo/ O rajanigandha tomar gandha shudha dhalo*" (the laughter of the moon has surpassed all its limits/ bindings, with its lights overflowing in all possible directions. And, requesting the tuberose to pour in all its fragrance all around).

He wrote poems, plays, short stories and also a separate group of lyrics in the form of poems for songs under the name of "*Prakriti Parjaay*" (here, *prakriti* means nature and *parjaay* means genre), emphasising the need to protect nature as well as our Mother Earth. Tagore not only wrote extensively on man's relationship with the environment but implemented it too by building Santiniketan. It is surrounded by greenery on all sides. He created an example for the whole world in terms of the relationship between nature and humans.

His love for the natural world got a boost from his sojourns across the lush green nature of east Bengal and amidst the sylvan surroundings of Santiniketan. To capture his entire philosophy on his surroundings, we have to go back to his views on Santiniketan's architecture, his concern for the welfare of the residents of Sriniketan, his benevolence towards his tenant-peasants, his inauguration of the ploughing season, his thoughts on cooperation, and the multifarious thoughts and consciousness of Tagore, the author of "*Aranyadebata*" and a pioneer in organising village fairs.

At Santiniketan, Tagore started the festival of the Earth through *brikharopan* (planting of trees) in 1927, at which the students would sing and read his poems. This approach gave his environmental campaign a very positive image, so that it was not a negative campaign about what man should not do but rather it was a subtle reminder conveyed through creative expression. This encouraged more people to get involved in supporting his campaign. "He wanted more official and unofficial promises for protecting the environment" [*Rabindranath O Bharatbarsho*, (Tagore and India) -- Amartya Sen: *Bharatbichitra*, July-December 1997]. It is clear from Amartya Sen's quote as to what extent Tagore considered trees important for safeguarding the environment.

Hala karshan (tilling the land) was introduced in July 1927. On one such occasion, Tagore wrote the song "*Marwijayera ketana urao he shunye*" (raise aloft the banner of the conquest of the desert), which was a clarion call to increase the green cover across the deserts through tree plantation. The festival of the earth, though one of the many expositions of Tagore's imaginative and at times maverick world-view, nonetheless is unique. Perhaps it was the first sentient move in the world to build up mass environmental awareness.

Tagore's thinking on fresh water and public health is reminiscent of his thoughts on the environment. Tagore

wanted to implement the call to satisfy all his wants in the village, through the medium of model work at Sriniketan. Classes in Santiniketan were in the shade of trees, not simply as a romantic idea but as a deliberate way of bringing students closer to nature so that they would unconsciously learn to respect it. He also started an annual celebration of the arrival of the monsoon at the end of the dry season (*borsha mongol*).

Environmental issues like river erosion and deforestation may be hot topics today, but Tagore had been conscious about the exploitation of environment even a century ago. What Tagore said on environmental crisis, modern technology and rural thinking in his lecture in 1922 on agricultural matters in honour of Leonard Elmhurst (Director, Sriniketan) comprises an important document even for today. Tagore believed that it was impossible to achieve overall development without rural development.

Tagore repeatedly compared life with a river's flow. He

and fall in love. The caged bird has even forgotten how to sing. But it can imitate its master's voice. The free bird knows that the songs of nature can never be taught, they are all part of the system of the birds. They flutter their wings in yearning and sing:

"Come closer, my love!

The free bird cries, it cannot be, I fear the closed doors of the cage,

The cage bird whispers, Alas, my wings are powerless and dead." (*The Gardener*, Poem No. VI, 19-28)

It highlighted the way in which man wants to domesticate nature, which he sees from only his own perspective and clearly refuse to see from nature's perspective. In another poem, "*I plucked you Flower*," human aggression is expressed through the plucking of a flower:

"I plucked your flower, O world!

I pressed it to my heart and the thorn pricked.

When the day waned and it darkened, I found that the flower had faded, but the pain remained." (*The Gardener*, Poem No. LVII, 1-4)



THOMAS BARWICK

Humans have the habit of destroying something to create something for themselves. Tagore spelt out in clear terms that the limitless greed of human beings is the chief enemy of nature.

expressed his desire to discover the essence of human living in the character of a flowing river. So he placed Calcutta's "*Brick among brick, man and insect amidst/ There's no affection, no love*" by the side of rural Bengal's profile, and often thought of coordinating the two. He wrote: "This is such a new sight! The dry river fills up in the rains, at other times it is filled with sand. The *sal* trees on both sides of the road form a shaded arch... in former times *Bharatvarsha* used to take lessons from one pilgrimage to another. The Himalayas lie in the north, the hot sea in the east and the Arabian Sea on the other side. This lesson had to be learnt on foot." (*RR*, vol. 27, pg. 599).

The literary works of Tagore can be used for raising awareness about the environment. Poet Abul Bashar said: "Rabindranath wrote extensively about nature, about the relationship between human beings and nature." Bashar referred to the short story "*Balai*" in which Tagore highlighted a young boy's love for a *simul* tree in front of his house. Through the poem, "*The tame bird was in a cage*," Tagore brought out the plight of a tamed bird. One bird is in the cage and the other in the forest. Both of them meet

Humans feel that plucking flowers is their own right. Nature is not a silent spectator. One day it will react. It would not be just a thorn-prick but can be a mighty tsunami. Humans should be careful about this. Humans have converted the animate and living nature into an inanimate thing. Because of their nature, they have always behaved in an anthropocentric way.

In the first poem, the caged bird does not react. The free bird does not know how to react to the human beings' greed for domesticating its loved ones. In the second poem, the plant reacts in a small way, but there will be a time when human beings will have to pay a heavy price for their anthropocentric behaviour. In "*Fruit Gathering*," Tagore clearly says that no one should interfere with the activities of nature. "No it is not yours to open buds into blossoms." Human beings do not know how to interact with nature. They "shake the bud" and "strike it" because they feel that they are the masters of the Universe, they crush the bud under the pretext of making it blossom. Tagore emphatically says:

"...it is beyond your power to make it blossom.

Your touch soils it, you tear its petals to pieces and Strew them in the dust." (*Fruit Gathering*, Poem No. XVIII, 2-5.)

Tagore's play "*Raktakarabi*" (red oleanders) (1925) was inspired by the image of a red oleander plant crushed by pieces of discarded iron that Tagore had witnessed while taking a walk in Shillong. The play's central character is king who cruelly exploits nature and man to develop an almost mechanised bureaucracy. Another play, "*Muktadhara*" (The Waterfall), tells the story of man's limitless greed and the backlash from nature. The plot revolves around a monstrous machine created by a king to block the natural flow of a huge river and how a prince joins commoners to protect nature by revolting against the king.

Humans have the habit of destroying something to create something for themselves. He spelt out in clear terms that the limitless greed of human beings is the chief enemy of nature. In the essay "*Aranyadebata*" (The god of the forest), he showed how man became unrestrained in his actions. He also wrote about the manner in which the kinship with the forest was spoiled.

He did not mince words in categorically blaming the all-consuming greed and profit motives of human beings for this. "It is a universal problem to save forest resources from man's excessive greed... The Creator sent life, he made arrangements for nurturing it all around -- but man with his greed has supplied the instruments of death. Human society is cursed for his transgression of God's scheme. Greedy humans have invited their own ruin by destroying the forest. Man has uprooted the very trees and vegetation which purify air, and the falling leaves of which make the land fertile. Callous mankind destroyed nature's gifts of good -- his welfare." (*RR*, vol.14, pg. 373).

Man is on an indiscriminate deforestation rampage as he has got a taste of modern civilisation. Trees are being felled for fuel. But this is spoiling the ecological balance. And human civilisation is hurtling towards doom. Hence Tagore reminded us time and again: "... a strange matter has been seen about India. Civilisation here takes root not in towns but in the woodlands. India's first wonderful flourish is seen where people are not cramped for space or packed like sardines. In those places there was abundant opportunity for man to be in close proximity with trees and vegetation, rivers and lakes" ("*Topobon*" [the forest for meditation], *RR*, vol. 7, pg. 690).

Humans should understand the roles assigned to them at a macrocosmic level. Any human aggression will end in a disaster for the whole biosphere. The time has come for them to realise that the destinies of both the humans and nature are intricately bound together.

Pabitra Sarkar, a former vice chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University and a Tagore expert, said: "In his literary works, he has said he was born along with the trees and flowers. He has depicted his intense love for nature and its beauty. His song '*Akash bhora, surjya tara, bishwa bhara pran*' speaks of his deep affection for nature."

Amidst the environmental degradation of the present time, making human habitation environment-friendly is a recurring issue all over the world. For good reason, in the control of terrible air and water pollution, waste disposal, noise and visual pollution and others, alongside technological planning, various aspects of human behaviour, too, have come up for consideration.

I feel that we should bring to light all of Tagore's highly motivating and touching words and inspire people to love nature and give our Mother Earth a reason to smile. The beauty of his conception was that he sought to inculcate this rubric not through slogan and pamphlets but over a cultural framework.

The writer is Governor, Bangladesh Bank. E-mail: governor@bb.org.bd

The views expressed are author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Bangladesh Bank. This article is a tribute to Rabindranath Tagore on the eve of his sesquicentennial birth anniversary.