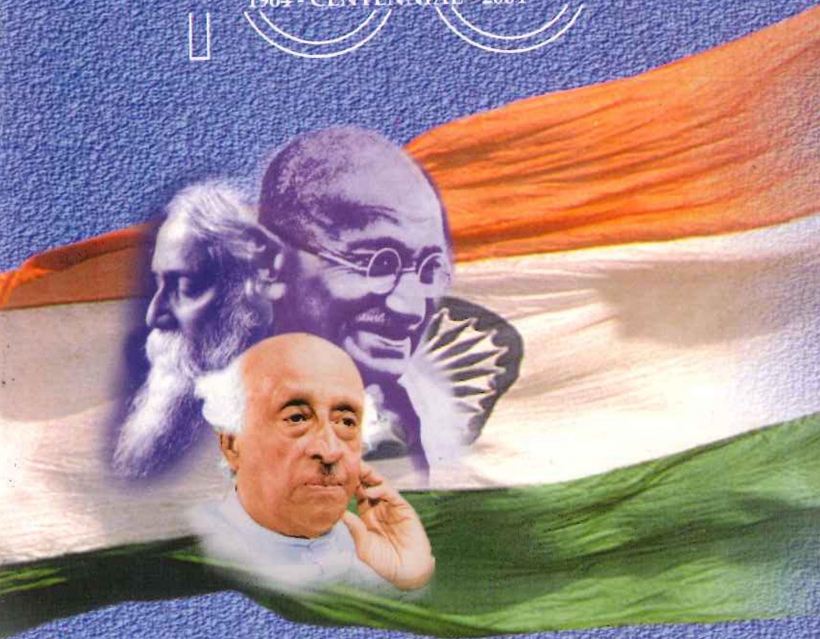


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DR G RAMACHANDRAN
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TAGORE, THE GREAT SENTINEL

By
G. RAMACHANDRAN

Edited by
N. RADHAKRISHNAN
&
SISTER MYTHILI

TAGORE THE GREAT SENTINEL



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TAGORE THE GREAT SENTINEL

Edited by

**N. Radhakrishnan &
Sister Mythili**

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD - Editors	i
INTRODUCTION - N. Radhakrishnan	iii
TAGORE : THE BACKGROUND	11
TAGORE : HIS PHILOSOPHY	32
TAGORE : HIS POETRY	48
TAGORE AND GANDHI	84
TAGORE AND GANDHI: AS EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTIONARIES	99

FOREWORD

This volume, the fifth in a series of 24 volume tribute to Mama Dr. G. Ramachandran published during his Centenary Celebrations, explores the Tagore - Gandhi link. We have carefully collected and edited some of the best known analyses of Tagore and Gandhi by Mamaji.

We are confident that the deligent reader will find this volume useful.

Sister Mythili

N. Radhakrishnan

INTRODUCTION

I still remember a question posed by the distinguished Kainikara Kumara Pillai during 'Mama' Ramachandranji's *Shastipoorthy* (Sixtieth birth anniversary) programmes at VJT Hall in Trivandrum in 1964: "Is Ramachandranji a Tagorean or a Gandhian?" To the disbelief of many in the audience, Kainikara said, "To me, he appears to be more influenced by Tagore than Gandhi. When we worked together in Gandhigram, I found that 'GR's disposition, taste, concern for beauty all had a distinct stamp of Tagore". Ramachandranji who was listening intently did not betray any sign of approval or disapproval of this observation by one of the finest scholars and long-time friend of his. But later when Prof. Samuel Mathai, Vice Chancellor of Kerala University who was also on the programme referred to this issue and argued passionately that 'G.R.' was more a Tagorean than a Gandhian the issue seemed to have compelled 'GR' to break his silence on this. In his reply to felicitations, he pointed out that it was difficult for him to answer the question. Both 'Gurudev' Tagore and 'Mahatma' Gandhi were part of his being and both were his teachers from whom he learnt and was indebted heavily, next only to that of his parents. He urged his

friends and admirers not to waste their precious time in running after "this illusory shadow".

Those who knew 'Mamaji' at close quarters realized that Tagore remained a great source of inspiration to him in many areas of his concerns. During 1970-1976 Mama used to take me to accompany him on his long tours and meetings. He was a different person on those occasions. Free from administrative pressure or political or social interventions, one could see him relaxed, jovial and would radiate a special kind of love and affection. They were great occasions of education for me. He would marvel anybody, even the best intellectual by the sheer depth of his scholarship and wide range of readership. He is not the 'Ramachandranji' known to his colleagues on those occasions. He would share with me and others around him jokes and anecdotes.

About his Tagore - Gandhi link he dealt extensively on several occasions. At a private conversation sometime in 1971 between Mamaji and great Tamil scholar and Vice-Chancellor Prof. T.P. Meenakshi Sundaram, Mama said that his meeting Tagore seeking admission in the poet's great university in Shantiniketan was a turning point in his life. A voracious reader that he was always right from his childhood, Bengali novels, short stories and Tagore's poems in translation attracted him.

I used to hear when I was in my highschool, what Bengal thinks today the rest of India does tomorrow'. the crucial and historic role Bengal played in the

Indian cultural renaissance, political awakening and the nation's march towards social justice are all known to every student of history and it will be naive for me to catalogue it here.

The contribution of Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Tagore followed by Vivekananda and Aurobindo in cement times in providing the basis for a new cultural outlook and life style based on humanism which will take in its stride the best in the various religious traditions and would take humanity to a new era of hope and awareness is a landmark in the evolution of human history in the twentieth century. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, who electrified a generation of men and women irrespective of their age group and who provided inspiring leadership to enhance the sagging morale of a nation when it was pitted against the biggest colonial empire of the world emerged not only as a national hero but he symbolised the irresistible spirit of all freedom loving people everywhere. The manner in which Netaji infused a kind of patriotic feeling that was unparalleled and it was natural that Gandhi and Netaji despite their differences in approach and perception held each other in great respect and esteem. It is important to remember while it was Gurudev Tagore who described Gandhi 'Mahatma', it was Netaji, who in his historic talk over the Rangoon radio called Gandhi the Father of the Nation. It is unfortunate that the minor differences of opinion that existed between Gandhi and Netaji on their approaches were

blown out of proportion and efforts were made to show both of these great men of our times as enemies. This is one of the greatest distortions of modern Indian history. Researchers should take up this subject seriously and the greatest homage the nation can pay to Netaji during his 100th birthday, which will be celebrated on 23rd January 1998, will be an honest attempt to assess the great role Netaji played in giving the nation a direction, a purpose and a vision.

The phenomenal achievement Mahatma Gandhi registered in Calcutta, Noakhali, Bihar, New Delhi and elsewhere in effectively controlling the fires of communal passion has to be viewed against the total approach Gandhi was adopting not only in liberating India from foreign rule but in liberating the Indians from the evils of orthodoxy thereby giving them a new direction and an alternative vision and lifestyle. In fact, Bengal was the testing ground for some of the most courageous and daring initiatives that Gandhi took during the last three years of his life.

Pyarelal, Gandhi's faithful secretary recorded the harrowing and soul-stirring happenings of those days. "Why do you want to go to Noakhali? You did not go to Bombay. Ahmedabad or Chhapra, where things have happened that are infinitely worse than Noakhali. Would not your going there only add to the existing tension?" Was it because in these places it was the Muslims who had been the sufferers that did not go there and would go

to Noakhali because the sufferers there were Hindus? Gandhi was asked by a Muslim friend.

Gandhiji's reply was that he made no distinction between Hindu and Muslim. He would certainly have gone straight to any of the places mentioned by the friend. If anything approaching what had happened at Noakhali and happened there and if he felt that he could do nothing without being on the spot. It was the cry of outraged womanhood that had preemptorily called him to Noakhali. He felt he would find his bearings only on seeing things for himself at Noakhali. He was not going to leave Bengal until the last embers of the trouble were stamped out. Gandhiji said :

“I may stay on here for a whole year or more. If necessary, I will die here. But I will not acquiesce in failure. If the only effect of my presence in the flesh is to make people look up to me in hope and expectation which I can do nothing to vindicate, it would be far better that my eyes were closed in death”,

Speaking about his resolve to stay back in Calcutta and concentrate on the helpless victims of communal frenzy, Gandhi wrote further “My resolve to go to Noakhali has collapsed after this evening's happenings.” Gandhiji told Pyarelal when he saw him. “I cannot go to Noakhali or for that matter anywhere when Calcutta is in flames. Today's incident to me is a sign and a warning from God. You have for the time being, therefore, to return to Noakhali without me. You can tell the people of

Noakhali that if my colleagues for any reason cannot be there, they will find me, surely in their midst”.

And then casually he hinted that if the conflagration spread, he would have no alternative but to fast, “Have I not often said that there is yet another fast in store for me”? The next day was his day of silence. Ugly news continued to pour in. Several deputations waited on him in the course of the day to consult him as to what they should do to quench the fire.

“Go in the midst of the rioters and prevent them from indulging in madness or get killed in attempt. But do not come back alive to report failure. The situation calls for sacrifice on the part of tope rankers. So far the unknown, nameless rank and file alone have been the victims of the holocaust with the one exception of the late Ganesh Shanker Vidyarthi. That is not enough”.

Just as Gandhi was able to influence people in a big way in the strife-torn Noakhali, Calcutta and other places, Bengal also gave remarkable insights to Mahatma Gandhi which helped him in sharpening his skills further as an astute thinker and visinory. It can be seen from the entries in the diaries of his close associates and friends that when he boarded the train to New Delhi. Gandhi was no longer the same person and Acharya Kriplani and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and others who received Gandhi at the Shahdra Railway station in Delhi on the 7th September 1947 could see the change in the Mahatma.

Gandhi was certainly unhappy particularly on two counts. The vivisection of the country into two was against all what he was trying to propagate and certainly a big blow to the visions that he was entertaining. Much more shattering than this was the blood-bath that followed the announcement of Mountbatten plan and he expressed his anguish in no uncertain terms. And even on 2nd October, 1947 when friends called on him to wish him well on his birthday, he chided them for their failures and asked them that there was nothing to congratulate him, instead they could offer him condolences. He spent, as well of us know. Independence far away from the nation's capital in fasting and prayer. He was fasting to atone the sins and failures and praying for strength and forgiveness but it is presumptuous and certainly a misreading of his story to say that Gandhi had lost all his will and desire to live and serve his countrymen and humanity at length.

The assassination that took place on 30th January 1948 on his way to the prayer grounds at the earthy Birla House in Delhi was certainly not the death of Gandhi and the end of the Gandhian era or all what Gandhi stood for. No student of history can miss the simple truth that while the assassin could succeed in removing the frail body of the Mahatma from our midst, the Mahatma emerged stronger and as Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out in his speech that the light that he shed would continue to inspire humanity for centuries to come.

India is an ancient country with a great cultural heritage with about five thousand years of continuous cultural growth about which every Indian should be proud of. The core of this civilization has been the tradition of tolerance and multiplicity of pluralistic religious values. It is said that there has been a great synthesis of all religions. ethical, spiritual, cultural insights which in turn provide the frame of Vasudeva Kudumbham a tradition India has been nurturing several centuries before the other countries could comprehend global human family. The upanishadic ideals of Vedic insights fortify and nurture this ancient culture which today preserves some of the exquisite forms of art everywhere in the world. The home ground of most of the principal religions of the world India also contributed to the enrichment of life in general over the centuries. The temples, mosques, gurudwaras churches, Budh-Vihars, synagogues and other places of worship are all integral part of the Indian tradition. The exquisite varieties of Indian music and the enchanting dances and other performing arts don't belong to any particular segment, instead they constitute the much famed Indian Consciousness. It is this Indian consciousness, rather Universal Consciousness Tagore nurtured through his poetry, paintings and educational experiments. Ramachandranji's understanding of Tagore's world of poetry was very intimate and this volume will be an eloquent testimonial to this assertion.

1 January 2006

N. Radhakrishnan

1

TAGORE : THE BACKGROUND

I was 18 years of age when I broke away from the traditional educational system and went to Santiniketan and, what was more, took classes for his students. There were other great names associated with Rabindranath Tagore during those glorious days of Santiniketan. One great name was that of the late C.F. Andrews. I do not know how many in this generation, particularly younger people, remember or know about C.F. Andrews. Mahatma Gandhi interpreted his initials "C.F.A" as "Christ's Faithful Apostle" and it has been said by more than one careful student of India's present history that Andrews was probably the noblest Englishman who ever came out of England to serve India. It has also been said that so long as the memory of C.F. Andrews lives in the mind of India, India and England will be friends. The President of the Indian Republic said the other day in Tokyo that India and England had become better friends after our country had attained freedom. We fought England long for our freedom. But after freedom came, India and England became good friends and today in international politics and culture, there are no two countries closer to each other than these two countries. We can look back and say to ourselves that

C.F. Andrews was one of those who forged this link of friendship between India and England.

C.F. Andrews was my English Professor in Santiniketan. I remember the thrill with which I first reached Santiniketan. My elder brother and I got down at the Bolpur Railway station, 5 or 6 miles away. There was an old bus which carried us from Balpur to Santiniketan. As the bus neared Santiniketan, I said to myself, "Here is the place which after long desire and seeking, I am approaching. What kind of a place will it be?" Then the bus turned in at the main gateway. I found avenues of trees and long dormitories hidden under the shade. It was a beautiful place with the horizon stretching away in a downward slope to the distant landscape. The picture, as I saw it first, is a picture which I have never forgotten. I also remember my first sight of Poet Rabindranath Tagore. My brother and I had our bath and our lunch and somebody said to us that at 3 O'clock the Poet would give us a few minutes. Many minutes before 3 p.m. we got ready. My brother was then going to compete for his I.C.S. and he was a bit of a boss already. He dressed up in *pucca* European style but I had already become a simple *Khadiwala* and so I retained my *dhoti* and *Kurta*. Each one performed his toilet with great care saying we were going to see the great poet of India!

As we walked up, we saw a beautiful mud hut. Now a mud hut carries no meaning as I mention it in

words in you. A mud hut would at once mean something ugly. But the first sight I had of this little hut gave me a thrill again. On the thick wall were beautiful figures moulded by the fingers of the artists of Santiniketan, and as one came near the door, there was a beautiful entrance to the hut. In the centre was a room with windows open to all four sides. Other rooms were tucked away not to obstruct the views from these windows.

There was no one in this room. This gave us a breathing moment. We were waiting to see the Poet, eager and even somewhat anxious, and then suddenly, the door curtain of a room opened and he walked in. One of the professors of Santiniketan who had come with us introduced us to the Poet. I gazed at the Poet in wonder. It has been said and said with truth, that God and the angels must have conspired in Heaven to produce a man of unsurpassed beauty of features and bearing. They must have said, "We shall send out to the world now a man who would be the most godly-looking."

Many people have compared Rabindranath Tagore to the traditional picture of Jesus Christ. As I looked at the man, standing framed against the afternoon light that came streaming in from the windows, I was lost in admiration. It was a tall, majestic figure and robed in a peculiar style. I had never seen that style before;

long flowing robes from neck to foot, in two or three folds. If God and the angels had conspired to make him one of the handsomest of men, some tailor must have conspired again to make beautiful clothes which fitted his so well. The Poet must, in those days, have been particular of his hair - how his long and beautifully combed silver hair fell in locks over both sides of his noble head. And then the mighty brow-how a head could have so much space for the forehead, is still a mystery to me. There was the dome of this brow and over it, like a crown of snow, was the white hair tumbling down and below was the majestic aquiline nose. It was not a round face, but a long oval face. And then like the silver hair, the silver beard. The great dark eyes looked at you and there was deep graciousness in those eyes. He came forward and shook hands. He sat in a cane chair and we took two other cane chairs nearby. He was talking more to my brother than to me. The Poet then turned to me and asked, "What subjects are you taking in Visva-bharati?" I had not made up my mind. But I had to tell him something. I blurted out, "Literature, Sociology and Philosophy, Sir." "That will make a good combination," was his encouraging comment. In a few minutes the interview was over because there were many others waiting. So we stood up, bowed to him and came out. This first impression was that of a noble, gracious and great personality. But that impression was not complete at all because I did not

then know the heart and the intellect of the Poet. It took a long time to get to know him more fully.

In a day or two, I joined Santiniketan. Let me now tell you something of the background of Santiniketan against which you have to see the personality of the Poet and understand his life, work, thought and poetry. Every great man has his own special background. It is the same with Mahatma Gandhi. Supposing you met him in New Delhi or Bombay or Calcutta, you might understand something about him. But if you went to Sevagram and saw him in the setting which his genius had made for himself, then it would be a different Gandhi that you see, a Gandhi in the framework in which he reveals himself spontaneously. Take even an ordinary painting. An artist paints the picture of somebody. It is there on the canvas—good enough—but when the painter takes that canvas, finds out the frame in which it must be set, puts the frame round it and gives all the finishing touches and raises it to the proper height on the wall and you look at it, then that picture becomes far more real. If this is true of a painted picture how much more true it is in the understanding of a great personality! If you want to understand fully the personality of Tagore, nothing would be better than to see him in the setting of Santiniketan.

Now what kind of place was Santiniketan? The most curious thing about the place is that, if we take it by

itself and keep it separate from its surroundings and ideas, and then look at it, few of us would admit that it is a specially beautiful place. Our Gandhigram in the enclave of the blue Sirumalai hills, is more beautiful than Santiniketan. Yet if you walked into the Santiniketan campus and moved about, saw everything, you will have a sense of breath-taking beauty about what you see. How does this magic work? It is situated on a gently raised level of land. When you stand in Santiniketan and look towards the four sides, you see vast stretches of landscape nor even a river nearby. But inside Santiniketan are majestic avenues of trees and lovely paths run under their shades. The buildings fit into the environment without a strain. There is a mango grove, where all the important functions are held. The most distinguished visitors are received in the mango grove. All the great occasions of the year are celebrated in it. This grove plays a vital part in the Santiniketan tradition. I remember how Mahatma Gandhi himself was received in the mango grove.

The whole place is full of trees and buildings look only secondary. Most classes are held in the mango grove and under the shade of trees in the open air. Only when the sun is very hot or when the rains come will students and teachers go into the class rooms or sit in the verandahs. At night people studied and slept in their rooms, but much of life during the day was lived in the open air.

This is very much changed now. Santiniketan is now one of the Chartered Universities of the Government of India and many big buildings have come up and a part at least of the old beauty is gone. But I am talking of the year 1932, when I first went there.

Let us now take a look into the life at Santiniketan. My brother and I went to have our bath at the well. It was a big well reached through an archway. Then came a circular enclosure around the well. As we went in, we saw an elderly and ascetic looking person taking his bath. My brother turned to him and enquired, "It is possible to see the Poet sometime this afternoon?" The man smiled and said, "If you are putting up in the Guest House Manager to fix up an interview with the Poet". My talkative brother did all the talking with this person and at one point he said, "I have brought my younger brother to to be admitted in the Visa-bharati. I would also like to meet the Principal of the Visva-bharati sometime. Do you know where he lives? This person at once pointed to a small thatched hut and said, "You see, there under the mango tree, that hut. That is where the Principal lives". Later after our interview with the Poet, we discovered this little hut and walked in. There in the verandah, on the floor, was sitting this same man who was with us at the bathing place. My brother went up to him and said, "You told me the Principal lived here. Will you please tell him that we would like to meet him?"

Then the man smiled and quietly replied, "Please sit down. You are talking to the Principal". My brother said, "I am very sorry. I didn't know you were the Principal". His reply was, "Why should you be sorry? "There is nothing to be sorry about; you did not know me". And so he went on talking. He answered all our questions, helped us in the matter of my admission and then we left him. As we were coming away, my brother said to me, "What a shame, Ramachandran ! I didn't know that this man at the bathing place who looked so simple would be the Principal of Visva-bharati!"

Now I must tell you who he was. His name was Pandit Vidusekhara Shastri. Even at that time, he was reckoned as one of the greatest Sanskrit scholars of India. His research in Sanskrit brought him to the study of Pali. He studied Buddhism were in the French language. So he learnt French. In the course of his Sanskrit studies, he discovered what the Germans had done in research in Sanskrit. So he learnt German as well. By the time I went there he knew these European languages and in addition, Tibetan and Chinese, because Buddhism had overflowed from India into Tibet and China and into the farthest corners of Asia. I discovered quickly that he was not only a great scholar, but a great patriot. For this was 1922 when Mahatma Gandhi was sweeping the country with his first non-violent revolution. In fact, many of the students in the Visva-bharati were those who had

left their colleges in response to the call of Mahatma Gandhi to serve the country. Vidusekhara Sastri was very devoted to Gandhi. Gandhi had given India the message of sacrificial spinning and some of the most intellectual and outstanding leaders in the land were spinning half an hour a day as a mark of identification with the masses in the villages. So this Principal of Santiniketan took that message from Gandhi and never sat at his noon meal before he had done his half hour of spinning. He had no servant in his house. He swept his own house, washed his own clothes, and cooked his own food. He was a widower. He really lived the life of a scholar saint.

I once played a prank on him. He would usually get up at 4 O'clock in the morning, then begin sweeping his house, putting everything in order and cooking his breakfast because all classes would begin at 6 a.m. Now, sometime in the second year of my life in the Visva-bharati, Pandit Vidusekhara Shastri fell ill. Yet he would get up early, though a little later than usual, slowly do the usual house-work and instead of going to the college, sit in his own house and do some reading and writing. I found that he was not getting up of 4 O'clock in the morning. He would get up at 5.30 and then slowly begin his work. I discovered where he kept his broom, bucket and cooking vessels. On the second morning of his illness. I got up very early and went to his hut. He was still sleeping inside and I went and gently opened the door

and started sweeping the floor, washing his vessels and tidying up everything and then quietly ran away. At about 6 a.m. he got up, rubbed his eyes and saw somebody had done everything that he had to do. He smiled and wondered who could have done this. He asked one or two students. Nobody could tell him who it was. He never asked me because I was in another class. I did it a second time and third time. He was under the impression that one of his own research students who lived close to him in one of the other huts was doing it. The next morning like the house keeper who wanted to catch the cat which came into the kitchen, he kept a watch, keeping his window open. He heard somebody opening the kitchen door and kept perfectly quiet. I went in and began sweeping, washing and tidying. He saw the culprit, gently, closed the window and slept on. At about 9 a.m. I was in the library hunting for some books when I saw Pandit Vidusekhara Shastri coming slowly along the narrow corridor of the library. He came to me and said with a laugh, "Ramachandran, I have discovered that there is a cat which comes to my house early in the morning. This wonderful cat can sweep, wash and arrange all my vessels". Then he took my hands and said, "You make me feel like a real Guru in the ancient Gurukula tradition of India. God bless you". I remember this picture 36 years after it took place. Pandit Vidusekhara Shastri, after I left Santiniketan, was invited by the Calcutta University to take over the Chief Professorship of Sanskrit. He has

left behind him many very valuable books which he wrote. I have not even a photograph of him. But I have only to close my eyes to get a picture of the lean, ascetic and saintly figure of the man standing in front of me. He resembled Sri Rajaji as we know him today.

In the years I spent in Santiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore was at the height of his achievements. He was in the glorious autumn of his life. That is often the richest part of one's life when one feels a deep sense of fulfilment. The Poet then had reached the richest fullness of life and had become world-famous. His vigorous and dynamic philosophy was not without an effect on current human culture and events.

He had built and nourished Santiniketan and after that the Visva-bharati, the first International University of India. Visva means 'Universal' and Bharati means 'culture' Scholars and students from the ends of the world came to the Visva-bharati to live and study there in peace and happiness. I remember my room mate was a Norwegian boy. He had read about Poet Rabindranath Tagore and about Santiniketan. He told his father that he wished to go to India to study philosophy. The father was a bnaker and he asked his son what was philosophy and poetry going to do for him ! The boy ran away from home and worked his ship's passage to India. He became one of the students at Visva-bharati and we lived together

in the same room. He was a very sensitive fellow and I distinctly remember occasions when he and I had some good intellectual fights. So students came from different parts of the world. Professors also came from many countries. Every year one very distinguished European Professor would be invited to come to Santiniketan to deliver a series of lectures on some special subject. During my time I was lucky that the four visiting professors were Professor Sylvian Levi (France), Dr. Winternitz (Germany), Dr. Formichi (Italy) and Dr. Stein Konow (Norway) all renowned Indologists.

The whole place had nothing narrow or fanatic about it. We lived there as a community of world youth. There was no caste or class, no communalism or racism in the Visva bharti. Our culture was Indian, but reaching out to world culture. We were in a deep and broad world-outlook and an intellectual and artistic atmosphere.

Rabindranath kept his intellect and ideals crystal clear. He was a very fearless person. I think I have very seldom come across in all my life a man who knew less of intellectual and moral fear than Rabindranath Tagore. You know 1922 was a great year in the history of India. It was in that year that Mahatma Gandhi had fully come into the life of India and taken up the leadership of the people. He had generated the first non-violent revolution in India. It was called the Non-Co-operation Movement

and it swept the country like a great storm from one end to the other. It uprooted many thing; it shook many institutions. Many colleges were left empty and even British Courts and the Provincial Legislatures were boycotted. They were thrilling days in India's history and Mahatma Gandhi was awakening and inspiring the millions as never before. Every word he wrote and every word he spoke echoed and re-echoed in every town and village in India.

Then suddenly the Sage of Santiniketan and the Saint of Sabarmati clashed with each other. One day Gandhiji opened the *Modern Review*, one of the highest class journals in India then, edited by Ramananda Chatterjee and the first article he saw was "The Call of Truth" by Rabindranath Tagore. The whisper went round in Santiniketan like wild fire that our Gurudev, our Chief Acharya of Santiniketan, had written a grand criticism of Mahatma Gandhi. Most of us, students, were Gandhi's followers; we were in fact fanatic Gandhians. We had left colleges in response to his Non-Co-operation Movement. We were therefor very much excited. We started reading the article which contained Tagore's criticism. Tagore said in effect in that article that Gandhi was the soul of India, that after the Buddha there never had risen in our country a greater person, but at the same time, even this great man of India's destiny was making a great mistake. He was establishing a kind of moral and mental

dictatorship which was worse than political dictatorship. Here was a man whose word had become law to millions of unthinking people swept away by the worship of the Mahatma. People had become like the sheep following the shepherd. This was intellectual and even moral suicide. Tagore then turned to the Charkha. He said he liked the Charkha and wanted the Charkha to spread in India. He was willing to sit down and learn to spin. But if Mahatma Gandhi said the Charkha and nothing but the Charkha would win our freedom, it was a clear case of misleading the people of India. Freedom cannot come only through innumerable programmes of action. So he warned Mahatma Gandhi to think again and not to establish a moral dictatorship over the conscience of India.

We were angry and said, "What right has Tagore got to challenge the Mahatma?" We argued up and down in loud voices and there was a lot of trouble, some of the students even shouted anti-Tagore slogans inside the Visva-bharati itself. We waited to see what Gandhi would do. Gandhi was editing the "Young India", and in those days no home was complete without a copy of "Young India".

So in the next issue of "Young India" came Gandhiji's reply. We opened our copies of this journal and began reading. One heading was "The Great Sentinel". Tagore's challenge came under the title "The

Call of Truth” and Mahatma Gandhi’s answer came under the caption “The Great Sentinel”, He said that he had no words to express his deep gratitude to Poet Rabindranath Tagore. He pictured Tagore as the great sentinel of the human spirit, warning people against fanaticism, and blind following. Mahatma Gandhi said he wanted every Indian to read every line of what Tagore had written. He wanted the whole of India to discuss the subject and also the warning which had come from Tagore. But, he added, that he had a quarrel with the poet who had said he was establishing a moral dictatorship. Gandhi wanted to assure him that he would rather perish than establish any dictatorship, even moral. He wanted every man and woman to think for himself or her spinning, unless there was complete understanding of these. He did not seek to establish moral dictatorship in India because he himself wanted the freedom of the human mind above everything else.

There were then certain economic arguments in the Poet’s article and Gandhi answered them. In one particular paragraph, he gave a somewhat sharp reply. He said to the Poet something like this, I speak from memory only, “If you trace the source of every pie that comes into your hands you will see that they come out of the toil of the villagers of India. There are the wealthy people, the educated people and there were great institutions in the country. But they all get their sustenance

from the village producers and give hardly anything sufficient in return. This was morally wrong and must be corrected. One of the ways of doing so was voluntary spinning". So Gandhi dealt with the economic challenge and said, he wanted poetry, philosophy and beauty for every man and woman but they must first have had a least one square meal a day. What was the use of poetry and philosophy and beauty for the hungry and the naked, for those who have challenged the Poet in turn and said that Santhiniketan and its music, dance and culture were good and necessary, but they must filter down to the millions in the villages. So the Poet must come down from the heights of poetry and philosophy and stand with the people of India shoulder to shoulder in the struggle for freedom and food. Then his songs will be richer and his poetry sweeter.

It was a great essay. It was one great man arguing with another great man, lifting the discussion to the highest level. As this controversy developed, people took one side or the other. The great scientist, Acharya P.C. Ray took sides with Gandhi against Tagore. Others took sides with Rabindranath Tagore. Then suddenly some of the students in Visvabharati also made up their minds to make their contribution to this confusion ! The Students Association called for a meeting. Somebody came and asked me, "Would you read a paper on Tagore and Gandhi at this meeting ?" Now like the Irishman in the story, I was

only too ready to join the fight. You know that story. Two Irishmen were fighting in the street, one fellow hitting the other. A third Irishman was coming down the street. He came up, stood and watched the fight for a minute and said, "Gentlemen, please wait a moment". They said, "What do you want?" He asked, "Is it a private quarrel or can I also join?" I was perhaps the Irishman of the student community in Visva-bharati. I said that I would read a paper and everybody said, "Ramachanran will read a paper fully supporting Gandhiji and opposing Tagore".

So most of the students in Visva-bharati and many of the teachers came to the meeting. There was, among others, a powerful supporter of Tagore, one of the Lecturers. He came to listen to me and he must have made up his mind to join issue with me. I moved a resolution, which was something like this: "In this controversy in regard to the immediate tasks to be accomplished in India, Mahatma Gandhi's programme is the only right programme and anyone who attacks that programme is against the best interests of India". I said it was all right for the great Poet to sit in Santiniketan, singing his beautiful songs and writing his magnificent poetry and weaving the texture of a world-philosophy. These were necessary and vital. But to reconstruct the shattered life of India was a different matter. It was this Herculean task that Mahatma Gandhi was trying to

accomplish and it could not be done unless all joined together. It required the hardest work at the lowest level of Indian life. It required the co-operation and regimentation of the millions of the people. And so on and so forth. Then, of course, someone attacked the resolution. There was a great debate and many people spoke for and against. A vote was taken. My resolution won. The support for the other side was very good and reasonable and the lecturer who also spoke did very well. We all returned to our hostels carrying the argument to our beds. Next day sometime in the forenoon I got a note from Gurdev Tagore, which simply said, "Ramachandran, I wish to see you". I thought the matter was being taken up at the highest level and I did not know what would happen. I was a little nervous. I went and Gurdev Tagore asked me to sit down. Then he said, "I was greatly delighted to hear that my students had a keen debate on whether their Chancellor is right or wrong and I am even more delighted that, by a majority, you had voted that your Chancellor is in the wrong". I said to myself, "What am I hearing?" I came to be reprimanded, to be told I was a fool. Here was the great Chancellor of Visva-bharati saying with a smile on his face that he was delighted to hear that his students argued fearlessly in Santiniketan and finally adopted an adverse resolution. And then he told me, "I want you to recall the Visva-bharati Sammelan and I too want to speak to the students". I could only say humbly, "There will be no

greater privilege than to listen to you". He then said to me with a twinkle in his eyes, "Even if I prove that I am right, will you like to hear me?" I had the good sense to reply, "Yes". I came back and met all my friends who were waiting anxiously. When I told them what had happened, they too could hardly believe their ears.

The next day, the whole of the Visva-bharati gathered to hear Gurudev. Then Gurudev's car arrived. He got out and smiled at all of us and came into the Hall. There was pindrop silence. He said something like this again from memory "When I established Visva-bharati, I had one great dream in my heart. I myself, as a boy, had a very unhappy life at school. Teacher would jump at me, compel me to think along their lines. So I ran away from school and when I grew up, I said I must establish somewhere a school and a college, where boys and girls will grow up in complete freedom of the human mind. Every boy and girl in Santiniketan and in the Visva-bharati must be absolutely free to think, grow and develop along his or her own lines. I have heard with the greatest delight of the debate you had yesterday. I told Ramachandran that I was particularly delighted that the motion had gone against me. I have not come here to attack your motion. I do not want a single word to be taken away from it. But I want you to give me a hearing" And then he explained his point of view at great length with great eloquence and conviction. He revealed such reverence

for Gandhi, such deep love for Gandhi, that those of us who listened to him said to ourselves, "Is it of this man that we spoke yesterday as a man obstructing Gandhi? This man understands Gandhi, knows Gandhi, more than all of us put together." He was not willing to agree with Mahatma Gandhi in everything. He spoke about khaddar, spoke about village industries, about non-violence and the emancipation of the untouchables. He said that in all these matters Mahatma Gandhi was giving India great leadership. But he warned that not one of us should accept anyone of these simply because they came from Mahatma Gandhi; but they must follow Gandhi, thoughtfully understandingly and knowingly but not blindly". And then his voice rose as he said, "Anybody following Gandhi blindly is doing the greatest injustice to the greatest man of our country. This is my thesis" Then he looked round finally and said, "I have promised Ramachandran that if anybody wants to speak after me he or she will be free to do so". I then stood up and said: "Gurudev ! you have no idea how humiliated and humbled we feel. Yesterday we were proud that we knew something. today we see your great-heartedness, your nobility of thinking and your great vision. Forgive us. But we are happy that because of our intransigence, you came out and opened your mind to us. So we have no regrets for yesterday". Then I did something which I generally don't do, I went forward and touched his feet and said, "I have nothing to say and I don't think anyone else is going to say anything". There

was complete silence in the Hall till Gurudev stood up, gave his namaste to all of us and went to his car. We followed him. There was no clapping and no cheering, but only the deepest reverence in our minds to this greatest of our teachers.

Now this is a picture of Tagore which I have never forgotten. He was indeed a great sentinel of the freedom of the mind.

So I remember his gracious personality, his intellect, his genius to befriend young people, the manner in which his heart could meet the heart of the youth of India in those days. He always came down from the great heights of his art and vision in order to meet the young people at their own level, to love them and get love in return from them. It was in Santhiniketan he lived and worked, wrote his great songs and poems, thought out his dynamic philosophy of life and progress and finally passed away in the fullness of time. Santhiniketan remains the greatest monument to his memory.

2

TAGORE: HIS PHILOSOPHY

I have tried to paint the background against which one can look at the personality of Rabindranath Tagore and understand it a little. But there is a much deeper background than a description of Santiniketan or some of his personal qualities. Someone once said that the history of India is the history from the Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi. He was probably right in a way. We might as well say that the cultural history of India is our history from the Upanishads to the Gitanjali. May be, we can amend it and say that the cultural history of India is the history of India from Valmiki and Kalidasa to Rabindranath Tagore. The thought of Valmiki and Kalidasa naturally comes to mind when we think of the vital cultural background of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy, poetry, thought and works.

Tagore's mind was deeply embedded in the philosophy of the Upanishads. He knew his Sanskrit well. He had grown up in one of the most cultured families of Bengal where the study of Sanskrit was like the air which the boys and the girls of the family breathed. His father was called 'Maharshi' Devendranath Tagore and the

Maharshi was a profound scholar of Sanskrit and one of the great leaders of the Brahma Samaj movement. Tagore from his early years steeped his mind in the thought and culture of the Upanishads. I remember once Tagore saying to us in a class, something from the Upanishads which at once suited the occasion and the lesson he was taking. It was something like this. "The human mind is continually being pressed down by the dead weight of wrong thinking; mental and spiritual superstitions weigh down the mind of man. The Upanishads teach us that if we release the mind from this dead weight, then it becomes like a flaming arrow, hitting the mark unerringly".

On another occasion I remember Tagore teaching us, "It is said in the Bible, it is a very great teaching of the Bible, that you should love your neighbour as yourself. There is in the Upanishads, an advance even on this. That is, that you and your neighbour are really one. It is not a question of somebody loving somebody outside himself. The Upanishads point not merely to the need of true love between neighbours but to your utter identity with your neighbour, as two sparks of life from the same fire of the Divine". Now this was a startling truth, the complete identity of all human life, which Gurudev stressed and which the Upanishads proclaimed.

So his mind was saturated with ideas from the ancient wisdom of India. He was a great lover of Valmiki

and he once said that there has never been in world literature, a greater natural poet than Valmiki. I remember that he said that in Shakespeare, Nature sometimes waits at the door for human recognition. Shakespeare allows Nature to peep in through the window and sometimes to come in at the door. But in Valimiki Nature is at the centre of life and life is woven round Nature. The cultural background of Rabindranath Tagore is thus the cultural background of India. But he was not a man who would retreat into the past and stay there. He went into the great past to recover its treasures and then to press forward into the greater future. I have never known a man who intellectually more completely rejected the idea of every reactionary thought than Tagore. Always, he looked forward, though he took all the strength that the past could give him.

There is his great book called "Sadhana" with chapters entitled, 'Realisation in Beauty', 'Realisation in Truth', 'Realisation in Action' etc. The whole book is an essay on self-realisation. This book gives the best in the past of India as reborn in the mind of one of the world's greatest Moderns. Here is India of the great past reincarnating in modern form and substance. So are other books like "Creative Unity" and "Personality" which represent a high synthesis of ancient and modern wisdom.

At this point I may mention something which we must never forget. Tagore hardly ever wrote a single

line of prose or poetry in any language except Bengali. Almost the entire body of his works which we have today in English is translation of what he originally wrote in Bengali.

I remember we were many South Indian students in Santhiniketan. He always spoke in Bengali in Santhiniketan. I once led a small students' deputation to him and said, "Gurudev, this is very unfair to us. We are not Bengalis and Visva-bharati is not a Bengali institution, but an International University. You are a great teacher and you refuse to speak a single word in Santiniketan except in Bengali language !" He looked at me, became a little thoughtful and said, "There is something in what you say". And then added, "I cannot be fair to you unless I am fair to myself. You know I cannot speak the English language properly". Now it was one of the greatest masters of the English language in India who was telling us that in comparison to his knowledge of his own mother-tongue, his knowledge of English was so poor that he dared not speak in it. When he spoke, when he took classes, when he took part in discussions, except rarely, he would talk only in Bengali.

Wednesday is the weekly holiday in Santhiniketan. There is no other holiday in the week, probably because Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, his father who founded Santhiniketan, passed away on a Wednesday. On every Wednesday Gurudev would come into the small, simple open temple to speak on spiritual

matters to his students. He never spoke except in Bengali on these occasions. His love of the Bengali language was a love all by itself.

When Tagore passed away, great tributes were paid to his memory from all over the world. In London, the then Secretary of State for India, Mr. Amery, said about Tagore, "One of the most remarkable things about this great Indian poet was his marvellous mastery of the English language". But the Poet himself would say he did not know English well enough to speak it well. The simple truth was he loved his Bengali best.

Now Tagore stood out not only for the unity of India; he stood valiantly for the unity of mankind. Visva-bharati was built, if I might say so, upon a triple foundation. This has been stressed by the Poet again and again. This consists of :

1. The unity of mankind. To him there was no white or black or brown or yellow man, nor the upper caste or lower caste or any class. Man was first and last just man, pure and whole.
2. The freedom of man and of his mind. This was a matter over which the poet could easily become prophetic and passionate in his utterances.
3. The right to happiness. The quest of civilisation is the undiluted happiness of men and women. Wherever true human happiness is betrayed, civilisation goes under.

So when the Santhiniketan school, after nearly 30 years of existence, became the Visva-bharati University, the basic concept of the University was that of the union of world cultures.

The Visva-bharati was founded on the rock of the belief in the unity of the human race and on the conviction that unity can be achieved only through the unity of all the cultures of the world. Therefore, the Visva-bharati became the great reception hall for all the cultures of Asia and Europe. It had Bengali at the centre of its life because this institution was in Bengal. Then there was naturally Sanskrit, Pali and Hindi. Later on, Tamil was added as the chief Dravidan language; from abroad there was German, French, Chinese and Tibetan.

Remember this was thirty years ago, long before India became free. Here was a thinker and a poet who said even then that national freedom was not the adequate goal of India. He wanted India to look far beyond political independence. He inspired India to look far beyond political independence. He inspired India to look towards the day when the world would become one. He, therefore, founded the Visva-bharati on the concept that mankind was one indivisible family, that the testament of that unity was the unfettered freedom of man and specially his mind and that the test of civilisation was the real happiness of men and women everywhere.

Now Gandhi also, like Tagore, took the view that

national freedom would come some day and there was the need to look toward the more distant vision of a new, just and peaceful human society. At the time we were under total subjection culturally and I remember Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das saying at the Gaya Congress that the cultural conquest of India was almost as complete as the political conquest of India. But even under such subjection, the soul of India remarkably rose again and again and stood up before the world declaring its indestructible autonomy. This deep cry has come from the heart of India through the uncounted centuries, vibrant with her *sadhana* that nothing could ever destroy her soul. It was Tagore's view that at no time was India really or totally subjugated in her mind. It was when we were under political subjection that, a Raja Rama Mohan Roy came, the Ramakrishna Vivekananda movement arose, Dayananda Saraswati appeared and scientists like Bose, Raman and Ray and poets such as Rabindranath, Iqbal, Bharathi and Vallathol gave the world new light and an outburst of beauty.

Then what is the meaning of subjection ? If it does not kill your soul, if it does not give you the feeling that you are fettered beyond recovery and if your soul continually rise up pushing away every obstacle, then subjection becomes meaningless. The history of India in those many years before freedom is a history which challenged subjection from within. Tagore was the finest and noblest symbol of that challenge.

Now Tagore travelled in many countries in the world. He won the Nobel Prize for literature. His writings became famous. Then after the First World War he went to Germany. The German people received him and heard his message of peace long before Mahatma Gandhi delivered that message. He delivered the message that war can solve no problem, that the only way of building the unity and prosperity of all mankind was the way of peace. Tagore did not use the words Ahimsa and Satyagraha but his meaning was the same.

I shall give you one remarkable story at this point. Tagore went to Japan after the First World War. Japan had become a world power. When Tagore spoke first at the Tokyo University, a big crowd of people came to listen to him because they had heard of his fame. In the very first lecture he delivered a moral attack upon militarism in Japan. He said people had taken him to Japanese schools and he had seen little Japanese boys dressed like soldiers, strutting up and down, as though they were to grow up and conquer the whole world. The entire system of education had become militarised. And then he said something which made them very angry. He said that it was only when the Japanese people proved to the satisfaction of the world that Japan too could rear the bloodhounds of civilisation in her kennels that she became a great power before the world. But he said, they had one of the most exquisite and artistic cultures in the world. There was hardly anything in the world that

could compare with it. But all this was being destroyed in the attempt to ape European civilisation. The Japanese became very angry and they wrote and they said that after all, Tagore was the poet of a defeated nation ! He came from a conquered country. The second day he spoke again. The audience was very small. But he lectured even more forcefully against militarism. He left Japan as a very sad man because he found that the message of peace and goodwill that he came to deliver was not acceptable to the militant Japanese people. We now know how atom bombs blasted and destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki years later. Was not Japanese militarism heading for this catastrophe ? Japan became an imperialist power, attacked the mighty body of China and tore it into pieces. The Japanese invasion of China is one of the saddest chapters of Asian history. You remember the old saying of the Bible "He who takes the sword shall perish by the sword". Man turns his back upon such teachings and goes into violence and military power and invites disaster. Look at what happened to Germany. When I saw Berlin in 1955, it was still an unbelievable picture of destruction. So many years after the war, the whole city had not recovered from the terrible disaster which fell upon it. Mighty buildings had crashed, many factories were blown up and grand palaces razed to the ground. The great church where the German Emperors used to worship was also smashed. It looked as if it would take many years to rebuild Berlin.

So, Tagore delivered his message of peace and internationalism to a war-weary world. He said his own country must look beyond the frontiers of nationalism, towards a world order in which the human family would be one. For a man to say this 40 year ago when nationalism was erupting in India and elsewhere, was moral courage of the highest order and when he found opposition to this idea, even then, he kept on redelivering the message with unabated vigour and conviction.

When he went to several European countries after the first War and delivered his message of peace, big crowds came and listened to him with great respect. A German paper wrote that there never was after Jesus Christ a greater teacher of peace than the poet-saint from India. A distinguished German thinker, Count Keyserling, after meeting and talking with Tagore testified that the was the most universal and complete human being he had ever known. He used the words 'most complete human being' because Tagore was not only a poet but a philosopher, a dramatist, a novelist, a Social Reformer and an Internationalist whose message was vibrant with hope and vision.

His philosophy was one which emphasised the unity of man. Infact, one of his quarrels with Mahatma Gandhi at that time was that Gandhi wa placing too much emphasis on nationalism in India. He warned Mahatma Gandhi that nationalism could become a dangerous trap

for the soul of India. The Poet wanted India to look far beyond the frontiers of nationalism. Gandhi's response was as noble as the Poet's challenge. He said in effect, "I cannot die for mankind before I learn to live for India. Unless India discovers its freedom and attains its nationhood, it can make no contribution to internationhood. A weak India, a broken India, an enslaved India can do nothing for mankind, and so I am seeking to release India from subjection. I am releasing India from bondage, so that there can be an India which will live in order to be ready to die for mankind, if necessary".

The second aspect of Tagore's philosophy is the freedom of man and specially the freedom of his mind. His whole soul raged against every kind of dictatorship, because his thesis was that if man studies the whole history of the world he would find that there is nothing more precious that has emerged through the ages than the freedom of the human mind. There have come to man through the ages of his history, poetry, philosophy, painting, architecture, culture, science, and progress. If you examine all these things and ask the question "What is the greatest gift of history to mankind?" Tagore's answer would be "The freedom of the human mind". Wherever that freedom is in peril, all civilisation and culture are in peril.

Now in this Tagore was not alone. Great world thinkers stood with him at that time. There was the great French writer and thinker Romain Rolland. He had also

won the Nobel prize and his books had become greatly known throughout Europe. When the First World War came, the French Government wanted the French writers to attack German culture. Many French writers fell into this trap of hate. The first casualty in a war is truth! But Raomain Rolland gave a resounding moral challenge saying "I am not a politician. I am a man of letters and literature has no frontiers. I will not utter a lie or propagate hate even for my fatherland". The result was that within a short time he found himself an exile on the heights of Switzerland. He never perhaps went back to France. He lived and died an exile.

Now he and Tagore and other writers joined together in those tragic and difficult days to uphold the truth that for men of letters, of culture and of philosophy, and for poets and painters, there could be no war amongst themselves because in such a community there was a brotherhood cutting across all national frontiers. You see, therefore, that the freedom of the human mind was for Rabindranath Tagore the most precious heritage of history.

I remember when I came from Santhiniketan to Gandhiji's Asharam in Sabarmati, people there talked about a good few 'musts' to me. I replied that I was a free man and was going to think and work along my own lines. I got into some trouble but it was Gandhiji himself who came to my rescue. He saved me from some of his

well-meaning disciples. But I am profoundly grateful to God that I have by then some understanding of the meaning of the freedom of human mind. Freedom is not licence. If I hurt you it is not freedom. If I vilify you it is not freedom. It is licence. Freedom is the right of every human being to think for himself, create a world of imagination and vision for himself and to grow up in that world with no one forcing him away from it by insisting he must go this way or that. May be many people who are free-minded may join together for a common purpose, but even that should be voluntary and should come from understanding and conviction.

Then, finally, his philosophy was one of human happiness. He used to say very often that no education was worth the name in which the boys and the girls were not full of happiness in their classes. If, in the process of education, boys and girls became unhappy, frustrated and subservient then there was something fundamentally wrong with that education. And so, he insisted on freedom and happiness in his school and his university.

These were, therefore, fundamental ideas in the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, the unity of man, the freedom of man and his mind and man's happiness in this earthly life. The Indian mind is often apt to be ashamed of and apologetic of happiness. Tagore broke away from that traditional view. Some of his great poems in the *Gitanjali* bear witness to this. But of this, later.

I said to you something about my first meeting with Rabindranath Tagore. Let me now say a word about my last meeting with him in Santiniketan. I had gone there a few years before he passed away. I have a very vivid recollection of the occasion. I was then in the thick of the fight for the freedom of India and going in and out of prison. During one of the intervals from prison, there was an invitation from the Malayalees of Calcutta asking me to come there and talk to them about what was happening in Travancore. They had promised me a few thousand rupees for the struggle. We needed money very badly in those days to run the campaign. So I went to Calcutta and having gone there, I went to Santiniketan. Gurudev Tagore was then there. I wanted to see him and he called me to him very kindly. I went and touched his feet and he talked to me at some length and when I was coming away, I said to him "Gurudev, it is a long time since I left Santiniketan and I have now seen you after many years. May be it will be many years before I come back to Santiniketan and will be able to see you again. Please give me a message, not a message for publication in newspapers, but a message which I can lock up in my heart for ever." He looked thoughtful for a minute, smiled (I distinctly remember that smile now) and said "Whereever you are and whatever you do, you must remember you are a child of Visva-bharati and you will be a child of Visva-bharati not simply by saying to yourself that you are a child of Visva-bharati and you

will be a child of Visva-bharati not simply by saying to yourself that you are a child of Visva-bharati but by being loyal to one ideal above all others. In all your dealings with men and women, make up your mind that the greatest thing about all men and women is just that they are men and women. Education, wealth, power, or any greatness are all extraneous and accidental but the mere fact that a man is a man is the greatest thing about him. Biologically and spiritually this is the truth. If you keep this in your mind is the greatest thing about him. Biologically and spiritually this is the truth. If you keep this in your mind then there are no castes in your mind, no communities, no races and no classes. You look upon man as man and respect him as man." I took this message from him with folded hands. Alas, I never saw him again. But I have tried to carry this message in my heart during all these years, sometimes successfully, sometimes not so successfully, sometimes even forgetting it but always coming back to it. Later on, I realised that Gurudev had defined for me the deepest basis of Sarvodaya without my realising it then.

I have tried to give you in this talk something of the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore. He was no sanyasin or ascetic turning away from life. He lived his life normally, richly and fully. He rejected nothing that nature or life offered him. He took everything and made it part of his living and radiant sadhana. He was a great poet. He wrote much beautiful music. He was a great

dramatist and story writer. He was a noble philosopher. He was great educationist and a great teacher. Before he died he became a great painter. He wrote a song for every mood of the soul, for every gesture and season of nature, for every rhythm of the human emotions. I have a notion that his songs will long outlive even his poetry.

Now songs cannot be translated. You can translate poetry with some difficulty. Supposing you take some of the exquisite poems and songs of Bharathi and translate them into English, what would happen ? If you read the English translation, you will get nothing of the beauty of the original Tamil composition. Can we translate Tyagaraja's Kritis into English and French ? So many of the great songs of Tagore remain untranslated and untranslatable. I hope they will never be cheaply translated because if that is done, they will perish. If anybody wants to know them, let him learn Bengali and know them first hand.

Tagore was a many-sided genius, the first of a new type in an integrated world culture.

3

TAGORE : HIS POETRY

If someone had asked Tagore whether he was dramatist, story-writer, novelist, philosopher, literary critic, painter, prophet or poet, he would have unhesitatingly said that he was a poet first and last. Every other expression of his art would be only secondary. Some of the world poets and thinkers have defined and elucidated the significance of poetry. But for Tagore, poetry was the highest expression of the human soul. Therefore, we see him saying in the *Gitanjali* that only as a poet could he reach God:

“ I know that only as a singer I come before by presence” No doubt, his dramas, essays, short stories, novels, paintings, philosophical writings and inspired talks were all parts of his profound self-expression, but without his poetry these would not fit into their proper places. Poetry was the sun of the solar system of his genius round which the other planets of his manifold art revolved. To Tagore, poetry at its best was God’s most authentic voice speaking and singing through the instrument of the human mind and, therefore, poetry represented beauty, truth, wisdom and goodness in one integrated process. That being his concept of poetry, it is no wonder that he

would often say he was only a poet and nothing but a poet !

Who is really a poet? And what is the function of poetry? There are innumerable classical statements on this subject. But there is one statement by a remarkable poet of our own time-George Russell - which we might consider. George Russell has written : "In poetry is found the sincerest and the highest utterances of the human spirit. All poetry is written on the mount of transfiguration and there is in it the mingling of heaven and earth. If a man is not sincere in this manner of speaking, his speech betrayeth him". In the Bible, there is the story of Christ's transfiguration. He stood on a hill and his and his disciples were looking on, when he suddenly gave them a vision of his Vishwarupa. This vision of the Viswarupa is what you come across in the Gita also. Lord Krishna gave Arjuna a vision of his Vishwarupa and then Arjuna saw the continuity of life from beginning to eternity and so his duty, his karma, became clear to him.

Therefore, this reference to the mount of transfiguration means that all poetry is written on the mountain-top of vision, looking at the totality of life and understanding the depth of truth. absorbs truth and then pours it out in words of beauty. All great poetry arises from vision, understanding and realisation. Then Russell further says.... "There is in it the mingling of heaven and earth." That again is significant. You know poetry is

sometimes considered as though it is in the air like the clouds, never coming down to the hard earth of reality. Russell says that poetry represents the mingling of idealism with realism, heaven standing for idealism and earth for realism. And then he adds that in this manner of speaking, if a man is not sincere, his speech betrayeth him. You know we can do many ugly things and get away with it all in this world. But one cannot get away with false poetry because if you produce false poetry it will stand self-exposed. It takes no time to discover false poetry—that is in the very nature of poetry. If you are really not a poet you can never convince the world you are really a poet, whatever you do about it. But if your poetry is real poetry, the world will know it and cherish it whatever happens. It comes out like the blossoming of a flower. No one can hide the truth and the beauty of true poetry.

What is the function of poetry ? All of us are fond of poems. Everyone of us can quote something from some poet or other, often when we are alone. Some lines of poetry come sometimes to all of us. I remember in prison how our doors would be closed at 6 p.m. We could be in separate rooms and in my cell, all by myself, I would recite or sing for all I was worth. I would recite long lines of Malayalam poetry. It is curious that I hardly recited an English poem in prison though I knew more English poetry than Malayalam.

Now does poetry come into the world ? To begin with, there is an imaginative mind and heart full of deep emotions. Then something strikes a chord in the mind and in the heart. The person looks at something and suddenly says, "Oh! How beautiful this is, how sweet this is!" He may be looking at the sunrise or a flower or a face forgetting everything else. Now if a person observes beauty or truth or goodness and is merely thrilled by them, no poetry is necessarily born. The thrill can only be the first step in poetry. After the mind and the heart join in a common thrill, in a common experience of emotion, if there is also an urge to express, to speak, to write, then you come to the second step in poetry. There are people who look at beauty and truth or goodness and is merely thrilled by them, no poetry is necessarily born. The thrill can only be the first step in poetry. After the mind and the heart join in a common thrill, in a common experience of emotion, if there is also an urge to express to speak, to write, then you come to the second step in poetry. There are people who look at beauty and truth and love them, But they do not take a pen and write; they do not sit back and whisper words to themselves nor would they paint. So the second step is the urge to express oneself in terms of what one has experienced. It is like the pangs of childbirth. Something has to be born from the mind and the heart of the poet and it struggles for expression. This is the struggle in the soul of the poet. Expression is, therefore, the third step in poetry. Some

words are coined, some lines written, either in the mind or on paper. Those words hold within them the image of the beauty or the goodness that struck the mind. They enshrine within themselves what the poet has experienced. In other words, words become the vessel in which the poet seeks to hold image of beauty or truth or goodness which he was experienced and by which he is thrilled. If all this takes place, then poetry is born.

· There is a test which we apply to find out if what has been born is real poetry or merely the jingling of words. There are many person who jingle with words and think they are poets. But if the work is real poetry, there is a test that it must stand. It is not enough that the poetic heart and mind has great experiences and that these experiences are put into the vessel of words. It must be said that poetry is the art of putting eternity into the fleeting moments of the poet's experience. After all, when a poet has experienced something as has written his poem that experience passes away and new experiences keep coming on. So there is a change of experience, a stream of experiences through which the poet's mind passes. But if he enshrines his experience in poetry he develops the art of holding that experience for ever in the vessel of words, in words of beauty, feeling and meaning.

Now if we keep in mind what George Russel said, then we see at once that poets are inspired teach-

ers of mankind, inspired revealers of beauty and truth. When Rabindranath Tagore said, as he has said so often, "I am a poet and nothing but a poet", he was not rejecting claim to greatness. He was taking to himself the greatest claim to greatness.

One of Tagore's great books is the *Gitanjali*. 'Anjali' means 'offering' and 'Git' means 'poetry' or song. So *Gitanjali* is the offering of poetry and song to man and God. This again is significant. Many people make many offerings to God. The rich man offers money. The women offer flowers. The Karmayogi makes an offering of action without attachment. Now what can a poet offer? He cannot offer money. He is often poor. A poet cannot offer a concrete programme of human revolution and action. He can only offer the best he can produce and that can only be this poetry.

In the *Gitanjali*, in one of his earliest poems, Tagore says:-

"When Thou commandest me to sing, it seems my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy race, and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony - and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence."

Here is the pathway of the poet towards God. The pathway of a Karmayogi is his action. The pathway of a Gnanayogi is his intellectual quest after God. But the only pathway through which the poet approaches God, realises God, is his poetry. Therefore, he says, 'Only as a singer do I come before thy presence'. That gives again an insight into what poetry means to the poet. To a true poet, his highest pathway of realisation is poetry and, therefore, politics, society, wealth, riches, power and glory are all nothing to him, compared to the gift of poetry. To him the first and last testament of greatness is his poetry and no poet will surrender his poetry for anything in the world. And so when Tagore offered his poetry and song to God and man he offered the best and the highest in his power and genius. But I have studied Bharathi with some care. I studied his works with a great teacher, the late Kalki. Krishnamurthi and I were working together many years ago in Shri Rajaji's Gandhi Ashram at Tiruchengode. I was the Manager of the Gandhi Ashram at Tiruchengode. I was the Manager of the Gandhi Ashram and he was working there as Personal Assistant to Rajaji. He had read something I had written in English and translated some of my writings into Tamil. We became friends and evening after evening I sat with him as he read or recited from Bharathi and explained the meaning of the verses. The vision that came to me was the vision of a poet who died very young, a poet who was not appreciated while he lived. He lived and died a pauper. In fact

he was sometimes hungry and had no food to eat. As I listened to his poetry I said to myself, "Here is another Tagore in another language". He did not have all the facilities which Tagore had to grow and to develop into a world figure. But there is the same exquisite genius of a poet in Subramanya Bharati. He too wrote patriotic songs like Tagore did. He wrote beautiful 'Pappa Pattu' - poetry for children - exactly the same as Tagore did. Bharati would interpret the deepest yearning of India's soul. Tagore did the same thing. May be, Subramanya Bharati is not as great a many-sided genius as Tagore-poet, dramatist, literacy critic, story writer, novelist, and philosopher which Tagore became. But all that genius was in him. It is curious in the case of Subramanya Bharati that his poetry came out of his suffering, out of his poverty and struggle. The name of Bharati will live because he interpreted the soul of the Tamil people as no other man did. I remember many things that Kalki used to read and explain - the genius of Bharati to hold a whole world of meaning in a few, crisp Tamil words. I think this is the genius of the Tamil language. As I listened to Bharati's songs read and recited by Kalki, I realised that Bharati was among the immortals of poetry. Bharati was an "unacknowledged legislator" of the Tamil mind. He wrote his poetry on the mount of transfiguration; in his poetry there was the mingling of heaven and earth. And in the manner of his speaking through his poetry his speech never betrayed him.

What then is the function of poetry ? Its function, as I said, is to put eternity into the fleeting glimpses of beauty and truth. What the poet sees, what the poet feels, what he understands, must live for ever his poetry. Secondly, a poet must reveal the truth without fear and without hesitation, because he rises upon great wings of inspiration and looks at life face to face. There is no going round and round to discover truth. There is no long search or analysis. What a philosopher takes a whole life-time to know, the poet will take one moment to experience. So a poet must reveal the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, fully, richly and without fear or favour. He must reveal it in such a way that we love the truth that he reveals. A politician may reveal some truth, but we may hate the manner he does it. An intellectual may reveal a truth and we might get headaches in understanding what he has revealed, but when a poet reveals the truth, he reveals it in such a manner that we love it and we get the same experience through which he passed.

Edward Thompson, who studied Bengali and read Gurudev in the original Bengali, has written a big book on Tagore. Some people considered it a superficial book. I remember the Modern Review writing about this book that there were some mistranslations from the original Bengali into English which would make the old women of Bengal have a good laugh ! Making allowance for all that, it remains one of the best books on Tagore in the

English language. In that book, the author ultimately asks the question whether Tagore would take his place with Shakespeare or Goethe. He did not say with Kalidasa or Valmiki because he did not know enough about them. He doubts whether Tagore's place is as high as to be with Shakespeare or Goethe. Edward Thompson's verdict is that Tagore would be among the first in the second rank of the world's poets. Now we need not accept this judgement. But we realise that even a cold-blooded Englishman could write this about Tagore. The judgment of Thompson is not final and cannot be final because Tagore's poetry is in Bengali and Thompson was not really a Bengali scholar. One great Bengali author told me once, "Tagore will take 50 years to recover from the English translations of his works. These translations are so inadequate, so incomplete is to misjudge him completely and some day people will have to study Tagore in the Original Bengali to know his greatness and it may take fifty, sixty or a hundred years before people of other lands learn Bengali to understand Tagore". This is a very significant statement, At the same time let us remember that the Nobel Prize was not given to the Bengali Gitanjali but to the English Gitanjali, which shows that even in his life-time his poetry survived the ordeal of translation. In fact, Tagore's work have been translated into many languages, sometimes undergoing the ordeal of a double translation. I can recall a story which shows how the translations of Tagore's works were valued by people in

distant parts of the world. You know there was a revolution in Spain before French took over. It was a great battle to establish the Republic of Spain. Pandit Nehru went to Spain then and spent some time with the Republican Army. Once Nehru was in one of the trenches. Towards evening the soldiers were resting in their trenches. Nehru suddenly heard a song in Spanish which sounded thrilling and so he asked what that song was. It was the Spanish translation of the poem of Tagore which begin with "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high". It is the song of Indian patriotism but lifting patriotism to the highest level. I know most of you know this piece of poetry. Someone has called it the noblest patriotic poem written by any poet in any language. Here is is :-

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit,

Where the mind is led forward by thee into
ever widening thought and action—

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let
my country awake. "

Tagore composed this poem as expressing the patriotic fervour of India and in that poem he paints the picture of the India that must finally emerge, the picture of the country which can be equal to any country in the world. The first quality of such a country would be fearlessness. As I have said earlier, the greatest passion of the poet was the passion for the freedom of the human mind. So knowledge must be free. Every child must be entitled to the highest education as the free gift of that new India. And then he wanted an India where life was not broken into castes and communities, by narrow domestic walls, an India where the clear river of reason was not lost in the desert of dead habits. Most of us, particularly young people, talk big of revolution, but when it comes to action we prefer retreat and surrender. If somebody in a family wants to break caste, we fight that person with all our might and yet we talk of a casteless society. Dead habits and superstitions are all around us like a dunghill. All these dead habits Tagore wanted to put away. Then he wished that India must continually strive towards a greater and nobler life. This is no narrow patriotism, nor the pride of country, but the glorious vision of a liberated India in a liberated world.

Tagore's poetry is like a veritable ocean. The Visvabharati University has published Tagore's original poems in the Bengali language running into many volumes. Luckily for Tagore and the world, he lived long. He drunk deep of the thought of the modern world. He had read much of all the great poetry of the world. His knowledge of English literature was wide and profound. His mind was of course soaked in Indian culture. When he began to write poetry, it came out of his soul like a Gangetic stream, running away with him and almost drowning him in its flood. His poems came to him out of his own deep sadhana. It is an old tradition in India for our saints and sages to rise before the sun rises. We look reverently at the sky and watch the beauty of the infant morning. In all our yoga practices, in our study of music and philosophy, we have the tradition to get up before sunrise and practise our lessons. Equally important is the sandhya time, the twilight before night. Tagore would come out of his little beautiful mud hut in Santiniketan and sit out in the open long before the sun rose or just at sunset time. Sunrise and sunset at Santiniketan are enchanting. It was on these occasions the poet sat in meditation and drew out of his soul and the soul of Nature his poems and songs.

Let me now refer to a few selections from his poetry. Here is one of his poems :

“Life of my life I shall ever try to keep my body

pure, knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs.

I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts, knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my mind.

I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower, knowing that thou hast thy seat in the inmost shrine of my heart.

And it shall be my endeavour to reveal thee in my actions, knowing it is thy power, gives me strength to act."

The poet would keep his body pure not simply because it was his body, but because it was the body that Divine grace touched every day and every moment of his life. If the body was to be worthy of Divine touch and grace, it must be kept pure and immaculate.

Here is another great poem, which is very often quoted. The poet wants to worship God. He seeks God everywhere. He goes into the temple, the church and the mosque. God was not in any of these. He went to the seats of power and he went to the great intellects, but did not find his God. He discovered that God was with "the poorest, the lowliest and the lost". God was with the toilers of the world. Then he wanted to bend and touch the feet of God in worship as Indians do. He found, however, that he could not bend low enough to reach the

depths of suffering and poverty where God's feet were caught and held in the lives of "the poorest, the lowliest and the lost".

“Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.”

Look at the combination of the words, “the poorest, and lowliest and lost”. The world reckons little of these people.

But it is with them that God moves.

“Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.”

This is a more revolutionary song than the “La Marseillaise” of the French Revolution, or any song of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The revolutionary urge develops further in the next poem. He goes into a temple and sees the priests sitting there. He looks at them and then in a wave of revolutionary emotion, he asks them to open their eyes and see that their God is not before them. They close their eyes in order probably to deceive themselves that God is there. But God is there with the toilers, with the stone-breakers, with those whose clothes are covered with dust and whose bodies drip with sweat. So in a passion he asks them to get out of the temple and stand where God stands with the toilers in the field. What a wonderful song for socialism in our

country of endless rituals and ceremonies! The poem rises in a crescendo of the spirit :-

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark comer of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the toiler is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

Deliverance ? Where is this deliverance to be found ? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever.

Come out of thy meditation and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained ? Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.”

“Let me now come to some poems of utter sweetness, poems of love. of dedication. Here is one :-

“Let only that little be left of me whereby I may name thee my all.

Let only that little be left of my will whereby I may feel thee on every side, and come to thee in

everything, and offer to thee my love every moment.

Let only that little be left of me whereby I may never hide thee.

Let only that little of my fetters be left whereby I am bound with thy will, and thy purpose is carried out in my life-and that is the fetter of thy love."

Occasionally people will say that all these songs are mystic songs. In fact Tagore himself once said to us, "If you try to see mysticism in every line I have written, you will not understand me." The song may be a song addressed to God or one addressed to the beloved; whichever way you look at it, you can get the thrill of joy and beauty from it.

Here is another poem:-

"When the heart is hard and parched up, come upon me with a shower of mercy.

When grace is lost from life, come with a burst of song.

When tumultuous work raises its din on all sides shutting me out from beyond, come to me, my lord of silence with thy peace and rest.

When my beggarly hear? sits crouched, shut up in a corner, break open the door, my king, and come with the ceremony of a king.

When desire blinds the mind with delusion and dust
O thou holy one, thou wakeful, come with thy light
and thy thunder."

Here is the cry of the mind for the Redeemer in every situation of life.

Now here is a nice little story :-

"I had gone a-begging from door to door in the village path, when thy golden chariot appeared in the distance like a gorgeous dream and I wondered who was this King of all kings!

My hopes rose high and methought my evil days were at an end, and I stood waiting for alms to be given unasked and for wealth scattered on all sides in the dust.

The chariot stopped where I stood. Thy glance fell on me and thou earnest down with a smile. I felt that the luck of my life had come at last. Then of a sudden thou didst hold out thy right hand and say, " What hast thou to give to me?"

Ah, what a kingly jest was it to open thy palm to a beggar to beg ! I was confused and stood undecided, and then from my wallet I slowly took out the least-little grain of corn and gave it to thee.

But how great my surprise when at the day's end emptied my bag on'the floor to .find a least little

grain of gold among the poor heap! I bitterly wept and wished that I had had the heart to give thee my all. "

Even this is not mysticism. You might call it an allegory. You give a grain of corn and you get a grain of gold. It is the law of moral life. It is the challenge that you get more than you give. There is no getting without giving.

Now look at this. This is one of the songs which I have always loved very much:-

" Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well.

O thou beautiful, there in the nest it is thy love that encloses the soul with colours and sounds and odours.

There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth.

And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows deserted by herds, through trackless paths carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.

But there where spreads the infinite sky for the soul to take her flight in, reigns the stainless white radiance.

There is no day nor night, nor form nor colour and never, never a word."

Now this idea "Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well" was painted by the great Bengali painter, Nandalal Bose. It is a very simple painting. There is the tiny, final end of the long twig of a tree stretching into space. A little tiny twig stretches out into the infinite space and on that twig is a little nest with a few birds fluttering in and out. At the bottom of the painting is written, "Thou art the sky and thou art the nest as well." The nest is very important to human life. Equally important is the infinite sky to the human mind. The nest is the earth, the home we make, our finitude as one might call it. No man can run away from finitude saying, "I am an unfettered human soul. I care nothing for the earth." The roots must be in this life, but the branches must spread out into the infinite sky and we should be capable of a quick movement from the nest to the sky and from the sky back to the nest again, the nest representing a well-ordered human society and the sky representing the infinite of aspiration.

His poetry was never always up in the clouds. It was rooted in the hard earth, but always reaching out into the farthest limits of beauty and truth. There are great revolutionary streams in his poetry. There is patriotism in his poetry, but it is a patriotism never narrow, never aggressive, but creative and envisioning the whole world bound together in love and beauty. There are streams of love - earthly love and divine love - which are

so illuminating that the dullest hearts can respond to their throbbing call.

Here is yet another poem which I am certain you would like to hear :-

“That I want thee, only thee — let my heart repeat without end. All desires that distract me, day and night, are false and empty to the core.

As the night keeps hidden in its gloom the petition for light, even thus in the depth of my unconsciousness rings the cry — “I want thee, only thee.”

As the storm still seeks its end in peace when it strikes against peace with all its might, even thus my rebellion strikes against thy love and still its cry is “I want thee, only thee.”

Now look at some of these lines. Every storm creates a stir unsettling peace, but the poet says when a storm breaks up peace and rages against peace, even so the storm is inevitably leading to peace because a storm is never a normal condition. However much a storm may rage in the heart and soul of man, that storm cannot last; it is making its way steadily towards peace. He reveals that storms and conflicts are not normal but interruptions. What really is valid and normal in the life of man is peace.

Here is a very striking poem again. The lovers had

spent the night together-may be God and man or may be human lovers. The lover had departed and the beloved finds some thing left behind as a memento. She suddenly finds it is not a garland of flowers that he had left behind, but a sharp sword. And then she says, "Oh! What is it thou has left behind for me?" She realises that what has been left behind is the challenge to action, the challenge to duty at the highest :-

"I thought I should ask of thee - but I dared not - the rose wreath thou hadst[^]on thy neck. Thus I waited for the morning, when thou didst depart, to find a few fragments on the bed. And like a beggar I searched in the dawn only for a stray petal or two.

Ah me, what is it I find? What token left of thy love? It is no flower, no spices, no vase of perfumed water. It is thy mighty sword, flashing as a flame, heavy as a bolt of thunder. The young light of morning comes through the window and spreads itself upon thy bed. The morning bird twitters and asks, "Woman, what hast thou got?"

No, it is no flower, nor spices, nor vase of perfumed water it is thy dreadful Sword.

I sit and muse in wonder, what gift is this of thine. I can find no place where to hide it. I am ashamed to wear it, frail as I am, and it hurts me when I

press it to my bosom. Yet shall I bear in my heart this honour of the burden of pain, this gift of thine.

From now there shall be no fear left for me in this world, and thou shalt be victorious in all my strife.

Thou hast left death for my companion and I shall crown him with my life. Thy sword is with me to cut asunder my bonds, and there shall be no fear left for me in the world.

From now I leave off all petty decorations. Lord of my heart, no more shall there be for me waiting and weeping in comers, no more coyness and sweetness of demeanour. Thou hast given me thy sword for adornment. No more doll's decorations for me ! "

So the lover looks at the sword and trembles wondering what it is for and then in contemplation discovers the meaning of the sword as the challenge to duty and action.

From this grand concept of action and duty, we now come to a gentle and wistful poem :-

" On the slope of the desolate river among tall grasses I asked her, "Maiden, where do you go, shading your lamp with your mantle ? My house is all dark and lone some,—lend me your light!" She raised her dark eyes for a moment and looked at my face through the dusk. "I have come to the

river," she said, " to float my lamp on the stream when the daylight wanes in the west." I stood alone among tall grasses and watched the timid flame of her lamp uselessly drifting in the tide.

In the silence of gathering night I asked her, "Maiden, your lights are all lit — then where do you go with your lamp ? My house is all dark and lonesome,-lend me your light." She raised her dark eyes on my face and stood for a moment doubtful. " I have come," she said at last, "to dedicate my lamp to the sky." I stood and watched her light uselessly burning in the void.

In the moonless gloom of midnight I asked her, "Maiden, what is your quest, holding the lamp near your heart? My house is all dark and lonesome, lend me your light." She stopped for a minute and thought and gazed at my face in the dark. "I have brought my light," she said, "to join the carnival of lamps." I stood and watched her little lamp uselessly lost among lights."

Many of us may wonder what its meaning is. This poem is characteristic of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was not only a poet, but a saint. But he was a modern saint, if one might say so, who integrated into himself some of the greatest things in the ancient traditions with a positive attitude towards life. I remember again and again Tagore saying that all negation is untruth and

that truth is ever positive. Generally a saint renounces everything and retreats into himself; he lights his own lamp inside his soul and then tries to look at the world with the light of that lamp. This poem gives you a different philosophy altogether.

The idea of a positive approach is reflected further in another poem: -

“Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.

Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen vessel to the brim.

My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy flame and place them before the altar of thy temple.

No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight. Yes, all my illusions will bum into illumination of joy, and all my desires ripen into fruits of love.” Here the two dynamic currents of thinking are: -

- 1) “No, I am not going to live a negative life. I am not going to starve myself and then sit back and weep. I shall live the full life of man but as I do so and as I look at beauty and realise and enjoy it,

I shall not be thinking only of that beauty, but of the Creator of that beauty so that even through the normal human enjoyment of all that God has given, I will move towards God.”

- 2) “I reject nothing; I accept everything and transmute whatever I accept into the substance of divine worship out of which will come the blossoming of love and service.”

He lost his wife when he was only middle-aged and later a beloved daughter. There were thus tragedies in his life. There are some wonderful poems born of sorrow which he has written without mentioning names. Here is one :-

“In desperate hope I go and search for her in all the corners of my room; I find her not.

My house is small and what once has gone from it can never be regained.

But infinite is thy mansion, my lord, and seeking her I have come to thy door.

I stand under the golden canopy of thine evening sky and I lift my eager eyes to thy face.

I have come to the brink of eternity from which nothing can vanish—no hope, no happiness, no vision of a face seen through tears.

Oh, dip my emptied life into that ocean, plunge it

into the deepest fullness. Let me for once feel that lost sweet touch in the allness of the universe.

He has lost something; he knows he cannot gain it back, but he seeks through that loss to gain the frontiers of eternity.

Usually we are all very much afraid of death. Who is not ? As middle age comes and we have passed the age of 55 or 60, we are wondering what is going to happen. Everybody has an illusion that somehow he is not going to die yet, for death is so unpleasant. Tagore's philosophy was that death is a great fulfilment, that life without death would be trivial. Like the leaves that become flower, the flower which becomes the fruit, the fruit which drops down and appears to die, but is reborn again, life is an eternal pilgrimage; and death looked against the background of such a pilgrimage becomes a fulfilment. The traditional Hindu philosophy is that death is like casting away one set of robes for taking on another. But more than that, it was Tagore's philosophy that if a man lived fully, richly, completely and made his life into a life of great understanding and achievement, then such a life would wait and watch for the coming of death as though death is the greatest gift of life. So he wrote:-

“On the day when death will knock at thy door
what wilt thou offer to him ?

Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my

life - I will never let him go with empty hands.

All the sweet vintage of all my autumn days and summer nights, all the earnings and gleanings of my busy life will I place before him at the close of my days when death will knock at my door."

He will not give to death a starved and petty life, nor a life without colour and glory. It is not a rattling skeleton that he wants to give into the hands of death, but a mighty gift made out of his experiences and his many-sided self-expression. So he would wait for death as though waiting for a friend and give him the full gift of his completed life. And so again :-

"O Thou the last fulfilment of life. Death, my death, come and whisper to me.

Day after day have I kept watch for thee; for thee have I borne the joys and pangs of life.

All that I am, that I have, that I hope, and all my love have ever flowed towards thee in depth of secrecy. One final glance from thine eyes and my life will be ever thine own.

The flowers have been woven and the garland is ready for the bridegroom.

After the wedding the bride shall leave her home and meet her lord alone in the solitude of night. "

I said to you that Tagore has wonderful poems

and songs for children and I once again compare him to Bharati who has given us his "Pappa Pattu". Here is a poem entitled "The Champa Flower". A child says to its mother :-

"Supposing I became a champa flower, just for fun, and grew on a branch high up that tree, and shook in the wind with laughter and danced upon the newly budded leaves, would you know me, mother ?

You would call, 'Baby, where are you ?' and I should laugh to myself and keep quite quiet.

I should slyly open my petals and watch you at your work, When after your bath, with wet hair spread on your shoulders, you walked through the shadow of the champa tree to the little court where you say your prayers, you would notice the scent of the flower, but not know that it came from me.

When after the midday meal you sat at the window reading Ramayana, and the tree's shadow fell over your hair and your lap, I should fling my wee little shadow on to the page of your book, just where you were reading.

But would you guess that it was the tiny shadow of your little child ?

When in the evening you went to the cowshed

with the lighted lamp in your hand, I should suddenly drop on to the earth again and be your own baby once more, and beg you to tell me a story.

‘Where have you been, you naughty child?’

‘I won't tell you, mother' That's what you and I would say then.’

Now there is another poem full of simplicity and at the same time full of majesty. It could be the simplest of poems and yet be the most mystical poetry, whichever way you choose:-

“When I bring you coloured toys, my child, I understand why there is such a play of colours on clouds, on water, and why flowers are painted in tints—when I give coloured toys to you, my child.

When I sing to make you dance, I truly know why there is music in leaves, and why waves send their chorus of voices to the heart of the listening earth—when I sing to make you dance.

When I bring sweet things to your greedy hands, I know why there is honey in the cup of the flower, and why fruits are secretly filled with sweet juice—when I bring sweet things to your greedy hands.

When I kiss your face to make you smile, my darling, I surely understand what pleasure streams from the sky in morning light, and what delight the

summer breeze brings to my body—when I kiss you to make you smile. "

When you give coloured toys to the child and see in the face of the child its reaction of happiness at the gift, when the little one bubbles with happiness, its whole world becomes a world of toys. When you look at this phenomenon, then you understand why God paints the skies at morning and in the evening and why flowers are clothed in colours. Is there any earthly reason, why a certain flower is beautifully yellow and another white? The whole meaning and mystery of life, all its beauty, becomes clear to the poet when he looks at the joy of the child as it plays with its coloured toys. There is wisdom, there is purpose in life and, we men and women, the everlasting children of creation, playing with nature, derive from it the same happiness, the same thrill, that children get when they play with coloured toys. When you sing and the child begins to dance, the poet discovers another meaning to the mystery of life. Was it not a great English poet who said looking at a sensitive plant that if he could understand it, root and branch, he would know the entire meaning of life? Here is Tagore saying that looking at a child and its play and its joy he too understands the meaning of life.

Then here is a prayer and it is a poet's prayer. This is no swami's prayer or even a saint's. We have the Lord's Prayer and we have the Qayathri of Hindu-

ism. And the great prayer in Buddhism 'Dharmam Qachami, Sangham *Qachami*, *Buddham Qachami!*' Also the great Koranic prayer. But look at the prayer of this poet. I would rather pray with the poet than with any prophet of the world:-

"In one salutation to thee, my God, let all my senses spread out and touch this world at thy feet.

Like a rain-cloud of July hung low with its burden of unshed showers let all my mind bend down at thy door in one salutation to thee.

Let all my songs gather together their diverse strains into a single current and flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to thee.

Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to thee."

Now he does not ask, as the ascetics would ask, that in one salutation to the Lord all his senses should be uprooted or suppressed. On the contrary he prays, let all my senses spread out and reach their fulfilment as dedication at the feet of the Divine; like the rain-cloud of July let all my mind pour down worship at Thy door in one salutation to Thee. "Rain-cloud of July" is a beautiful picture. Heavily laden with rain, since the rain has not poured out, they hang low in the sky with the promise of

rain. So like these rain-clouds coming close to the earth, his mind, laden with all the truth, with all the sense of beauty and goodness, bends down to touch this world at God's feet. Let all my songs, he says, gather together their diverse strains into a single current and flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to God. It is impossible for me to give you the full depth of the meaning of these lines. For a poet, his songs, his poems are the greatest things and as a poet recites his poems, and sings to himself his songs, he finds the greatest ananda of his life. The poet says here that all his songs, all the poetry he has written, may join together into a stream of silence flowing towards the Divine. He is willing to surrender to the Lord even the ananda of his own self-expression when he says that all his songs might flow into a sea of silent worship. You can offer all other kinds of worship flowers, faith, devotion—but when a great poet says that all his songs and poems might become silence at feet of the Lord, then something is said in the world of prayer for which there is no match in the human languages. He is offering the greatest “Like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests, let all my life take its voyage to its eternal home in one salutation to Thee.” You know cranes fly long distances. Hundreds of miles is nothing to a crane when once it starts flying home from one land to another. Therefore, the poet thinks of these birds. They may have come from far away, may be, they came from over the Himalayas

to the banks of the Ganges and the Yamuna and are flying back over the mountains at the call of the changing season. Flying quickly, day and night, back to their nests. In the same manner he says, let the soul take its eternal voyage back to Thee, Oh Lord!

Let us look at the poem on the Taj Mahal in Agra. A great Emperor built the Taj as a monument to the memory of his beloved queen. Rabindranath Tagore called it once a dream in marble. Far away from the Taj is the old palace of Shah Jehan in the Agra Fort. By the time the Taj was completed. Shah Jehan was old and dying. So he wanted his bed to be placed in such a way as to enable him to continually look at the Taj. As his life ebbed away, he wanted to raise his eyes to the Taj which was a monument to his beloved queen. This Taj has defied time and yet has preserved its beauty as completely as when it was built. Here are Tagore's lines on the Taj. "You allowed your great kingly power to vanish. Oh Shah Jehan, but your wish was to make eternal your tear drop of sorrow." The Emperor allowed his kingdom to perish. Even before Shah Jehan breathed his last, the pomp and majesty of the Moghul power was being shaken. He did not care but he took care of his "tear drop of sorrow" at the passing away of his beloved queen and wished that this should become an imperishable symbol of love in the whole world. "Oh! Shah Jehan, you allured time itself with beauty, made time your captive and crowned formless death with fateless form." This is a poor translation

of the original exquisite Bengali lines; we get, nevertheless, something of the meaning of the original lines and their loveliness. Here is another poem : -

“I dreamt that she sat by my head, tenderly ruffling my hair with her fingers, playing the melody of her touch. I looked at her face and struggled with my tears, till the agony of unspoken words burst my sleep like a bubble.

I sat up and saw the glow of the Milky Way above my window, like a world of silence on fire, and I wondered if at this moment she had a dream that rhymed with mine.”

I must not go on with these selections from Tagore any longer. All I have done is to introduce my listeners to the magnificent and exquisite panorama of Tagore's poetry, full of truth and beauty.

Rabindranath Tagore passed away after long illness and much physical pain. He was operated upon, but the operation did not save his life. He knew that death was coming and so he gathered all his powers even while death was pulling him down. He gathered his powers like a yogi, made his mind clear as crystal and the whole fountain of his art came gushing up as he wrote new songs in Bengali. He wanted that one of his songs should be sung as his body would later be reduced to ashes at the funeral pyre. He wanted every particle of his ashes

to listen to this song. Its meaning may be given roughly as follows:-

Till now I was the captain of this little bodily vessel of mine. I held the rudder of this little boat till now, guiding it through my finite life. But now, O Lord, I surrender the rudder into Thine hands. Take the rudder and launch this boat into the radiant ocean of infinity.

He was thus surrendering his spirit into the hands of the Universal Spirit in the supreme faith that death does not end life.

4

TAGORE AND GANDHI

We often indulge in comparisons and find that they obscure even more than reveal the truth. When we compare two great human personalities we are apt to be partial to one or the other and most often comparisons are made to show that one of them is greater than the other. Luckily for me, I cannot make such a mistake because when I look into my mind there is not in it the slightest trace of any such inhibition. I shall not decide till my dying day who is nearer to me in spirit and for whom of these I have deeper love and admiration. That being my attitude, my comparison will not be for the purpose of proving who is the greater, but for drawing out in contrast with each other, the full greatness of each. I have sometimes said that if an Indian student fully learns Tagore and Gandhi that student would have nearly exhausted the study of the whole history of Indian culture. A full study of Tagore and Gandhi qualifies an Indian student as nothing else can for the deepest understanding of Indian culture. Tagore and Gandhi have undoubtedly been the two outstanding and dominating figures of India in the present century. No two persons could be so different from one another in personality and tempera-

ment. Tagore, the aristocratic artist turned democrat with proletarian sympathies, represented essentially one of the deep cultural traditions of India, the tradition of accepting life in its fullness and interpreting it creatively. Gandhi, fundamentally a man of the people, almost the embodiment of the Indian peasant, represented the other ancient tradition of India, that of renunciation and service. Tagore was primarily the man of thought and Gandhi of concentrated and ceaseless action. Both in their different ways had a world outlook and both were at the same time wholly Indian. They represented different but harmonious aspects of India and complemented each other gloriously.

Gandhi and Tagore were as different from each other as two human beings could ever be and yet they represented jointly that supreme synthesis of the spirit of India which has never died down in all the centuries of her history. They represented what was never in conflict but what was always complimentary to each other.

Before I go into the philosophy of that synthesis, I want to speak of the personal affinity between Tagore and Gandhi. They were the best of friends revering and loving each other. I have seen them together. Let me give you the first picture I have of a meeting between Tagore and Gandhi. I was then a student in Santiniketan. We suddenly heard that Mahatma Gandhi was coming to Santiniketan. The year was 1922 or 1923. When the

students heard that Gurudev had invited " the Mahatma" to Santiniketan and that Gandhiji was coming, there was a great nutter among us. The flutter increased when we heard that Jawaharlal Nehru was also coming with him. To get Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru together in one place and to see them together, we at once realised, was going to be a great event. We held ourselves ready to see Gandhi arriving. And he arrived, if I remember right, in the afternoon. Tagore's cottage was astir. Earlier in the afternoon Gurudev had asked his grand-daughter to bring him his Khadi gown. This smart little kid turned to Gurudev and asked, "Why do you want a Khadi gown today ? You don't put on a Khadi gown every day." The grandfather said to the child, "Don't 'you know, Mahatma Gandhi is coming ?" The child persisted, "Why should you put on a Khadi gown because Mahatma Gandhi is coming?" And then Tagore said, "I am the host and he is going to be my guest. If a host should honour the guest, he must do such things as will please the guest most. So I am going to put on Khadi." The child was not convinced, so the story goes. But the Khadi gown came out and Tagore, dressed in it, waited for Gandhi. We too were waiting and watching two long rows of students, of nearly two furlongs stretching towards the hut in which Tagore lived and to which Gandhi was coming. Then we heard the distant horns of the motor cars. There was a flutter again and the cars passed. I managed to be right at the hut where the meeting was to take place. The first

car brought Gandhi and Nehru. As soon as the car stopped, Tagore quickly came down the steps and opened the door of the car and Gandhi jumped out. Tagore opened his arms and the little figure of Gandhi completely disappeared in the embrace of the tall and gracious poet. Gandhi was hidden for a moment in the big robes of Tagore! Then holding each other like lovers they came up the steps. Tagore asked him, "Did you have a comfortable journey?" Gandhi replied, "What does it matter! I was coining to meet you. That was the greatest happiness in my mind." Then there was a beautiful reception. Santiniketan receptions are very beautiful and artistic. Soon after the reception, Gurudev said to Gandhi, "Now I will take you to where you are to stay." He was to stay at the Guest House. And what had happened in the Guest House? The artists of Santiniketan had combined to make a set of rooms upstairs as beautiful as they could make it with simple things arranged in a beautiful way. The bedroom of Gandhi was also most tastefully decorated. They all got into cars and drove away to the Guest House. Somebody took me in a car and I managed to be there again in time. Gurudev took Gandhi from room to room. Gandhi looked at one room, then at another and when he came to the bedroom he turned round to Gurudev and said, "Gurudev, this looks like a bridal chamber!" Gurudev at once replied, "Yes, it is a bridal chamber." Then Gandhi with a burst of laughter asked "But where is the bride?" Gurudev was equal to the occasion.

“The bride we are offering you today is the ever young bride of Santiniketan!” Gandhi joined in the joke at once, “So even a toothless old man like me can still get a bride!” And laughter echoed and re-echoed in the room. Having seen that Gandhi was properly settled and everything was arranged nicely, Gurudev went back to his cottage.

But there is a most amusing sequel to this story. In the night Gandhi wanted to have his cot taken on to the terrace, because he always slept in the open. So the decorated cot met a sorry fate. All the decorations had to be taken away and the cot was dragged out on to the terrace. Everything was upset. Art ran away that night and charkhas and a carding bow took its place for Gandhi's programme of spinning. Next morning Gurudev came to see Gandhi and talk to him. He came up and looked this way and that. All that his art students had done had gone to pieces. Everything had been upset. He came to Gandhi's room. Gandhi was sitting on a mat on the floor with a little desk in front of him and he at once stood up to receive his host, Gurudev asked Gandhi, “Now Mahatmaji! What has happened ? What have you done with the bridal chamber ? Where is the bride ?” Gandhi burst into laughter again and said, “I told you I am a toothless old man, so the bride ran away. I have searched for her. She has gone and hid herself.”

Now this was their first meeting during my days in Visva-bharati. I have written the full story of this in

my book called "A Sheaf of Gandhi Anecdotes". I shall refer to another characteristic meeting between Gurudev and Gandhi. This was in Delhi. You know Santiniketan and Visva-bharati are very big institutions, but they were not Government institutions. They were non- governmental Foundations, like Gandhigram, taking grants from Government, but finding their own resources and functioning autonomously. Every year Tagore had to collect funds to keep Santiniketan and Visva-bharati going, over and above whatever grant came from Government. How did he manage to do that ? There were, of course, some people who gave donations. But every year Tagore would take a group of trained students with him and go to Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay, or Madras and stage one of his own great dramas. He would personally guide the performances and occasionally himself participate in one. He would thus collect a good amount of money which would go into the Santiniketan treasury. Tagore once came to Delhi with his students' troupe, though he was in very indifferent health.

Gandhi was also in Delhi and he felt deeply concerned. When Tagore's Secretary had earlier come to Gandhi, he had asked, " Why is Gurudev in Delhi now?" The Secretary replied, "He has come to collect money for Santiniketan." Gandhi looked thoughtful for a while and said, "But I read in the papers that Gurudev is not keeping good health. Why did you then allow him to

come to Delhi?" The Secretary said, "What else can we do? Santiniketan is dearest and nearest to his heart. He wants the institution to go on." Gandhi's mind must have done a little quick thinking. He told the Secretary, "Now I am going to see Gurudev. Before I do that I want you to tell me how much money Gurudev needs this year to keep Santiniketan and Visva-bharati going. If I can find that money he should go back to Santiniketan and rest." This news was taken to Gurudev who was deeply moved and he said, "No, let us not trouble Mahatmaji. There are so many calls upon his time. We should not add to them." But the Secretary was shrewder than the Master! He got all the figures ready before Gandhi arrived to see Tagore. If I remember right, the amount needed was about eighty thousand rupees. So Gandhi went and saw Tagore. They embraced each other and sat down to talk. After a few minutes, Gandhi said, "Gurudev, this is very wrong. I know your health is not good. Why then do you travel so much and take this strain of the collection of funds upon yourself?" Gurudev gave the reply "I do this often from year to year; otherwise my institutions cannot continue." Gandhi at once rejoined, "I have had a talk with your Secretary and I understand what your need this year is. I am going to make a request to you. Please go back to Santiniketan at once and take rest. In the meantime I am finding all the needed funds for this year for you. "Gurudev was deeply moved but he accepted the plea of

the Mahatma and went back to Santiniketan. Gandhi called on a few rich men to help and obtained the amount he wanted and sent it at once to Santiniketan. This brought Gurudev and Gandhi closer to each other. Gurudev realised that in Gandhi he had a friend on whom he could count in spite of differences of ideas and programmes of work.

Much earlier than all this Mahatma Gandhi was fighting the battle for Indians in South Africa. Gurudev Tagore then gave him great moral support. Tagore made up his mind that he must send somebody from India to help Mahatma Gandhi. He asked C. F. Andrews and Pearson, both of them then professors at Santiniketan, to go out to South Africa. Andrews thus became a constant link between Gandhi and Tagore. There is a beautiful painting by Abanindranath Tagore, the great Bengali painter, showing Gurudev Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi sitting and facing each other with Andrews behind Gandhi. It is a symbolical painting. Gurudev is shown sitting calmly and majestically facing wiry, little, firm Gandhi. They appear to be in dialogue with each other. Andrews behind Gandhi is the picture of a divided mind. He loved both Tagore and Gandhi and sometimes agreed with one and sometimes with the other. The whole picture is a superb study in character.

When Mahatma Gandhi first returned from South Africa with his family and friends he wondered

where in India they could all settle down. Tagore sent them an affectionate invitation to come straight to Santiniketan. So Mahatma Gandhi and his group went to Santiniketan. Santiniketan thus became Gandhi's first home after South Africa. But pretty soon it became clear that Santiniketan could not hold Gandhi. Tagore, of course, gave Gandhi full freedom to function and even to change Santiniketan. Gandhi introduced several reforms. He sent away all the servants giving them other work. Teachers and students were to do all the sanitation work, sweeping, cleaning, scavenging etc., and also to cook and serve food in batches in turn. The whole life of Santiniketan was upset. Tagore never said a word. But the teachers began to complain and then the students. Gandhi saw what was happening. He did not want to force himself and his ideas on Santiniketan. So he decided to quit and he did so very gracefully and with no irritation in his mind or in the minds of those left behind. Both sides realised the incompatibility of the new ideas and methods with the traditions in Santiniketan. But even today there is a Gandhi Day in Santiniketan when all the servants get a day off and the teachers and students do all the community work themselves.

Another historic meeting between Gandhi and Tagore took place in the midst of throbbing historic events in the Yerawada prison where Gandhi was a prisoner. Gandhi had come back from the Round Table Conference in London. From inside the prison Gandhi had started

a fast unto death on behalf of the 'untouchables' of India. It was the great Harijan fast. Tagore kept in close touch with Gandhi while the fast was going on. Even as Gandhi was beginning his fast, came a letter of benediction from Rabindranath Tagore. The fast dragged on and India was shaken with emotion and sorrow. Gandhi was old and feeble and his strength began to ebb away. Then the news began to spread all over India that Gandhi was sinking. The whisper went round that Mahatma Gandhi would not survive the fast. Gurudev Tagore heard the whisper and immediately started on his journey to the Yerawada prison. He himself was old and ill at the time. As Gurudev was entering the Yerawada prison came the news that the British Cabinet had yielded to Gandhi and Indian public opinion and that they had reversed their decision in regard to the untouchables in the "Communal Award", enabling Gandhi to break his fast. Gurudev Tagore walked in saying that he had arrived rejoicing on the wings of glad tidings. That was their great friendship.

Later came the final meeting. Gurudev Tagore was very unwell and doctors had given up hope. Mahatma Gandhi journeyed from Sevagram to sit at the bedside of the dying poet. They held their hands together and looked into each other's eyes, no one could say which pair of eyes held greater reverence and love for the other. Then Gurudev Tagore said something very moving to Gandhi. He said, "Gandhiji, I am going. My

anxiety is about Santiniketan and Visva-bharati. I am leaving these in your care and when I am gone you must look upon them as your own." Gandhi promised at once to do so. After Gurdev Tagore had passed away, Gandhi looked into the affairs of Santiniketan and Visva-bharati and gave full support to them. Luckily India became free and then Visva bharati became a 'Chartered University' of the Government of India.

Their two great lives met again and again at the highest' level. They were different from each other in many ways. And yet like two very high-souled prophets they remained close in the highest friendship, and mutual reverence. Tagore and Gandhi demonstrated that two people could be the greatest of friends with many vital differences between them. I have already referred to the controversy that once took place between Gandhi and Tagore. You will remember I told you that Gurudev Tagore once challenged Gandhi, saying that Gandhi was establishing a kind of moral dictatorship in India and a moral dictatorship sometimes was even worse than political dictatorship. I also recalled how Gandhi answered back at the same high level. Long, long after that controversy was over, the great French thinker. Remain Rolland read about it. In his book on Mahatma Gandhi, Remain Rolland wrote that he had never known a controversy conducted at such a high level, neither party yielding to the other and still revering and understanding each other fully and unreservedly. Some of Rolland's words on the

subject will remain classic for ever: - "Oh, Tagore, Oh, Gandhi! Rivers of India like the Indus and the Ganges; clasp within your double embrace the Orient and the Occident, the one, a great radiance of light streaming from the Divine fountain and the other, a matchless saga of the noblest and most heroic action. May you both mingle your waters again and again to fertilize the soul of India and of mankind".

Now what did Gandhi represent and what did Tagore represent ultimately? In answering this question, I want to refer to what we called the three great yogas in the philosophy of India. One is Gnana Yoga, the yoga of the highest intellectual understanding; another is Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of utter devotion, and self-surrender to God and the third. Karma Yoga, the yoga of ceaseless action. Yoga means as many of you may know, 'Union'. It is the process under which the soul of man comes into union with the Universal Soul. So union with God through Gnana is one of the great yogas of India. Union with the Divine through Bhakti is another great yoga. Union with the Divine through Karma is the third and, we might say, the most challenging of all. A man like Aurobindo Ghosh was a Gnana yogi. He was perhaps the supreme Gnana yogi of the century in India. If you look at Ramakrishna Paramahansa, he was the supreme Bhakti yogi, representing utter self-surrender to God. I think Jesus Christ also was a supreme Bhakti yogi. The

whole of the teachings of Jesus was utter surrender of the individual will to the Divine Will. Gandhi was the greatest of our Karma yogis in this age.

We all know something of these yogas. But I think that this does not complete the circle of yogas. There is still another yoga of which we have not thought nor written much. And that is, if I may coin a new word, 'Kala Yoga', the yoga of realisation in and through Beauty. In my opinion, this Kala Yoga comprehends the other three yogas. Inside Kala Yoga, there is Gnana, there is Bhakti, and there is Karma. Poets and singers have often sparked off revolutions. We have the song "Bande Mataram" in that category and also "La Marseillaise". You all know the part these songs played in the history of India and France. Some of the bravest revolutionaries of India went to the gallows or were shot, with the "Bande Mataram" song on their lips.

We must add to Gnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga, the Yoga of Kala in its widest and deepest sense. If we do that and if our understanding of Kala Yoga is complete, then Tagore would be the great master of this yoga in India. He was a great intellect, he was filled with Bhakti; he was steeped in Karma. He built up the complex of some of the greatest institutions of India. There are many other things about Tagore to which I have not referred at all. For instance, side by side with Santiniketan, he built another institution called Sriniketan,

something similar to Sevagram for rural reconstruction. The first leader in India who gave the greatest value to village reconstruction, was Tagore and that, long before Gandhi had returned to India from South Africa. The ideals left to us in this regard in the words of Gurudev Tagore himself will read today like the latest documents of Community Development. What should be done in the villages ? That through self-help the villages must rebuild themselves from within, that others can only help and guide, that the destiny of the villages is in the hands of the villagers them selves, these and many other things Tagore made crystal clear even before Gandhi arrived on the scene. He realised that the whole of rural reconstruction is largely a programme of self-sufficiency. Agriculture was the most important item; next to agriculture were cottage and village industries. In Sriniketan you will see many village industries taught and organised. Tagore was, therefore, also a Karma yogi. Comprehending all these and adding to all these the great gift of his poetry, of his imagination, of his kola, he becomes the supreme symbol and fulfilment of the cultural renaissance of India.

The Indian renaissance is still working itself out. I do not think that the forces of the Indian renaissance have ceased. What is now necessary is greater contact between the great cultural cycles within India itself. We have the Sanskrit cycle of culture. Pandit Nehru was

asked once, "What do you think is the greatest gift of the past to India?" Without hesitation he said, "The greatest gift of the past to modern India is the cycle of Sanskrit culture". This does not mean that the Tamil cycle of culture is one bit less important than the Sanskrit cycle. I think that the two greatest cycles of the culture of India are the Sanskrit cycle and the Tamil cycle. Tamil is the 'Hindi' of South India. Anywhere in South India, one can manage with Tamil. In Mysore, in Kerala, in Andhra, Tamil will pass. There is no question that our Tamil culture is a great cycle in itself. Only a dead culture will take nothing from another. Let us not make carcasses of our cultures, taking nothing and giving nothing. Not all the petty-minded people of the world working together can suppress the intercourse of different cultures within India. India is indivisible. It shall remain one. I want every young man and woman living in Gandhigram to say to himself or herself, "This indissoluble unity of India, this integrated culture of India is the greatest of our possessions." Tagore represented that unity and that integration. To him, India was one and indivisible. His poems represented that unity and his philosophy and life strengthened the fibre of that unity linking it with world unity.

As I close this talk, I would ask you to study Tagore and Gandhi afresh, understand them more fully and make their vision of the unity of India and the unity of mankind sink deeper into your minds.

5

TAGORE AND GANDHI: AS EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTIONARIES

Tagore was not just a poet, nor Gandhi a mere saint. The Poet was a philosopher, a story writer and novelist of almost unrivalled distinction. He was a dramatist and a literary critic. With great zeal for social reform he attacked many evils. He was a patriot who understood and loved his country. He was at the same time one of the foremost internationalists of his day. Alongside he was dedicated to rural reconstruction. As an artist he created in colours and forms something of what he had expressed earlier in spoken and written words. Above all, he was a complete human person who had grown fully as a man and looked at life as a whole. Gandhi the Saint was a thinker. His analysis of the problems that surrounded him was crystal clear. He revolutionised the society of his time with far-reaching consequences. He was also a master of the spoken and written word and many passages from his writings will remain classics as long as human memory survives. He was a matchless political leader. As an economist he faced realities and suggested and carried out practical solutions. A great patriot and freedom fighter,

he was above all a humanist and peace maker. A complete study of these two personalities, very different from each other and at the same time very similar to each other, is one of the most fascinating adventures for any student concerned with the renaissance in India.

This brief thesis is no attempt to list or explain the many fundamental similarities and affinities between Tagore and Gandhi. It will, however, seek to discover what is perhaps the closest affinity between the two. i.e., their role as educational revolutionaries. As the years pass their revolutionary contributions to educational reconstruction in India will be seen in their fuller perspective.

Rabindranath Tagore was the first educationist in India to fearlessly reject a book-centred system of education for boys and girls. During the years I was a student in the Visva-bharati at Santiniketan this protest against textbooks and the book-centred system of education came from Gurudev again and again. Those were days, the earliest after the creation of Visvabharati, when Gurudev himself taught students, young and old. The first thing he would do as boys and girls came to sit round him was to ask them to put away their textbooks and note books. He would say, 'listen to me, ask me questions, let us talk to each other, let us argue and let us understand'. He would add, 'we can understand very little sitting here, let us enter into the hearts of Nature, let us walk into the villages-and meet people face to face and thus let us learn.' There is plenty one can quote

from Gurudev's writings. Let that be done by others who want to. But I would like to fall back entirely on my own experience as a student, forty years ago in Santiniketan. Gurudev loved books and wanted us all to read books and love them as he did. But he was convinced, to pin the minds of boys and girls to a prescribed textbook would simply encourage memorising instead of learning. A textbook limited the growing mind and the expanding sense of enquiry.

Gurudev was again the first among our educationists to insist that the hands should keep pace with the mind. He wanted creative work through which the hands would produce beautiful and useful articles. The importance of handicrafts like pottery, carpentry, handloom-weaving and leather work in the general programme of education of boys and girls was underlined. His allegiance to these crafts was not simply an expression of the 'Swadeshi' movement of his time. As the hands developed marvellous skills in the crafts, the intellect also became enriched and the personality of the student became fuller. He certainly did not attempt to work out the scientific and systematic correlation between the development of the skills of the hands and those of the intellect and personality of the students. He was a poet and an artist and he wanted that this inter-relation should develop spontaneously and under conditions of freedom and elasticity.

Gurudev never accepted that the object of education was simply the accumulation of knowledge. He

unhesitatingly proclaimed that education should give all round development of the human personality in which the physical, the intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual growth would be harmonised into one integrated process. He therefore emphasised freedom and joy as of basic importance in the education of boys and girls. This meant the elimination of physical punishment, examinations and therefore of fear and every humiliating restriction from the Santiniketan system of education. Gurudev was the most uncompromising prophet of the freedom of the human mind in modern India and he stood sentinel over this freedom with a tenacity and courage unparalleled in our history. He wanted boys and girls to be fearless, free and open minded, self-reliant, full of the spirit of enquiry and self-criticism with their roots deep in the soil of India but reaching out to the whole world in understanding, neighbourliness, cooperation and material and spiritual progress. What could be a greater objective in any education and what could be a nobler method of achieving this objective than the one indicated by Gurudev?

Gurudev experimented with new methods in rural reconstruction and built up Sriniketan. At the heart of Sriniketan was Gurudev's firm conviction that villages cannot be rebuilt merely with strength borrowed from outside but only through that rediscovered within the village itself and harnessed to clear new creative purposes. Every village development activity must aim at the growth of the initiative and self-reliance of village people themselves. Village reconstruction must be an integrated

programme in which the physical, material, mental and spiritual elements should be fully balanced with one another. Gurudev was perhaps the first thinker and leader in modern India who gave us the vision of Samagra-Qrama' Seva. Sriniketan was not separate and cut away from Santiniketan and Visva-bharati. It was an integral part of Visva-bharati so that intellectual, academic and aesthetic growth could be extended to identification with the life of village people and to the service of the villages without conceit or patronage or any imposition from above.

We thus see that Gurudev's concept and programme of education were comprehensive. When Gurudev gave new shape and impetus to education in India he stood out as the first great educational revolutionary of our time. To the extent the Visva-bharati remains true to this radiant and full-blooded concept and programme of education, it will reflect the life, thought and genius of Gurudev. Otherwise, this great institution will simply become a caricature of what Gurudev stood for.

There is a halo of history surrounding Gandhi's revolutionary contribution to educational reconstruction. The aim of Satyagraha is freedom and justice. Suffering without surrender and retaliation becomes the instrument of the satyagrahis and his battle. Now this requires training and education. Inevitably, such education has to be through life, for life and throughout life. Unless generations of men and women grow up holding fast to certain

ideals and disciplines touching life on all sides, they cannot become satyagrahis, i.e. human instruments of love in action, without fear and without hate. It also becomes essential for a satyagrahi to function effectively that suitable social conditions should be created. Educational revolution under Gandhi thus sought to fit the individual for a new society and to create a new society in which the individual could function effectively.

Nai Talim was the name Gandhi gave to education as he conceived it. Leaving aside all the trappings and details, necessary and relevant as they are, only the core of Nai Talim may be briefly described here.

Education must set before itself not only the creation of a totally just, democratic and peaceful social order based on non-violent sanctions but also indicate clearly and precisely the methods of achieving such an objective. Such education must begin with the earliest years of childhood and continue throughout life.

The school should help in developing the full personality of the student, drawing out all his talents and bringing them into harmony with one another.

This means education of the mind and the intellect should be combined with that of every physical and bodily skill. This leads to the rejection of any book-centered system of education and the acceptance of a creative and life-centred system. Life and work are coeval. Life ends where work ends. In a country like India a creative and life-centered system of education must keep productive work at the centre and such

productive work must be carefully regulated from year to year in consonance with the aptitude and capacity, of the growing child. But the aim of Nai Talim is not simply the production of articles however useful or beautiful. Productive work is only the means to the end which is the complete education of the child and the full development of its personality.

Education is drawn from three main sources constituting the catchment area of learning, i.e., the natural environment, the social environment and processes of productive work, each one of these three sources being of equal importance. The child thus grows in harmony with nature, properly integrated with society and taking delight and pride in productive work because all such work is transmuted into the substance of learning. The child puts his roots into his own soil and then reaches out to an expanding vision of life, its purposes and duties.

The development of the sense of freedom, initiative and responsibility should be achieved through the self-government and self-help of children inside the school community. Therefore, every school has its parliament and its chosen cabinet of ministers in charge of sanitation, punctuality, and internal disciplines.

Examinations should be replaced by the continuous assessment of the achievements of children throughout the year including a measure of self-assessment.

The school must be closely linked with the community and vice versa. This means extension in the best sense of the word.

Children growing up in the love and pride of productive work, learning through kinship with Nature and the social environment, getting trained in self-help and self-government and even self-assessment, progressively become the free and cooperative citizens of a democratic society in which there is no high and low, no distinctions of caste and class, everybody standing for justice and peace. The schools thus become the starting point of a non-violent revolution for a new social order.

A careful comparison of the concepts and practices of education which came from Tagore and Gandhi will show how, starting from different points, they almost converge in the end. The approaches appear different but both faced common problems and challenges and offered solutions in regard to which there is a broad area of agreement. Like Gurudev Tagore who kept Sriniketan and Santiniketan close together within the frame work of a broad-based educational programme, Gandhi wanted the school to be the starting point of a creative revolution inside the village.

There are educationists in India who sometimes challenge the claims of Tagore and Gandhi to be educationists at all. We must not quarrel with them. We must not at the same time hesitate to proclaim that Tagore and Gandhi were the most outstanding educational revolutionaries of our time in India and both have left imperishable marks on the whole process of educational reconstruction in the country, though we have not properly assessed the startling contribution of both to national reconstruction.



G Ramachandran provided an inspiring example of single-hearted dedication during an adult lifetime to a great, universal but sharply delineated spiritual ideal.

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(Peace activist, USA)

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