

CHAPTER SECOND :

INDIA , THE EAST AND THE WEST .

C H A P T E R - II

INDIA, THE EAST AND THE WEST

Rabindra Nath Tagore was not completely influenced by the western political philosophy and he was also not carried away by the cultural nationalism expounded by Tilak and Aurobindo because he was of the view that both the traditions follow the idea of nationalism. Before launching attack on the concept of nationalism, Tagore carefully studied the interpretation of Indian history by the British historians and he analysed through comparative perspective merits and demerits of Eastern and Western civilizations because he was not a blind supporter of the past as well as a blind opponent of westernization.¹

In the present chapter, we shall first deal with Tagore's ideas on Indian history as in this section he attempted criticism of British historiography and sought to find out the basic characteristics of Indian history. Then we shall discuss Tagore's evaluation of the significant features of both Eastern and Western civilization and his advocacy of the synthesis of the good qualities of two civilizations.



A) Tagore's ideas on Indian History :

Tagore's critique of British historiography :

According to Tagore, the history of India written by the foreign historians did not represent the real history of the country. It merely put forward a record of information of foreign invasions and conquests, rise and fall of different dynasties, struggle and conspiracy among the ruling community to capture the throne or the march of pathans, Moghuls, the Portuguese, the French and the English over the Indian soil.² The Muslim history of medieval India seemed like a tale of Arabian Nights. The fantastic stories of the luxury and comfort of the Muslim emperors obscured the sacred scriptures of ancient India, the real source of information of the cultural heritage of Indian people.

Tagore argued that the British Indian history provided the information of the advent of the British rule in India. He pointed out the far reaching consequences of the British rule in the following manner, " we in exchange of food, bought everything - good government, good thinking and good education from the white waylaidlaw. All our shops engaged in petty trade were now all closed. Whatever produced in the western factories - be it ideas or marcantile goods were

Whitneys and laidlaw

considered as superior and in this world of clerks our India occupied an inferior position "⁴. He criticised the British historiography on the ground that the British historians failed to catch the essence of Indian history, because the real of life of Indian people was non-existent in their historical analysis. Tagore felt the need of such historians who would make a correct evaluation of Indian historical tradition. He wrote, " I called upon the historians to open the doors of our ancient and hoary store-houses and show us the valuable treasures collected over the centuries which we could freely offer to others."⁵

He held that the greatness of Indian history could only be realised not in going through the writings of foreign historians but by understanding the forces and factors contributed for the development of Indian culture and tradition. But at present, people had been influenced by the western political ideas. Hence, it was quite natural that Indian history might be inter-preted on western lines. He was of the opinion that, it would be difficult to understand the movements and tendencies of Pre-British Indian history judging them merely from political view points. ^{the} History of such a country was to be collected from the time honoured precepts and culture of the people spread through the ages.⁶

Main characteristic of Indian History :

Indian History showed the development of

Indian Spiritualism :

According to Tagore, the real history of India showed the development of Indian spiritual ideas. A number of great spiritual teachers like Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya and Tukaram were born in the country, whose one object had been to set at naught all differences of man by the overflow of our consciousness of God. He said, " In fact, our history had not been of the rise and fall of Kingdoms, of fight for political supremacy (. . . .) our history was that of our social life and attainment of spiritual ideals ".⁷ He further argued that ancient India attained the highest phase of spiritual development in spite of it was inhabited by the barbarians and hunters.⁸

History of Indian Social Development

(Social Interpretation of History)

Tagore wanted to interpret Indian history through social perspective. He argued that Indian society could be revitalized not on the basis of political action, but by activating the latent social forces.⁹ Hence, the essence of Indian history could be realised when it was interpreted in

social dimensions, because Indian society like western societies had no political precedence.

Taking into consideration, the short comings of the Prevalent Indian history, Tagore had recorded the history of Indian social development, right since the coming of Aryans, the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, the advent of Muslim rule and finally the British conquest of India.

Due to lack of sufficient historical evidences Tagore took the help of ancient Indian religious scriptures like the vedas, the upanisads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Buddhist and Jain literatures in his interpretation of Indian history. Here, the poet had blended his philosophical outlook with historical events in his analysis.

Indian history was the history of racial
struggle and reconciliation :

While analysing the essence of Indian history, Tagore made it clear that the chief characteristic of Indian history was racial struggle and the consequent reconciliation among the different races.

The initial phase of development of ancient Indian society was explained in his book entitled ' The Religion of Man ', where Tagore wrote, " In vedic verses, we found constant mention of conflicts between the original inhabitants

of ancient India and the colonialists."¹⁰ He was of the opinion that the most crucial problem of Indian society was the race problem. Foreigners came and settled down in India. But all the foreign races were accommodated in Indian social system. The inevitable result of foreign emigration was the emergence of racial conflict in Indian society.

After racial struggle, there occurred racial synthesis of divergent races of Indian society. Racial synthesis occurred "not by extermination of all inherent differences but by toleration of these distinctive differences within the bonds of adjustments. He who strove to bring about the racial reconciliation between the Aryans and the non-Aryans was worshipped to this day as an avatar or incarnation of God"¹¹ In this view, Ramachandra of the Ramayana and Lord Krishna of the Mahabharata should be regarded as the avatars in the history of India because they were the pioneers of this social unity.¹²

Aryan society was divided into four clans - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. Among them the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas held the dominant position in the society. The Brahmins were engaged in Priestcraft because they had the specialized knowledge in theology. Defence and administrative functions of the country were

assigned to the kshatriyas. In the course of time, there occurred a bitter conflict between the Brahmins and the kshatriyas over the supremacy in the society. The Brahmins obstructed the spontaneous development of the entire society by raising the immovable walls of caste-barriers. On the other hand, the kshatriyas upheld a bond of unity among all the people in the society. The rigidity of Brahminism was against unity of the society.¹³

The emergence of the Buddhism and the Jainism, according to Tagore, was the result of prolonged conflict between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. These two religious sects expounded the supremacy of the Kshatriyas over the Brahmins and as a result, strong protective walls of Brahminism were destroyed. There occurred a tremendous change in the religious life of Indian people due to the impact of these two religious ideas. Unlike the clergies of medieval Europe, the Brahmins in India were not interested in controlling the state power. They only established supremacy over the society. As a result of the dominance of the Brahmins over the Hindu society, the Sudras were deprived of their social rights and were placed into the lowest stratum of the society. Tagore commented, " In spite of this social classification where the Sudras were despised the message of the spiritual freedom and unity of man mainly sprang from the community ostracised

by the Brahmins. Most of the great saints of the contemporary, India who took up the mission to voice the cry of unity came from the despised class."¹⁴ He pointed out that even during the Muslim period the rigid social principles were maintained by the Hindu society. In the opinion of Tagore, " India came under foreign domination due to the lack of proper leadership in thought and action."¹⁵ Due to her inherent social weakness, India could not stop the British conquest in India. Despite this social weakness, India developed unique system of accomodation and conciliation and followed the principle of unity in diversity.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY :

The mission of ' Bharatvarsha ' according to the Tagore, was to establish ' unity in diversity'.¹⁶ From the distant past, a number of foreign races came and merged with Indian social system without losing their cultural affinities. She did not discriminate the outsiders on the ground that they were not Aryans and all of them were accomodated to Indian society . An unique civilization was built up whose founding principle was of unity in diversity. The same idea of Tagore was also expressed in his famous poem ' Bharat Tirtha ' (Indian Pilgrimage) where the poet wrote, " No one knows whence and at whose call came pouring endless waves of men rushing wilding alone -
to lose themselves in its sea,

Aryans and non-Aryans, Dravidians and Chinese, Seythians, Huns, Pathans and Moghuls all had merged and lost themselves in one body." 17

Following the same Principle Tagore held that
Social Unity was maintained inspite of Political
Upheavals :

India was the country of divergent castes, races and religions. She solved her social problems through peaceful means. No social revolution occurred in this country in spite of the change in political regimes,. Each member of the society was tied to it with some social bonds. He had to perform particular social duty according to his status in the society. He held that the social unity of India was maintained in a peculiar way. She kept the divisive force of society within their limits and entirely separate. She did not allow opposition and disorder to raise their heads by limiting each within its bonds. Not allowing the social forces to be continuously on a war path where one worked against the other it made for dharma, duty and family to be kept away from agitation, guilt and wrong ways. Thus the main objective of Indian society was to provide opportunities for ripe maturity and personal salvation through united decision, harmony, peace and stability.¹⁸

Society was more important than the State:

Indian people put more emphasis upon the maintenance of social order, compared with the maintenance of the State-system. Tagore argued that, "in our country if the society paralysed the country would fall in a real crisis. For this reason we did not fight for political independence vigorously but fought for safeguarding our social independence. But in Europe, if the royal authority was routed, the whole country was put at the brink of destruction. Therefore, politics was taken so serious an affair in Europe."¹⁹ He held that Indian social development was less influenced by the rise and fall of the state authority because Indian society was organised as well as administered by the precepts of dharma.

The role of Dharma for the maintenance of Social Order :

Tagore maintained that the soul of India could be discovered by the precepts of dharma or right conduct, for it was regarded as the highest ideal of human civilization. The goal of ancient Indian social life was the right observance of the principles of dharma.

Our religious literature like the Bhagavad Gita made a happy synthesis of knowledge, love and the performance of one's own duties.²⁰ He wrote "India resisted all mental

divisions in the pursuit of dharma. Our reason, our faith, customs, our present and future life all together constitute dharma."²¹ In brief, dharma in ancient India was nothing but the society as a whole, sprouting from the innermost earth and the head of this gigantic tree reached the very skies.²²

According to Hindu philosophy dharma was part of four principles or the four ends of life (purushartha) dharma, artha, kama and Moksha. The perfection of human life was only possible with the right observance of these four principles. Tagore put forward the basic tenets of Indian philosophy when he wrote, " the enjoyment of political freedom in Europe was equivalent to the salvation of human soul in our country. We did not recognise the importance of any other freedom other than the freedom of soul. The bonds of six senses were the only bonds that fetter and by breaking down these bonds, one could acquire the most exalted position like that of an emperor. Our household duties incorporated all the duties towards the entire world. We had installed in the midst of our houses the creator and his creation of entire universe."²³ This argument showed the deep influence of monistic philosophy over Tagore's philosophy and he sought to understand Indian history through that principle.

Tagore's Outlook On Indian History :

According Dr. K. N. Mukherjee, Tagore classified history into history of facts and history of ideas and to him the latter was more important than the former.²⁴ Therefore while analysing the inner self of Indian history, Tagore remarked " The history of India had been the history of the struggle between the constructive spirit of the machine which seek the cadence of order and conformity in social organisation , and the creative spirit of man, which seek freedom and love for its self- expression." ²⁵ Thus, in his interpretation of Indian history, Tagore assimilated his philosophical consciousness with the historical consciousness.²⁶

B) TAGORE ON EASTERN AND WESTERN CIVILISATIONS :

Tagore made it clear that in India, society was more important than state and the key to understand Indian history was its unique social mechanism of integration through the principle of unity in diversity. He argued that Indians were more interested in metaphysical liberation than in political liberation as the principle of dharma enjoined them to seek liberation from the fetters of six senses of pleasure.

Tagore continued his discussion of Eastern civilization and India in the light of his criticism of western civilization because Tagore held a view that everything was not good and palatable in Western civilization. Hence he began his arguments on the Eastern and Western civilization in the light of opinions of famous french intellectual Guizot, who criticised Eastern civilization for its lack of mobility.

Tagore on Guizot's critique of East :

Tagore summarized the mainpoints of Guizot's analysis in the following manner.

According to Guizot, the ideas that held the Eastern societies together were the basic religious beliefs and the ways of life. Thus, theocracy prevailed in Egypt and the Brahminical authority in India. The predominance of a basic idea²⁷ thwarted the spontaneous development of these societies and they remained stagnant and monotonous. He held that the western civilization attained rapid development because it was not dominated by one idea. The existence of divergent socio-economic forces made the western civilization more complicated and dynamic. These social forces were always in a state of conflict with one another. Dissension was allowed and no single idea could dominate the other. As a result liberty, Prosperity and affluence were the main qualities

of this e civilization. The natural corollary of these social forces, was the emergence of political democracy in Europe. European societies were more liberal and free from religious fanaticism, Guizot was of the opinion that freedom had taken birth in Europe because all the contending social forces were kept alive and they confined within their own limit. All the social forces had come into a mutual understanding about their special position and rights. They did not try to destroy the opponents and hence, the opposing parties could maintain seperate identity and freedom.

Guizot concluded with the argument that there existed a struggle of the opposites in the universe. No single idea or social force had the capacity to rule the universe by abolishing the influence of others. All the ideas and systems fought with each other and mutually influenced one another. None of them rully got destroyed in this struggle and everybody maintained its seperate identity. Moreover, these differences in forms, essence and ideas, their battles, their momentum, were all directed fowards a single unity and towards a special ideal.²⁸ Therefore, he maintained that the European civilization was the reflection of universal phenomenon. It was neither parochial nor static. The development of European civilization was multi-dimensional, wide and working in different directions.²⁹

Tagore on Western Civilization :

While commenting on Guizot's arguments, Tagore wrote that the three great continents of America, Australia and Europe bore the traditions of western civilization. Thus western civilization had overcome the narrow barriers of a particular nation. Westernization was major trend that swept all over the world.

Tagore put forward the argument that the western civilization was also dominated by a basic idea, it was to him ' protection of national interest ' ³⁰ There may be differences of opinion among the European peoples, but they were in accord for the protection of national interest. They united like an unitary whole to defend national interest when it was threatened.

He argued that protection of self-interest created conflict and it was reflected in all spheres of European civilization. He held that this idea might lead the European civilization to the verge of destruction. He wrote, " Due to bitter conflict among the European nations cracks will appear in its edifice, through these openings, śani the god of destruction will enter into the very centre of the civilization." ³¹ According to the Hindu scriptures god śani was the sign of danger.

Hence, the appearance of *Sani* was nothing but Tagore's prophecy about the out break of first world war. How international morality was crushed down by the European nations was best explained by Tagore in the following manner. " We observed ominous signs of scramble and rush for conquering the world. No-body felt ashamed to pursue the policy of might was right in Europe. " 32

Hence he argued that the ultimate goal of European civilization was to acquire more wealth and power. The competition for acquiring more wealth and power created bitter conflict among the European people. The out break of war in Europe, was the main consequence of this power struggle. Tagore depicted a soul deadening horrible picture of war after visiting some war devastated areas of France. He wrote " The awful calm of desolation which still bore wrinkless of pain-death-struggle stiffened into ugly ridges -brought before my mind the vision of a huge demon, which had no shape, no meaning yet had two arms that could strike and break and tear, a gaping mouth that could devour; and bulging brains that could conspire and plan."³³ This type of destructive wars were the result of European pursuit of power and wealth.

Tagore pointed out that the political aim of western civilization was to establish nation-states in Europe. Being guided by the ideology of nationalism, she was " raising the

thorny hedges of exclusion and offering human sacrifices to national self-seeking. It had intensified the mutual feeling of envy among western races themselves, as they fought over their spoils and displayed a carnivorous pride in their snarling row of teeth (. . . .). The collective power which was guiding the helm of western civilization, was a passion, not an ideal." 34

He was of the opinion that trade and politics were the basic ingredients of western civilization, as western people dominated the whole world by pursuing the policy of commercial and political cannibalism.³⁵ But ultimately it would bring negative result to western civilization. He held that the goal of human civilization was the full-fledged development of human personality. But western civilization had created such a man that wanted to make only profit and thus it had broken the backbone of human civilization by its financial leap-frog.³⁶

Therefore, it was the firm opinion of Tagore that the European civilization stood on the foundation of brute force and deceit. It wanted to dominate the whole world with the might of arms. He said " In European politics, no-body felt ashamed to use false-hood, violation of promises, resort to deceit^e and cheating. Those who pursued truth and morality in

personal behaviour, in matters of politics their sense of morality became insensitive." ³⁷

According to Tagore, European civilization was based on politics and it wanted to bring about political unity in the society. Moreover, it wanted to establish uniform pattern of society by creating one religion, one language and identical dress, thereby it sought to extinguish the diversity of social elements. Tagore held that, ' although political unity was maintained in European societies, it could not resolve the social conflicts, because the key to political success itself was rooted in opposition and conflict. He was of the opinion that, the problem of social integration could be solved in two ways- such as ' by the extermination of outsiders for the maintenance of the purity of the society or the accommodation of outsiders into the social system, by giving them a proper place in the society." ³⁸ He held a view that the European society followed the first path and it created a world of opposition against itself. Indian society followed the second path and it tried to absorb foreigners within her own fold.

In spite of a few demerits of the western civilization Tagore praised the achievements of the west in the spheres of science and technology. According to him , " If the great light

of culture be extinct in Europe, our horizon in the East would mourn in darkness western humanity had received its mission to be the teacher of the world, that her science, through the mastery of laws of nature was to liberate human souls from the dark dungeon of matter. The East was greatly needed the blessings of sciences, that the west could bring to her."³⁹

Tagore On Eastern Civilization :

Tagore appreciated some of the qualities of western civilization and he was of the view that the help of the west was necessary for the full fledged development of the East. He had discussed some characteristics of Eastern civilization. He held that in India caste system did not allow lower castes to raise their status and prevented spontaneous development of the society. Due to the influence of British education the supremacy of the Brahmins was challenged and the lower castes were allowed to raise their status.

But while pointing out the basic principles of Eastern civilization he argued that the India social system was more important than the state and India did not follow the western model of social integration but allowed different racial groups to develop their personality and maintain their individual identity. Social unity in India was based on Co-operation and conciliation but in Europe, it was based on competition and confrontation. He was of the view that the

Eastern civilization did not give encouragement to nation-states. Hence, he advocated the synthesis of East and West as it was complementary for the development of mankind.

Synthesis Of East and West :

Tagore considered the civilization of the East and the West as complementary to each other in spite of their differences of outlook upon life. He was in favour of the meeting of two civilizations on the basis of creative ideals. Eastern people came in close contact with the western civilization due to the advent of the British rule in India. Hence, it was the major task in front of the noblest men of modern India to imbibe the virtues of western civilization to build up a perfect union of East and west on the basis of humanitarian values.⁴⁰

Tagore pointed out that the greatest men of India, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.G. Ranade, Swami Vivekananda and others spent their lives in the task of reconciling the ideals of the west with those of the East.⁴¹

He always propagated the idea of spiritual union of the civilizations of East and West. The term of meeting was described in the following manner, " the East did once meet the west profoundly in the growth of her life. Such union became possible because the East came to the West with the ideal that was creative and not with the passion that destroys moral bonds.

The mystic consciousness of the infinite, which she brought with her, was greatly, needed by the man of the west to give him his balance.⁴² (. . . .) The world to-day was offered to the west. She would destroy it, if she did not use it for a great creation of man. The materials for such a creation were in the hands of science, but the creative genius was in Man's spiritual ideals." ⁴³

Thus, the spiritual ideas of the Eastern civilization were greatly needed by the men of the west to give them the moral balance, on the other hand the western civilization could bring the achievements of modern science for the material prosperity of the Eastern people.

Tagore was fully aware about the limitations of these two civilizations. So he advocated that only a society that combined the best ideals of the East and the West could solve the difficult problems that had troubled modern humanity.⁴⁴

He also warned against the adverse consequences of pure revivalism. In his writings from New-York on 13th March 1921. Tagore said, " our present struggle to alienate our heart and mind from the west was an attempt at spiritual suicide. If in the spirit of national vain-gloriousness, we shouted from our house tops that the west had produced nothing that had an infinite value for man, then we only created a serious cause of doubt about the worth of any product of the Eastern mind. For it was the mind of men in the East and West which was ever approaching truth in her different aspect from

different angles of vision. If it could be true that the stand point of the west had betrayed it into an utter misdirection, then we could never be sure of the stand point of the East." ⁴⁵ In most of his later writings Tagore criticized those who regarded everything Indian to be spiritual and praise worthy and everything western as material and unethical. ⁴⁶ It was the firm opinion of Tagore that the highest ideal of the Europeans was the same as that of the Hindus, and that it was not pleasure for self but happiness for all and the full development of humanity. ⁴⁷

There were Europeans who only sought personal pleasure and who devoted their lives to rob the wealth and to destroy the happiness of the weaker peoples of the earth, but there were also in Europe great men who sought the good of all mankind. ⁴⁸ Foreign cultural contacts did not destroy but rather enriched the indigenous culture of a nation. Tagore pointed out that every modern nation knew that it must bring the treasures of its culture to the market place of the world in order to estimate their worth and value. ⁴⁹ Hence the coming of the English to India did not appear meaningless to him. He believed that the English had a mission in India, and that India would have been shorn of fullness if she had been deprived of the western contact. ⁵⁰ According to Tagore, an ideal civilization

should combine the dynamic spirit of the west with the ancient wisdom of the East.⁵¹

Tagore's was a brilliant critique of western civilization and he had tried to point ~~some~~ basic inadequacies of western civilization. He did not support the biased historiography of the British historians and did not approve of Guizot's criticism of Eastern civilization but he knew that both western and Eastern civilizations were not perfect and the development of such a civilization was required that would promote the unity of mankind. Hence, he was of the view that there was a necessity of synthesis of East and West so that the best values and achievements of both the civilization could be brought together in the cause of human development.

Western civilization succeeded in establishing her rule over the Eastern civilization and in modern times the main goal of western civilization was to establish nation-states. Due to direct and indirect influence of the west the Eastern countries were also developing nation-states in their own countries and were trying to promote the spirit of militant nationalism. In his famous essay on 'Nationalism,' Tagore tried to analyse nationalism in the west as well as in Asia in the light of his ideas on synthesis of East and West.

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