



# Rabindranath Tagore's Universalism

- Viswa Ghosh



A couple or more years back I received a T-Shirt (see image) bought in Mumbai as a gift from my two daughters – a T-Shirt that carries a wonderful message of universalism. This mere T-shirt attests to the fact that we continue to have a whole lot of folks in India who would design and sell such T-Shirts, who agree with the message, and give the assurance of India remaining free from xenophobia. We may hope that the spirit of universalism that Rabindranath Tagore (henceforth, Tagore) re-kindled, breathed and lived will continue to thrive in India for long and, hopefully, will also spread to other lands.

A generation younger than another *Brahmo Samajist*, Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), Tagore (1861-1941) was well known for his universalism – a conception of the world as a single unit, and humanity as the defining characteristic of human beings rather than man-made categories, which allows for the appreciation of greatness in all shapes and sizes of humans, from any source of thought and in all regimes of belief, and affirms faith in a common heritage of immeasurable diversity for all of humankind.

In this essay I have attempted to present his philosophy of *universalism*, which I believe to be one of the highest kind. To provide a broader context and some idea of the social milieu within which he nourished his philosophy I cite his contemporaries and other philosophers.

## On Religion

I am fairly certain that Tagore (and other universalist philosophers like Swami Vivekananda) would have been delighted by the message of universalism printed on the T-shirt. Being one of the leading members of *Brahmo Samaj*, Tagore subscribed to *Advaita Vedanta* according to which, not only are the different deities merely celestial manifestations

of the ONE, *Brahman*, but there is also no religious separation between God and humanity:

“... our spirituality is based not on your philosophical and religious dualism which separates God, humanity and nature, but on the One underlying the many – that is *Brahman*.”<sup>1</sup>

In this view, things in reality exist only in relationship with each other. Thus, according to Tagore, if the relationship is removed *that* reality ceases to exist (and another different ‘reality’ may emerge from another set of relationships). And the ultimate guarantor of such relationships is the ONE.

In July 1930 Tagore met Einstein at the latter’s Potsdam residence. As an aside it is worth noting Einstein’s reactions on seeing Tagore for the first time: “His shock of white hair, his burning eyes, his warm manner impressed me with the human character of this man who dealt so abstractly with the laws of geometry and mathematics.”<sup>2</sup>

It is extremely interesting to note Tagore’s understanding of universal truth that is revealed from their dialogue at this meeting. Excerpts from a dialogue between Tagore and Einstein (below) illuminates Tagore’s thoughts on reality and universal truth:

**Einstein:** “Do you believe in the divine as isolated from the world?”

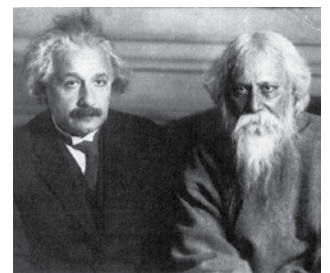
**Tagore:** “Not isolated. The infinite personality of man comprehends the universe. There cannot

be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the truth of the universe is human truth.”

**Einstein:** “There are two different conceptions about the nature of the universe - the world as a unity dependent on humanity, and the world as reality independent of the human factor.”

...

**Tagore:** “The world is a human world – the scientific view of it is also that of the scientific man. Therefore, the world apart from us does not exist; it is a relative world, depending for its reality upon our consciousness. There is some standard



of reason and enjoyment which gives it truth, the standard of the eternal man whose experiences are made possible through our experiences."

**Einstein:** "Truth, then, or beauty, is not independent of man?"

...

**Tagore:** "What we call truth lies in the rational harmony between the subjective and objective aspects of reality, both of which belong to the superpersonal man."

**Einstein:** "We do things with our mind, even in our everyday life, for which we are not responsible. The mind acknowledges realities outside of it, independent of it. For instance, nobody may be in this house, yet that table remains where it is."

**Tagore:** "Yes, it remains outside the individual mind, but not the universal mind. The table is that which is perceptible by some kind of consciousness we possess."

**Einstein:** "If nobody were in the house the table would exist all the same, but this is already illegitimate from your point of view, because we cannot explain what it means, that the table is there, independently of us. Our natural point of view in regard to the existence of truth apart from humanity cannot be explained or proved, but it is a belief which nobody can lack – not even primitive beings. We attribute to truth a superhuman objectivity. It is indispensable for us – this reality which is independent of our existence and our experience and our mind – though we cannot say what it means."

**Tagore:** "In any case, if there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity, then for us it is absolutely non-existing."

This interesting dialogue with Einstein took place in July 1930 at the latter's Potsdam residence.<sup>3</sup>

Tagore had concluded that *Advaita Vedanta* was the basis of India and her deeper spirituality. Envisioning the highest of ideals for India, Tagore wrote in "The Indian Pilgrimage" (*Bharat Tirtha*):

*None can tell, at whose beckoning,  
vast waves of humanity  
... merge into the Great Sea! ...  
All shall give and take, mingle and be mingled in,  
none shall depart dejected  
From the shores of the sea of  
Bharata's Great Humanity!*<sup>4</sup>

Thus, for Tagore, India stood for spiritual universalism and universalism of the spirit.

### On Nationalism

As can be expected from a universalist like Tagore, he was fiercely opposed to Nationalism, the unflinching devotion to one's nation that sees it as supreme, that

seeks justifications of cultural or racial supremacy to explain this greatness. His philosophical basis informed his rejection of the Nation as a concept and Nationalism as a political idea.

In his lectures in the U.S. during 1916-17 he condemned Nationalism in no small measure.<sup>5</sup>

"The Nation has thriven long upon mutilated humanity. Men, the fairest creations of God, came out of the National manufactory in huge numbers as war-making and money-making puppets, ludicrously vain of their pitiful perfection of mechanism. Human society grew more and more into a marionette show of politicians, soldiers, manufacturers and bureaucrats, pulled by wire arrangements of wonderful efficiency."

Expressing his outrage on the behavior of nations and nation-states in his poem titled, "The Sunset of the Century", written on the last day of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>6</sup>:

*The last Sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red  
clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.  
The naked passion of the self-love of Nations, in  
its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the  
clash of steel and howling verses of vengeance.  
The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a  
violence of fury from its shameless feeding.  
For it has made the world its food.  
And licking it, crunching it and  
swallowing it in big morsels,  
It swells and swells...*

Not being in full agreement with any of India's politicians – that included such colossus figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Bose, Balgangadhar Tilak, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel – Tagore did not enter politics. Although in spirit he was always with the struggle for freedom, he distanced himself more and more from Nationalism and nearly every brand of *Swadeshi* as these propounded hatred for the British, or burning of Manchester-made goods, or blind obedience to the "spin and weave," and so on.

On the one hand he opposed the British attempts at partitioning of Bengal in 1905 and, on the other, he opposed the virulent and violent kind of politics that allegedly aimed at India's independence from the British.

Tagore's stand was not an easy one. It called for a careful negotiation of a middle-path. Freedom of countries was important so that they could negotiate, partner with, borrow and learn from each other on equal terms. But he spurned national chauvinism or national narcissism. Thus, each country needed the necessary space for flourishing and self-fulfillment. But none had the right to denigrate the other as

*Anjali*

inferior and presume superiority over others.

To appreciate these subtle differences in his attitude we need to realize that while he supported the quest for freedom with all his being, he opposed any action that would spread hatred for the 'other'. To him partitioning of Bengal would add a wedge between an already divided population and distance the people from universalism. At the same, hatred for anything British – people and goods – would also drive a wedge between two peoples.

To reconcile and understand Tagore one has to look at his concept of universalism which was sincerely indiscriminate and, closely linked to his view of freedom. Hence, in 1908, in one of his oft referred to letters, Tagore wrote to Srimati Abala Bose, a social-worker and educationalist, and widow of scientist and nationalist, Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose:

"Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, to understand Tagore's desire for independence from an unjust British rule, one needs to look beyond the façade of political freedom. For him of paramount importance was freedom of the mind. Hence, he penned in the *Gitanjali* (75):

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 the clear stream of reason  
has not lost its way into the  
dreary desert sand of dead habit; ...  
Into that heaven of freedom,  
my Father, let my country awake.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, one realizes that Tagore was far ahead of his time and, in many senses, even of ours. He spoke in a language the significance of which many of his contemporaries – great stalwarts in their own right – failed to comprehend. Nobel Laureate Chemist, Ilya Prigogine, commented:<sup>8</sup>

"The question of meaning of reality was the central subject of a fascinating dialog between Einstein and Tagore. Einstein emphasized that the sciences had to be independent of the existence of any observer. This led him to deny the reality

of time as irreversibility, as evolution. On the contrary Tagore maintained that even if absolute truth could exist, it would be inaccessible to the human mind. *Curiously enough, the present evolution of science is running in the direction stated by great poet.*" (my highlights)

Another point that strikes out is his relevance to our world today – a world that is, on the one hand, strife with greed and narrowness of minds and, on the other, pregnant with possibilities of universalism, of universal acceptance of cultural, religious and ethnic differences, of universal harmony, of a borderless world that is rid of Nations and Nation-states, and brimming with the potent. And, above all, for the sensitive mind his life and work provide the soothing effect after being exposed to the torture and torment of a civilization (so called, the most intelligent) that appears not to know the answer to the simplest of questions, "*Quo Vadis*". □

## (Endnotes)

1 Gosling, David L. *Science and the Indian Tradition*. (cites Tagore), London: Routledge, p. 131.

2 *Ibid.*, (Einstein cited) p. 138.

3 *Op.cit.*, Gosling, David L. P. 138.

4 Chatterjee, Monish. "Rabindranath Tagore: Sadhaka of Universal Man, Baul of Infinite Songs." The English translation is taken from Monish Chatterjee. For readers who may be interested in confirming the meaning in original, Tagore's original verse in *Bharat Tirtha* (ভারততীর্থ) reads:

...  
কেহ নাহি জানে কার আস্থানে কত মানুষের ধারা  
দুর্বার স্রোতে এল কোথা হতে, সমুদ্রে হল হারা ।

...  
দিবে আর নিবে, মিলাবে মিলিবে, যাবে না ফিরে –  
এই ভারতের মহামানবের সাগরতীরে ॥

...

5 Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. "Nationalism in the West," Norwood, Massachusetts: Norwood Press, August 1917, p. 58.

6 *Ibid.*, "The Sunset of the Century", p. 157.

7 Sen, Amartya. "Tagore and His India," *The New York Review of Books*, June 26, 1997.

8 Dutta, Krishna & Robinson, Andrew (eds). *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*. New York, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2009, p. 14