

# A Living Legacy: The Relevance of Tagore in Today's World

Poonam Surie

**Abstract** Many of the issues that Tagore wrote about are still relevant today and are being faced by societies across the world and will continue to be significant in the decades ahead. Tagore believed in a synthesis of the cultures of the East and the West; the spirituality of the East enriching itself with the rationality and scientific mind of the West. The human spirit above all would sustain and propel humankind forward when all other resources are at an ebb. Always opposed to the dehumanization introduced by industrialization and technology, Tagore believed that it is up to each individual to lead his or her life, governing it with freedom based on well ordered and enduring laws. Tagore's individual is deeply enmeshed in complex networks and he draws from multiple planes in keeping with the realistic world. Tagore's interpretation of religion was quite revolutionary and he believed that atheism was better than superstition of religion and the shackles of ritualism. He recognized multiculturalism and plurality and realized that ethnic and minority groups and their beliefs had to be accepted as a part of the complex fabric of society. He emphasized an educational system where learning was holistic, the aesthetic development of the senses being as important as the development of the intellect. Unlike Einstein, he believed that all scientific laws and objects are connected in some way with human perception and that scientific research should be carried out not just as an end in itself but for the betterment of humankind.

**Key words** Tagore; multiculturalism; religious plurality; minority rights; Chinese ethnic communities

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The legacy left behind by Tagore is not only a human endeavour to synthesize a sense of living in the world along with social obligations and mores, and find beauty in its existence but it is also an attempt to unravel the tensions behind the struggle with modern life. Tagore is one of the most well known poets of the modern era. He is a novelist, a dramatist, a composer of dance dramas, a folklorist, a satirist, but he is

also a social reformer, a nationalist, and a thinker on race relations. A curiosity and creativity characterized his life, a "ceaseless adventure to the endless further" (qtd in Ghose xii), to use his own language. As we pause and reflect on his thoughts and essays we are struck by how relevant his thinking is for us even today, so many years after his demise. Among the issues that he wrote about, many are being faced by societies across the world and will continue to be significant in the decades ahead. As governments and citizens strive to solve some of these issues, the thought-provoking works of Tagore provide a wealth of ideas which can be used to steer us through the dangerous and treacherous lanes of modern society today.

Tagore's role as a philosopher, an erudite scholar, an educationist and a public figure is no less imposing, varied and significant than that of him as a poet and writer. In him we find an instant example of a person who has a multifaceted personality. The poet and the philosopher cannot be separated just as one cannot, according to him, separate the myriad and complex influences that culture and history as well as modern living have on people. Not only have his poems and essays found an echo in India and the rest of Asia, as also China, but the echo also reverberates in the Western world. His letters, stories, essays and treatises on issues close to the life of the times that he lived in have been valued by many and as we come to the beginning of the second decade of the twenty first century, we cannot but help realize how his philosophy still touches our lives and those of the people of the world in many ways.

Tagore believed in a society where each individual had a right to live as a free person. The sense of freedom and absence of ritualism and symbolism permits us, in Tagore's own philosophy, to look at the world freed from the shackles of social mores and norms, political processes and religions. As he said decades ago, it is time to view the world from a truly realistic and objective view, free from local bias.

A realist and a humanist, Tagore never tried to found a system of philosophy. His writings are an attempt to bridge together metaphysical doctrines of Indian philosophy with the need to respect the dignity of the human individual through compassion and feeling (Bharathi 15). A genius who absorbed different aspects of indigenous and foreign thought and integrated them into his own thinking, Tagore believed in a synthesis of the cultures of East and West and even the different ethnic groups within India. His belief that the spirituality of the East should take within its fold ideas to enrich itself from the rationality and scientific mind of the west; his views on nationalism, his belief that the human being and his or her spirit mattered more than religion, and his view of education as the joy of learning as opposed to it being a burden are issues extremely relevant in the current context of multiethnic, multicultural societies.

Tagore was a believer in *realpolitik* and dealing with life with its many complexities. Even during the *Swadeshi* movement, Tagore was not a believer in any narrow creed, however popular it may have been. Narrow domestic walls did not allow his vision to be broken into fragments (Ghose xiv). Nor was he a conservative. He belonged on the side of progress. He was convinced that the power of the human heart would transcend all limitations of caste, race and nationality. Human values being similar across the world, he appealed to people to erase boundaries and try to live in harmony and peace.

In his “The Meeting of Races” he writes: “The races of mankind will never again be able to go back to their citadels of high walled exclusiveness. They are today exposed to one another, physically and intellectually. The shells which have for so long given them full security within their individual enclosures have been broken, and by no artificial process can they be mended again. So we have to accept this fact, even though we have not fully adapted our minds to this changed environment of publicity, even though through it we may have to run all the risks entailed by the wider expansion of life’s freedom” (39).<sup>1</sup> Further, he believed and it is still relevant, that the vastness of the race problem with which modern societies are faced today will either compel citizens to train and adapt to the new globalized world around themselves or the complications arising out of it will fetter all our movements and drag us to our death. In other words, there is no choice but to adapt, evolve and change constantly to keep pace with new problems arising as the world changes rapidly. As internet, Twitter and Facebook bridge distances between citizens from different countries, as borders fade and become irrelevant and as the speed of information moves like lightning across the globe, new solutions have to be found and ideas and concepts combined to form new philosophies and new religions which may be more loosely defined and be a combination of other existing ones.

According to Tagore, thanks to science, speeding vehicles of communication are racing over land and water and even through the air. This, even at his time had meant that there are no longer any geographical barriers. The age of conflict had come. “The outward forces which are bringing men together are running at a great speed; the inner forces which make men united are lagging behind. We, the people of the East who are used to trudging on foot, how can we bear the brunt of the collision? Things which are near us and yet keep aloof, if they have their movement, always give us shocks. Such a conjunction of shocks may not be comfortable, but in certain circumstances may be wholesome” (Tagore, “The Union of Cultures” 434 – 36). How true this rings even today.

Tagore says aptly that the human spirit above all, above machines and material things will sustain and propel humankind forward when all other resources are at an ebb. “When the resources that have sustained us so long have been exhausted, then our spirit puts forth all its force to discover some other source of sustenance deeper and more permanent. This leads us from the exterior to the interior of our storehouse. When muscle does not fully serve us, we come to awaken intellect to ask for its help and are then surprised to find in it a greater source of strength for us than physical power” (40). Overall what is most impressive about Tagore’s work is the humanity that is reflected throughout. He was always opposed to the dehumanization introduced by industrialization and technology. Through his works, Tagore has shown us the inner psychology of the poor villager, the urban middle class and the idle rich, without losing sympathy for anyone.<sup>2</sup>

Tagore’s view of religion was never about a God of human force but about a God of human personality. Tagore’s interpretation of religion was so different from the traditionalists that his views on atheism and communism shocked many. He felt that atheism was better than superstition of religion and the shackles of ritualism. For

example, Tagore felt that folk religion was as important as the study of the *Upanishads*. He translated the works of *Kabir* and *Jnanadas Bagheli* and they were for him no less important than the beliefs of the Bauls, the mystic minstrels of Bengal. He set about bringing to the attention of people the Baul texts. Music was the only source of sustenance of the Bauls as they travelled from place to place, accepting whatever was offered to them as alms for their music.

Tagore did not consider the Baul thought either contradictory to the *Upanishadic* doctrines or as a self-sufficient alternative to them. He accepted its heretic character, its rejection of all institutional religions. This recognition of a folk-world view resistant to canonical texts and institutions provided a fuller view of Indian religious plurality, the coexistence of religious sects, distinctive by social stratification - *brahmanical* and *non-brahmanical*, elite and folk (Das 19).

The fact that Tagore, decades ago had the intuition to think of a multi-religious and multicultural society as it is found today shows the brilliance of a man who had a vision far beyond his time. This shines through his evocative and thought provoking poetry and essays. Today, multiculturalism and minority rights are important issues to be dealt with in Asia as well as the Western world. The growing phenomena of the Naxalite movement in India is said to be currently a most serious threat to its internal security and peace. Other examples are the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, the members of various hill tribes in Thailand who were traditionally regarded as second class citizens and now look for equality in Thailand; and ethnic groups in China.

Asia as well as Europe is witnessing the rise of identity politics. People are mobilizing along ethnic, religious and cultural lines and demanding recognition of their identity, acknowledgement of their legal rights and historic claims, and a commitment to the sharing of power (Kymlicka Will and Baogang He 1) In the West, shift in ethno-cultural relations are continuously taking place as indigenous people regain their lands, customary law and self-government. The troubles in Northern Ireland and ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan are examples of minority group clashes.

Today, as we face divisions and cleavages in societies, peace is key to political stability. In addition, in an interconnected world where boundaries fade and are made redundant for all practical purposes, these cleavages are supplemented with ongoing migration between and within countries<sup>3</sup>. How these ethno-cultural diversities in the West are dealt with is a matter of drawing upon different intellectual traditions and combining them with the thinking of the government in power. But what makes multiculturalism in contemporary Asia so different from its western model is a set of unique and varied factors such as pre and post colonial legacies, democratic transition, territorial tensions across the border, an emerging and increasingly aware and educated middle class and complex political structures. However, in the end, all solutions boil down to engagement of people, tolerance and above all, a sense of what it means to be a human who is part of a civilized society. Tagore's writings certainly seem to reflect this and beyond doubt he has, even in his time, touched upon the nerve of current diversities and ethno-cultural issues in these countries.

No less brilliant was Tagore's treatise on "*Swaraj*" or Self-Rule. He writes in his essay, "The Union of Cultures" that according to the *Upanishads*, immutable

laws have been made for all time to come, and it is up to each individual to lead his life, governing (and not governed by) it with freedom based on well ordered and enduring laws. In other words, man does not need to fear any divine being. These laws of matter and those of the mind, used together make the individual grow in greatness ( 428 – 429). “The empire of the universe is yours, yours its wealth, yours its armoury of forces. May yours be the victory!” (Tagore, “The Union of Cultures” 428 ) Self-rule can only be achieved when the science of the unchangeable laws of matter are brought into harmony with the laws of our mind. In other words, all persons are clean and to call them unclean merely because of their religion is keeping the intellect in a state of delusion. In this state, there can never be a spiritually healthy society.

According to Tagore, in the beginning the East was much more advanced in terms of science than the Western countries. The positions got reversed because the West was able to harness the science to use it in a more useful way. The way in which this can be remedied and reversed is through education. The *Upanishads* teach that we should “gain protection from death by the cult of the finite, and then by the cult of the infinite you shall attain immortality” (Tagore, “The Union of Culture” 434). By union he did not mean uniformity. Material and spiritual, kept separate, in their own respective provinces can lead to a unity of the West and East.

Tagore had a great deal of respect for the interconnectedness of the world. As Amartya Sen summarizes Tagore’s views, one could be a citizen of the world, without being a citizen of the world state. Hence home and world would not be two ends of a continuum but overlapping categories.

What is the “new” perspective that Tagore brought to the debate about people in society? Two major points are worth stating: Tagore’s view of the nature of individuals, and, arising out of this view of the individual, his ideas about the dynamics of groups and culture.

Tagore differs fundamentally from the “Western perspective” in his notion of the individual. The individual of Tagore’s model is not isolated but is one nucleus in a web of relationships. His belief is drawn from a *Upanishadic* understanding of all things of the universe as manifestations of the same underlying reality system. His individual is neither similar to the liberal version of the rational, self-interested individual, nor the communitarian version of the autonomous individual who is committed to community bonds. Tagore’s individual is deeply enmeshed in multiple networks and there are no dichotomies between self-interest and duty towards others. He draws from multiple planes in keeping with the realistic world in which we live. Hence Tagore’s concept of freedom is based on understanding ties instead of pursuing self-interest. Based on his idea of the individual tied to the Universe, Tagore’s conception of interpersonal and intergroup relations necessarily focuses on acknowledging ties (Purkayastha 49).

Tagore’s commitment is to unity in diversity, acknowledging interdependencies, creating channels of communication and exchange as a way of creating a society where multiplicity and pluralism are a way of life. His reference is to the daily Hindu prayers where the individual acknowledges ties to the Universe of people, plants, animals and energy. This conscious awareness and personal commitment to a set of values that

put a human-in-the-universe above the person defined by nation states or other identities, would lead to better ties among people in different parts of the world. It would be difficult to draw the line between insiders and outsiders while one consciously acknowledged ties to the universe.

As long as societies continue to benefit from each other's insights, they would progress and grow in the true sense of the word.

A very important element of Tagore's beliefs was the constantly changing and evolving society. The commitment to the web of relationships meant that the aim was to create and recreate social systems that support such actions. Tagore's model recognizes multiple allegiances, making it possible to respect one's own country without strident patriotism and cultural isolation. So one can be committed to one's own culture without creating walls of sectarianism or viewing culture as fixed. One can respect tradition without becoming enslaved by outdated rules and rituals. It requires seeing the home in the world (Purkayastha 61).

As our lives are increasingly influenced by happenings in other parts of the world, we are confronted by Tagore's core issues of unity in diversity. How do we maintain rights of people whose religions, languages, social practices, codes of living are different from ours? We have two choices among others: Either the old ones of assimilation and homogenization or then the recognition of differences, identities and individual practices recognizing universal interdependence.

Since Tagore wrote his poems, essays and letters much water has flown under the bridge. Changes that can only be classified as socio-political have taken place. In India, the diversity of its people has been recognized as, for example, the making official of multiple languages and institutionalizing several civil laws that guarantee the citizens settlement of differences according to the norms of their religions.

As globalization brings citizens across the world face to face with each other, they may be forced to realize that plurality and multiculturalism are the name of the game in today's world. Religions, languages, ethnic diversity, arts and science, culture and economics, local and global, politics and spirituality, all are intertwined and inseparable in the complex lives we all lead. Moving from the boundaries of home to the world, we remain indebted to a sage who once was. His ideas remain still fresh and relevant even today.

Tagore's thoughts on education and the educational system are well known. He expressed in the strongest terms through his writings that learning by rote is a burden on the individual and what was needed is an education where learning is holistic, where the surroundings are conducive to learning, so that it becomes a joy. He believed that between individuals, whatever the antagonisms in business were, they would disappear in the field of culture. His vision was that his country should become a centre of culture for the world where East would meet West. This vision is still shared by many. Education has been and still is, of vital concern for the policy makers. An increase in the number of educational institutions, modifying curricula to suit the changing requirements of the globalized world, vocational studies, professional courses where hands on experience and training is needed and emphasized are much needed and we are, in India, making an effort to move in that direction. What needs

attention is knowledge of conducting oneself with grace and dignity, politeness and courtesy with members of the civil society and empathy towards others. These are as important components of education as academic requirements. The introduction of “Value education” as a subject in young learners is a step in that direction.

Tagore admired thinkers and reformists such as Raja Rammohan Roy because even though the latter did not study English till he was much older, he was a profound scholar of Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and Hebrew in order to study the Old Testament in its original oriental setting. He knew more of the Sanskrit scriptures and Indian philosophy than any contemporary *pundit*. His learning, because of its depth and comprehensiveness, did not merely furnish him with materials for scholarship, but trained his mind for the free acceptance of truth.

Tagore felt that the colonial system of education followed at his time, created a cadre of clerks who worked for the colonial masters, not true thinkers. His ideas on education thus were that education should adapt itself to the particular cultural features of the country where it was being taught. According to him the East has been educated along Western lines and therefore has developed a contempt of itself which continued to the days in which he lived (Tagore, “The Way to Unity” 465 – 467 ). Studying culture, as he says, just for the sake of brandishing it before the world without actually understanding, absorbing and feeling it is of no use. As we know, his school Shantineketan developed into a university and rural reconstruction centre where he tried to develop an alternative model of education that stemmed from his own learning experiences. In Tagore’s view an aesthetic development of the senses was as important as the development of the intellect. Music, literature, art, craft and drama were thus as important as science and mathematics. Tagore’s dream was to create *Vishva Bharati*, a national centre for the arts where individuals would work together in a common pursuit of truth and realize “that artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered secrets of the universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual world organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged, but for all mankind”<sup>4</sup>.

Tagore’s upbringing had been such that he was exposed to a multitude of individuals right from his childhood. Tagore’s father had been a leader in social and religious reform, and he encouraged multi-cultural exchange in the family mansion. Tagore’s thirteen brothers and sisters were mathematicians, journalists, musicians and novelists. The vitality and creativity of the large and extended family ( they also had cousins staying in the same house) gave ample material for thought to the young poets mind, making him believe in a dynamic, open model of education, which he later tried to recreate in his school in Shantineketan. He refused to attend formal school. He felt that a curriculum should revolve organically around nature with classes held in the open air under the trees to learn and appreciate the plant and animal kingdom and the harmony of nature. Students were encouraged to write, create their own publications and produce many illustrated magazines.

Tagore believed that education means the inquisitive minds of young students should be left to investigate nature and absorb their surroundings. Education means

having the freedom of mind, the freedom of heart and the freedom of will. And human beings have to be educated to be not judges, doctors, businessmen and soldiers but to be the makers of their own world and their own destiny. And for that they must have all their faculties developed in the atmosphere of freedom.

He tried to realize a common meeting of East and West by free exchange of ideas between people from the East and the West, to ultimately strengthen conditions of world peace. His vision was to provide at Shantiniketan a centre for the research of the study of religion, literature, history, science and the art of Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Islamic, Sikh, Christian and other civilizations as well as the culture of the West in an atmosphere of friendship and co-operation, "in the name of the one Supreme Being who is *Shantam, Shivam, Advaitam*"<sup>5</sup>.

Curricula were designed to study the history and culture that brought people together rather than just history, as a dry subject. Art was seen as a way of furthering aesthetic imagination and expressing and examining themes taken from the universe. The overall development of the personality was stressed upon. This path breaking method has paved the way for educational reforms for all times to come. The recent changes and modifications in educational policy for high schools in India has been along the lines that Tagore showed. His methodology of education is unique and can be compared with any of the leading educationists of the world like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey.

Coming to science and rationality, the brilliant conversations between Tagore and Einstein are fascinating and intriguing. Tagore's depth of knowledge and intellect is pitted with the genius of Einstein in a perfectly balanced match of words in which both display, in their own way their honesty of purpose and sincerity. Both gifted and idealistic thinkers, they had very different viewpoints of science. However, in later years Einstein's basic view of sub-atomic nature was abandoned by most quantum physicists, who adopted a position that bears considerable resemblance to the one taken by Tagore (Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson 294). The argument went like this: Einstein said that scientifically, laws and objects remain outside the purview of the human mind. What exists, exists. Tagore, on the other hand, argued that everything is connected in some way with each other and thus with human perception. Tagore fundamentally disagreed with Einstein's theory of realism. "We can never go beyond man in all that we know and feel" (qtd in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson 294), wrote Tagore in "The Religion of man" and it summed up his beliefs in relation with Einstein's.

If we look at science today, Tagore's belief that all scientific phenomenon fall within the purview of human consciousness seems to ring true. Then going a few steps further, science should be used in a way that it benefits society, not be used against it. Scientists like Werner Heisenberg and Bohr did not agree with Einstein and were of the view that science should be concerned with not what nature is but what we can say about nature. In other words, research just for the sake of research is not as desirable as conducting research on those subjects that can be used for the benefit of human beings.

Tagore did not see eye to eye with another great and legendary person of his



time, Gandhi on a number of issues. For example, he did not understand nor did he approve of Gandhi fasting unto death. Gandhi's approach to education was utilitarian, while Tagore's vision was that of artistic creation. During India's struggle for independence, Tagore tried to reason with Gandhi that he should think of the masses who were looking towards him for leadership and guidance and for their sake, if nothing else, stay alive. According to him, the false sense of nationalism kept an individual from looking at the world as his home and thus keeps him in the narrow confines of his mind. If nationalism means patriotism in a narrow sense of defending one's own country even when one's intellect says that opening one's mind can benefit the citizens, then Tagore did not favour it.

Tagore felt that the absorption of foreign philosophies combined with traditional and indigenous ones can result in a change in society from one level to the next, a betterment of its citizens and their lives. For example, liberal thought of the West combined with the tradition of the east, and western ideologies combined with Confucianism, Buddhism and Hinduism can result in a flowering of ideologies in a climate of globalization, more relevant and enriching than the two separately.

It seems completely in keeping with life in our times that Tagore should have said in his essay, "The Meeting of Races" that "human races owing to their external geographical condition, developed in their individual isolation a mentality that is obnoxiously selfish. In their instinctive search for truth in religion either they dwarfed and deformed it in the mould of the primitive distortions of their own race-mind" (38). He said, and this is very relevant in today's world that when creatures who have always lived in the dark caves of separation find the walls removed suddenly by some catastrophe, "then either they must accept the doom of their extinction or carry on satisfactory negotiations with their wider surroundings" (38).

"This is a great fact. Man, suckled at the wolf's breast, sheltered in the brute's den, brought up in the prowling habit of depredation, suddenly discovers that he is man, and that his true power lies in yielding up his brute power for the freedom of the spirit" (42).

In essence, Tagore held a central place in the Indian renaissance and it would not be wrong to say that in the present context where multiculturalism and globalization have brought citizens of different countries across the world face to face and sharing common spaces with each other, Tagore can be seen as a harmonizer of East and West, the old and the new, the romantic and the rational, the religious and the scientific, between man and machine, man and God. Criticized by some as being confused and sometimes self contradictory, the basic appeal of a brilliant mind thinking far beyond his time was that he thought that "reconciliation, fusion and transcendence are to be attempted and realised. . . in the heart and soul of man" (Iyengar 111).

His words showed Indians and other Asians a way to self mastery and self-realization. Instead of the narrow and limited vision imposed by nationalism, his thinking has shown the world a wider view in which each individual, each community, each religion, each country has a unique place and in which people can learn from each other, borrow and adopt ideas, work for the betterment of the human race and be the makers of their own destiny.

In conclusion, Tagore's thinking is as relevant today as it was in his time. This brilliant mind had the vision and intelligence to look far beneath the surface and intuitively find some of the answers to the problems that riddle society even today. And all along the beauty of his works lingers with us as we try to see the world through his eyes.

### [ Notes ]

1. Tagore, Rabindranath, "The Meeting of Races." *Tagore for You*. Ed. Sisirkumar Ghose. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1966. 38 –43. hereafter, only page is given.
2. See Nakagawa, Ulara. "Rabindranath Tagore | New Emissary." *The Diplomat*. 24 May 2010. Web. 22 Nov. 2010. < <http://the-diplomat.com/new-emissary/2010/05/24/rabindranath-tagore/> > .
3. Kymlicka, Will. "Multiculturalism and Minority Rights: West and East." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 4 (2002): 1 –27. see [http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/Focus4-2002\\_Kymlicka.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/Focus4-2002_Kymlicka.pdf).
4. See O'Connell, K. M. (2003) "Rabindranath Tagore on education", *the encyclopaedia of informal education*, <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/tagore.htm>.
5. "Rabindranath Tagore on Education - Kathleen M. O'Connell." Contents @ the Informal Education Homepage. Web. 08 July 2010. < <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/tagore.htm> > .

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