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## 34. Rabindranath Tagore a Social Reformer

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India is fortunate to have, in its long history, many extraordinary human beings who devoted all their lives for the betterment of the society and for the upliftment of the downtrodden. A few among them are Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Anne Besant, Mother Teresa, Vinoba Behave and Rabindranath Tagore.

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the great revolutionary and served for the downtrodden people through his works. He is as a novelist, essayist, storywriter, composer and painter. But the author in Tagore has put his contribution to social reforms that Indian society needed at the beginning of the 19th century and still needs it.

Although Tagore was educated and brought up in an urban aristocratic and elite family environment in Kolkata, the moment he happened to come—even though as a zamindar (landlord)—into close contact with the fragments of Bengal's material village economy, society, and life, he got immediately struck and shocked by discovering the gulf of difference between these two segments of our society. Just a few months before his death in 1941, he mentioned lamentingly that our villages were left living still in the medieval age, while the towns have already reached the twentieth century. This difference obviously does not refer only to the material levels of living, but also to the spheres of perceptions, consciousness, worldview, education, and attitudes.

He remained, indeed, rather disturbed by the relative neglect and disrespect generally shown to the villages by the urbanite powerful and influential sections—an ugly fact which, he argued, can disappear only through introduction and expansion of enlightening education in villages just at par, in terms of standard and quality, with those in towns and cities. It is not that Tagore was not aware of the substantial financial burden involved in spreading good quality education in all villages, but unlike many of his times he consistently appeared uncompromising, emphatic, and resolute about its absolute urgency.

Tagore, while functioning in his role of a zamindar of his large family estates in parts of East Bengal during some spells of his youth, was so shaken by witnessing 'the sorrow and poverty of the villages' that he, in his own words, 'became restless to do something about it', instead of spending his days 'as a landlord, concerned only with money-making' and with his 'own profit and loss'. Besides, Tagore continued writing essays and commentaries almost persistently on various social, economic, and political problems and their possible remedies. Tagore in his numerous writings, speeches, and lectures, published mostly in Bengali already touched upon several socio-economic and environmental problems.

In our present essay, we attempt at illustrating some of such major areas and issues where Tagore's concerns, visions, and thinking, though they have hitherto remained lamentably unutilised or perhaps even unheeded to, do still appear almost as a precursor to many of our contemporary thoughts and policy initiatives. This reflects how keenly practical Tagore's ideas and activism pertaining to the means and experiments for our rural socio-economic uplift have had been.

### **Santiniketan and Sriniketan**

Tagore's conviction in the importance of reviving and reconstructing rural Bengal was amply matched by his intense urge to do something for the villagers, which eventually led him to set up two major experiments in rural transformation and education, namely, Santiniketan and Sriniketan. Unfortunately, these two experiments in Tagore's social activism neither received the appropriate amount of state support, patronage, and formal recognition by the time he died in 1941, nor did they receive serious academic, scholarly, and bureaucratic attention, appreciation, and recognition. Ironically, while Tagore's social activism and experiments at Santiniketan and Sriniketan have hardly ever been evaluated seriously in academic and bureaucratic circles for deeper insights and policy guidance, it has recently been somewhat popular among the social science community across the globe to examine selected successful local level economic and social experiments undertaken usually by NGOs or trusts, with a view to discovering insights, lessons, principles and policies of more general nature and applicability in the larger scale development and policies. But these two major rural experiments of Tagore—and their underlying ideas, practicalities, programmes have hardly ever been taken into account by social scientists in their research and output both before and after his death.

### **Casteism**

On his 157th birth anniversary which falls on May 7, poets, theatre artistes and academicians in the city remembered him as social reformer and his works which they said are as relevant today as they were years ago. "Most of the works of Tagore were against casteism. Besides, Tagore highlights religious contradictions in his works like Gora. His aim was to end the narrowness of caste and religion," said Hindi poet Rajesh Joshi to Free Press. Remembering Tagore's role as a social reformer, theatre director Alok Chatterjee said, "No doubt, his works like Visarjan, Mukta Dhara, Chandalika, Tasher Deshe and Kabuliwala talk against the caste, religion and orthodox mindset."

He was a poet of an era when such social evils as caste and untouchability dominated the society. He fought it out through his works. The most-important feature of Indian society is the caste system which has shaped every sphere of it. It was not surprising that Tagore who advocated for 'creative mind' of an individual was against the caste system and it is associated practices including those of untouchability and animal sacrifice. He ripped into the Brahmanical social order through a dance drama, In the Land of Playing Cards (Tasher Deshe), The Red Oleanders (Rakta Karobi), Chandalika (Untouchable Girl), Mukta Dhara (Free Rivulet). These plays are full of suggestions not only on modern politics but also on many other problems that unveil the modern world.

"Tagore's writing is a blend of the Indian tradition and the western philosophy, so it is difficult to understand Tagore's works," said Chatterjee. "Tagore has combined the Sufism, the Buddhism and the folk tradition, so his works cross all barriers of life and death; they are eternal,

Tagore was so intensely concerned and committed to serving the helpless, illiterate, ignorant people of village India that he did not hesitate even for a moment to take to an activist's role in reaching out to the rural common masses through many innovative schemes and experiments in rural development and educational improvements. Tagore once wrote plainly enough that 'my thoughts on motherland which permeated my mind ever since my boyhood days have not been expressed merely in the rhythm of metres. I always tried to translate them into practice.

### **Green Revolution**

It seems amazing to see how keenly perceptive and practical a prolific poet like Tagore used to become when it came to the question of social, political, and economic uplift of our

already hugely impoverished country. For example, one cannot but be struck by the fact that the ideas of agricultural extension services and sustained innovations for land productivity improvements that constituted the core of the Government of India's new agricultural strategy launched in the early 1960s the so-called 'package programme' or 'Green Revolution' were envisaged and sought to be implemented long ago—albeit on a much smaller scale in Tagore's Sriniketan project in the 1920s and 1930s. The latter included, inter alia, the introduction of chemical fertilisers, growing newer crops like fibre crops and fruits, trying out with new variety of seeds, emphasis on research and innovations for augmentation of land productivity, dairy and animal husbandry development and innovations, periodic socio-economic surveys of surrounding villages and dissemination of useful knowledge and innovations through,

Through his own personal-level efforts, Tagore had approached and brought many inspired and dedicated experts in various fields from within the country and abroad with a view to initiating rural transformation with new, scientific, and efficient methods in community health, agriculture, rural non-farm activities (handicrafts and cottage industries) and spreading out their training, among others, along with cooperative credit.

Tagore's ideas and efforts towards eradication of malaria in the villages surrounding Sriniketan chiefly through communication, information, diffusion, and distribution of preventive and curative medicines and other resources almost wholly on a charitable basis did succeed in reducing the number of malarial deaths by 27 per cent between 1928 and 1948.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude somewhat rhetorically, our country has not so far adequately accepted Tagore as a social activist and social reformer probably on account of the common conviction. It is doubtful as to how many among us are aware of this achievement and I am doubtless certain that this historical fact deserves a lot more trumpeting and publicity even today not only among those who are involved in social work, but also among the entire social science community and government official and administration circles alike. This is important because we should care to avoid courting ourselves to a self-defeating repetition of such lament as the one voiced by one eminent historian in the context of Tagore's Sriniketan experiment:

As one of the chief architects of Sriniketan during its formative period wrote, it had sought in a unique way to combine 'Indian philosophy, British enterprise and American finance.

In fact it is difficult to find a close resemblance of Tagore's such initiatives with what our contemporary governments have been doing under various cultural exchange programmes.

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