

Christine Marsh, *Tagore Speaks to the Twenty-First Century*. Devon: Tagorean World Publishing, 2016. 354 pp. ISBN 978-1-5262-0254-3.

For Western scholars the great religious scriptures of India seem to possess merely a retrospective and archaeological interest; but to us they are of living importance....

Rabindranath Tagore, "Preface," *Sadhana: The Realization of Life* (1914)

In his "Foreword" to a recently published book by Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik, titled *A Theory of Imperialism*, Akeel Bilgrami, the noted professor of philosophy from Columbia University, lucidly explains an important idea of economics for laypersons like us which might seem pertinent for our present discussion. He writes that capital accumulation causes increased demand for certain goods which lead to more production. But in such a situation, the commodities are producible only at *increasing supply price*. If this happens there is a threat to the *value of money*. The countries which require the goods but cannot produce them have to procure them from the countries that produce them under a threat to the value of money. In a ploy to avoid this threat these countries impose *income deflation* on the countries where these goods are produced, resulting in terrible hardship to the poor and working-class people of those countries. The countries that produce the goods and have income deflation imposed on them by countries that need to procure the goods from them were initially the colonised (the "periphery") and the colonising countries (the "metropole") respectively. It must be ensured that the supply of goods from the periphery to the metropole must be at non-increasing prices. Therefore, the same relationship continues between these sets of countries via different mechanisms even after decolonisation. Bilgrami writes, "Imperialism' is the name for this relationship between these different countries" (xii). Taking capitalism to be the prevailing economic formation in the present-day world and with theories propounded by thinkers like A. Negri and M. Hardt in their book *Empire* residing at the back of our heads we shall have to place Rabindranath Tagore's ideas within a matrix formed by capitalism and imperialism and then test their relevance in the contemporary world.

In the "Introduction" to her book, *Tagore Speaks to the Twenty-First Century*, Christine Marsh, the author, makes some such claims. She wants to draw our attention to that objective of hers even with the title of the book. Ms. Marsh uses five books of Tagore's "English Essays" as the mainstay of her study. The books *Sadhana* (1913), *Personality* (1917), *Nationalism* (1917), *Creative Unity* (1922) and *The Religion of Man* (1931) which comprise forty-two essays in all, according to the author, "are the most important of all Tagore's writings" (9). She states that "Tagore had a mission which was practical as well as spiritual, with a world change [sic] philosophy underpinning it" (9) and her aim is to "present Tagore's ideas as

having down-to-earth practical value...” (7). Ms Marsh, however, leaves out *The Centre of Indian Culture* (1919), a lecture delivered by Tagore in Madras on 9 February 1919 which was published by the Society for the Promotion of National Education, Adyar, Madras. We find it – a text very important for drawing a complete picture of Tagore’s vision of an ideal human race – in the “Essays” section of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Volume II*, edited by Sisir Kumar Das and published by Sahitya Akademi of India. For Tagore, an ideal system of education is a necessary precondition for realising the full potential of humanity in an ideal world.

Discourses of the nation-state and cosmopolitanism, *samaj* and *atmashakti*, colonial modernity, rising city-centrism and need for rural reconstruction, “political” West and the inclusionist Indian civilisation, man-nature relationship and realisation of man’s true potential, national culture and literary modernism and ideals of a perfect education are some major ideological categories with which the polemicist self of Tagore engaged throughout his career as an essayist in a consistent manner. One needs to consider the complete design of the scaffold of Tagore’s idea-world in order to find out the true relevance of his views for the twenty-first century; a century plagued by the onslaughts of capitalistic development and cultural imperialism and a world-order on the cusp of an era of “post-truth” (the international word of the year in 2016, according to Oxford Dictionaries, with 2000% increase in usage since the previous year).

But to put Tagore’s oeuvre within a historicist perspective, one must realise that Tagore’s large corpus of writings with subjects ranging from development of Sriniketan and Visva-Bharati, philosophy of education, ecology, science, literature and aesthetics, constituted responses to the problems posed by the advent of British imperialism in India. These problems were, in a way, also the problems of European metropolises, via imperialism, which was, after all, global in nature. Michael Collins, in a research done in 2009 from Oxford University with a similar subject, (later published as a book in 2012 with the title *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World: Rabindranath Tagore’s Writings on History, Politics and Society*) diagnoses that these problems involve, “the contradictory relationship between Man and Nature, the effects of technology on human creativity, the power of the modern bureaucratic state, individual and collective identity, creativity in modern pedagogy” (153). For him, “Tagore’s critical evaluation of the nation state, his rejection of nationalism as a response to imperialism, his unforgiving criticism of Gandhi’s non-cooperation, his “anti-politics” and his avowal that he would never ‘commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man’ were ways of refusing – of stepping outside – the logic of a totalized ‘colonial modernity,’ which a derivative anti-colonial nationalism merely reinforced” (154).

Two other issues are relevant in any appraisal of the contemporaneity of Tagore’s world-view in today’s globalised world: Tagore’s ideas of history and his understanding of human nature. Ranajit Guha has shown that a robust historical

imagination is seen to be operational in Tagore's reading of Indian civilisation, past, present and future along with a strong desire to provincialise the stifling empiricism of modern western historiography. In his book, *History at the Limits of World-History*, he observes that Tagore's search for *suchana* (inauguration – "to disclose what is unknown or not quite explicit") in history was an attempt to "retrace a development to its source and let it show up in its history" (71). In an age when the only kind of integration achievable is that of a global capitalist economy, Tagore, according to Collins, cherished ideas about human creativity that have implications for a critique of contemporary capitalism. In Tagore's philosophical schema, Man has an essence which is to be found in his desire to express a foundational impulse; that of a creative, active love, which leads all human beings to bonds of unity with their fellow men. It is an impulse integral to the human race which exists over and above Habermasian idea of instrumental rationality in the clutches of which modern man is suffocating these days.

This year we are celebrating the centenary of the publication of Tagore's lectures titled *Nationalism*. A lot has been written about Tagore's position vis-à-vis western systems of governance pertaining to the "nation-state." Ms. Marsh has also written a chapter on this book with the lecture "Nationalism in India" included in the end. Ms. Marsh makes an interesting observation in this chapter. She has noticed that since Tagore's demise editors of this book have taken liberties with the sequence of lectures included in the book. But for her, the sequence matters. She observes that "In *Nationalism*, the original sequence of the essays reflects the history, not of Tagore's tour, but of the world" (139). She takes up Tagore's coinage "no nation" of India for analysis. Partha Chatterjee in his essay, "Tagore's Non-Nation," included in his book *Lineages of Political Society*, deals with Tagore's trenchant criticism of nationalism as well as his struggle to offer an alternative system of community-formation in an incisive manner. Tagore's views in this field are perhaps the most pertinent in the present-day global scenario with ideas like "post-nation" which are "in" these days with their dialogic existence. For Tagore, Chatterjee writes, "Not the nation, but *samaj*. Not the political unity of the state, but the social harmony of the *samaj*" (103). But when Gandhi's mass movements failed, Tagore's hopes of an alternative community were dashed. Tagore turned to his cooperative movement and undertook projects "in two or three villages" to uplift the condition of the village society. In the last stage of his life, the aspect of modern state that pained Tagore most, according to Chatterjee, was the "scientization" of power, "the attempt to reduce the multifarious social exchanges among people to certain rules of technology" (125). Chatterjee concludes his essay with an observation. It is about an important facet of the personality of "Tagore – the myriad-minded man," a facet which is so relevant for the present-day war-torn world. Chatterjee opines, "For Tagore, a fundamental condition for the efflorescence of free human life

was the guarantee of the aesthetic freedom to be creative without any heed to utility or interest” (126).

Ms. Marsh’s book is a well-timed publication. Time has come to dispel myths surrounding the mystic-Tagore, not only in the West but in India as well, and also to work out ways to make Tagore our contemporary. The book will surely contribute to such an endeavour. But the author should have been a lot more meticulous in matters of citation. For a research work of this kind failure to conform to a particular style-sheet and in the process providing readers with incomplete data regarding notes and references is a serious offence.

Works Cited

Partha Chatterjee. “Tagore’s Non-Nation.” *Lineages of Political society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011. 94-126.

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