

Rabindranath Tagore: Critic of the Enlightenment

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore was not only a poet – but what else was he during his life? What is his legacy? He insisted he was not a philosopher or scholar; he was only briefly a political leader. He lectured extensively on the future of his country and the world, and with his work on alternative education and rural reconstruction demonstrated an alternative path for society. It is argued in this essay that Tagore can best be understood as a critic of the European Enlightenment, comparable to Herder. Isaiah Berlin gave a lecture on Tagore during the centenary celebrations, and concluded that Tagore “tried to tell the complex truth without over-simplification, and to that extent was perhaps listened to the less” (Berlin, “Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality”). With the world on the edge of ecological and social collapse, it is time we listen to him now.

Keywords

Tagore, rural reconstruction, Enlightenment, Herder, Isaiah Berlin, identity politics

It is a curious thing how often people refer to Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) as if he has a future. This is sometimes about his poetry being timeless – as great poetry should be – although with Tagore the awesomely beautiful and significant lyrical verse is held out by his Bengali admirers, only to be snatched back from anyone who does not know his language. It is more curious that the other Tagore – the one with the myriad mind – who left a vast amount of non-literary writings, much of it the vestiges of his efforts to communicate his ideas to uncomprehending and unreceptive audiences – is written about as if he has a future, a future in which he will deliver on his promises.

The demands on the future Tagore have become more urgent as time has gone on, as we see from what is written at his significant birth anniversaries. In 1986, the 125th birth anniversary, a weeklong international seminar was held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, on the subject of

¹ After a business career as a systems analyst, Christine Marsh undertook research into global problems of land degradation, and then on alternative land use systems based on reviving local communities. Learning of Tagore's work on rural reconstruction, she embarked on a study of his writings for her M.A. dissertation entitled: “The Village and the World: A Political Reading of Tagore's Prose Fiction,” followed by her doctoral thesis: “Towards One World: A Journey Through the English Essays of Rabindranath Tagore,” for which she has been awarded Ph.D.

“Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today.” In 2011, for the 150th, conferences and commemorative volumes appeared with titles such as *Contemporarising Tagore and the World* (Dhaka), “Tagore’s Relevance Today” (Dartington, Devon), “Revisiting Tagore” (Tagore Centre, London) and “Tagore: The Global Impact of a Writer in the Community” (Edinburgh).

Bengali sociologist and economist, Sasadhar Sinha, writing in the 1960s in his *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*, suggests that Tagore’s ideal of human unity “could only come when the present possibilities of compromise and reform had been completely exhausted,” and that this would involve “the disappearance of one’s own familiar world” (Sinha 53). Tagore wrote in 1941, in his last essay “Crisis in Civilization,” of a “new dawn” to come when the cataclysm was over (359). The end of the Second World War and of British rule in India did not bring that new dawn; another whole lifetime has passed since Tagore’s death and we are still waiting. I suggest in this article that we are waiting for the end of the modern era, which began at the end of the seventeenth century when Newtonian ideas of universal order began to be extended to “positive” and “rational” studies of human nature, history and progress (Cassirer 3-8). There have been critics of the Enlightenment from the beginning – the great historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, has written on three of them: Vico, Hamann and Herder. Berlin has also written, albeit briefly, on Tagore, not making any direct connection with these thinkers, but with a sense of a connection, perhaps with Herder in particular.

The trajectory of expectations of a Tagorean future has its origin at the birth centenary in 1961. Only twenty years after Tagore’s death, there were many people around who had known the poet in life. The handsome *Centenary Volume* produced by the Sahitya Akademi has a special section of contributions from his close relatives, friends and colleagues. The Introduction to the book is by Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, who writes that he grew up under Tagore’s influence, which he sees as an emotional and spiritual one (Nehru xiii-xvi). Contrasting Tagore with Gandhi, Nehru says: “Tagore was the poet and the singer; Gandhi was the man of action, the true revolutionary,” who “crept into the hearts of those who were disinherited and whose life was one long tale of unhappiness.” After musing over Tagore’s “outlook on life,” Nehru decides that Tagore, for all his Indianness, was “essentially a person of international mould and thinking,” who helped to break down the barriers of nationalism, which is apt to become a “narrowing creed,” “*and yet*,” Nehru writes, Tagore “believed firmly in a people growing from their own soil and according to their own genius” (xv). Those words “*and yet*” (my emphasis) are crucial to understanding Tagore’s “outlook on life” – and why it is that the hopes that were so high in 1961 were disappointed in 1986 and 2011. 1961 is a long time ago, and one is bound to wonder about the high hopes in 1961 for a Tagorean future – and what went wrong.

We can get a good idea of the kind of future for India Tagore wanted from one of the books which came out of the centenary celebrations. *Towards Universal Man* is a collection of eighteen representative essays, “containing a message for humanity,” with a lengthy eulogy on Tagore’s genius by Humayun Kabir, India’s Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs (Kabir 1-35). This was the first book on Tagore that I read, after hearing about him in 1990 from Marjorie Sykes, who had worked as a teacher at Santiniketan in the last years of Tagore’s life. She told me that Tagore was a deep ecologist, and quoted from his essay “City and Village,” where he relates an intriguing fable about how a race of greedy moon people had ruined their planet. “My imaginary selenites,” Tagore writes, “behave exactly in the way that human beings are today are behaving upon this earth” (314). I found a copy of the book containing that essay, and learned from it that Tagore’s vision of the new India meant reviving the life of its villages (Tagore 302-22). Some years later I found out more about his rural reconstruction projects when I carried out research on the Elmhurst Papers in the Dartington Hall Trust Archive. I recognised the approach which Tagore and Elmhurst had taken as essentially the same as relocalisation initiatives gradually attracting support worldwide in recent years. Since then I have been interested in making connections between Tagore enthusiasts and people currently engaged in his kind of world change.

Around the time of Tagore’s birth centenary, it may have seemed that his vision was being taken forward. According to Stanley Wolpert’s *A New History of India*, the new government of independent India launched its first “Community Development and Rural Extension programme” in 1951 on the anniversary of Gandhi’s birth (Wolpert, *A New History of India* 363). This was an ambitious programme, aimed at training workers “to help villagers ‘transform’ their socioeconomic lives through self-help” (Wolpert, *A New History of India* 363). This sounds similar to the work Tagore began in 1922 at Sriniketan, the department for rural reconstruction at his Visva-Bharati university (Das Gupta, “Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction”). Wolpert cites many reasons for little having been achieved by the Government programme, including “much effort and expenditure” going into “pouring concrete for urinals that were never used, digging new wells in locations whose drainage soon led to pollution” and generally “trying to teach old peasants new tricks” (Wolpert, *A New History of India* 363).

The emphasis on toilet facilities in the programme is presumably a reflection of one of Gandhi’s obsessions. We know from Wolpert’s book *Gandhi’s Passion* that the Mahatma was adamant that the work of “proper village sanitation and good hygiene” be shared by everyone, not left to “untouchable” sweepers (Wolpert, *Gandhi’s Passion* 179). One is reminded of the famous novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, where the hero is torn between obeying Gandhi, who says he must carry on cleaning the latrines along with everyone

else, including the brahmins, and the poet Iqbal who promises him liberation by “the flush system” (Anand 154-57). Interestingly, Tagore’s friend and colleague, Leonard Elmhirst, who was the first manager of Sriniketan, also made a point about latrines. He demonstrated that the disposal of human waste should be a responsibility shared by all Sriniketan students and staff by doing the sweeper’s work himself, after which the others joined in (Elmhirst 119-20). Even Tagore was moved, and he wrote to Elmhirst of the “filmy web of respectability that shuts me off from intimate touch with Mother Dust” and that “[i]t is something unclean like prudery itself to have to ask a sweeper to serve that deity who is in charge of the primal cradle of life” (Elmhirst 145-46).

Tagore, Gandhi, Elmhirst, and those involved in the Indian government “Community Development and Rural Extension Programme” may have agreed on “self-help” as a general idea, and on the importance of sanitation, but probably on little else. A key difference was one of scale. In “City and Village,” Tagore declares his belief in starting with only one or two villages, and aiming for joy, fellowship and loving kindness, as well as economic welfare.² The Government scheme involved 1,650 villages, 11 million peasants and 50,000 acres of land in its first year (Wolpert, *A New History of India* 363). And this was just the first scheme. Others were launched as part of the government’s first two Five Year Plans, with a view to “involving villagers in the actual process of nation building and development,” “raising total food-grain production” (Wolpert, *A New History of India* 364) to cope with increasing population pressure, and programmes of school building to raise levels of literacy. The scale of these plans makes Tagore’s “one or two villages” look pitiful, easily dismissed as the romantic poet’s whim, a view Gandhi shared, saying that “[t]he Poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation,” so his criticism (of the *charkha* as a cult) is just “a poet’s licence” (Gandhi 122-23).

The contribution made by Leonard Elmhirst to the *Centenary Volume* is one of the best accounts of the inspired but also practical philosophy behind Sriniketan (Elmhirst 12-26). The events themselves are well known, from how Elmhirst and the Poet met in New York in 1921, through Elmhirst’s work with a team of students and staff on the farm in Surul, discussions with Tagore about Gandhi’s campaign of non-cooperation, and Elmhirst’s travels with the Poet to China, Argentina and Italy. In 1961 Elmhirst published a collection of “essays and exchanges” entitled *Rabindranath Tagore, Pioneer in Education*, and in 1975, a year after Elmhirst’s death, *Poet and Plowman* was published with material from the Rabindra-Bhavana collection. The Tagore-Elmhirst correspondence,

² Reports on what was carried out on Tagore’s behalf show that over the fifty years from the 1890s to the end of his life when he was engaged in helping villages, on the family estates in East Bengal and later around Santiniketan, some hundreds of villages came to benefit (Uma Das Gupta, *Santiniketan and Sriniketan* and “Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction,” and Ahmed Rafique, “Tagore’s Thoughts on Village Development and Rural Reconstruction.”)

assembled by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson from the archives at Dartington and Santiniketan, was published in *Purabi*, commemorating fifty years since the Poet's death. That volume also includes an edited version of Uma Das Gupta's account of the Sriniketan Programme. (It is unfortunate that her extensive footnotes, which provide details of the impressive scope of the work, were stripped off for reasons of space.) As Das Gupta and others have put on record, Tagore was an ambitious innovator and a capable manager through decades of work in this area. This is good to know, but it is not the key to understanding why people still have high hopes of Tagore somehow delivering on his promises in a future "new dawn." The key is Tagore's insistence that his method only needs to be worked out fully in one village for his vision to be capable of being extended to the whole of India – and to the world.

Tagore's alternative comes from his lifelong "faith in man," which he never abandoned, even when he was near to despair over the outbreak of another war in Europe. In practical terms, what Tagore's faith amounts to is a confidence that people are capable of meeting their needs and solving their problems if they can get together in small enough communities, engaging cooperatively with each other, depending on local resources, and being in touch with nature – without closing themselves off from engagement with the wider world. This can be seen as a "political vision," as Radhakamal Mukherjee observes in his tribute to Tagore for his eightieth birthday:

One who has seen at work [Tagore's] rural education and reconstruction programme at Sriniketan cannot but appreciate the nobility, certitude and comprehensiveness of his political vision, in which agricultural co-operation and education, folk art, festival and pageant recreate themselves along with a free creative and self-governing peasantry that does not surrender itself to either bureaucratic inspection or socialistic regimentation. (96)

The political structure Tagore envisaged is set out in his "Presidential Address" of 1908:

Our aim must be to restore to the villages the power to meet their own requirements. We should combine a number of villages to form a regional unit. Self-government will become real only if the leaders of these units can make them self-reliant and capable of coping with the needs of their component villages. They must have their own schools, workshops, and granaries, their own co-operative stores and banks which they should be assisted to found and taught to maintain. Each community unit should have its common meeting place for work and play where its appointed headmen may hear and settle local disputes and differences. (Tagore, *Towards Universal Man* 118-19)

The key difference between Tagore's political vision and the Indian government's "Community Development and Rural Extension programme" in 1951 is that Tagore gives power: self-government and responsibility, primarily to the villages. This is Kropotkin-style "mutual aid" or anarchism, involving but not depending upon central government. Tagore explains in his well-known 1904 essay, *Swadeshi Swaraj* ("Society and State") that the tradition in India was that rulers waged wars and defended their territory, but everything else "from the supply of water to the supply of knowledge" was provided by society operating at local community level. In contrast "England relegates to State care all the welfare services in the country; India did that only to a very limited extent" ("Society and State" 49-50).

With such a system, the individual pockets of local self-reliance are bound to be very diverse, each one suited to the resources available in the local environment. It is this diversity which makes Tagore's thought echo that of critics of the Enlightenment such as Herder. According to Berlin:

Herder maintained that every activity, situation, historical period or civilisation possessed a unique character of its own; so that the attempt to reduce such phenomena to combinations of uniform elements, and to describe or analyse them in terms of universal rules, tended to obliterate precisely those crucial differences which constituted the specific quality of the object under study, whether in nature or in history. (Berlin, *Three Critics* 168)

I quoted earlier Nehru's remark that Tagore was "essentially a person of international mould and thinking [...] and yet he believed firmly in a people growing from their own soil and according to their own genius" (xv). If we combine this with Tagore's thinking in the two essays "Society and State" and "City and Village" in *Towards Universal Man*, we arrive at a model reminiscent of the slogan adopted by the environmental movement: "think globally, act locally." We see here Tagore's belief in "unity in diversity," which was the principle behind the university he established in 1921, named Visva-Bharati, from its motto *Yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam*: "Where the world meets in one nest." Tagore's initial intention for Visva-Bharati was that it would be "a natural expression of all that was best in Indian thought, arts, and civilization," but the conception advanced in three concentric circles: first India, then Asia and finally the world (Sykes 76-84).

Tagore's conception of the local and the global (but with no alienating and authoritarian cities and states in between) always had a deeply personal element. Returning to Elmhirst's "Personal Memories of Tagore" from 1961, what is vividly present besides the known facts is how Tagore's personality was

set free by this “utterly simple and intimate” friendship. Elmhirst shows us Tagore’s passion, his sense of fun, his teasing wit, and his principled stance on the politics of the day, brought out by his English friend’s understanding of Tagore’s vision and how to make it a reality, and his deep respect for the songs and spirituality bubbling up in the older man when he was “young and old at the same time” (Elmhirst 24). Significantly, Elmhirst closes with part of a letter Tagore wrote to him in 1940:

I often dream of those days when both of us sailed together great seas and found warm access to the hearts of strangers. We were not fully aware of the value of those facts of life, with such perfect ease they came to us. It proved the pervading health of human society and it was the time when things that were one with civilized life could easily be counted upon, as by right, ours.... History is waiting long for a perfect renewal of spirit through the elimination of short-sighted nationalism. (Elmhirst 26)

We see from the full text of this letter in *Purabi* that Elmhirst’s ellipsis has taken away Tagore’s harangue against the English as degenerate, power hungry, war-mongering mediocrities – sentiments he repeats in his well-known last essay “Crisis in Civilization.” The final sentence in the letter is “Nations decay and die when they betray their trust but long live Man” (Dutta and Robinson 118-19). The agony Tagore felt for the suffering and destruction in both world wars is evident in his writings on nationalism, and these texts can seem too polemical if we want to understand Tagore’s hopes for his own country and the world.³ I have mentioned that my initial exposure to Tagore’s ideas was through the essays in *Towards Universal Man*. It would appear that Isaiah Berlin had a similar induction. He was one of the nineteen “scholars in India, Europe and America who helped in the final selection” (*Towards Universal Man* 365-66) of which essays from a long list of thirty should be included in the volume. We also know that in 1961 Berlin addressed a conference in New Delhi held to mark the centenary of Tagore’s birth, and the text of his lecture entitled “Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality” was unpublished until 1996 (Berlin, *Sense of Reality* xi).

Berlin’s essay is a curious piece in that he makes surprisingly little reference to Tagore, remarking at one point on having “wandered far afield from Tagore” (Berlin, “Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality” 259). The collection which includes the essay is introduced by Patrick Gardiner, who notes that some of Berlin’s critics have complained of the absence of “any unitary ambitions or systematic pretensions” in his writings. In mitigation Gardiner observes that in Berlin’s vastly wide-ranging studies he

³ Elsewhere I have read Tagore’s *Nationalism* essays as constructive discourses on history, with resonances with his essay *Swadeshi Samaj* (“Society and State”) (Marsh 85-102).

“brought to life” the ideas of the past “by entering into the minds and viewpoints of the persons who held them” (Berlin, *The Sense of Reality* xiv). Gardiner’s insight helps us to navigate and understand Berlin’s Tagore essay.

Berlin begins with disclaimers about his ignorance of Indian history and being unable to appreciate Tagore’s poetry due to not knowing his language. Then follows a long passage with no mention of Tagore, which occupies over half the essay. When Berlin returns from his wandering thoughts back to Tagore, he states that “these reflections, such as they are, come from reading essays and addresses by him” (Berlin, “Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality” 259). Berlin evidently found the essays in *Towards Universal Man* thought provoking. (He presumably also looked at the other essays from the long list of thirty and, given the title of Berlin’s lecture, we may suppose he also read Tagore’s *Nationalism*.) The result is a meditation on what nationality has meant in the history of the world.

Berlin states his unwillingness “to praise or attack nationalism,” which is “responsible for magnificent achievements and appalling crimes” (Berlin, “Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality” 251). He finds other factors besides nationalism which have been “just as revolutionary, brutal and violent,” in particular religious or political ideology and “the pursuit of power by individuals and interests that are not national” (251). Then Berlin comments that nationalism is the strongest of the forces released by the French Revolution, stronger than “German romanticism, French socialism, English liberalism, European democracy [which] were compromised and distorted by it” (251). Berlin surveys the critical voices raised on behalf of nationalism’s many victims, but says that nationalism springs “from a wounded or outraged sense of human dignity, the desire for recognition” (252), and he gives examples, from “small States” to the poor and various groups and classes excluded by the powerful elite. He seems to be implying that India was not a special case in its struggle for independence; other peoples in the modern period have escaped the imperial yoke by forming themselves into nations.

Reading Berlin’s meandering discourse, one is impatient for him to make some mention of Tagore’s arguments about what has been lost due to nationalism, and he does so, but citing Ruskin, Morris, Marx and Proudhon, who have taught that “the roots of discontent lie... in the destruction of that solidarity which only close-knit societies give to their members” (255). Those western thinkers pointed out how “industrialisation and mechanisation leads to the disintegration of society, to degradation of the deepest human values – affection, loyalty, fraternity, a sense of common purpose – all in the name of progress, identified with order, efficiency, discipline, production” (Berlin, “Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality” 255). Tagore said much the same:

This history (of Man) has come to a stage when the moral man, the complete man, is more and more giving way, almost without knowing it, to make room for the political and the commercial man, the man of the limited purpose. This, aided by the wonderful progress in science, is assuming gigantic proportion and power, causing the upset of man's moral balance, obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organization. Its iron grip we have felt at the root of our life, and for the sake of humanity we must stand up and give warning to all, that this nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, eating into its moral vitality. (Tagore, *Nationalism* 16)

It seems paradoxical that Berlin sees the loss of traditional society as the driver behind demands for national recognition. When Berlin at last returns to Tagore, it is to say that the great poet's "vision of the difficult truth" in relation to his country's future was of the need to strengthen his country internally, "forging... the national links without which there is no great chain of all mankind" (Berlin, "Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality" 264). According to Berlin, Tagore saw internationalism as a noble ideal, which can only be achieved when every nation is strong enough to bear the required tension, hence a people "who are scattered, weak, humiliated, oppressed must first be collected, strengthened, liberated, given opportunity to grow and develop at least to some degree by their own natural resources, on their own soil, in their own languages, with unborrowed memories, and not wholly in perpetual debt, cultural or economic, to some outside benefactor" (264). This statement may have prompted Patrick Gardiner's comment that Berlin would have seen Tagore's nationalism as a benign example of Counter-Enlightenment doctrine (Berlin, *The Sense of Reality* xx).

Berlin has written that Herder "believed in kinship, social solidarity, *Volkstum*, nationhood, but to the end of his life he detested and denounced every form of centralisation, coercion and conquest, which were embodied and symbolised... in the accursed State. Nature creates nations, not States" (Berlin, *Three Critics* 181-2). Berlin also says of Herder that he "condemns the very wish to resurrect ancient ideals... [which] live and die with the social wholes of which they form an intrinsic part" (Berlin, *The Sense of Reality* 238). In a work on Herder which Berlin cites, G.A. Wells seems to take a different view, when he points out that Herder looks back approvingly to the Middle Ages:

Herder points out the inestimable advantage which [the mediaeval world] derived from being composed of a great number of small units, which made a uniform, centralized and despotic administration impossible.... Europe was populated and cultivated, for the feudal system greatly stimulated agriculture; lord and workman, king and subject were closer together than today; the lack of refinement so conspicuous in medieval

castles prevented an unhealthy growth of the towns; and the small amount of trade barred the way to excessive luxury. (Wells 16)

In “Society and State,” Tagore makes similar comments on traditional India, and in *Nationalism* he praises mediaeval Europe too:

In your mediaeval age in Europe, the simple and the natural man, with all his violent passions and desires, was engaged in trying to find out a reconciliation in the conflict between the flesh and the spirit. All through the turbulent career of her vigorous youth the temporal and the spiritual forces both acted strongly upon her nature, and were moulding it into completeness of moral personality. Europe owes all her greatness in humanity to that period of discipline, – the discipline of the man in his human integrity. (Tagore, *Nationalism* 33-34)

One of the most perceptive remarks which Berlin makes about Tagore, right at the end of his essay, is that “[i]n setting down his social and cultural and above all educational ideas, he tried to tell the complex truth without oversimplification, and to that extent was perhaps listened to the less” (“Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality” 266).⁴

We need to ask ourselves, what is Tagore’s “complex truth,” and what are the obstacles to our taking action in the way he both advocated and demonstrated? The action is easy to understand in principle. We have to rebuild society one village at a time, each one with its particular local character, which will be a combined reflection of the people involved and the place where they live. Tagore’s reasons why this is right – and inevitable – cannot be absorbed from any simple statement. I think perhaps he explains it best in “The Second Birth,” one of the essays in the collection *Personality* (Tagore 77-107).⁵

There have been Tagore specialists and other scholars who have made major contributions to understanding Tagore’s relevance to the challenges of today. I have mentioned Uma Das Gupta’s extensive research into the work that was done at Santiniketan and Sriniketan during Tagore’s lifetime. She has written that Tagore’s “lifelong endeavour with education in a remote corner of

⁴ This seems like an appreciative version of the quip Tagore is supposed to have made about himself: that inconsistency was both his greatest intellectual weakness and his greatest intellectual strength (Kripalani 176). Tagore scholar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, seeking to compare Tagore’s ideas on “Civilisation in the Indian Nationalist Discourse” with those of Gandhi and Nehru, takes one book each by those two: *Hind Swaraj* and *The Discovery of India*, but has to survey many essays from the 26 volumes of his collected works in order to distil Tagore’s “evolving perspective” on the subject (Bhattacharya, *Talking Back* 67).

⁵ *Personality* is subtitled “Lectures Delivered in America” although, as is well known, the essay “Nationalism in the West” in *Nationalism* is the text of the lecture (entitled “Nationalism” or “The Cult of Nationalism”) which Tagore gave over twenty times in 1916. He lectured on “The Second Birth” just once, in Urbana, Illinois, on 26 December that year (Sujit Mukherjee 212-13).

rural Bengal was intimately connected with his ideals of a non-parochial and ‘inclusive’ nationalism” (Das Gupta, *Oxford India Tagore* xxi). Das Gupta is alluding to an understanding of nationalism similar to that of Herder, who “insists over and over again that no one milieu or group or way of life is necessarily superior to any other; but it is what it is, and assimilation to a single universal pattern, of laws or language or social structure... would destroy what is most living and valuable in life and art” (Berlin, *Three Critics* 222-23).

Das Gupta is an historian, and so her scholarship has been concentrated on the details of what took place in the past, thereby producing invaluable material for those of us who are interested in taking Tagore’s ideas and practice forward. The area of Tagore’s endeavours which can most easily be related to present initiatives is alternative education, and the new schools movement. The way Tagore’s challenges to conventional education have inspired this movement is the focus of international studies by Professor José Paz. There is an indirect connection to Tagore in David Gribble’s study of “Real Education,” in that one of his case studies is Dartington Hall School, which was inspired by Tagore’s work (Gribble 23-40). Kathleen O’Connell has specialised in Tagore’s writings on education, and she contributed a very rich chapter to the 150th anniversary collection *The Poet and His World*, in which she brings in the theme of sustainability by relating Tagore’s intriguing fable about the irresponsible race of moon people (O’Connell 121-22).

Making a connection between Tagore’s rural reconstruction initiatives and world change today is not straightforward. Patrick Colm Hogan is Professor of English, Comparative Literature and the Program in Cognitive Science at the University of Connecticut, whose multidisciplinary approach makes possible the cognitive leap that is needed. Hogan is not a Tagore specialist, but he has edited collections on Tagore and written interestingly on his prose fiction. Hogan’s work on the understanding of nationalism takes us in an important new direction, that of “the politics of identity.” He makes a perceptive comment on Tagore in his introduction to the collection of essays *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition* which is worth quoting at length:

Tagore opposed any narrow identification with a group. Whether that group was religious or racial, whether it was a caste or nation. For Tagore, the function of such identification was invariably exclusion, hierarchy – and violence. That is why Tagore contrasted national independence with a deeper and more encompassing freedom that eschews the categories of what we now call “the politics of identity.” Drawing on the idioms of Hindu metaphysics – according to which all individual souls are ultimately identical in brahman, according to which all material differences are a web of *maya*, mere illusion – Tagore wrote that “Our fight” is not a battle for a new political entity, which can despise all other political entities. Rather, it is a struggle “for Man. We are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he

himself has woven round him – these organizations of national egoism.”
(Hogan, *Universality* 16)

In his writings on identity politics, Hogan employs a pair of contrasting terms. “Practical identity” is what we do or can do in relation to others, and in a traditional society it refers to someone’s useful role, his or her contribution to collective wellbeing, which always involves networks of direct interconnectedness. “Categorical identity” is a label, essentially vacuous, “our inclusion of ourselves in particular sets of people, our location of ourselves in terms of in-group/out-group divisions” (Hogan, *Understanding Nationalism* 8). Categorical identities define communities in ways that include people who have no contact, or useful relationship, with each other. Nationalism is a particularly powerful categorical identity, religion is another. Tagore has observed that professionalism and specialisation have similar defects and dangers, bringing a narrow, impersonal rigidity to the modern world (Tagore, *Creative Unity* 145-46). Hogan finds an important connection between the “in-group/out-group divisions” of categorical identity and researches in cognitive neuroscience which have shown that people experience antipathy and even hostility towards people in an out-group, even when the grouping is entirely arbitrary and artificial – perhaps contrived for experimental purposes (Hogan 5-6). One thinks of Tagore’s concern that protests and disputes lead to violence, even when they are supposedly based on the principle of non-violent non-cooperation (Bhattacharya, *Mahatma and Poet* 54-62).

I see a relevance of Hogan’s ideas and terminology to expectations of Tagore’s new dawn. Hogan writes of a trend away from cohesive practical identities in traditional societies towards divisive categorical identities in modern, urban-industrial society. I have witnessed over the past twenty years of my own involvement as an activist, pockets of reversal of this trend. I mentioned earlier Tagore’s principle of starting with “just one village,” and one might think that urbanisation has advanced so strongly that rural reconstruction in such terms no longer looks viable. However, what is happening instead is a crystallisation of urban neighbourhoods into communities interested in building self-reliance. This is taking place in pockets of inner cities, and in suburbs, towns and villages, in many countries of the world.

I have been involved in three manifestations of this trend: the permaculture movement, which is an approach to designing for sustainability (Mollison 1-9); the transition network, which is directed at planning for independence from fossil fuels (Hopkins 13-16); and most recently the emerging interest in urban agriculture, a local food movement based in cities (<http://www.urbanfoodjustice.org>). I see these initiatives as parts of a Counter-Enlightenment trend which would benefit from being connected to Tagore’s legacy. We need his “faith in humanity,” his belief in “unity in diversity” with

his emphasis on celebrating the diversity rather than a “colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 5).

We are all aware that the world is faced with an ecological crisis, with climate change, land degradation and water shortages giving rise to suffering and conflict, and even threatening human survival. For many years I have been interested in the work of Lester Brown and others who have been warning since the 1960s of the limits to economic growth (Meadows 9-12). Brown is president of the Earth Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., and he sets out the global policies needed to avert this crisis in his *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse*. Anthony Pagden, in his recent book *The Enlightenment and Why It Still Matters*, seems to have similar hopes of “the modern conception of the global society,” which he says we owe to the Enlightenment. His focus is on human rights rather than the ecological crisis, but he is emphatic that cosmopolitan institutions such as the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, International Maritime Organization and others are going to be crucial for the twenty-first century, and that “the central Enlightenment belief in a common humanity” is superior to belonging to “the community, family, parish or patria” (Pagden 349-50). But we know that inter-governmental agreements have a history of failure and compromise. Brown cites only one area where progress is actually being made, and that is the “local food movement” (Brown 175-78). This shows how beneficial change takes place when people get together to find ways of meeting their needs locally, which is the approach Tagore advocated a century ago.

I have argued that Tagore was a “Critic of the Enlightenment,” but one must not take that to mean that he rejected the achievements of modernity. Gandhi, of course, wanted India to “discard modern civilization,” and declared that railways, hospitals, law courts, “all machinery and mills” are “[a]t best a necessary evil” (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* 2-3). Tagore condemned dehumanising systems in the modern world, but he welcomed its science and technology. We see this in his essay “An Eastern University”:

Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of the intellectual life of India, but the centre of her economic life also. It must co-operate with the villages round it, cultivate land, breed cattle, spin cloths, press oil from oil-seeds; it must produce all the necessities, devising the best means, using the best materials, and calling science to its aid. Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial activities carried out on the co-operative principle, which will unite the teachers and students and villagers of the neighbourhood in a living and active bond of necessity. This will give us also a practical industrial training, whose motive force is not the greed of profit. (Tagore, *Creative Unity* 200-1)

This is an inspiring and not unrealistic vision. One can imagine a Tagorean future where every village is a university and every university a village. Tagore wrote in 1922 that “in the present age, with its facility of communication, geographical barriers have almost lost their reality” (Tagore, *Creative Unity* 171), and I am sure that he would have welcomed the internet, delighted at how it enables the urban and rural communities working for self-reliance and harmony with the planet to inform and inspire each other. As I have indicated, alternative approaches to education, food growing and self-reliance are well advanced, but take up of these initiatives is too slow, given the scale of the crisis we face. There is still a tendency for people to assume that change is a matter of policy, to be decided at some remote national or international level. Tagore’s vision and his faith in humankind are needed to encourage and inspire those working locally for change, cooperatively and creatively, one village or city neighbourhood at a time.

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