



LISTENING to TAGORE...

Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

Aseem Shrivastava connects Tagore's perspectives on nature with the crying need today for a philosophy for an Ecological age.

It is fascinating to see how poets experience the world in their exquisite description of nature. The immediate humanization and personification of the moon in a passage by Tagore tells us a lot about the way he perceived things. We see both the naturalisation of humans and the humanisation of Nature that Tagore seems to experience in a simultaneous process.

Much of Tagore's work primarily describes the various ways of looking at the relationship between nature and human beings; there is a lot of spontaneity and expression of free spirit in the life of Tagore. No doubt it had something to do with his having had the courage to step out of Macaulay's education system at the age of 14. He had his ears so firmly planted to the earth that he was able to connect with many things that most of us would miss.

Our lives in cities on the other hand are a far cry from such a connection with Nature. A poster I have seen encapsulates what is considered "normal" today; getting dressed in clothes to get ready for work, driving through terrible traffic in a car that you are still paying for in order to get to the work, so that you can afford the house you leave vacant all day to get to the

work you do. That's the definition of life in its maturation today.

The period before the earth was circumnavigated by the earth explorers - first the Chinese and the Europeans, had a different perspective. Our relationship as a species with the natural world before the 15th century was one where we were dominated by nature; we were subject to elements much more, life span was short and infant mortality high.

By the time we reach the well springs of the Industrial Era, towards the end of the 18th century, ideas of conquest of nature were certainly on the march. As we traverse into the 19th century, the vision of Francis Bacon

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matured and the human species began dominating nature to such an extent that people believed that we could conquer other planets as well.

Being responsive to Nature as well as Human needs

Today, humanity needs to redefine its relationship with nature in order to determine a new balance where neither are we dominated by nature and nor do we dominate nature. The word I would like to use is *anthropo-responsiveness*. This basically means catering to our deepest and highest faculties, calling to our spiritual nature, other than our material nature, where we cautiously experiment to look at alternative ways. A very clear and vivid example of this is what has been undertaken by Mr Wangchuk in his work in Ladakh. [See extracts from Mr. Wangchuk's talk at the Yugaantar Workshop in page 24 of this issue]. We live today in Yugaantar - the cusp of Industrial Age and Ecological age, an age of transition. The man-made world rests on the foundations of fossil fuel that is very strictly non-renewable. So it seems obvious that the challenge is how do we make the human economy align with Nature's rhythms and cycles. However, the prevailing modern belief is that we are smarter than Nature, that we can conquer Nature.

How did this come about?

We often forget that war is at the heart of the ecological crisis. From the times of Columbus and Vasco de Gama entire economies have been designed on a system of warfare and conquest. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that competition was and continues to be a cardinal value. War becomes a practice of daily life as it is visible in the ways people drive on the streets or the way parliament functions. It is either you or me but never us. The fact that both may be wrong never enters our imagination.

The core value that I am trying to question here is the one concerned with a kind of monarchy. There is a monarch in all of us with dreams fueled by the temptations and seductions of power- "I can do anything, I can do everything, the sky's the limit and not the Earth." This is the prevailing definition of freedom. So one doesn't have to take nature, cosmos and other elements of the ecosystem into account because one subconsciously, over the generations believes in the idea of becoming the conquerors and masters of the universe. Something that our children grow up learning through their schools, television screens and films.

Wholeness, Reciprocity and Renewal

The three key words which I would now like us to deliberate upon are Wholeness, Reciprocity and Renewal. We often use Wholeness interchangeably with Totality, Reciprocity with Exchange and Renewal with Sustainability, though they are very contrasting and mean very different things.

Modern society thinks of exchange as a one on one affair wherein I do something for you and you do something for me. Reciprocity on the other hand is for the group together and it is the product of the ancient past, the distant future, the present, the otherness, the ecology and the cosmos, much of what we owe others and the rest of the nature.

Is there a way we can think of passing it on? One has to ask oneself, what is it that has truncated our vision that we cannot see anymore the wisdom handed down to us by tradition. Can those things be restored? Can we have a greater sense of reciprocity in our lives, in our economic system? Renewal is not the same as sustainable. The whole gamut of Sustainable Development was conceived by the UN. Briefly, sustainability is really about the way the powerful elites have

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adjusted the public rhetoric regarding the emerging ecological realities to keep the same economic system going.

The word Renewal gears us towards renewable energy or to shift and adapt to the natural rhythms around us. For instance, renewal is about how one doesn't mess with the water or the soil cycle. Nothing is more disastrous than the modern human sanitation systems because it interferes with the soil and water cycles. When we talk of renewal, it is not just ecological but also cultural renewal. This would imply borrowing some aspects of traditions of our part of the world which will serve our needs best. What of the past are we rejecting and why; what of the present are we choosing and why? What are good beliefs and practices, what are not? That choice has to be democratically undertaken, it can't be done from the top. And so all that that is coded in the word Renewal is not implied in the word Sustainability. Sustainability talks about how long can we keep going the way we are going and what all can we go on doing without our children getting terribly hurt?

The idea of wholeness is extremely important and it should be distinguished from the idea of totality. For example, when we talk of infinity, we may imagine counting and hitting against it - but it's a concept that cannot be measured. Works of poets like Tagore enable you to see things that are otherwise not visible. There is something greater in a sense of wholeness, something one cannot own and it exists as it is. When you have accessed that, consider yourself fortunate.

Totality on the other hand is literally total. Its when you have desacralized nature and when trees are solely stands of timber and when you total it up and add it to number of planks generated. IBM's marketing theme of building a smarter planet

has innumerable hidden meanings attached to it. It sends a message that, in the near future, technosphere will take over the biosphere - which would actually render millions of people redundant and aid a privileged few. This is exactly the opposite and rejection of wholeness.

But, the hunger for wholeness is inevitable and in one way or the other, we find it in the search for unity. Political leaders have managed to galvanize human emotions in the direction of a fake unity around totality and material success which surpasses seeing the wholeness of humans, their emotions and spirit.

These distinctions between wholeness and totality, renewal and sustainability and reciprocity and exchange are needed to understand what's going wrong in the way we view nature, human society and its politics. It goes without saying that philosophies for an ecological age need to be embedded in wholeness, renewal and reciprocity.

The whole issue of philosophy for an ecological age is connected with the question, what is nature? What would we include or exclude in nature? Where is the breath? Is it in us or in nature? One needs to understand the significance of breathing in order to have a different view than the normal. Where is it located? There is no inside or outside with breathing. It is the most fundamental process which every living creature is a part of. We can evolve a meaningful philosophy for a new Yuga only with a deeper understanding of our oneness with Nature.

This I am sure is the essential message of poets like Tagore.

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