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Contextualizing Environmentalism in South Asia: Contributions and Relevance of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract

This paper tries to locate the failure of successful environmental policy implementations in this region by challenging the ontological paradigm of creating a 'real world' within the bounds of a single universal rationalism (i.e. post-enlightenment European ideals). Here, we argue on the need to accept the reality of a multipolar and multidimensional world, so we could provide different solutions for the challenges of environmentalism in different parts of the world, based on their historical evolutions and philosophical foundations.

In this respect Rabindrath Tagore's ideas are of vital significance. From his entire creative world, we can discover Tagore's deep empathy for nature. He had merged the ideas of environmentalism with the tradition of India. Even being a chief advocate of using scientific technology for human progress, he had entirely rejected the idea to do so at the cost of natural environment. In one of his famous plays, 'Mukhta Dhara', he has severely criticized the technocratic tendency of contemporary civilization.

The paper seeks to explore the Tagorean idea of Environmentalism and suggest few policy imperatives based on the same. In addition to this, the paper also seeks to investigate how far indigenous outlook is successful in case of initiatives of environmentalism. The

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research methodology here is inductive in nature. It is constructive and interpretive respectively for ontology and epistemology.

Key Words- *Environmentalism, Indigenous approach, Self and Other, South Asia.*

Introduction

To challenge any ontological dominant paradigm two things should have to be necessitated. Primarily the palpable gap of culture must be recognized between two civilizations. And in addition to that one should put major emphasis on the construction of identities. Now, it is kind of a parallax to concentrate on identities while talking about some policy formulations, particularly in case of ‘Universal’ ‘Objective’ notions like Environmentalism. However, as we know neuro-scientific optics have long recognized that ‘culture is a part of our brain’ [Kakar, 2007], even the domains like pure science, cannot escape the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’.

Talking about the basic cultural difference between ‘South Asian world’ and the ‘Real World’, context-sensitivity could be recognized as phenomenal [Ramanujan, 1989]. Apart from that, several other philosophical prisms such as ‘the sense of interior-exterior’, the idea of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ and the notion of ‘Space’ are also important. Before pursuing our main area of discussion (applicability of Tagorean ideas of Environmentalism in South Asian context), these philosophical areas of Environmentalism should have to be demarcated and identified as diverse from its Western ‘Universal’ counterpart.

What Tagore offers, we’ll argue is not only a ‘South Asian’ kind of Environmentalism but also a blending of Eastern and Western philosophical terrain of the same. Though, in case of ‘context sensitive’ societies these admixtures of different cultural designs were also common and part of the value system.

In this paper, we’ll focus on primarily the philosophical areas of Environmentalism and why an indigenous Environmentalism is essential for South Asia. These discussions will

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smoothen the path to show the possibilities of implementation of the ideas of Tagore in this field.

Philosophical areas of Environmentalism:

We'll start our discussion with the concepts of interior and exterior. Now, it is also correlated with the construction of the 'Self' and the 'Other'. It postulates the theoretical underpinning about how a South Asian sees the Nature. Let me offer a quote from the famous book *A Passage to India*:

Going to hang up her cloak, she found the tip of the peg was occupied by a small wasp. She had known this wasp or his relatives by song; they were not as English wasps, but had long yellow legs which hung down behind when they flew. Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch --- no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon as nest inside the house as out, it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternatively produces, trees, houses, trees. There he clung, asleep, which jackals bayed their desires and mingled with the percussion of drums. [Foster, 1952: p.35].

These remarkable contemplations of Mrs Moore provide us a substantial idea of what is the 'Space' in Indian psyche. This also demonstrates the peculiarity of the South Asian philosophical sphere.

The post-renaissance dominant Western ideologies has some idiosyncrasies. In case of defining modernity, the materialist outlook discarding the imaginary world is prime. The secular viewpoints are predominant, thus religion loses its social prisms and becomes 'Objective' (like Protestant Christianity). Interestingly the anthropocentrism of post-enlightenment thoughts, i.e., "whereby an intrinsically human order of knowledge and reason, agency and subjectivity, appears to be self-evidently distinct from a non-human order of 'Nature', from a mere "environment" of inert "resources", subjectless "processes" and

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enclosable “property.” [Anderson, 2015] are the basic elements of it. And obviously, the recognition of individualistic rather than community centric life becomes a norm.

These notions stumble in South Asian societies, thus our sense of modernity becomes problematic. The dilemmas have narrativized in several modes which reflects our existence, most prominently in literature, education system, environment, food habits, polity, religion, health and society. Partha Chatterjee has contextualized this sphere in his essay ‘Our modernity’ [Chatterjee, 1997], drawing examples from Rajnarayan Basu’s ‘Se Kaal Aar E Kaal’ to Kalyani Datta’s ‘Thod Badi Khada’. How the South Asian mind relate the process of modernity and environmentalism and health care could be indicated through a quotation of Rajnarayan:

Before people would travel from Calcutta to Tribeni, Santipur and other villages for a change. Now those places have become unhealthy because of the miasma known as malaria... For various reasons it appears that there is a massive environmental change taking place in India today. That such change will be reflecting in the physical strength of the people is hardly surprising. [Chatterjee, 1997]

And there are many everyday narratives which corroborates this. Invariably, therefore, the general tendency to relate all the turmoil in the South Asian society with modernity is evident. The cultural gap is playing a vital role here. The South Asian mind does not understand the rational ‘real world’ and searches its panacea in the traditional past.

Again rationality is not a monolithic term. Problem commences by identifying the ‘non-modern’ world as mythical. Challenging the rigid myopic optics is crucial for this.

An aseptic outlook to the multidimensional world, consequently, have to be context-sensitive. Here enters the inevitability of indigenous theories. We’ll come to that under the next heading, before that, another important contour should have to be addressed by now, that is, the South Asian ideas of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’.

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Contrary to the Western extremely opposite 'Other'¹, the South Asian traditional philosophies perceives the 'Other' as a member of a family. The Vedic sermon, which describes 'World as a family' or 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', uniquely intertwines several 'Selves' as a part of the larger 'Self' i.e. the God. This exclusive construction of identity, therefore, explains how the Nature is related with the South Asian soul. Where the dominating individualistic ontological paradigm excludes the 'Other', the society centric 'South Asian World' philosophically embraces the 'Other' as a part of 'Us'. This methodological difference in exploring the world, hence, provide the 'Space' where one can blur the landscape of 'interior and exterior'; the 'Self' and the 'Other'.

Culture as a part of life delivers ample day to day instances how South Asian households, even urban ones, intermingle with Nature². In case of villages, Nature is a part of life in a more robust manner³. Thus any initiative of environmentalism must borrow these unique philosophical characterisation in mind, arguably, to be successful.

Indigenous Theories and Environmentalism:

For generations now, Philosophers and thinkers shaping the nature of social science have produced theories embracing the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind----- that is, those living in non-Western cultures. This in itself is not paradoxical, for the more self-conscious of European philosophers have always sought theoretically to justify this stance. The everyday paradox of third world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of 'Us', eminently understanding our societies. [Chakrabarty, 1992]

Starting a paragraph with a large quotation may seem odd, although, Dipesh Chakrabarty here mutinously identified the problem of a dominant ontology. This theoretical jurisprudence where the basic parameters and tools to make anything intelligible and communicable are the notions of post-enlightenment rationality is indeed awkward.

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Nevertheless, the subjects with inadequate paradigms have a severe problem to contextualise the juxtaposition. As we lack mechanism to define a theme, often it becomes a mammoth task.

We have already briefly discussed under the previous heading about the different ontological paradigms of different 'Worlds'. Perhaps to overcome this chasm the ideas of the thinkers of the 'fringe' civilisations are vital. According to Raweyn Connell "Debates among the colonized societies are unreferenced, and social process is analysed in an ethnographic time-wrap." [Connell, 2007: p.44]. Mignolo similarly have acknowledged that "the Third World produced not only "cultures" to be studied by anthropologists and ethnohistorians but also intellectuals who generate theories and reflect on their own culture and history." [Mukherjee, 2015]

To put it in another way, the motif of the South Asian societies could be changed by implementing the ideas of its indigenous thinkers in policy formulations. The advantage of such a project is that, there is a possibility to understand the dynamics of a society to which the author is himself a part of. Secondly, different methodologies could be useful to illustrate a 'differently communicable' society. Historically, there was a suppression on the intellectual thoughts of the peripheries, either through exoticizing or through silencing. A multi-theoretical world is indispensable for a multidimensional world.

Environmentalism in today's world relies on Western scientific parameters, for example the schemes like carbon trading are completely based on the post-enlightenment materialistic notions. Here the anthropocentric behavioural science philosophically divides Nature as the 'Other' and it is only to serve the 'Self'. Thus, any initiative is for the purpose of human development only. On the other hand, as Ramanujan has described the Indian narratives encompasses "a taxonomy of landscapes, flora and fauna, and of emotions----- an ecosystem of which a man's activities and feelings are a part. To describe the exterior landscape is also to inscribe the interior landscape. What the man has, he is; the landscape which he owns, in which he lives represents him; it is his property, in more sense than

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one.”[Ramanujan, 1989] Thus, even the objects are ‘beings’ in the South Asian logical domain. Again daily activities are self-evident, borrowing the tradition of Ayudhpuja (worship of the weapons) South Asians still today worship their books, vehicles, for instance. The concept of the ‘Other’ is different, therefore. The ‘Other’ here is a part of the ‘Self’ in a broader context, for that reason, anything, even being an ‘object’ in nature, could be considered as ‘alive’. In such a case to combat the environmental degradations cannot be done, properly, without keeping these philosophical underpinnings in mind. So, an isolated universal action could give rise to critical dilemmas, whereby simple community-centric decentralized ventures may become helpful. The base of South Asian civilization was always social, differing to the political Western World [Choudhury, 2013]. Any solutions to the problems in these territories, thus, bear the community-centric broader dynamics.

Tagore’s Environmentalism

In the background resides the question *why Tagore?* The crucial point of rendition follows his ability to philosophically synthesize and contextualize each problem in accordance with the need of the society. At this juncture the real dislocation required to be addressed is the ontological fissure between different worldviews. Tagore’s solution was that, “You must apply your Eastern mind, your spiritual strength, your love of simplicity, your recognition of social obligations in order to cut out a new path for this great unworldly car of progress shrieking out its loud discords at it runs.” [Tagore, 1917]. I would like to mark this ‘social obligations in order to cut out a new path’ part in bold. It exerts the ‘context-sensitivity’ of the South Asian society empirically recognized by Shweder (1972) and others⁴. Over again, this context sensitivity enables the overlapping, recreation and assimilation of different cultures. Tagore is important as he corresponds with this theme.

Radhakrishnan rightly pointed out once, that one of the important sources of Tagore’s philosophy was ancient eastern literature, particularly Upanishad [Radhakrishnan, 1919: p2]. Following this line Dyson wrote,

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Though Tagore was not a systematic philosopher, he is of considerable relevance as a thinker, one of those farseeing individuals whose ideas show us the way forward in the modern world and who are going to gain importance as time passes. Those who are interested in 'deep ecology' should find him a very congenial thinker. A 'Green' to his core long before the term was coined, he was what is nowadays called a holistic thinker, never forgetting the whole even while concentrating on the parts. His Upanishadic background made him constantly aware of the interconnectedness of all things in the cosmos. He saw human beings as part of the universe, not set apart from it, and knew that the human species must live in harmony with its natural environment. [Dyson, 1991: p.26]

From his entire creative world, we can discover Tagore's deep empathy with nature. He merged the ideas of environmentalism with the tradition of India, "The Indian mind never has any hesitation in acknowledging its kinship with nature, its unbroken relation with all."⁵ He considered human beings, floras, faunas; animals are the part of a single supreme energy. Tagore was compassionate with nature, according to him "the earth, water and light, fruits and flowers, to her were not merely physical phenomena to be turned to use and then left aside. They were necessary to her in the attainment of the ideal of perfection, as every note is necessary to the completeness of the symphony."⁶ Even being a chief advocate to use scientific technology for human progress, he had entirely rejected the idea to do so at the cost of natural environment. In one of his famous play 'Mukhta Dhara', he criticized severely the technocratic tendency of contemporary civilization. "There is a notable parallelism between Mukhta-Dhara and the battle environmentalists fight today, inter alia against gigantism of dams on rivers." [Bhattacharya, 2011: p.157].

These ideals of environmentalism echoed in Tagore's activities. He, with his son, started 'Vriksharopan Utsab' (Tree Planting Festival) at Shantiniketan. His concerns towards

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environment compelled him to say “Dao Phire Se Aranya Lao E Nagar” (Give back those woods, take away these cities) [Bhattacharya, 2011: p.358].

Tagore wrote several songs and poems as a part of Vriksharopan Utsab. His love for nature had flourished in those works; nature was equated with the ‘Self’:

Thou, robust life, flying flag, in space
Of the conquest of the deserts,
Bless the dusts of the earth, consecrate,
With your gracious mercy, soft line, the insignificant dust.⁷

Back to the theoretical dice, the Tagorean environmentalism acknowledges the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ by decentring the nucleus from anthropocentrism to the idea of ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’; “the chasm between life and non-life, between human and non-human” is blended and received communicably, and “arouses his sensibility and prepares him for a deeper vision.” [Tagore, 1931: p.63]. Stories like ‘Balai’ turns out to be a mirror of this philosophic prism, where he submits the confluence of the ‘Self’ human and ‘Other’ nature in way to shuffle the interior and exterior gripping. “Tagore does not accept the Western emphasis on dualism between natural and human realms. In contrast he argues that “it is like diving the bud and the blossom into two separate categories and putting their grace to the credit of two different and antithetical principles.” [Nayak, 2008: p.22]. The ‘Space’ is claimed to be flexible; “the kinship of man with conscious and unconscious creations alike.” [Tagore, 2002: p5]

Interestingly, we may witness Tagore citing Vedic hymns during the Vriksharopan Utsab. It strikes the area of intimacy towards the root, but more profoundly, amplifies the recognition towards the civilizational culture. Here these hymns identify the existence of a ‘live’ Nature, opposing the idea of the ‘slave’ Nature.

Conclusions

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The threats in this region are not only coming from the political or economic sphere but from the nature too. South Asia is one of the most environmentally vulnerable regions. Maldives is presumed to be submerged in the sea if the sea level rises at this rate⁸. Nepal and Bhutan both will be affected in similar fashion through glacier melting caused by environmental pollution and global warming. Bangladesh is already a flood prone zone⁹. One of the reports on climate change says that the major victims of climate change are going to be Bangladesh and India¹⁰.

It is, surely difficult to claim that a shift of philosophical base could provide panacea. Rather the historical evolution shows the desirability of a context free society and India is of no exception [Ramanujan, 1989]. We are not claiming here the ideas of Tagore as the ultimate solutions, but nevertheless his notions are empirically applicable and at par with the culture of the region. Thus, there are possibilities of empirical success. For example, shifting the individualistic materialistic paradigm to a community based solemn festive model, like Vriksharopan Utsab, may be more acceptable for a South Asian World. A school like traditional Visva Bharati is also a viable model where a rejuvenation between Nature and Man could be possible. This may establish a practical recognition of the cultural 'interior-exterior' pattern between Nature and the 'Self' in South Asian societies. These could provide an exemplary framework to reduce the dilemmas of 'non-modern' societies, therefore much emphasis is needed in these directions.

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End Notes

¹ "Sartre's famous statement 'hell is the other' carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defines one's identity as identity against the other either to be appropriated or to be destroyed" Indra Nath Choudhury

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- ² I am inclined to offer several examples that how South Asian dwelling houses, offices and hostels are also home of stray dogs, stray cats and other animals. There is a general tendency to consider these places as the homes of these creatures too along with the humans.
- ³ ‘Mahesh’ a short story written by Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay may be offered as an excellent example here to show that how ‘interior-exterior’ areas of relationship have been blurred in rural India and for that matter in South Asia.
- ⁴ Oriya and American societies studied by Richard Shweder (1972) explores that there is a tendency of using generic words to describe people among Americans, Oriyas on the other hand mark persons more with a context specific description.
- ⁵ Sadhana p.5 cited in S. Radhakrishnan *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p.17
- ⁶ Sadhana p.7 cited in S. Radhakrishnan. *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. London: Macmillan, 1919), p.18
- ⁷ Tagore, Brikshoropan Utsab, Banabani, Rabindra Rachanabali, VIII, 114 cited in Amartya Mukhopadhyay. *Politics, Society and Colonialism: An Alternative Understanding of Tagore's Responses*. New Delhi: Cambridge, 2010. p.359
- ⁸ From underwater, Maldives sends warning on climate change, CNN, Oct 17, 2009
[<http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/10/17/maldives.underwater.meeting/>]
- ⁹ In flood prone Bangladesh, a future that floats, 28 Sept,2007,Seattletimes
[http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2003909268_bangladesh28.html]
- ¹⁰ ‘Climate change is serious for India, says expert, The Hindu, Dec 2012; Kolkata, Mumbai in top ten climate change risk cities, The Indian Express, Nov 16 2012

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