Tagore’s Aesthetic Visions: Pioneer of Geo-Environmental Awareness

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Abstract:

‘We do not honor the worth of nature until it’s dry’. We, almost at each and every stage often forget the contribution of nature by exploiting its pristine quality. Our obnoxious foot-prints on the heart of the earth prove this through pollution, desertification, deforestation, waste dumping, biodiversity loss, industrialization, urbanization, concretization and so many environmental problems. Nature, in turn, being compelled exerts adverse impact to us. Realizing the painful destiny of nature along with its inhabitant, the great noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore spread the awareness vista for geo-environmental concerns among people during 19th century. His geo-environmental visions were framed in aesthetic sense depicted in his all poems, lyrics, dramas, prose etc. which can demand distinct entity and may be applied at present perspectives by making people aware about the values of the environment. Authors have tried to establish here the aptness of the Tagore’s literary works at present degrading scenario of environmental quality to extend his ever-lasting ideas of environmental conservation.

Keywords: Biodiversity, aesthetic, lyrics.

Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore was the first non-European Nobel laureate. His poetry in translation was viewed as spiritual, and this together with his mesmerizing persona gave him a prophet-like aura. His "elegant prose and magical poetry" remain largely unknown outside Bengal. A Pirali-Brahmin from Kolkata, Tagore had been writing poetry since he was eight years old. At age 16, he published his first substantial poetry under the pseudonym Bhanushingho and wrote his first short stories and dramas in 1877. His efforts endure in his vast canon and in the institution he founded, Visva-Bharati. His novels, stories, songs, dance-dramas, and essays spoke to political and personal topics. Gitanjali (Song Offerings), Gora, and Ghare-Baire are his best-known works, and his free verse, short stories, and novels were acclaimed for their lyricism, naturalism, and contemplation. Tagore penned two national anthems: India’s “Jana Gana Mana…” and Bangladesh's “Amar Shonar Bangla...”. Tagore considers nature and human life as integral part of the single unit or of the universe. So Tagore emphasizes symbiosis and symmetry between man and all other aspects of the world i.e. plants or other animate world, the earth, atmosphere and the rest of the universe. The whole universe has a specific beauty (aesthetic). To feel this beauty Tagore spends lots of time on the boat in River Padma (in recent Bangladesh). According to his demand a gorgeousness boat was constructed like a house and in which a room was built up. Tagore was trying to search the matter, what is aesthetic? When he was failure to search the answer, on that time fortunately he closed his book that was reading with the help of candle light. After that he saw an outstanding miracle that is; an aura is penetrating in his boat-room from the way of open window of the boat-room in new moon night. After that he came out from his room and saw that the full moon light was reflected from the Padma’s water and that reflected aura is incoming into the boat room and he gain or realized the reality of the aesthetic. So aesthetic is the beauty and to feel it you have to open your own aspiration and have to free from the all types of ripus or addiction like: greed, jealousy, pride, lust on material world and this one was largely governed the human’s desire, demand and aspiration. Tagore felt ‘the smell of grasses, soil and the
temperature of earth and he realized that the earth spreading her exhale on me and also may my breathe out is falling or touching to earth’s body’ (1891, Chinnyapatryabali 23). So anything is incomplete without aesthetic. For example a calendar becomes more glorified when the calendar is formatted with dates and pictures. A drinking water glass will be the more beautiful when some design will be portrait on the outer body of the glass. His geo-environmental vision was framed on the basis of aesthetic parameter. In his all poem, lyric, drama, prose etc. artistic praiseworthy situation has been depicted. Tagore’s is a mind extremely responsive and sensitive to nature. Throughout his poems, songs, dramas, we meet bright sunshine, mellow evening, calm night and many other aspects of nature which reflects the actual and pristine quality of nature. Tagore is not only concerned with the harmony of social relations. But also with people’s harmony with nature (Sengupta, 2005). In Tagore’s philosophy environmental ethics emerges from the aesthetic of environment (James, 1999). He wants to convey by his notion of surplus. This insistence on surplus gives us the clue as to why the environment matters to Rabindranath (Palmer, Cooper, Corcoran, 2001). The relation between aesthetic and literature could be intimate at the same time intricate (Ghosh, 2000). In present age, according to Tagore, is characterized by aesthetic reaction, evident in man’s narrowness of perception which result in the division of his aesthetic awareness into beauty and ugliness (Sharma & Sharma, 1988).

Literature Review:

To shape the whole work we studied different poems, lyrics, articles and dramas of Rabindranath Tagore and also various books those have been published of several authors on environmental ideas through Tagore’s geo-environmental awareness. The lists of Tagore’s writing those have been reviewed here are: lyric no.94 (prem paryay), song no.46 (Bichitra), song no.205 (puja parjal) and Lyric no.12 (Anusthanic Paryay) of Geetabitan, poem no. VI of The Gardener, poem Sabhyatar Prati Chaitali (1895), poem Pakshi-Manav of Nava Jatak (1940), poem Proshno of Sanchayita (1931), poem no.48 of Gitanjali (1909), poem no. 44 of SeshSaptak of 1936, poem Vyoma of Banabani (1928), poem Durakanksha of Chitra (1896) and the essay Aranya Devata, the article Tapavana and Bilaser Pha’ns, Prakriti Paryay, drama Muktadhara (1922) and Raktarakabi (1925). The other documents or books are ‘Rabindranath Tagore’ of S.K.Ghosh in 2006, ‘Ethical perspectives on environmental issues in India’ of A. James in 1999, ‘Fifty Thinkers on the environment’ of J. Palmer, D.E.Cooper and P.B.Corporan in 2001. To analyze the acceptance of Tagore’s aesthetic thoughts in recent days different data has been collected from different newspaper like from ‘Anandabazar patrica’, ‘Telegraph’ and ‘Bartaman’. Also we collected relevant photographs of Tagore from Internet websites. To feel the Tagore’s aesthetic visions about geo-environmental consciousness we observed different festivals like briksharopan, halakarshan and barshamongol in recent Santiniketan and Sriniketan.

Objective:

To establish the aptness of the Tagore’s literary works at present degrading scenario of environmental quality to extend his ever-lasting ideas of environmental conservation and awareness.

Results and Discussion:

The Nobel Laureate depicted his intense affection for the nature and its beauty in his literary works-

“Chander hasir bandh bhengechhe, uchhle pore alo
 O rajanigandha tomar gandho sudha dhalo”

[Tagore, 1927.Geetabitan: lyric no.94 (prem paryay), p.289]

The mirth of the moon has surpassed all its limits or Bindings, with its lights overflowing in all directions and desiring the tuberose to spread out in all its eternal fragrance all around.
His aspiration was to build a nexus between the man and his surrounding nature. To build his eco-thought on society, he framed his *Brahmacharyaasram* or *Santiniketan* on the lap of Nature. A perfect significance can be drawn from the fact that classes at *Santiniketan* are conducted under the shade of trees.

He realized the importance of ‘free and open environment’ for complete upliftment reflection and expression of any person’s mine and soul. So the natural environment had great importance in Tagore’s thoughts. Through his lyrical-poem ‘a tame bird was in a cage,’ Tagore brought out the plight of a tamed bird. One bird is in the cage and the other in the forest both of them met and fall in love. The caged bird forgotten even to sing. But it can imitate its master’s voice. The free bird knows that the songs of nature can never be taught. They flutter their wings in yearning and sing:

‘come closer, my love!

The free bird cries, it cannot be, I fear closed doors of the cage,
The cage bird whispers, Alas, my wings are powerless and dead.’

(The Gardener, poem no. VI, pp.19-28)

It highlighted the way in which man wanted to domesticate nature according to his own perspective rather than the nature good well. Truly it was the faction form finite to infinite. From this his aesthetic thought has been flourished too some extent.

Tagore’s travelling history bears the environmental consciousness. For instance, in 1926 Tagore has planted a tree (Plate 1) in Balatonfured (Hungary) during his Europe travels (it was done by Tagore mainly on the request of the authority of Balatonfured to establish or bear the Tagore’s incoming sign) and that was now dedicated as Tagore promenade or Tagore Setany. His pre assume line about environmental consciousness that is till now presented as plaque (plate 2) at the foot of the tree planted by Tagore in Balatonfured, the lines are:

“When I am no longer
On this earth, my tree
Lelh the ever-renewed
Leaves of thy spring
Murmur to the wayfarer”

[Tagore. Balatonfured (Hungary), Nov., 1926]
World is moving to make friendship with urban landscape. To fulfill their achievement they are engaging to fell the green landscape. Tagore was conscious about the result of the ultimate outlook of that felling and opines:

“Dao phire se aranya loha ei nagar”

[Tagore,1895.Chaitali :poem Sabhyatar Prati, p.18]

‘Bring back the forest and take this city centric civilization’

The changing technological periphery and changing social culture around riverside has been clearly expressed in Tagore’s writing. He knew that the green periphery of Ganga River is now replaced with brick-smoke-mills and he wrote: ‘...our little riverside (Ganga) nests, clustering under their surrounding greenery, have been replaced by mills which now dragon-like, everywhere rear their hissing heads, belching forth black smoke. In the midday glare of modern life even our hours of mental siesta have been narrowed down to the lowest limit, and hydra headed unrest has invaded every part of life. May be this is for the better but I, for one, cannot account it wholly to be good’ (1917, Reminiscences, pp.208-209). Human’s aggressive science have invaded in the sky, not only land or soil or in water world. Man could kiss the sky with invention of Aeroplane though it wasn’t equally eco-friendly as birds. This creates a sound & radio pollution in sky and that will be cause of disturbance for other avian society. Tagore elaborates the modern situation:

“Yantra danab manabe karile pakhi
    sthal jal yata tar padanata
    Akash achhila baki.

    Akasher sathe amil prachar kari
    karkash sware garjan kare
    Batusere jarjari/
    Aji manuser kalusita itihase
    Uthi megha loke swarga-aloke
    Hasichhe attahase.../

(Tagore,1940. Nava Jatak, Poem Pakshi-Manav)

‘Satanic machine, you enable man to fly
Land and sea had fallen to his pown;
All that was left was the sky.

In the brutal roaring of an aeroplane we hear
Incompatibility with sky,
Destruction of the atmosphere.
High among the clouds, in the heavens, its din
Adds new blasphemous grating laughter
To man’s catalogue of sin.’

People’s consumption level has become so high that they forgot the health of nature as well as the earth and there will be a time when nature will be a revenge on destroying persons for their non eco-friendly activities. But he also knew that nature is too sympathetic and tolerable about their child and with respect of this he stated:

‘Jahara tomar bishaiche bayu, nibhaiche tabo alo
Tumi ki tader khama kariacho, tumi ki bescho bhalo.’

(Tagore,1931.Sanchayita:poem Proshno, p.645)
‘Have you loved them?  
Have you forgiven them? Those who have made your air poisonous.’

If we search the geographical philosophy of Tagore, we get environmental deterministic philosophy. He wrote: ‘In man, the mind, life impulse and the body system, all the three together help carry out all activities. Compromising these three factors our speed of action sets up a rhythm. The body and the mind, both a just themselves according to the prevailing atmospheric condition. In cold countries the fire has to be roused up within the body, while in a hot country the same heat lies outside’ (1925, Pashchim-yatrir Dairy, p.491). Tagore highlighted the view that if we have to sustain on earth for longer time then we have to nourish our fundamental elements of nature. So he presented the opinion:

“batas, jala, akasha, alo,  
sabare kabe basibe bhalo,...”

So these lines reveal that when will all be able to love the breeze (“batas”), water (“jala”), the sky (“akasha”), and the light (“alo”). Tagore believed five primordial elements arrange our nature and natural world.

1. “Ksiti” or Soil: Addressing the soil as the very first element of nature, the poet urges the young sapling which is being planted be held firmly into the soil. Tagore expressed his respect to earth through:

“Mati tomai nomi...” (Tagore, 1909. Gitanjali: poem no.48, p.39)

‘my greetings to soil.’

The Poet hears the call of earth and which was elaborated in:

“Chirodin mati amai dekechhe...”

(Tagore,1936. SeshSaptak: poem no. 44, p.109)

‘earth has enchanted me…’

2. “Ap” or Water: The second primal element of our environment. According to the poet and traditional Indian concept, water represents a kinetic power in the form of motion, arising out of its fluidity. Tagore expressed that motion and sound (means life) was firstly generated and founded in water. He portrait the line:

“Dhora tale chanchhsalata  
Saba age nemechhilo jole  
Sabar prothom dhoni uthechhilo jege....”

(Tagore,1939, Akaskpradip: Jol poem)

‘Motion is beneath the earth  
Was down first in water  
Sound or life was awake first’

3. “Tejas” or Energy: Light is the source of energy. Tagore would like to move the way of “jyotir” or light (the consciousness of knowledge) from the darkness of ignorance (lack of knowledge). He has given the enlighten view:

“Alo amar alo ogo alo bhurban bhora  
Alo nayan-dhoa amar,alo hriday bhora.”

[Tagore, 1927. Geetabitan: song no.46 (bichitra) p.476]

Through the light is spreading in whole earth as well as in me and this light has refreshed my eyes which also touch my heart were the light is the knowledge and the knowledge is the light.

4. Marut or the Wind power: He sketched his view in the following lines:

“Batas tomay nami  
Amar ghuchuk abosad.........”(Tagore,1909. Gitanjali, poem no. 48, p.39)

‘O wind, I bow down to you,
may my tiredness be removed.’

From these lines it is cleared that Tagore gave his salutation to wind and he also expressed the application of the wind to reduce the fatigue condition of health. The poet invokes the soothing quality and the healing power of soft breeze. Poet accepted the blowing wind in its motion, as a very close friend. The ferrous wind wipes out everything that comes on its way. The poet expresses the fearful form of violent storm in many of his poetic works-

“Jete jete ekla pathe nibhechhe mor bati
Jhar eseche, ore, ebar jharke pelem sathi…”

‘on a walk with alone , the light is put out
Storm is here and it is a companion me…’

5. “Vyoma” or cosmos: Tagore was conscious about the Space and its importance on the earth. He wrote:

“’Akash, tomar sahas udar dristi
Matir gabhire jagay ruper srishi…”
(Tagore,1928. Banabani:poem Vyoma, p.115)

To Tagore, the brightly smiling sky enlighten the deepest part of the earth which is a bliss indeed .

In the essay “Aranya Devata” (Forest Deity: R. R. edition Vol. 14, p.373), Tagore expressed his opinion that modern man indulges too much in luxurious and decadent living. Here he showed how land became uninhibited in his actions and wrote about the matter in which the kinship with the forest was spoiled. As long as he used live in and around the forest, he had a deep love and respect for the forest and therefore he used to live in perfect harmony with forest and its different organisms. As soon as he became a city dweller, he lost his love for the forest which had been the source of his nourishment. Willful destruction of forests, in order to supply timber for city life, brought about a nuisance on human race. Scarcity of rainfall endangered human life and the swift spread of deserts started engulfing human habitation in various parts of India. So Tagore emphasized we should retrieve our love and respect for the forest and restore symbiosis with the forest in order to prevent threat.

In the article “Tapavana” (The forest for meditation, Rabindra Rachanabali.edition, Vol.7, pp.690-704), Tagore analyses the ecological imbalance and also he investigates the inner causes of this imbalance. He expresses that ripus (the basic vices like: greed, jealousy, pride, lust etc.) are the sources of commercialism, consumerism, and economic competition among human’s aspiration; that is the inner manifestation of the causes of ecological instability. Trees are being felled for fuel and are spoiling the ecological balance and human civilization is hurtling towards doom. Hence Tagore pointed out in ancient society of Tapavana (Tagore, 1909. Prabashi patrica) where he speaks: “…a strange matter has been seen about India. Civilization here takes root not confined for space or packed like sardines. In those places there was abundant opportunity for man to be in close proximity with trees and vegetation, river and lakes”.

In the article “Bilaser Pha`ns” (The noose or loop of luxurious living: R.R.editionVol.6.pp.526-530), Tagore opines that consumerism is now making in vista into the Indian society and lifestyle, which was the food meal of Western society. Actually the problem that is being rooted in society is personal consumption; which losses the Indian social identity and humanitarian attitude and has made them self-centered. To maintain their demand’s geography, people are trying to spend beyond their means; which creates extra- pressure or mental hazard.

“It is a universal problem to save forest resources from man’s excessive greed…The creator sent life, he made arrangements for nurturing it all around…but man with his greed has supplied the instruments of death. Human society is cursed for his transgression of God’s scheme. Greedy humans have invited their
own ruin by destroying the forest. Man has uprooted the very trees and vegetation which purify air, and the falling leaves of which make the land fertile. Callousness on the part of mankind destroyed natures gifts of good…his welfare” (Rabindra Rahanabali, vol.14, p.373).

Tagore wrote poems, plays, short stories and also split group of lyrics in the form of poems for songs under the name of “Prakriti Paryay” (here, prakriti means nature and paryay means chapter), emphasizing the need to protect nature as well as our mother earth. He not only wrote widely on man’s relationship with the environment but implemented it too, by building Santiniketan. It is delimited by greenery on all sides. He created an example for the whole world in terms of the relationships between nature and human. Tagore’s pen and writings is the pavement of geo-environmental awareness for the earth. Tagore’s vision was concentrated to conserve our nature and natural world with human touch. Different festivals were encouraged in Santiniketan and Sriniketan by Tagore. Festivals were the milestones of Tagore’s awareness about the earth. In July, 1927 Tagore started the observance of the festival of the earth through briksharopan (plate 3 & 4), halakarshan and barshamongol. He was an environmental pioneer and was conscious about the relation between progress and preservation. He very well-expressed the exploitation of environment even a century ago. He first became concerned about man’s impact on the geo-environment after seeing an oil spill at sea on his way to Japan in 1916. This experience provoked him to write about at length about his anger at the way of modern man was failing to respect nature. Tagore was the pioneer of the eco-lover and he expressed his great respect to nature or to climatic seasons through different. Like he started the borshamongol or an annual celebration of the arrival of the monsoon at the end of dry season. He was the earthen philosopher and Tagore himself once said to plough earth using bull in the year 1927. On 14th July, 1928, Rabindranath Tagore started the briksharopan Utsav by planting a bokul (Mimusops elengi) sapling in Santiniketan, at which the student would sing and read his poem. Briksharopan now has become synonymous with 22 Sravan (Bengali month) or death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan. But when Tagore was alive the ceremony was celebrated around rainy season, but not in any particular date. The first Briksharopan was held in 1332 (Bengali year), on his very birthday on 25th Baisakh (Bengali month), when Tagore planted five trees or the famous ‘Panchabati’ around his new house as referred in the books, which probably lies within the present Uttarayana Complex. The ‘Panchabati’, namely Amloki, Asoke, Asathya, Batobriksha & Bel (Aegle-marmelos) is a concept that originated from the Upanishada and Tagore planted those 5 trees with a whole ceremony conceived in consonance with the unique style of Santiniketan. This approach gave his environmental movement a very positive image.
Tagore’s eco-perception is outlined by the Amartya Sen in his book Bharatbichitra (July-December 1997) as: ‘he (Tagore) wanted more official and unofficial promises for protecting environment’ (Basu, 2009). These all writings reflect Tagore’s visual aesthetic thought about geo-environmental consciousness.

At Santiniketan he started the festival of the earth through halakarshan, (tilling the land) introduced in July, 1927. On such occasion, Tagore wrote the song -

“maruvijaye keturao he shunne...”


‘rise up the flag of the conquest of the desert.’

It was a clarion call to increase the green cover across the deserts through plantation. Perhaps it was the first attentive move in the world to build up mass environmental awareness. In his different story he developed the theme of love to nature through plantation trees. In the short story “Bolai” Tagore highlighted a young boy’s love for a simul (silk cotton plant) tree in front of his house. The mechanized bureaucracy exploits the nature and man which this concept was highlighted in the play of “Raktakarabi” (red oleanders, 1925) and Tagore was inspired by the image of a red oleander plant crushed pieces of discarded iron that Tagore had witnessed while taking a walk in Shillong. The king play’s central character is king who cruelly exploits nature and man to develop an almost mechanized bureaucracy. Another drama “Muktadhara” (The Water flow, 1922, p.336), tells the story of man’s limitless greed and backlash from nature. The plot revolves around a monstrous machine created by the king to block the natural flow of a huge river and how a prince joined the commoners to protect nature by revolting against the king through the destruction of Muktadhara dam. The important philosophy that reflects in some lines from this drama:

“Citizens of Shivtarai: Water (River) is an abounded God creation, nobody can restrain it

Bibhuti (mechanical engineer): God has given water only for the commoners; he gave me the power to restrain the water flow. I have the power of mighty mechanical.

Dhananjai Bairagya: What are you saying! Is this matter normal about to bound the naughty power (river flow), may that is the outer or inner.

Avijit (Prince): I hear the call of mother tone from water.”

So, 89 years from till from now Tagore depicted the great bitterness among the local people for putting up iron lock-gates and dykes stopping the natural flow of a hill-stream and eventually the people rebelled against the government, ultimately bringing about demolition of the dam. Tagore was awfully against putting up of big dams, huge reservoirs and large scale canal systems in the name of agricultural development. In 1907 he felt the natural instinct of be notorious and flow as it is. ‘The River flows -all its water are not used up in our bathing, drinking & growing our autumnal rice. The largest part of its water is mean to keep the river flowing ever on. Even without carrying out any other task, there is great significance in maintaining its flow’. Also he expressed his love to fluvial sphere through:

“Keno more gelo nadi
Ami bandhi tare, chai dhoribare

Tai more gelo nadi. ...”(Tagore,1896. Chitra: poem Durakanksha)

‘Why river died
I bound her, wish to restrain

For this river died.’
Conclusion and Recommendation:

Tagore’s worldly outlook springs from views embedded in the Upanishad. His philosophy is pillared by ancient Indian world outlook for sustainable development and eco-ethical human living. In the omega environment, a question may arise are we conscious enough regarding about the Tagore’s geo-environmental awareness? The answer is, yes we are but not up to demark. We are polluting, concrete dam, unnecessary wastes, toxic chemicals, bomb, war fear weapons which intern herms (own) to our mother earth. We are working against of nature. But the relevance of Tagore’s thought is contemporary. We are moving again to destroy the concrete dams and embankment (Decommissioning of Dam) in USA. We are spreading this ecological thought in our present life through the enacting of his dramas like “Mukhtadhara”, played on Lipica Auditorium (Santiniketan) by the students of Visva-Bharati in March-2011 (plate 5), organized by Akhil Bharat Bhuvidyaa O Paribesh Samiti (NGO) of Santiniketan in West Bengal (India). This drama has also acting in different portion of West Bengal like in Siliguri town in West Bengal (plate 6). Again in this mechanized era we are also practicing the bull-plough based agriculture or halakarshan; (plate 7 & 8) which was observed by Tagore to adopt the earthen practices or culture in nature. So Tagore’s aesthetic visions have a great relevance in modern culture, in mechanized world.

Plate 5: A still from the drama “Muktadhara”, was acted in Lipica auditorium (Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 2011), India.
Source: plate has taken by Pal.T., 2011

Plate 6: A published report of the playing drama “Mukhtadhara” in Anandabazar Newspaper (Basu, 14th August, 2011) which was acted in Siliguri town of West Bengal (India).

Plate 7: 84th Halakarshan festival celebrated in Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India

Plate 8: Halakarshan festival is enjoying in Visva-Bharti University, Sriniketan, India
Source: Bartaman (Bengali Newspaper), 10th August, 2011. p.11.
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