

VIEWPOINT: The Eco-Ethical Views of Tagore and Amartya Sen¹

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Introduction

Ever since the Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to Amartya Sen, there has been much endeavour to highlight Sen's Shantiniketan² background and affinity of his world outlook with that of Rabindranath Tagore. Unfortunately, a deeper analysis is likely to reveal that Amartya Sen's views (based on a western world-outlook) are diametrically opposed to that of Tagore (based on ancient Indian world-outlook), particularly as regards sustainable development and eco-ethical human living. This article endeavours to highlight these contrasting aspects of the world-outlooks of two Bengalee Nobel Laureates.

Tagore on Eco-Ethical Human Living

Rabindranath Tagore's views pertaining to eco-ethical human living and sustainable development (scattered in various works, listed at the end of the article) are based on ancient Indian philosophy, especially embedded in the Upanishads. Tagore considers Nature and human life as integral parts of the single entity, the omniscient, omnipresent, ubiquitous (*sarbang khallidang*), attribute-free (*nirguna*) Brahman. So Tagore emphasizes symbiosis and balance between man and all other aspects of the mundane world (plants, other living beings, the Earth, atmosphere and the rest of the universe), and between man and the world beyond (*moksha*).

In "Aranya Devata", (Forest Deity: R.R. edition, Vol. 14, p.373), Tagore opines that modern man indulges too much in luxurious and profligate living. So long as he used to live in and around the forest, he had a deep love and respect for the forest and therefore he used to live in perfect symbiosis with it and its plants and animals. As soon as he became a city-dweller, he lost his love for the forest which had been the source of his sustenance. Wanton destruction of forests, in order to supply timber for city life, brought about a curse on human race. Paucity of rainfall endangered human life and the rapid spread of deserts started engulfing human habitation in various parts of India. So, Tagore emphasizes, we should retrieve our love and respect for the forest and restore symbiosis with the forest in order to avert peril.

Tagore's views on ecological stability and symbiosis between man and Nature have been elaborated in the article "Tapavan" (R.R. edition, Vol. 7, pp.690-704). The great

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors endeavour to publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

² Editorial Footnote: This town, near Bolpur (West Bengal, India), had a school and now a prestigious university following Tagore's education concepts [see in brief <http://www.santiniketan.com/>]

philosopher-poet does not confine his analysis to the outward manifestations of ecological imbalance alone. He investigates the inner cause of this malady which springs from the *ripus* (the basic vices), such as greed, jealousy, pride, lust etc., sheltered in the dark grooves of human mind. These *ripus* have their ugly manifestations in commercialism, consumerism and unbridled competition. In the article “Bilases Fans” (The Noose of Luxurious Living: R.R. edition, Vol. 6, pp.526-530), Tagore opines that consumerism, which has been eating into the vitals of western societies, is now making inroads into Indian lifestyles, vitiating all spheres of Indian life. The motive of insatiable personal consumption has made people in India lose their social identity and philanthropic attitude, and has made most of them mean and self-centered. Pomp and conspicuous consumption is not a new thing in India. At earlier times, however, it was associated with social activities, but now it is centered on purely personal consumption in isolation from the society. Consumerism is not only generating pressure on the purse of the rich but also causing unimaginable hardships to the poor who, being enticed by its demonstration effect, are trying to spend beyond their means.

Tagore opines (R.R. edition, Vol. 6, p.529) that the revelation of dazzling riches in some parts of the country is making a false impression that this signifies economic prosperity. Unfortunately, this is not due to prosperity, but due to increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few at the cost of the majority.

Tagore unravels the perverse impact of the unbridled competition in “Bharat Varsha” (R. R. edition, Vol. 2, p.711): The motive of competition, which forces people into a mad race for outclassing all other persons around them, leads to an endless struggle for supremacy and deviation from the path of responsibility and ethical living. The demonic impulse for going farther and farther ahead knows no limit and makes one’s mind ever more restless and bereft of stability and peace. Tagore expresses pity for those who consider this mad race as prosperity. In contrast, traditional Indian society, Tagore holds, was based on universal welfare and symbiosis between man and man, and had never encouraged this self-destructive competition leading to infighting within human society for individual supremacy.

In “Samabaya Niti” (Cooperative Policy: R.R. edition, Vol. 14, pp.311-332), Tagore expresses the view that European society is based on the system of exploitation of the majority by the minority, which is one of the major evils emerging from unbridled competition and the motive of unabashed self-advancement. Tagore, however, admits that the motive of self-advancement and competition, within some limits, are necessary for the material progress of human society, but they are perilous for human society if these limits are crossed.

Thus, according to Tagore, eco-ethical human living should be based on symbiosis between man and Nature, and between man and man. But manifestations of *ripus* through limitless competition, consumerism and commercialism have undermined this symbiosis alarmingly in the modern era. Unless the trend is reversed and objective conditions for eco-ethical human living restored, the consequences will be disastrous.

Tagore on Sustainable Development

Tagore's concept of sustainable development of India is rooted deep in rural regeneration, since the majority of the population of India resides in villages. It has two major planks:

- i) Cooperatives, and
- ii) Panchayats.³

In both the cases, Tagore calls for revival of the spirit of the rural masses so that they could be self-sufficient and free from dependence on outside assistance ('to approach the authorities with begging bowls', so to say) for their economic and social empowerment. Tagore lays greatest stress on instilling the spirit of self-confidence and unity in the minds of the rural folk (through proper education) so that they could, on their own, fight off the maladies afflicting rural India.

If cooperatives and *panchayats* are thrust on the rural folk from without (say, by the government, political parties or vested interest groups), they would miserably fail to generate and support the process of sustainable development. Tagore holds that success can be found only by inspiring the rural masses to form cooperatives and *panchayats* by their own efforts.

In "Samabaya Niti" (*ibid.*), Tagore attributes agricultural backwardness in India to subdivision and fragmentation of agricultural plots, problems of marketing, storing and mechanization of small farmers, lack of finance and exploitation by money lenders etc. Tagore thinks that all these problems could be solved through cooperatives. He further emphasizes that the root cause of rural destitution is the lack of self-confidence of the rural people, which makes them dependent on outside help, especially from the government. So, our primary task is to make the rural folk aware of their own strength, which lies in unity. Tagore stresses: "For this reason, the most urgent need in our country is not to place begging bowls at their hands, but to make them confident of their own power, to make them realize that a man united with others is a complete entity, whereas an alienated individual is but a powerless fragment." (R.R. edition, Vol. 14, p.313)

Coming to *panchayats*, Tagore, in "Atmashakti" (Self-power: R.R. edition, Vol. 2, p.644), argues that a rural *panchayat* system imposed by the government would be a miserable failure. It would breed jealousy and in-fighting among rural masses for the coveted *panchayat* posts and would generate more problems than it would solve. The members of the *panchayats* would be interested more in serving the government officials (to gain favour) than in helping their rural brethren. They would virtually become instruments at the hands of the government to repress rural people. The *panchayat* system, which was a real source of power of the rural people of India in earlier times,

³ Editorial note: Panchayats refer to local districts (and their village councils) that could serve as units of self-government within India. For some of their political, gender and distributive implications, see for example Rai, Shirin M. "Deliberative Democracy and the Politics of Redistribution: The Case of the Indian Panchayats", *Hypatia*, Vol. 22 Issue 4, Fall 2007, pp.64-80

would now become a cause of disunity and weakness of the rural masses. They ought to form *panchayats* on their own.

Tagore always encourages the application of modern technologies for rejuvenation of rural India, but all these should be within the framework of a regenerated rural society based on self-help and freedom from outside interference.

The Views of Amartya Sen

Amartya Sen's world outlook pertaining to eco-ethical human living and sustainable development, notwithstanding his Shantiniketan background, springs from western paradigms. His major works bear testimony to that fact that, unlike Tagore, he treats ecology and sustainable development as extraneous elements amenable to treatment within the framework of the market mechanism. Sen treats in detail the problems associated with environment and ecology (Sen 1982, pp.67-68; 1984, pp.95-97; 1995, pp.211-216) in the light of western paradigms associated with the market mechanism, individual choice and Game Theory. This is clear from the following excerpt:

Suppose it is the case that there are strong environmental reasons for using glass bottles for distributing soft drinks (rather than single-used steel cans) and for persuading the customers to return the bottles to the shops from where they buy these drinks (rather than disposing them in the dustbin). For a relatively rich country the financial incentives offered for returning the bottles may be adequate if the consumers neither worry about the environment nor are thrilled by receiving back small change. The environment affects the life of all, true enough, but from the point of view of any individual the harm that he can do to the environment by adding his bottles to those of others will be exceedingly tiny. Being generally interested in the environment but also being lazy about returning bottles, this person may be best off if the others return bottles but not he, next best if all return bottles, next best if none does, and worst of all if he alone returns bottles while others do not. If others feel in a symmetrical way we shall then be in a prisoner's dilemma type situation in which people will not return bottles but at the same time all would have preferred that all of them should return bottles rather than none. To tackle this problem, suppose now that people are persuaded that non-return is highly irresponsible behaviour, and while the individuals in question continue to have exactly the same view of their welfare, they fall prey to ethical persuasion, political propaganda or moral rhetoric. The welfare functions and the preference relations are still exactly the same and all that changes is behaviour. . . .

I am not, of course, arguing that a change in the sense of responsibility is the *only* way of solving this problem, penalizing non-return and highly rewarding return of bottles are other methods of doing this. . . . The real difficulty arises when the checking of people's actions is not easy." (Sen 1982, pp.67-68)

Sen's view regarding cooperatives is:

In many countries, the main rural institutions set up by the administration and the political system have taken the form of cooperative structures. . . . It is not an exaggeration to say that rural cooperatives, far from being partners of pressure groups with which the government has to negotiate, are in fact the lower elements of the state apparatuses. (Sen 1995, p.536)

Although Sen's observation is related to Africa, the miserable outcome observed is perfectly in line with predictions made long ago by Tagore in the case of Indian cooperatives imposed from above by the government.

Unfortunately, Sen fails to unearth the real cause of failure for the cooperatives and attributes it, erroneously, to colonial legacy and technological backwardness. As the solution he prescribes:

From the above list of factors it is evident that the problems which Africa has to solve in order to trigger off new growth and development impulses in her agricultural sector do not lie wholly in technological sphere. Changes in institutions and in the cultural and political systems will also be required. Moreover, it is worth, stressing that the levels of income and the food security of the small holder majority in Africa will not be improved unless serious attention is paid to equity issues and distributive effects of agricultural growth-promoting strategies." (*Ibid.* PP. 542-43)

Thus Sen's way out comes down to technological changes and policy measures from outside. The question of moral regeneration of the rural masses is totally ignored. This is also evident from his technical model building in *Resources, Values and Development* (Sen 1984, pp.37-89)

In *On Economic Inequality* (Sen 1973), *Poverty and Famines* (Sen 1981) and *Hunger and Public Action* (Sen & Drèze 1989), Amartya Sen has endeavoured to investigate the causes of human deprivation (as regards basic amenities like food, nutrition, healthcare, education, women's rights etc.) and assessed them in terms of 'entitlements' and 'capabilities'. Later on various Human Development Indices (HDIs) have been constructed by the Pakistani economist Mahabub Ul Haq and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) on the basis of concepts of Amartya Sen, who classifies human deprivation into three major categories:

- i) Those caused by uncontrollable natural calamities like earthquakes, cyclones etc.
- ii) Those caused by the inherent vices of the sufferer.
- iii) Those caused by bad governance, social injustice and economic exploitation of the majority by the well-to-do minority.

Amartya Sen emphasizes the third category, whereas Tagore's stress is on the second. In an exchange-based economy, a man collects his basic amenities through the basic capability, i.e. income ('exchange entitlement' to use Sen's jargon). Sen deals with in detail various human deprivations resulting from lack of capabilities and entitlements. These are the basis of all deprivation indices constructed later on by Haq (1997) and UNDP. The spirit of the viewpoints of Amartya Sen and his followers is that policies of the governments of different LDCs and those of the world bodies (World Bank, IMF etc.) are to be reoriented to eradicate human deprivation in various parts of the globe.

So, in essence, they propose that these authorities are to fill the begging bowls of the deprived, the approach most abhorred by Tagore.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that the endeavour to trace Tagore's world outlook in Amartya Sen's works (pertaining to eco-ethical human living and sustainable development) cannot stand close scrutiny. Tagore's world outlook springs from views embedded in the *Upanishads*, whereas Sen draws his concepts from the western paradigms.

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