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ECO-ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY: UNDERSTANDING RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S ALTERNATIVE APPROACH AND CARE PARADIGM IN HIS SYMBIOTIC ECOLOGISM

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the ecological insights of Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. His philosophical reasoning is invoked here to assess individual sanity and dilemmas concerning ecological well-being. Imbued with the spiritual consciousness of Upanishadic philosophy, Tagore provides a distinctive, holistic approach to the ecological debate that I identify as symbiotic ecologism. He draws extensively from the *Tapovan* (forest) idea in ancient Indian philosophy, where life was lived holistically amidst the vibrancy of Nature. He believes in a perfect symbiosis of all existence in the universe. His eco-ethical philosophy is not based on antagonistic dualism but on the fundamental principles of love, care, cooperation, kinship, reverence, humility and gratitude. My work is based on the textual analysis of selected pieces from Tagore's work that I found relevant to this eco-ethical study. Notably, his childhood memoir *My Reminiscences* (1912), selected songs from *Geetabitan* (1932), letters in *Glimpses of Bengal* (1895), essays "Shakuntala" (1902), "Palliprakriti" (1928), "Aranyadevata" (1939), and the short stories "Subha" (1893), and "Balai" (1928) are explored in this work. This article aims to review Rabindranath Tagore's ecological vision. My argument is based on current dominant theoretical debates and Tagore's thoughts on the environment; it aims to highlight the points of conjunction and divergence between Tagore's vision and the dominant paradigm in ecological discourse. Tagore's insightful engagement with Nature and its significance for life sustenance on Earth is explored in this paper through an eco-ethical approach to the care paradigm.

KEYWORDS: Rabindranath Tagore; eco-ethics; deep ecology; ecofeminism; care ethics; ecocriticism

RESUMEN *Filosofía Eco-Ética: Entendiendo el Enfoque Alternativo y el Paradigma de los Cuidados del Ecologismo Simbiótico de Rabindranath Tagore*

Este artículo tiene el objetivo de explorar las ideas ecológicas del premio Nobel indio Rabindranath Tagore. Se trae a colación su razonamiento filosófico para evaluar el bienestar individual y los dilemas relacionados con el medioambiental. Con influencias de la conciencia espiritual de la filosofía Upaniṣad, Tagore aporta un enfoque holístico distintivo al debate ecológico al que identifico como ecologismo simbiótico. Se basa en gran medida en la idea del *Tapovan* (bosque) de la filosofía ancestral

india, por la que se vivía de manera holística imbuido en la vitalidad de la Naturaleza. Él cree en la existencia de una simbiosis perfecta de toda la vida del universo. Su filosofía eco-ética no está basada en un dualismo antagónico, sino en los principios fundamentales del amor, los cuidados, la cooperación, los vínculos, el respeto, la humildad y la gratitud. Mi trabajo se basa en el análisis textual de una selección de escritos de Tagore relevantes para este estudio eco-ético. De manera notable, se exploran en este trabajo sus memorias de la infancia, *My Reminiscences* (1912), una selección de canciones de *Geetabitan* (1932), cartas de *Glimpses of Bengal* (1895), los ensayos "Shakuntala" (1902), "Palliprakriti" (1928) y "Aranyadevata" (1939) y las historias cortas "Subha" (1893) y "Balai" (1928). Este artículo pretende revisar la visión ecológica de Rabindranath Tagore. Mi argumento está basado en los debates teóricos dominantes en la actualidad y los pensamientos de Tagore sobre el medio ambiente. Pretende resaltar los puntos de unión y divergencia entre la visión de Tagore y el paradigma dominante en el discurso ecológico. Se explora en este artículo la reveladora visión de Tagore de la Naturaleza y su importancia en la sostenibilidad de la vida en la Tierra a través de un enfoque eco-ético al paradigma de los cuidados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Rabindranath Tagore; eco-ética; ecología profunda; ecofeminismo; ética de los cuidados; ecocrítica

Introduction

Debates on environmentalism during the last couple of decades have pervaded almost all streams of analytical enquiry. From philosophical reflection to ethical considerations, field experiments to political activism – the subject matter of environmentalism has opened the floodgates to a variety of modes of thought, including environmental ethics, eco-criticism, deep ecology, ecologism, ecofeminism, green theory, and sustainable development. The issue of environmental degradation and its impact on the ecology has become a collective concern. Environmental decay and its concomitant hazards transcend national boundaries and encompass the entire 'global village', resulting in the 'tragedy of the commons'. This demands both practical measures and normative explanation.

Known worldwide as a poet-philosopher, dramatist, playwright, novelist, essayist, and artist, Indian and Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore has only recently been recognised as an ecologist. His extensive literary and artistic creations, unique musical genres, and the concept of deviant nationalism have been the subject of rigorous examination worldwide. Attempts are being made to unearth newer dimensions in Tagorean thought. His poems and songs typify him as a nature poet, like William Wordsworth. Littérateurs consider him to be a luminary of Indian Romanticism. However, critical studies on Tagore's ecological thought have been neglected so far. In recent times, however, the scholarly works of Amartya

Mukhopadhyay (2010), Debarati Bandyopadhyay (2019), Ramchandra Guha (2024), Sibaji Pratim Basu (2024), and Aseem Srivastava (2020) have examined Tagore's manifold deliberations on diverse ecological issues. Ramchandra Guha acknowledged the verity that "Tagore's environmentalism was more direct as well as multifaceted" (Guha, 2024: 2). Through their works, Guha and other scholars have attempted to show Tagore's inherent ecological temperament, which was present since his childhood days, later developing into a well-knit eco-ethical philosophy.

In academic research, Amartya Mukhopadhyay (2010) identifies an unexplored area of environmentalism in Tagorean thought. In the lengthy discussion, he primarily focuses on the point of intersection between Tagore's thought and diverse ecological ideas, such as permaculture, bioregionalism, and the Gaia hypothesis. Both Bandyopadhyay's (2019) and Basu's (2024) works are eco-critical studies of Tagore's literature, where vivid textual analysis has been highlighted to bring out his environmental thought. Guha's (2024, 36) essay on Tagore is more direct and specific in its depiction of Tagore as "…an unacknowledged founder of the modern Indian environmental movement", where Guha highlights Tagore's environmental thought and activities through an examination of diverse phases of his life. Aseem Srivastava (2020) examines in detail the different ecological messages Tagore conveyed in his diverse literary compositions. The critic also highlights the significance of the Santiniketan-Sriniketan experiment in Tagore's eco-ethical research.

My work is also based on the textual analysis of selected works of Tagore. The issue of whether Tagore can be considered an early environmentalist or not, whether his ideas, philosophy and holistic approach can open new avenues for advanced ecological debate, or whether the prescriptive measures he undertook to resist environmental decay and establish communion with Nature are ongoing concerns that demand further research and deliberation to explore newer dimensions with regard to the existing scholarship.

The article further develops the argument of earlier scholars to review Rabindranath Tagore's holistic approach to ecologism. His perpetual engagement with Nature and invocation of spiritual consciousness to have a rendezvous with Nature's spirit bring to the fore Tagore's distinctive approach to eco-ethical philosophy. For the poet-philosopher, the world acts in unison. It is a systematic coordination of diverse phenomena. Rabindranath Tagore's thought

process evolved and was shaped by Upanishadic truths. In the essay titled "The Religion of the Forest", written originally in Bengali and published in the magazine *Sabuj Patra* in 1919, Tagore notes: "The Indian sages have held in the Upanishads that the emancipation of our soul lies in its realising the ultimate truth of unity" (Tagore, 2019: 33). Unity is the recurrent theme in Tagore's eco-philosophical understanding. His ecological vision can only be comprehended through the cosmology in which he develops his idea of ecology. For Tagore, life is lived and realised holistically. Every phenomenon in the universe and beyond is interconnected through a complex web of symbiotic relationships. A panentheist, Tagore believed in the presence of the divine not only in all mortal creation but beyond all finite existence. For Tagore, to realise and worship the sacred in all finite and infinite beings is the joy of life. In *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, written originally in English and published in 1913, the poet reiterates the message of the Upanishads: "…whatever there is in the world as being enveloped by God…I bow to God over and over again who is in fire and in water, who permeates the whole world, who is in the annual crops as well as in the perennial trees…can this God be abstracted from the world" (Tagore, 2014: 85). Searching for the divine in all existence has been a theme in philosophy, but what makes Tagore's approach unique is that he proceeds from this philosophical underpinning, translates it into an eco-ethical theory and implements it in practice in his Santiniketan laboratory that itself became a unique experiment in the history of the world, earning UNESCO recognition as a World Heritage Site in 2023. Santiniketan – the 'peace abode'-was the living microcosmic ecospace that Tagore selected for experimenting with his eco-ethical theory. Tagore believed in a perfect symbiosis of all existence in the universe and beyond, which was devoid of any dualistic mode of thought. He abhorred atomistic individualism. Tagore's eco-ethical understanding starts with 'what ought to be done' to realise the divine within oneself and be one with the entire cosmos.

Through a textual analysis of Tagore's selected works, the article attempts to examine the interconnections between humans, non-humans, and Nature. Through his vast literary compendium, Tagore takes his readers on an expedition where, beneath the vivid descriptions of landscape and Nature, the poet-philosopher's ecstasy and happiness, pathos and anxiety, fear and apprehension about human life are subtly manifested.

The first segment of the article will introduce readers to Tagore's eco-philosophical understanding. It will discuss in detail how, since his childhood, Tagore cultivated within himself the inspiration and vitality drawn from Nature. The texts I will refer to are *My Reminiscences* (1912), originally written in Bengali as *Jibansmriti*. At the age of fifty-one, the poet takes a trip down memory lane to recollect the nostalgia of his childhood tryst with Nature and his present understanding of Nature. The second piece I engage with is "Balai" (1928), compiled in the short story volume *Galpoguccho*. The significance of this story is manifold. While initiating the tree-planting ceremony at Santiniketan on July 14, 1928, Tagore read out the story that he had especially composed for the event. The tale of Balai marks two remarkable convergences. First, the character conveys Tagore's childhood fascination with Nature and its offshoot. Balai is nobody but Tagore's inner self. Secondly, the poet composed and cited the story at a time when he had already travelled a long distance from his childhood romanticism and was engrossed in real-life activism, performing atonement for the immense sacrilege caused by human greed and deeds. This section primarily underscores Tagore's deep ecological sensibilities. It dives into the theme of searching for Tagore's ecological insight in his consciousness and composition.

Section two of the article attempts to locate Tagore's receptivity towards feminist issues that ecofeminists would be taking up as a political stance, almost forty years after Tagore's demise. What makes Tagore's eco-ethical approach distinctive is his appeal to the care paradigm, where he voices his concern for the peripheral – female, Nature and non-human beings with love and reciprocity. The texts that I will analyse in this segment are "Subha" (1893) and "Shakuntala" (1902). "Subha", written in Bengali, was compiled in the short story volume *Galpoguccha*. Most of the stories in this collection are the result of direct interaction with the people Tagore met during his stay at the family estate in present-day Bangladesh, where, amidst Nature and the River Padma, Tagore witnessed human-nonhuman-Nature interaction and their silent conversation. "Shakuntala", originally written in Bengali and published in 1902, is an essay in *Prachin Sahitya*, Tagore's eco-critical venture where he engages in a comparative study of Kalidasa's famous play *Shakuntala* and Shakespeare's drama, *The Tempest*.

The third section of this article builds upon the earlier one, developing a textual analysis of selected works in order to highlight Tagore's engagement with humanity and ecology. This segment attempts to analyse Tagore's concern for the rural poor and peripheral voices in terms

of environmental ethics. The works that I refer to are *Glimpses of Bengal* (1892), "Palliprakriti" (1928) and "Aranyadevata" (1939).

In section four, I will attempt to encapsulate Rabindranath Tagore's eco-ethical philosophy concerning one of his most remarkable compositions, *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (1913). Here, I will attempt to illustrate Tagore's scepticism regarding the emergence of exclusivism and primitive individualism. How Tagore negotiates between man-made civilisation and *tapovan* (forest)-based natural habitats are areas that will be explored vividly in this section, which may intrigue readers in connection with Tagore's East-West enquiry.

In this article, I have attempted to identify the points of convergence and departure in Tagore's thought concerning prevalent Western epistemology, which is founded on dualism. Although his entire thought process evolved along the lines of Upanishadic teachings, the essence of deep ecology and ecofeminism is apparent in his thought process. As these two concepts are integral to this article's methodological framework, I would like to engage in a brief discussion of their basic premises in this introductory section with a view to elucidating how they contribute to a critical understanding of Tagore's works.

The precepts of the Upanishads and childhood kinship with the natural world inspired Tagore and led him to believe in the intrinsic value of all creation, that everything in this world and beyond is part of the Supreme Being. Every phenomenon has a value in itself and exists for its own sake. The contours of this reasoning are reflected in the concept of deep ecology, which emerged in 1972. As a brainchild of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, it was a path-breaking philosophical position that opened up novel aspects of ecological enquiry. There is a striking similarity between deep ecology and Tagore's eco-philosophical perception. Both believe in the oneness of being and derive spiritual realisation from the teachings of the East. Tagore's fascination with the natural habitat and his profound kinship with it situates him in the same philosophical temperament as deep ecology. He was already exploring and noting down deep ecological thoughts in 1910. In section one of this article, I will discuss in detail the points of intersection between Tagore and deep ecology and reflect on how Tagore moves forward from the basic premise of deep ecology.

Deep ecology is an eco-ethical philosophy based on the proposition of 'biospheric egalitarianism' that situates human beings and all other species on the same and equal echelon, demolishing the hierarchical categorisation of human beings. Deep ecology prioritises the intrinsic worth of an object, irrespective of its utilitarian usage. Naess criticises individual atomism, which validates the individual's separate identity from all other beings, making them self-centred, selfish, and egotistical.

Drawing inspiration from Eastern philosophy, Arne Naess argues that human beings, along with all other organisms, form 'knots' of the biospherical web, each surviving through the cooperation of others. Naess advances his theory of deep ecology by amalgamating the individual self with Nature, thereby broadening the scope of the individual self to encompass the vast ecological sphere. According to Naess, this deep approach gives deep satisfaction to the human self, which can identify with Nature, thereby enhancing the quality of life of each individual. For Tagore, this identification with the larger world, feeling its rhythm and pain, as well as joy and sorrow, is the moment we are blessed with life-rasa, or aesthetic pleasure. *Rasa* means juice, which in Indian aesthetic theory denotes the essence or flavour derived from literary, musical or visual creation that awakens a sublime and joyous feeling in the mind of the receiver.

Ecofeminists object to the deep ecologists' idea of the identification of the individual self with Nature. The 'expanded self' doctrine, inherent in deep ecology, denotes the expansion of the human self to encompass the non-human and natural world as nothing more than an extension of human expansionism, where the natural world exists at the whim and fancy of the human world. "In seeking to form a different kind of relationship with nature, deep ecologists seem to seek an erasure of the differences among the individual members of the natural community, a kind of identity of each in the life of the whole" (King, 1996:86). Ecofeminism emphasises the acknowledgement of 'difference' in our interactions with Nature and non-human species. "We are always…members of a community" (Lauritzen, as quoted in King, 1996:84). For ecofeminists, this community extends beyond the human species to our relations with animals, trees and plants, places and ecosystems (Zimmerman, as cited in King, 1996: 84). According to ecofeminists, all the constituents form an exquisite whole with heterogeneous specification. Notwithstanding these unique differences, both the biotic and abiotic communities constitute a moral community.

In Tagore, we find the 'expanded self' theory in many of his notable works. However, the self in Tagore is not an egotistic individual but rather a trivial, ephemeral, and infinitesimal being in the infinite universe who realises his true self in communion with the larger world. This self does not colonise but appeals to divine creation to render him a limited space and a little time in the Divine macrocosm. In song 317 in the Prayer (*Puja*) section of the *Geetabitan*, Tagore writes:

> In this joyous *yajna* of this world, I have had my invitation,
> Blessed am I, and fulfilled is this life of human. (Tagore, 1990: 133)

Tagore certainly shares the profound contemplation of deep ecology in ecological thinking. A striking similarity exists between the thoughts of Tagore and deep ecologists, particularly in their shared understanding of the intrinsic value of the natural world. However, the harsh reality of life and the arduous journey of the common person to survive that Tagore witnessed led him to the mundane truth of life, away from the deep ecology's obsession with wilderness preservation. Deep ecology considers Nature as a repository of resources, and making use of it for human purposes is wrong. Therefore, they focus on the preservation of unspoilt wilderness and the restoration of degraded areas to a more pristine condition (Guha, 1989: 1-3).

An obsession with wilderness and drastic population reduction was not a valid proposal for third-world countries like India. Tagore's approach to the ecological crisis was mundane and devoid of romantic propositions. Deep ecology's indifference towards the issues of people experiencing poverty – food, fodder, fuel, soil erosion, deforestation, and water scarcity makes it a less appealing theory in the densely populated, underdeveloped countries of Asia and Africa, where the inhabitants share a strong kinship bond with the natural world based on reciprocity and cooperation. The poor and the female population, animals and the physically disabled are vulnerable as regards environmental damage. Deep ecology comes under scathing attack from a section of ecofeminists who dub the concept androcentric. The hazards that subalterns and the animal world face due to environmental catastrophes are areas that have remained sidelined in deep ecological introspection. Deep ecology fails to address its precarious condition. Nonetheless, deep ecology's concept of 'biospheric egalitarianism' — which disapproves of anthropocentric hubris and acknowledges the intrinsic worth of every phenomenon — is undoubtedly a novel proposition in eco-ethical discourse.

Almost a century ago, Tagore was introspecting on issues of land and water resources, water scarcity, deforestation, soil erosion, and climate change, and was desperately seeking ways to ameliorate the suffering of the poor, peasants, women, children, and the non-human world. Ecofeminists were also addressing these issues: "common human needs which can be satisfied only if the life-sustaining networks and processes are kept intact and alive. These 'symbiosis or living interconnectedness' both in nature and in human society are the only guarantee that life in its fullest sense can continue on this planet" (Shiva and Mies, 2014: 13). Ecofeminism is not at loggerheads with deep ecology. Rather

> Ecofeminism's critique of predominant Western environmental attitudes is at least in part quite like that of deep ecology: the central fault is an attitude, logic, and practice of dominating nature…deep ecology focuses exclusively on human domination of nature, ecofeminism insists that a proper analysis must also emphasize the intimate logical and historical connections between the various forms of domination – the same logic and attitudes of superiority and practices of domination humans (men?) display in their relations toward the nonhuman dimensions of the world are found in men's relations to women and in imperialistic, racist, and classist structures and practices. (Sessions, 1996: 142)

Ecofeminism draws an analogy between the female body and the experience of Nature. Female impulses and reproductive power, as well as the will to maintain a cohesive unit for the protection of the newborn, experiencing the fertility cycle, giving birth, breastfeeding, and nurturing, are all attributes similar to those found in the natural world. According to ecofeminism, women share an intimate relationship with Nature.

Writing in the late nineteenth century, Tagore complicated the patriarchal approach of dualist thinking and attributed the feminine qualities of care and nurture to male members of society. As I shall demonstrate in this article, through his works, he established the universal truth and the fundamental principle of life that love and respect exist beyond gender and other cultural boundaries.

Rabindranath Tagore and his eco-ethical philosophy

The connecting thread that runs parallel between Rabindranath Tagore's eco-ethical philosophy and deep ecology is the belief in the interconnectivity and interdependence of all existence in the universe. This interconnection is based on respect and reciprocity, taking into account the intrinsic value of all beings – both animate and inanimate - irrespective of their utilitarian value

to humans. This section aims to explore Rabindranath Tagore's profound ecological thinking, as reflected in his works. The poet-philosopher conveyed his ideas in many of his literary compendia. The works I will refer to are selected songs from *Geetabitan* (1932), the memoir *My Reminiscences* (1912), and the short story "Balai" (1928).

In *Geetabitan*, a compilation of 2232 songs of different genres published in 1931, Tagore portrays the splendour of divine power. In the Prayer (*Puja*) and Nature (*Prakriti*) segments, the ultimate devotion and reverence of the poet for the Almighty and His creation is reflected in every verse and tone. In Song 8 from the *Prakriti* segment of the *Geetabitan*, Tagore expresses his intense metaphysical thought,

> The sky is blooming with the sun and the stars, the world's brimming with life,
> Amidst the cosmos, I have had my abode, my tie,
> My songs arise in amazement, thus.
> In the waves of the infinitum, the Earth swings in ebb and flow,
> The pulsation in my bloodstream, has the impulsion of its glow;
> Hence, my song evolves in wonder!
> I have put my feet on the green and the grass, on my way to the arboreal,
> My soul in awe with the aroma of the amaranth;
> And the joyful song pervades the Earth,
> My songs arise in amazement, thus. (Tagore, 1990: 430)

In almost all the verses of the song, Tagore expresses his profound deference and awe towards all the natural phenomena of the universe. He feels elated to have found a place amidst the sun, the moon, the stars and the sky. His pulse beats in rhythm with the ebb and flow of the streams, and the wondrous eventuality of the macrocosmic world spellbinds him. The poet rejoices in contemplating the interplay of diverse natural phenomena before his eyes.

Tagore is a holistic thinker for whom the human heartbeat resonates with the rhythm of Nature, animals respond to humans and the Earth, and Nature enters into the spirit of life to maintain the equilibrium of all divine creation. Tagore's childhood exposure to the teachings of the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Vedas* instilled in the already sensitive mind the philosophy of 'oneness of being', a kinship bond amidst the whole of existence and an empathetic disposition towards all species, including the most trivial and inanimate ones.

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Rabindranath Tagore's engagement with Nature started in his Jorasanko mansion. The all-embracing fortification of the house made the young Tagore restless to touch the horizon, to play with Nature's enigma – "there was no way of our meeting. So, its attraction was all the stronger" (Tagore, 2012a: 427). In his childhood days, when he was debarred from venturing out, he would astutely employ his imaginative power to establish communion with the larger world that lay outside his great mansion. In *My Reminiscences*, Tagore writes,

> To leave the house was forbidden to us …We had to get our glimpses of Nature from behind barriers. Beyond my reach stretched this limitless thing called the Outside, flashes, sounds and scents of which used momentarily to come and touch me through interstices. It seemed to want to beckon me through the shutters with a variety of gestures. But it was free and I was bound. (Tagore, 2012a: 427)

When children of his age played with toys, he would peek out of his window to have a secret conversation with the larger world called the 'outside', observing the nitty-gritty of the regular humdrum with an inquisitive and engrossed interest:

> Like a prisoner in a cell, I would spend the whole day peering through the closed Venetian shutters…From early morning our neighbours would drop in one by one to take their baths. I knew the time of each one's arrival…Then the bathing-place would become deserted and silent…Only the ducks would remain…when solitude thus reigned over the water, my whole attention would focus on the shadows beneath the banyan tree…It was of the banyan tree that I later wrote: Day and night you stand like an ascetic with matted hair. Do you ever think of the boy whose fancy played with your shadow! (Tagore, 2012a: 426)

For Tagore, the universe is a conglomeration of interrelated beings where each note bears its unique identity. Singularly, though, it cannot develop into a piece of music, for music is a superb combination of separate artistic playing of the seven singing notes. For Tagore, the existential essence is similar to music. The components – human, non-human, Nature and beyond are in constant interaction with each other, playing their distinctive tune. They are engaged in a continuous ebb and flow of life. Together, they form a unit yet retain their essential uniqueness. A mere insect to the insignificant blade of grass, the dust in the air to the endless horizon – for Tagore, it is the music of life – a living embodiment. Every tune is in conversation with the other, sharing happiness and pathos. *Fireflies*, written in Bengali, is a slim book containing 256 epigrams and was published in 1928. The poet wonders in epigram 35:

> The breeze whispers to the Lotus,
> 'What is thy secret?'

'It is myself', say the lotus,
Steal it and I disappear! (Tagore, 2019a: 12-13)

Tagore's ingrained inquisitiveness to know the unknown remained his lifelong companion. However, his never-ending quest was imbued with admiration and worship for the divine mystery. In Song 8, in the *Prakriti* section of *Geetabitan*, Tagore writes,

…I have placed my ear, and opened my eyes,
Unfurling my heart to the bosom of this Earth,
Amidst the known, I've searched for the unknown,
Elated so, my song arises in amazement thus. (Tagore, 1990: 430)

Seeking the unknown in the midst of the known is the poet's ultimate quest to perceive the truth that supersedes all knowledge and resides in divine mysticism. For him, the beauty and awe of Nature are a divine creation. To his utter astonishment, he found himself in a constant conversation, to fathom out the reason behind the enigma of Nature: "I was surrounded by mystery…and every day the uppermost question was: when; oh! when would we come across it? It was as if Nature held something cupped in her hands and was asking us with a smile: What d'you think I have? 'We had no idea there might be any limit to the answer'" (Tagore, 2012a: 431).

Tagore's deep respect for the divine mystery that lies beyond human understanding is marked by humility and admiration. The prevalence of truth based on specific facts that lie beyond human interpretation and jurisdiction induced in man the obligation to be humble and acknowledge the supremacy of the Divine. But the Renaissance pronounced man omnipotent. Here, Tagore calls into question the efficacy of the post-Enlightenment knowledge system that celebrated human prowess. Intoxicated with power and complacency, the self-confident man challenged the humility that had until then characterised human life. Philosophy fell within a whirlwind of power dynamics. When the ego within us reigns over the mind, we forget that we are just a part of the cosmos, not the whole.

Tagore challenged the Cartesian Cogito, where man elevated himself to the magnitude of God. Though a product of modernity and one of the greatest avant-garde pioneers of the Bengal Renaissance, Tagore brought back the essence of humility against hubris in philosophy, which

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permeated eco-ethical philosophy as well. This sense of humility is nothing new to Indian civilisation. It was conspicuously present in the cultural ethos and practices of ancient Hindu society. Tagore reiterates that essence in song 109 from Prayer (*Puja*) in *Geetabitan*:

> …In love and in more love, may the 'I' in myself get inundated further,
> And You reveal Yourself to me as drops of the heavenly nectar. (Tagore, 1990: 50)

Tagore expresses the ultimate submission of the egotist self to the power of Supreme Love. It is love that demolishes pride and vanity, bringing the individual closer to the divine and His creation. Tagore not only demolishes the conceited 'I', but he also refutes Cartesian epistemology by undermining the dualistic mode of thinking. He critiques the rigid bifurcation of male-female, man-nature, culture-nature, and rational-emotional dichotomies and infuses one of his male protagonists with the feminine attributes of empathy and care. The ethics of care that ecofeminists discuss find a place in Tagorean literature, in essence and texture. The short story "Balai" (Tagore, 2018b: 244-247) from the short story collection *Galpoguccho* is one of them.

From the time of his childhood, Balai had developed within himself the unique capacity to experience the emotions of trees and plants and could reciprocate responses. A motherless, lonely child sits quietly, only accompanied by the stacks of dark clouds. He was able to extract 'something' from the evening sky. Balai does not speak a lot but thinks profoundly. Different seasons colour his mind and soul. For him, the bed of grass is not still but a rolling substance he rolls down to play, and he laughs at the tickling sensation caused by the grass blades at his neck. He stands alone in the *Debdaru* (Indian mast) forest and feels the 'persons inside the trees'. He looks at the saplings and, with an inquisitive mind, asks: 'When?' His story is a never-ending one. He looks at the trees as if they would ask “What's your name? Where is your Mother?” And he would say: “I don't have a Mother!” He shares his happiness and sorrow with the plants and the saplings. He becomes distressed when somebody plucks the fruits or flowers, or when boys of his age strike the trees with sticks and break the branches of the Bakul (the Spanish Cherry) tree…When the grass-cutter comes to trim the tender grasses in his uncle's garden, he feels an excruciating pain when he sees a little creeper or the nameless purple tree being removed. For the little boy, they are not just unwanted weeds, but are lives. Nobody understands his mind. He realises very early in his life that there are pains which are of his own and nobody can feel them. His deep bond with the *Shimul* (Cotton) tree that he had been

watering and taking care of illustrates an exceptional relationship based on love and care. With all his strength and perseverance, he protects the tree from being uprooted. However, with his departure, he fails to protect his 'friend', although the friendship between Balai and his Shimul tree remains in the hearts of his readers.

This story is a classic example of Tagore's intense love for trees. Here, Balai, the little boy, is Tagore's subconscious. In the words of deep ecologists, 'it is the expanded self.' But ecofeminists argue that the 'expanded self' is nothing but an "extension of egoism" (Plumwood, 1996: 166). As Jean Grimshaw states – "…certain forms of symbiosis or 'connection' with others can lead to damaging failures of personal development…Care and understanding require the sort of distance that is needed in order not to see the other as a projection of self, or self as a continuation of the other" (Grimshaw, as quoted in Plumwood, 1996: 165). Erosion of identity, differences, and uniqueness is nothing but a subtle form of coercion and exploitation, as it enables the human self to play with its indistinguishable self in whatever ways it may wish to.

Though it may seem to readers to be an 'expanded self,' Tagore's Balai actually retains his individuality. His conversation with trees, empathy towards the petty weeds and creepers, pleasure at seeing the young buds coming out or his secret exchange of emotion with the trees, his vehement protest against the uprooting of trees, or acting as a protective shield against the cutting of the *Shimul* tree – are a manifestation, not of 'expansion' but of cooperation, coordination and empathetic relationship with Nature and its tributaries. Every phenomenon of Nature – the seasons, the sun, dark clouds, the symphony of the rain, flowers, the sky, and its vividness, forests and their deep reverberation, birds, trees and plants together with Balai himself – all retain their distinctiveness, sustaining life on this beautiful Earth with their variegated existence.

However, Tagore's engagement with Nature is a personal interaction and experience inspired by early Vedic philosophy and his childhood exposure to diverse forms of natural life. This affinity with Nature and spiritual realisation is Tagore's disposition to engage reciprocally with Nature. No doubt, this proximity and affiliation that Tagore experiences is marked by a profound sense of belonging towards the 'other' – Nature as well as the non-human world. The

approach of deep ecology is almost identical to Tagore's perspective. However, Tagore's firm conviction in the innate sagacity of the human soul is the core problematic area, as each individual is born with distinctive traits, and no two individuals are alike. Thus, the degree of perception or calibre required to establish kinship bonds and develop respect for the unknown or an insignificant being is different and varied for every individual. However, as a normative approach, this ecological perspective guides us to a better, habitable future founded on love, care and reciprocity.

Care and reciprocity in Rabindranath Tagore's eco-philosophical understanding

This section of the article aims to understand Rabindranath Tagore's eco-ethical approach to the care paradigm, in which he expresses his deep concern for marginalised groups – women, Nature, and non-human beings. The texts that I will analyse here are "Subha" (1893) and "Shakuntala" (1902). The essentialist version of ecofeminism maintain that women by virtue of their affectionate, emotional, caring and empathetic nature are in close proximity to Nature compared to men. Contrarily, the conceptualists argue for demolishing the male/female or culture/nature dichotomy as these dualisms legitimize male domination over both female and Nature. However, both the streams agree "that environmental ethics will benefit from creating theoretical space for human relations to nature, personal lived experience, and the vocabulary of caring, nurturing, and maintaining connection" (King, 1996: 83). Ecofeminism attempts to subvert the prevalent ethical conceptions based on abstract theories of justice with a more value-based ethics that "makes a central place for values of care, love, friendship, trust and appropriate reciprocity – values that presuppose that our relationships to others is central to our understanding of who we are" (Warren, as quoted in Curtin, 1996: 66). Thus, feminist environmental ethics obtain central theoretical insight from care ethics.

Care ethics was developed by Gilligan, employing different methods of moral thinking. In contrast to the concept of justice, Gilligan prioritises the traditional roles of women as nurturers or caregivers. Justice, as an abstract theory based on the rational parameter, is considered to be superior to emotion-backed care, but the "claim of the ethics of care is that care is an important part of moral reasoning…care emphasises peace, compromise and stability" (McKinnon, 2018: 246-247). Ecofeminists borrow the concept of care ethics and expand it to encompass not just the human world but also, and more emphatically, the non-human and natural world, as did Tagore in the powerful literary creation, "Subha".

It is a narration between dumb creatures: Subha and her companions. The author juxtaposes two modes of language: a spoken one, fraught with indignation and obstinacy towards the poor, dumb girl, Subha, and an unspoken one, filled with affection, emotion, and reciprocity. Silence here becomes the language of humanity. The spoken world believes that as the girl is voiceless, she can also be emotionless, therefore, discusses their angst regarding her gloomy future, particularly marriage, in front of her, making her realise how burdensome she is. When the world brazenly snubs her because of her 'abnormality', she finds solace in the silence of Nature: "…here Nature and a dumb girl, sitting very silent – one under the spreading sunlight, the other where a small tree cast its shadow" (Tagore, 2012b: 164). When her blood despises her with aversion, like a stain, Mother Nature becomes her true companion. Subha also finds in other 'dumb' creatures a soulful respite – the two cows who had never heard Subha's voice but could recognise her from the sound of her footfall. The two different creations of God, animal and human beings, are united with each other through the language of silence, love, trust, care, and empathy. The cows could understand when Subha, the mute girl, scolded them "…Though she had no words, she murmured lovingly, and they understood all her speech" (Tagore, 2012b: 164). Her friends could understand her anxiety and voiceless tears – "whenever she heard any words that hurt her, she would come to these dumb friends…they would rub their horns softly against her arms…try to comfort her" (Tagore, 2012b: 164). Apart from the cows, the goat and the kitten shared the same attachment towards the girl.

In this refined piece, Tagore also personifies Mother Earth, which conspicuously illustrates a different contour in the care paradigm. It narrates the story of the mute girl's dependence on Earth. Subha imagines the Earth as a mother who would hold her tight and not let her go. "Do not let me leave you, Mother. Put your arms about me, as I have put mine about you, and hold me fast" (Tagore, 2012b: 167). Interdependence, care, love, and refuge are the dominant themes throughout this story. Here, significantly, Tagore anthropomorphises Earth as 'Mother'. In the short story "Balai", discussed in the previous section, we observed that Tagore rejected the dualistic bifurcation of the male-female dichotomy by infusing Balai with all the empathetic features associated with femininity. In "Subha", we see the author retaining his traditional Upanishadic lineage of equating Nature as female, a Mother – the feminine power (*Shakti*) who is the provider, caregiver, and protector, and not an object to be exploited and abandoned.

Tagore's eco-ethical vision synthesises the male-female, culture-nature binary into a universal paradigm of humanity.

In both Western and Eastern philosophy, the Earth is often equated with Mother because of its potency to carry life within it. The Earth is equivalent to life. Its womb is the source of all creation. In Western philosophy, the Earth is often compared to a mother due to its life-giving and nurturing properties. This approach is mainly materialistic and utilitarian, prioritising humans over Nature. However, the concept of Gaia, which originated in Greek philosophy and was developed by the English environmentalist James Lovelock in the 1970s, transformed the utilitarian outlook with a more holistic approach. According to this view, the Earth is a self-regulating living organism, and every creation, whether big or small, is part of Gaia. "…and ecology movements in the west today are inspired in large part by the recovery of the concept of Gaia, the earth Goddess" (Shiva, 2023: 41-42). This particular way of thinking is similar to Eastern philosophy, where the Earth is often viewed from a spiritual perspective, symbolising the divine power. It may be said, then, that Tagore was already contemplating a visualisation of Gaia in "Subha".

For Tagore, the Earth also symbolises Motherhood. She is the provider and preserver of life. But he conceives her not as an abstract divine power that can only be perceived in purely spiritual and philosophical terms. As Mukhopadhyay writes, : "The passion with which Tagore addresses the earth as mother in whose womb he once was and whose milk he had once drunk, may strike the Western reader with its cultural difference" (Mukhopadhyay, 2010: 354). For Tagore, Earth personifies both the biological Mother and feminine power. She is that affectionate entity with whom the poet shares his joy and sorrow, tears and pain, with whom he can interact and play. She is Mother Nature, who takes him in her arms, shielding him from all pain and nature: "After many days I am meeting Mother Earth again, and it is as she says 'Here he is', and I reply 'Here is she.' We sit side by side without stir or speech" (Tagore as cited in Guha, 2024:5). Tagore's Mother Earth is not an impersonal and detached entity, but a real-life mother with whom he shares a lifelong affinity.

The broad spectrum of Motherhood, from the Earth, where a child is nurtured, to human beings mothering the natural and animal world, has been vividly portrayed in Indian literature. The

second piece that I have selected for my analytical purpose is Tagore's eco-critical study of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, which was published as an essay in *Prachin Sahitya* in 1902.

In the story "Subha", we find that Tagore personifies the Earth as the Mother and delicately draws the silent string of communication among the peripheral voices. In Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, the author highlights the role of the human Mother, where the forest maidens become the Mothers of the beasts, birds, and flowers of the hermitage, and Shakuntala herself becomes the Mother of the motherless baby deer. In both the stories, Tagore's "Subha" and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, Motherhood is celebrated through diverse manifestations. The reason for selecting these works is to highlight the resonance of care ethics in Indian eco-ethical understanding.

In the eco-critical study of Western literature, Tagore demonstrates how Indian literature differs in its epistemological reasoning. There is fury, instability, domination, and disunity in the former, whereas in the Indian texts, despite their inclination towards wealth and prosperity, life ultimately recourse to the simplicity of a forest hermitage. Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* overshadows the grandeur of the King's palace. The idea runs through the entire play: "the recognition of the kinship of man with conscious and unconscious creation alike" (Tagore, 2019b: 37). Tagore makes a comparative study "between Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. Their external resemblances and inner disparities are a matter for discussion". (Chaudhuri, 2015: 237) Miranda in *The Tempest* is surrounded by Nature, just like Shakuntala. But Miranda is a detached self from the affectionate touch of Nature. Tagore notes:

> We see Miranda in the midst of a wave-lashed, desolate, mountainous island; but she has no intimate relationship with Nature on that island…we find no mental affinity with the ocean and mountains there. The island is only required for the plot; it is not essential to the character…This cannot be said of Shakuntala: she is one with the forest retreat. If the hermitage were to be kept at a distance, not only would the dramatic action suffer; Shakuntala would remain incomplete. Shakuntala is not an isolated being like Miranda; she is linked in spirit to her surroundings. (Chaudhuri, 2015:240)

Miranda gains meaning only in the context of her love affair with Ferdinand. However, the impact of Shakuntala's character is not dependent on her marriage to Dushyanta. She has her autonomous presence, yet she is not 'free' like Miranda, as her soul is inextricably tied to the beasts and birds of the forest. The relationship is based on reciprocity and love rather than

domination and exploitation. In *The Tempest*, we see Ariel, the nature spirit, take the form of a human being but fails to establish a bond with humans. The relationship remains between slavery and domination. "In *The Tempest*, through Prospero's treatment of Ariel and Caliban, we realise man's struggle with Nature and his longing to sever connection with her" (Tagore, 2019b: 45). But in *Shakuntala*, we see Nature and animals, birds and beasts remain who they are; retaining their distinctiveness, they enter into kinship with humans, each following its own rhythm. When King Dushyanta chases the antelope to hunt it, the forest dwellers appeal to him not to disrupt the rhythmic tune of forest life. As Tagore writes: "the cruelty of the chase appears like a menace symbolising the spirit of the King's life clashing against the spirit of the forest retreat, which is '*sharanyam sarva-bhutanam*' (where all creatures find their protection of love)" (Tagore 2019b: 42).

According to Tagore, the heart-rending atmosphere that Kalidasa portrays in the Fourth Act of the play is perhaps the finest exemplar of the human-nonhuman bond ever produced in World Literature (Tagore, 2015: 726). It excellently and poignantly depicts the pathos and trauma that overwhelm the heart of the forest dwellers when Shakuntala leaves sage Kanha's ashram:

> The grass drops from the mouth of the little dear, Oh! Peahens have stopped dancing,
> The creeper sheds its leaf in sorrow, with tearful eyes and leaves falling…
> The deer pulls her dress from behind, not to let her go,
> Just like a dear son stops his Mother from bidding adieu. (Tagore, 2015: 727)

Significantly, the author addresses the non-human creatures as 'forest dwellers'. The play *Shakuntala* signifies the establishment of a relation with the universe through union, where there is no hierarchisation of life forms. Here, life signifies conscience and human consciousness, where humanity pervades interactions between humans, non-humans, and Nature.

Rabindranath Tagore's engagement with humanity and ecology

This segment of the article further develops the argument presented in the earlier section and examines selected works by Rabindranath Tagore to underscore his engagement with humanity and ecology. It highlights Tagore's concern for the rural poor and the peripheral voices in the context of environmental ethics. *Glimpses of Bengal* (1895), "Palliprakriti" (1928) and "Aranyadevata" (1939) are the selected works I will refer to argue my case.

If Tagore's mind travelled in the land of imagination to feel the pulse of Nature, his heart also bled for the poor and the deprived. Through his writings and speeches, Tagore raised serious eco-ethical issues that environmentalists would later address. From apathy to insensibility, from selfishness to crude individualism, Tagore was highlighting areas of grave concern. Witnessing the horrific famine in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum and some portions of Burdwan, on April 12, 1885, the poet appealed to his fellow brethren:

> Not too far – it is close to your door that the hungry people stand. They look with such craving at the leftovers that you throw to the cats and dogs every day! You rejoice in the birth of a son; their starving infant does not even have the strength to cry…you sit serene at home, talk matters over, feel amused, concentrate on family affairs, they have no other topic, thought or work – in their life, all thoughts, all the desires of their heart and all their hopes, day and night, remain bound to a handful of rice…Hunger is such a terrible hazard - …hunger makes them inhuman…Indeed, don't you have Anything? Are you more destitute than the one who has only boiled tamarind seeds as grain during the last few days? (Pal, as cited in Bandyopadhyay, 2019: 2)

Tagore donated a sum of five hundred rupees and appealed to others to come forward for rehabilitation. He even offered to rehabilitate the farmers and their families at the Tagore family estate in the Sunderbans, but the appeal fell on deaf ears (Bandyopadhyay, 2019: 1-3).

Tagore expressed his experience in a series of letters to Indira Debi, the daughter of his elder brother, Satyendranath Tagore. Indira Debi compiled these letters and sent them back to the author, who selected 145 letters to be published as *Chhinnapatra* in 1912. Later, some of the letters from *Chhinnapatra* were translated into English by Tagore himself and published in 1921 as *Glimpses of Bengal - Select letters 1885-1895*. During this period, Tagore was assigned the task of administering his family estate in Shilaidaha, Kaligram, Patisar, and Shajadpur (currently in Bangladesh). Tagore voiced his concern over man's dependence on Nature and how its fury can wreak havoc on human habitat. In a letter to his niece, dated May 10, 1893, Tagore writes:

> Over there, on the sky-piercing peaks of Simla, you will find it hard to realise exactly what an important event the coming of the clouds is here, or how many are anxiously looking up to the sky, hailing their advent. I feel a great tenderness for these peasant folk – our ryots – big, helpless, infantile children of Providence, who must have food brought to their very lips, or they are

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> undone. When the breasts of Mother Earth dry up they are at a loss what to do, and can only cry… (Tagore, 2018: 92).

The ryots, i.e., the individual peasant cultivators who were a product of the ryotwari system introduced during British rule in India, were the worst sufferers of economic exploitation. Contrary to the zamindari system, which operated through intermediaries, under the ryotwari system, the ryots had to deal directly with the British government. The amount of revenue was fixed or could be increased. Even in times of natural calamities, such as floods or famines, the peasant cultivators had to pay their fixed amount of revenue to the British coffers, which subsequently worsened their hardship.

Tagore observes that, amid the universe's immensity, humans are simply feeble and temporary. Man is vulnerable. Thus, he engages in an eco-ethical discourse to unearth the causes of environmental decay and attempts to remedy the situation with normative contemplation of the ethical question of what should be done.

Tagore's ecological insight is guided by the vigour of humanism, the spirit of which is structured around an ethical norm or principle of inclusivity. The Brundtland Report coined the term ‘sustainable development' in 1987. But we find the essence of it in Tagore's diverse compilation. In this context, it is pertinent to mention in detail the eco-ethical message compiled in a slim book called "Palliprakriti," which contains nineteen essays and lectures written and delivered by Tagore on various occasions. I will discuss the contemporary relevance of his ideas, referencing an essay titled "Palliprakriti" (1928), written in Bengali, and a lecture titled "Aranyadevata" (1939), delivered during the *Halakarshan Utsav* (ploughing festival) and *Brikharopan Utsav* (tree-planting ceremony).

The message of sustainable development is apparent in the essay "Palliprakriti" (Tagore, 2014a: 362-366). Tagore highlights the importance of man's judicious use of current material resources so that future generations are not deprived of them. Working for the benefit of society becomes more important than working for self-development. Man's ultimate perfection lies not in his self-accomplishment but in the achievement of all, when he realises that truth transcending the present lies in the future. Whatever he gives today may not come back to him during his lifetime, but there remains no miserliness in showering generosity. Tagore defines

the human habitat as a refuge where the 'self' and the 'other', the 'present' and the 'future' are tied to each other in an everlasting bond.

In a similar tone to Thomas Hobbes's description of the state of Nature, Tagore describes how primitive men, who, to satisfy their basic instincts and depended mainly on animal hunting for food, failed to establish a human habitat. His life was uncertain, lonely and violent. In other words, life was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

In "Palliprakriti", Tagore traces the origin of human civilisation along the banks of great rivers, where habitation prospered in the fertile lands that gradually attracted human populations, and human society was established based on a communitarian ethos.

Tagore imparts an aesthetic dimension to the necessities of life. For him, the food that the Earth provides is not just to satisfy hunger, but it has a beauty that gratifies the soul, where the eyes rest, and the heart rejoices. The resplendent note of sunlight touching the sky, embracing the ripened harvest scattered throughout the horizon, creates a golden tune of harmony. This amalgamation of physical need and mental satisfaction, combined with the willingness to sacrifice for the other and protect the future, drives out cruelty and selfishness. According to Tagore, society is founded on the principles of benevolence and reciprocity. Along the path of Earth's resources, a human habitat grew that survived and flourished through unity and amity. Sharing religious ideas, literary and musical knowledge, art, and other areas of interest became the primary means of mutual exchange and interdependence. City life also began to flourish alongside the village. The anatomy of a city was altogether different from that of villages. The concentration of state power and the presence of military forts, business hubs, and educational institutions, which facilitated the exchange of values and ideas from faraway lands, characterised city life. It became a meeting ground for negotiation, competition and power politics. Life is challenging here, where every individual wants to grow alone, guided by crude individualism and a desire to supplant one another.

Tagore identified greed as a malevolent instinct. Just as dacoits are an antisocial element in society, greed is also a malevolent force that operates within the individual. The moment greed takes control of the human mind and becomes powerful, it starts dismantling societal norms

and ethos, giving rise to self-centred individualism. In modern times, the advent of machines has increased labour power and, consequently, human greed, leading to disequilibrium between human interests and societal ethos. Hostility and conflict are spreading rapidly. In the vortex of internecine rivalry, the bond between village and city crumbles, and the latter exploits the former, returning nothing. This observation made by Tagore resembles John Friedman's core-periphery model, which he advanced in 1966. Friedman, an urban planner and theorist, played a pivotal role in establishing the Program for Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The Core-Periphery Model analyses the unequal distribution of power and resources between two zones – the core, which refers to large and rapidly growing cities, and the periphery, which relates to rural villages. The city thrives on the resources and labour power supplied by the villages. Economic growth necessitates exchange between the core and the periphery. The core disburses capital to import resources and labour power from the periphery. The terms of trade remain structurally unequal and exploitative, with the periphery consistently deprived of genuine exchange value. This asymmetry enables the core to accumulate prosperity while the periphery is relegated to chronic underdevelopment.

By means of this economic theory, Tagore attempts to highlight the psychological void caused by the tragic severance of the kinship bond between the village and the city. The artificial torch that lights the city is at the expense of the spontaneous illumination of villages. There is no longer a symbiotic rhythm of the sun, the moon and the stars. Not only does the water of the lake dry up amidst this artificiality, but the human heart also shrivels under the swirling pace of machinery. An individual’s instinct, too, becomes mechanised, and his novelty crumbles down, making him deaf and dumb. He gradually returns to his primitive self with his barbaric individualism and snatches away whatever resources he can for individual use by exploiting and depriving others. Tagore provocatively suggests that when the individual is governed by an absolute consumer ethic, he is reduced to servitude—either to external forces or to his own instincts. Such subjugation inevitably breeds jealousy, hostility, frustration, and falsity.

Tagore sends a warning message against the abuse of natural resources. Overstepping the boundary is tolerable up to a certain level, after which destruction is inevitable. He specifically mentions the problem of sustainability concerning soil erosion. While we are receiving all our necessary items produced on land, we are impoverishing it by not returning its necessities in equal measures (Mukhopadhyay, 2010: 371). Half a century before the UN's initiative on

deforestation in the 1970s, in "Aranyadevata" (1939), Tagore was already contemplating the devastating effects of deforestation and climate change.

On the occasion of *Halakarshan* and the tree-planting ceremony, through his lecture, Tagore makes a scathing attack on the intemperance of human character. Through an imaginative journey, Tagore records that at the time of life's creation, the Earth was rugged and barren, bearing no signs of affection towards life. Frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions destabilised the Earth's equilibrium. To save the Earth and welcome life on it, by the grace of God, the forest deity (*Aranyadevata*), appeared to protect, nourish, feed and clothe the impoverished, naked and devastated Earth. And gradually, the vegetation prepared to invoke life on Earth. But human beings are intemperate. The moment man severed his kinship bond with Nature and built the concrete city, he lost all connection with his first acquaintance. Befriending the forest connectivity, he now embraced the artificial barrier of brick and mortar. The natural habitat that appeared as a boon to human life was destroyed to serve human greed. Modern-day science and technology have ventured into the strategy of exploiting natural resources and non-human species in the name of progress and economic growth. No other species has caused so much havoc in its habitat as human beings have within such a short period. Tagore was appealing to the human soul to pause a bit and reflect that the time had come to repay what had been extracted from Mother Nature. It's time to pray to the forest deity to protect and shelter us from further annihilation.

Tree plantation was a striking manifestation of the poet-philosopher's resolute commitment to the spiritual and corporeal urgency for the 'oasification', that is reclamation of the scorched and deserted areas of Birbhum's districts. *Brikharopan Utsab* (the Tree-plantation Ceremony) introduced by Tagore and his son in Santiniketan, transformed the place into a garden (Mukhopadhyay, 2010: 358). Andrés Martínez de Azagra Paredes coined the term 'oasification' in 1999. Tagore, however, had already conceived the idea almost a century earlier and initiated practical measures in the parched areas of Birbhum. Living near the vegetation and riverine belt in South Bengal, Tagore's experience of the arid zone of Birbhum compelled him to search for ways to replenish and recuperate Mother Earth's lost vitality. His ecological wisdom was not restricted to poetic imagery or season-inspired songs in *Geetabitan* but encompassed the rugged and practical terrain of activism.

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A Universal message of harmony and Unity in Tagore's eco-philosophical understanding

Tagore's aestheticism towards Nature was not the only aspect of his ecological awareness. His approach towards the ecological crisis was overtly worldly. Hitting out at human greed as the primary cause of ecological devastation, coupled with the rampant use of material resources and unrestrained industrialisation, Tagore was contemplating pressing environmental issues.

At the outset, Tagore called into question the ethos of city life that pervaded the human soul and consciousness, turning it into a soulless machine devoid of human value and wisdom. Thus, his vociferous call in the poem 'Sabhyatar Proti' (To Civilization), written in Bengali in 1896 and published in *Chaitali*:

> Give back the forest, take back the city,
> Get hold of the iron, the steel and the walls in stony immensity,
> Oh! The modern civilisation, Oh! The devouring evil,
> Restore the rustic greenery, and the divine veil…
> In thou iron-clad prison, we do not desire to revel
> In the newly shielded princely domain,
> Yearning freedom and the expansion of the pinion,
> We aspire to get back the lost vigour and self-dominion,
> The soul desires to unshackle the chain,
> And to feel in thy heart, the infinite's vein. (Tagore, 2015:18)

In this poem, Tagore's vehement protest against the artificial wall of city life, with its soulless machinery, is expressed. For the poet, absolute freedom lies not in the confinement of princely abode, secured by the imperial chain, but in communion with the larger world.

Time and again, whenever there was an opportunity, Tagore escaped the hustle-bustle of the city of Calcutta. His spiritual sojourn in Dalhousie, his retreat in Chandannagar, or his long stay fulfilling familial responsibilities in Bangladesh resuscitated his tired soul. Whenever he was close to Nature, his soul felt fulfilled. In *My Reminiscences*, Tagore remembers, "The bank of the Ganges welcomed me into its lap like a friend from a former birth" (Tagore, 2012a: 448). During his stay in the Himalayas with his father, Tagore recalls, "My eyes had no time to rest the entire day, so much did I fear missing something…Why had we ever to leave such spots, cried my thirsting heart. Why could we not stay for good?" (Tagore, 2012a: 479). Tagore's spiritual bond and reciprocal relationship with Nature are significant elements of his ecological consciousness. He felt content in the lap of Nature, whereas in "the streets of Calcutta, I

sometimes imagine myself a foreigner" (Tagore, 2012a: 479). The city in which he was born was far from his soul because it had severed all its ties with Mother Nature. Contrarily, distant places of Dalhousie or remote areas of Bangladesh were close to his heart. In 1880, after returning from England, Tagore went to Chandannagar with his brother and sister-in-law and stayed at their riverside home. In *My Reminiscences*, Tagore writes, "The Ganges again...Indeed the place was like home, and these natural ministrations like that of a mother" (Tagore, 2012a: 558).

However, thirty years on from this journey, when Tagore was writing his *My Reminiscences*, he mourned, looking at the current condition of the place: "I am not speaking of very long ago, and yet time has wrought many changes. Our little riverside nests, sheltering in greenery, have been replaced by dragon-like mills which everywhere rear their hissing heads, belching forth black smoke" (Tagore, 2012a: 558). The iron dragon and the lifeless machinery of the soulless city life exterminated not only the natural environment, causing a severance between human and non-human ties, but also successfully withered away human sensibility and responsibility towards Nature and non-human beings.

Tagore's repugnance towards the artificiality of city life, which hindered all kinds of intimacy with Nature and divinity, encouraged him to theorise on an alternative model of life-sustenance that had its roots in Vedic philosophy. In the philosophical piece *Sadhana*, Tagore articulates:

> …in India it was in the forests that our civilisation had its birth…It was surrounded by the vast life of Nature, was fed and clothed by her, and had the closest and most constant intercourse with her varying aspects…His aim was not to acquire but to realise, to enlarge his consciousness by growing with and growing into his surroundings…the only way of attaining truth is through the interpenetration of our being into all objects. To realise this great harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the world was the endeavour of the forest-dwelling sages of ancient India. (Tagore, 2014c: 75-76)

Indian civilisation was born in the lap of Nature. Based on forest culture, it was a continuum of synergy and harmony. Nature sustained life, feeding and protecting it. Nature, with its vast tracts of forest land, expanded the vision of humanity, whose aim was not to confine its belonging within the concrete walls of egotism but to find freedom in eternity. Tagore not only detested the conctete-filled city of Calcutta or the mushrooming of machine-based industrial

belts along the river Hooghly, but he also unequivocally stood against all kinds of barriers that interrupted the nature-human interrelation. In *Sadhana*, Tagore states:

> The civilisation of ancient Greece was nurtured within city walls. These walls leave their mark deep in the minds of men. They set up a principle of "divide and rule" which begets in us a habit of securing all our conquests by fortifying them and separating them from one another…The west seems to take a pride in thinking that it is subduing Nature; as if we are living in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things. This sentiment is the product of the city-wall habit and training of mind. For in the city life man naturally directs the concentrated light of his mental vision upon his own life and works, and this creates an artificial dissociation between himself and the Universal Nature within whose bosom he lies. (Tagore, 2014c: 76-77)

Born within the confines of concrete walls and separated by the sea, this civilisation erected a culture that extolled segregation between the self and the other, the citizen and the subject, the nation and the non-nation, giving rise to self-important, egoistic individuals and an insignificant 'other'. Apathetic and self-centred, he was obsessed with protecting what he possessed and tried to conquer what he didn't have. A myopic-artificial, and aggressive outlook confined his vision. A continuous battle persisted in the mind for conquest and competition. This civilisation bred on a division between nations, knowledge systems, and man and Nature. This dichotomous relationship was based on antagonism and discontinuity. For Tagore, a civilisation that is devoid of the life and rhythm of Nature is man-made and, therefore, soulless. The emergence of modern industry and city-based life ruptures the essential bond between man and Nature. Tagore wrote a letter to C.F. Andrews from New York where he says:

> Just now, I am on the top storey of the skyscraper to which the tallest of trees dare not send its whisper; but love silently comes to me saying; 'when are you coming down to meet me on the green grass under the rustling leaves, where you have the freedom of the sky and of sunlight and the tender touch of life's simplicity?' (Andrews as cited in Basu, 2024:83).

Unity and amity, symbiosis and harmony, humanity and universality characterised the poet-philosopher's mode of thinking. Fragmentation, discontinuity and disharmony agonised him and defeated his firmly held belief system concerning the Unity of the soul and Unity with the divine. For Tagore, man and Nature are symbiotically connected. Any disruption, be it the "closed Venetian shutters" of his Jorasanko mansion or the skyscraper of New York City, that restricted communion with the larger world was unacceptable to him. In *Nationalism* (1917), Tagore writes:

> Take away man from his natural surroundings, from the fullness of his communal life, with all its living associations of beauty and love and social obligations, and you will be able to turn him into so many fragments of a machine for the production of wealth on a gigantic scale. Turn a tree into a log and it will burn for you, but it will never bear living flowers and fruits…(Tagore, 2012:52)

Disjuncture with communal life turns the human soul into a soulless machine. Tagore comprehends truth not as a self-seeking individual residing in isolation but amidst the pulsating rhythm of the Earth: "…in India, the point of view was different. It included the world with the man as one great truth. India put all her emphasis on the harmony that exists between the individual and the Universal" (Tagore, 2014c: 76-77).

In the above excerpt from *Sadhana* (1913), by 'India', Tagore was referring to the ancient Indian ideal of a symbiotic cohabitation, particularly in the forest habitat, rather than the colonial present in which he was living. In Western nations, life was mainly city-based. However, in traditional Indian society, the *Chaturashram*, i.e., four ashramas — *Brahmacharya* (Studenthood), *Grihasta* (Householder), *Vanaprastha* (Hermit), and *Sanyasa* (Renunciation) — are the traditional stages of life according to the tenets of Hinduism that guide the life cycle of individuals. A man had to spend three-fourths of his life in the forest. Bonding with forest life was an inevitable part of life experience. The period of forest retreat served as a crucial phase of deep introspection, during which the inhabitants gained not only spiritual knowledge, maturity, and tolerance but also reverence for the natural world.

Through 'India', Tagore is particularly indicating the Vedic Age (1500-500 BCE), which marked the advent and blossoming of Indian epistemology and critical thinking in philosophy. Undoubtedly, Aryan civilisation was forest-based and had a close interconnection with the larger world. It was founded on the precepts of the Upanishads. However, we do find instances when forest land and its dwellers were destroyed for the establishment of empires. For example, in the Mahabharata, the Pandavas built their dream-like city, Indraprastha, by clearing the Khandava forest and its inhabitants. The Vedic ritual performed by Brahmins called 'yajna', required a considerable amount of wood and clarified butter, along with the slaughter of animals in sacrificial rituals (Gadgil and Guha, 2018: 70). Jainism and Buddhism emerged in response to Brahmanic hegemony and cruelty towards animals. These two religions dismissed ritual-based yajnas and Brahmanic supremacy. Non-violence was the basic creed of these

movements. The Vedic age, thus, did not represent a uniform and homogeneous concept of ecological justice. Instead, there existed variations between philosophy and practice.

Tagore's fascination with the forest hermitage of the Vedic period was a personal preference that he chose as a possible course of action to address the impending ecological crisis around the world. Moreover, he was not opposed to science and technology; otherwise, he wouldn't have sent his son, Rathindranath Tagore, to the University of Illinois to study agricultural technology. Tagore was opposed to the misuse of technology, the political imposition of state power, and the concrete-based, artificial life of towns that severed all connections with the natural world. For him, a simple life amidst Nature, based on a communitarian ethos and reciprocity, self-reliance, and humility, was the founding stone of an independent society.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it appears that Tagore was thinking in a binary mode: on the one hand, he was criticising Western civilisation, and on the other, he was idolising India. But scrutiny reveals his indictment was towards the idea of a narrow nationalism that begets exclusivism, egotism, hyper-masculinity, tyranny and power-mongering. In *Nationalism*, Tagore writes: "I must not hesitate to acknowledge where Europe is great, for great she is without doubt…I have a deep love and a great respect for the British race as human beings" (Tagore, 2012b: 13,39). He appreciated Europe for its contribution to art and literature. Contrarily, he criticised the inertia that had penetrated deep into the minds of his compatriots. He admired the British people given their fight for freedom and justice. However, Tagore criticises the government of the Nation, which is "like a hydraulic press whose pressure is impersonal" (Tagore, 2012b: 40). Anything impersonal is soulless and static. Thus, the only way to break this chain of stagnation is to fiercely shake it from within with the powerful force of love and humanity that cuts across all boundaries and mental barriers.

Rabindranath Tagore abhorred all kinds of bondage, whether it was a boundary that segregated people, a city wall that separated cultures, a fence that inhibited free movement, or an ego that blocked love and humanity. Thus, Santiniketan was founded on Tagore's imagination, where love and humanity transcend all man-made barriers. Visva-Bharati was Tagore's practical

initiative to not only bring the human soul closer to Nature but also to unite humanity under one roof. His Santiniketan experiment was the culmination of the poet-philosopher's attempt to bring about a harmonious ecospace where man finds fulfilment of his soul in the rhythms of Nature. It is a meeting place where the West meets the East, fostering cultural and educational exchange and unlocking the prospect of human freedom and wisdom. The scope of Tagore's ecology extends beyond human, non-human, and natural interactions, proceeding towards infinity. Tagore not only infuses the spirit of humility, reverence, love, reciprocity, gratitude, care, and benevolence into his eco-ethical approach but also enlightens us about the virtues of these values for the vitality of life on Earth.

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