

## Environment and Development : A Visit to the World of Tagore

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### Abstract

Environmental consideration of economic development has been attracting attention of the western intellectuals for more than half a century. From 1970 onwards we find a large number of writings that pointed out the danger of self-destructing nature of growth of the modern society. The study published in 1972 under the title 'Limits to Growth' or its updated version 'Beyond the Limit' as published in 1992 portrayed an extremely pessimistic vision of the future of this world and predicted the cessation of growth process after a certain period of time. Thus the environmental repercussions of economic activities led the people to think about the kind of growth process that can be continued over time. The study published under the title 'The Ultimate Resource' envisaged an unending process of growth but this seems to an extremely optimistic vision of the real world situation. The concept of sustainable development, as it appeared in the Brundtland's report (1987) and got widely accepted in agenda 21 of the Rio conference in 1992 seems to reconcile the concept of environment and development in a meaningful way. Sustainable development seeks to provide the most obvious solution of the issue of continuing developmental activities paying adequate consideration to this planet earth. But long before these western efforts Rabindranath Tagore, one of the greatest poets, writers, thinkers, social reformers and environmentalists of the 19th century talked much about environmental repercussions of economic development and provided solutions to embark on the path of development suited to Indian soil and situations. A visit to the world of Tagore presents ample evidences of his deep concern about nature and the self defeating activities of the human race that have enormous bearing on environmental health. This paper attempts to focus on Tagore's thought on environment and the lessons as is found in his writings for mutual co-existence of progress and preservation.

**Keywords:** Environment, Development, Sustainable development.

Several decades have elapsed since the term economic development has got some separate entity from economic growth. Not only expansion of per capita G.N.P. economic development implies something more. Provision of life sustaining articles, ensuring self esteem and freedom which in some sense implies expansion of entitlement and capabilities of the people or in nutshell enhancement of well-being of the people comes under the orbit of development discussions.

Expansion of G.N.P. per capita or expansion of people's wellbeing or a combination of both, whatever be the way development is defined there is no denying the fact that development has important bearings on environmental health. Economic development initiatives without any environmental repercussions are completely absurd as the development of language without people to speak it. Continuing development activities and maintaining environmental balance

has been haunting intellectuals of different branches of study for many years and this reached to an amicable settlement in the Rio conference in 1992 which accepted the idea of sustainable development. Sustainable development seeks to offer the way by which development activities can be pursued without much effect on environmental health. But long before this concept has been evolved by western thinkers, Rabindranath Tagore developed almost the same idea to maintain a fine balance between environment and development. If we delve deep into Tagore's literary treasure, we find ample evidences where he speaks about environment friendly development approach (Sarkar 2012). This work attempts to travel into the world of Tagore, as far as possible, to form a wreath into these concepts.

### **Environment and Development: A Concept Note**

The report of World Watch Institute (2015), shows that World coal extraction increased from about 10 million tons in 1800 to 762 million tons by 1900. It climbed to almost 7,900 million tons in 2013—a more than 10-fold increase since 1900. World oil production started only in the late nineteenth century, but grew rapidly from 20 million tons in 1900 to 4,130 million tons in 2013—a 207-fold expansion since 1900. Use of synthetic fertilizer increased from 137 million tons in 2000 to 179 tons in 2013. From perhaps 25,000 cars on the world's roads in 1900 and less than 1 million in 1910, the global automobile fleet crossed the 1 billion mark in 2013. The production of energy-intensive materials— cement, plastics, and steel—has more than doubled since 1992, far exceeding overall economic growth. Global resource extraction—of fossil fuels, metals, minerals, and biomass—grew 50 percent in the 25 years between 1980 and 2005, to about 58 billion tons of raw materials (Renner 2015). Global coal consumption rose from 2261 million tons of oil equivalent to 3826.7 tons of oil equivalent in 2013 (<http://vitalsigns.worldwatch.org/trends>).

The above figure suggests that unending economic growth influenced by unbridled consumption is so important to modern economies and so deep-rooted in the thinking of corporate and political leaders that environmental action

is often seen as in conflict with economy and is relegated to inferior status.

This attitude towards environment has started yielding disastrous consequences. Some 52% of the commercial fish stocks are now fully exploited, about 20% are over exploited, and 8% are depleted. In 2008 there were more than 400 oxygen depleted dead zones in the world's oceans that cannot support marine life, covering an area equivalent to the size of U.K. The world's forests shrank by 1.3 percent or 520,000 square kilometers from 2000 to 2010—an area roughly the size of France. About one-fifth of the world's coral reefs have already been lost or severely damaged, while another 35% could be lost within 10–40 years, according to the latest review by the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network. In 2012, there were 905 natural catastrophes worldwide—and 93 percent of these events were weather-related disasters. This figure was about 100 above the 10-year annual average of 800 natural catastrophes. Overall, the global mean sea level has risen 1.65 mm per year since 1880. But average sea level rise from 1993 to 2009 was almost double that long-term rate, at 3.2 mm per year. In 2013, the global combustion of fossil fuels and the production of cement resulted in the emission of 36.1 billion tons of carbon dioxide, a figure which was 61% over 1990 levels. According to the most recent estimates, emissions in 2014 are likely to be 2.5% over 2013 levels. In physical terms, this translates into the release of 37 billion additional tons of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. (<http://vitalsigns.worldwatch.org/trends>).

The story does not end here. Some 1.2 billion people—almost one fifth of the world—live in areas of physical water scarcity, while another 1.6 billion face what can be called economic water shortage. It is estimated that by 2025 fully 1.8 billion people will live in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, with almost half of the world living in conditions of water stress. For reasons ranging from warfare and persecution to natural disasters and development projects, an estimated 92.56 million people were displaced under compulsion in 2012, either inside their home countries or across the borders. Global deaths from air pollution was about 7 million in 2012.

These disturbing statistics are completely in tune with the pessimistic group's study 'Limits to

Growth' or its updated version 'Beyond the Limit'. These studies presented a completely dismal picture regarding the future of the growth process and predicted the cessation of the growth process within a century. Limits on population or pollution can avoid the collapse the study suggested. The focal point of the pessimist model is that either the termination of the growth process by self-restraint or conscious policy or termination of the growth by collision with the natural limits, resulting in social collapse. One way or other the growth will cease the study hints. The only issue is that the conditions under which it will end, congenial or hostile? (Titenberg 1998).

The picture presented by the study 'Limits to Growth' is not supported by many. well known population economist Julian Simon published an alternative version 'The Ultimate Resource' which out rightly rejected the prediction of collapse (Simon, Julian L 1981). This study, as come to known as, optimistic model, concludes that with the passage of time income rises and people move toward less severe shortage, lower costs and increased availability of resources, including a cleaner environment and greater access to natural recreation areas. The study thus finds no convincing reason for the growth process to continue indefinitely.

The picture presented by the pessimistic or by the optimistic model reaches into extreme conclusions regarding the future of the growth process and cannot be accepted totally. But both contain some observations which are obvious reality. In between these two extreme the concept of sustainable development as adopted in agenda 21 of the Rio conference in 1992 provides the most likely solutions for the continuation of the growth process giving due consideration to environmental health.

Sustainable development seeks to meet the need and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs. This definition signifies the need for equity between and within generations to attain sustainability. Agenda 21, built around the concepts of combating poverty, restraining wasteful consumption patterns and tackling demographic pressures, provided a comprehensive blueprint for

global action to achieve sustainable development. The Rio+20 conference outcome 'Future we want' reaffirmed our need to achieve a sustainable world.

### **Tagore on Environment and Development**

Tagore was very much concerned about development and environmental issues as is found in his writings. Long before western efforts he announced the need for maintaining environmental health in the context of economic progress. As early as 1916 on his way to Japan he felt deep concern regarding environment seeing oil spill at sea. This incident annoyed him because of the way modern man continuously disregarding nature. He always wanted to maintain some harmonious relationship between man and nature. In Tapoban he wrote, the amazing fact is that, in India there is seen a mutual coexistence between river, ponds plants and human being. (Rabindra Rachanabali, vol-7 page 690). Tagore strongly denied the disruption of this harmonious relationship in the name of progress (Sarkar 2012). In 'Atma Shakti' (Rabindra Rachanabali, vol-2 page 692) he warned that to satisfy our ravenousness we should not impair natural balance. But we are doing these in every sphere of activities and making our problems increasingly complicated.

Improvement of the quality of life and extension of real freedom of the people, not simply the acceleration of economic growth, is considered to be the main theme of development according to the modern thinkers. This is almost as the reflection to what Tagore said regarding development of human race in general and India in particular. Since village people constitute the majority of Indian population, rural regeneration got topmost priority in Tagore's writing. ` He speaks for the establishment of self dependent village units. In these self dependent village units, controlled by scientific and co-operative understanding, people and society would be mutually responsible in the overall development activities. Cities will be linked with villages with mutual respect and trust. The society would be free from all sorts of dominance, dependence and exploitation. He says the immense creative talent and mutual cooperation of the village people would give birth to a society free from poverty, hunger and deprivation i.e. where the people will

enjoy 'real freedom', as per modern development terminology. This can be achieved as Tagore said in 'Samabayaniti' (Cooperative policy), human beings can be saved from conflicts and sufferings resulting from inequality by inculcating the truth of unity in the sphere of economic activities too ('Samabayaniti' Rabindra Rachanabali, vol-14 page 322). Thus Tagore leaves us to the concept of a society, a habitable people's world, which can ensure sustainable living for everybody.

Tagore's immense love for nature is found in his songs, poems, plays, in short in almost every branch of literature he has travelled. Tagore wrote song under the label 'Prakriti-Parjaay' where 'prakriti' stands for nature and 'parjaay' stands for form, in which he uttered the need for maintaining adequate balance between human activities and environment and urged for protecting the mother's earth. Tagore's play 'Muktadhara' (The Waterfall), centres around a mountain-stream and a dam which has been built by the royal engineer, Bibhuti of Uttarakut across its waters with the help of a scientific Machine. The stream known as Mukta-dhara (the Free Current), and the dam, stand out as the chief matters of interest in the play and it evolves around three persons, namely the Yuvaraja Abhijit, the royal engineer Bibhuti, and the king of Uttarakut, Ranajit. Going against the king and the engineer the prince finally succeeded in shattering the dam and letting the water of the river flow with its usual course.

The play actually conveys Tagore's strong objection against human efforts of subordinating nature. In the poem 'tame bird was in a cage' (The Gardener poem No. 6) Tagore nicely pictures the longing of caged birds to sing the song of the woodlands and his inability to fly into the forest for its powerless and dead wings.

Tagore was in strict opposition of the self defeating nature of development activities, which cares little about nature, and the balance between man and the surrounding environment. He was very anxious about the unrestrained destruction of forest resources. Tagore said, by destructing forests greedy people are digging their own grave. People have uprooted trees which give us clean air, help us in making our land fertile. Completely forgetting their own welfare man has destroyed

all that is the gift of god (Rabindra Rachanabali, vol-14 page 372-373). This concern for nature, and harmony of man and nature, which is an essential perquisite for the development of a sustainable living condition, is also reflected in the building of Santiniketan, Sriniketan and in Tagore's vision of Visva-bharati. The seasons festivals of santiniketan and Sriniketan, Viz., Barshamangal, Brikhharopana (tree planting ceremony), etc. bears the testimony of his love for nature and his untiring efforts in building up of a society which allows sustainable living by maintaining ecological balance. At Santiniketan, Tagore started the festival of the Earth through brikhharopan (planting of trees) in 1927 which reflects Tagore's vision of the necessity of tree plantation in environment protection. The way by which he tried to develop Sriniketan and Santiniketan conveys the message that rural regeneration through development of agriculture by cooperative efforts and improvement of living conditions of the people are sine qua non of the advancement of the country.

## Conclusion

Tagore's view on environment and development makes it amply clear that Rabindranath Tagore, much before the western development thinkers, campaigned much to maintain ecological balance. Tagore wanted to convey in many of his writings that development activities are necessary but not at the irreparable cost of environment. He was always in favour of a balance between progress and preservation. Tagore dreamt of a world which ensures congenial living not only for us but also for our progenies.

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