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Relevance of Rabindranath Tagore's *Muktadhara*, to Contemporary World – A Perspective

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Abstract

The present article explores Tagore's concept of freedom against the backdrop of Tagore-Gandhi debate on 'charkha,' the role of science and technology in Indian context, and the concept of Nationalism. These concerns of Tagore are evidently manifest in the play, *Muktadhara* as the author analyses the writer's 'meditations' on the frailties of State sponsored educational system and the imposition of science on humanity, thus causing horrible imbalance in man-nature equations.
Keywords: 'Charkha,' nationalism, science, technology, 'mukti.'

Probably, the first reaction of a perceptive mind drawn to Tagore's oeuvre is that its timeless creations demand modern interpretation, and this feeling, in fact, triggered the present article. The very title of the play, *Muktadhara* compels thinking about Tagore's concept of freedom. Creighton Peden observes: "The ideal which lies at the heart of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy is Mukti or Freedom. This freedom is not to be conceived in a narrow social or political sense; rather it is the heart of the spiritual endeavour which involves the deeper self . . . In the deeper realm of Mukti, Freedom and *Jnanam*, Wisdom is to be found the inner harmony of conscious relationship. This inner harmony is best expressed as Shivam, Goodness or Love. Law in the broader social realm provides the freedom of peace but in deeper social relationships we find our freedom through Goodness or Love" (Peden 1978: 211-212). John Murray quotes Tagore: "Love is freedom: it gives us that fullness of existence which saves us from paying with our soul for objects that are immensely cheap" (Murray 1961:86). However, to Rabindranath Tagore, 'Mukti' is conceptually broader than freedom in physical sense. In a sense it is a feeling of oneness as one understands the presence of Him in one and all, and in

turn, realizes the interconnectedness of his individual self with Brahma; it constitutes 'Mukti' for him. The objective of the present paper is to find the relevance of Tagore's *Muktadhara* in today's world.

In order to understand this one may go back to Tagore-Gandhi debate on *Charkha*. Shiv Visvanathan avers that "Gandhi describes Tagore's description of the Charkha as poetic license. Tagore sees the *charkha* as Gandhi's private dream articulated as a private language, claiming to be public good. He fears that each village would become a collection of isolated units and khadi would create the prison house of technology" (Visvanathan 2013:49). Critics have observed Tagore's keen awareness with regard to "imposition of the scientific world on village India" (Peden 1978: 214) that will supposedly destroy its rich culture. A.H. Somjee observes: "The Western Civilization produced science and technology. They both are remarkable feats of human intellect. The western humanity, however, has yet to prove that it deserved them. While it made progress in the field of science and technology, it ceased to grow morally. It has now created gigantic organization and man vis a vis it, is powerless. It has organized violence to such an extent that now it is threatening the very existence of man" (Somjee 1961:143). For Tagore, real scientific training should inspire in man "the courage of experiment and the initiative of mind which we lack as a nation" (Murray 1961:86). Peden opines: "He realized that properly employed the scientific method generated an atmosphere of rational thinking and behaviour which can wean people away from bigotry and moral cowardliness" (Peden 1978:214). Visvanathan says: "Tagore believed that science and technology were prosaic, everyday efforts operating in terms of logic but what Tagore added to them was an imaginary, where science also becomes a dream of possibilities, a series of thought experiments about the nature of freedom and logic of choice" (Visvanathan 2013:49). Does *Muktadhara* embody, in the word of the critic, Tagore's search for a "Poetics of Science"? The collapse of the dam in the play perhaps conveys Tagore's message that science shouldn't be an imposition on nature; science shouldn't be a barrier between man and nature, rather science should attempt towards transformation of 'society' (society in the sense Tagore understands it) from within. Against the backdrop of "Chipko Movement," "Save Silent Valley Movement," "Jungle Banchao Andolon," "Appiko Movement," "Narmada Banchao Andolon," and "Tehri Dam Conflict," it could be said that it is wise for mankind to remember Tagore's cautions in *Muktadhara*, that is, whenever Science and Technology become barrier between man and nature, it is calamitous for human society. Moreover, in today's context of global climate change we discern the human

causes behind it and note to what extent the imposition of Science and Technology on nature has proved detrimental.

In one sense Tagore's ideology regarding Science and Technology is connected with Tagore's idea of "real freedom" (it doesn't mean political emancipation only). In an attempt to comprehensively understand it, we must know Tagore's idea of Nationalism, Society and State, Gandhi's concept of 'Ahimsa' as theory and as civic virtue. Amartya Sen says: "Perhaps no one has been more vocal than Rabindranath Tagore in arguing against nationalism when it goes against one's humanity" (Sen 2008:16). Tagore remains sceptical of nationalism so far it is legitimization for violence. The national policies of the State Uttarkut and the execution of the same in *Muktadhara* manifest the negative aspects of Nationalism as perceived by Tagore. Tagore contradicts state-centric civilization of West with that of India's, and observes that as opposed to European civilization, "In our country society is the source of our welfare. It pervades our society under the cloak of religion. Consequently, India has so long considered the preservation of her religion, her society, as the only way of self-protection. India has not cast a look at kingdom; she has looked at her society. Hence freedom in our society is India's real freedom" (Somjee 1961: 141). It is obvious that Tagore is averse to the invasion of 'State' into the territory of society. In *Muktadhara*, Uttarkut stands for the aggression of the State whereas the moral world of Shiva-Tarai speaks of why Tagore emphasises on freedom of 'Society' from 'State.' Tagore is generally considered as anti-Nationalist. In fact, what he is really against is seeking mere political freedom, and ignoring the weaknesses of 'Society.' In that case, as it happens in the free land of Uttarkut, the majority is driven by minority. Tagore is all for freedom in true sense of the word. In Shiva-Tarai we see that Dhananjay doesn't want to lead so that the people must not feel weak in his absence, and this is real education/teaching that frees mind and enables it to access Truth freely as it brings us close to Gandhi's concept of 'Ahimsa.' The contemporary relevance of *Muktadhara* is indisputable. Today there is no leader, no Dhananjay Bairagi but it seems as if one of his wishes is fulfilled. In 2024, in context of the heinous crime of R.G.Kar Medical Hospital incident, people of West Bengal propelled by self-seeking of Truth are trying to reach Absolute Truth, following the path of Ahimsa. Through the portrayal of Dhananjay Bairagi, Tagore has conveyed an eternal message that no leader should consider himself god. When thousands of people in West Bengal constitute the civil disobedience movement against State Government, seeking justice for the lady doctor brutally murdered in her work place, we hear the reverberations of Tagore's ideas that love is the god

that resides within people's heart that propels one to the path of righteous action to reach the Absolute Truth.

Dhananjaya Bairagi's peaceful protest and civil disobedience aim to attain 'Truth' (Absolute Truth as different from Relative Truth, as says Gandhi), real freedom in society. On February 1922, Non-Cooperation Movement was withdrawn by Gandhi. *Muktadhara* is published in 1922. And this seems to be no mere coincidence. Significantly, when Shiva-Tarai is in utter crisis in *Muktadhara*, Batu prays "Awake, Bhairab awake" (58) (my translation). The play ends with the exaltation of God Bhairab when Truth is reached. Apotheosization of Bibhuti and his exemplary work, the dam was almost like rejection of Bhairab from his temple which is shockingly believed to have become the abode of "Trishna" (24) (Thirst/ Desire). Symbolically the trident of Bhairab Temple, the last hope of the setting sun stands for "Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram" (Truth, Beauty and God). "Politics is for Gandhi, intrinsically a realm of truth-seeking" (Godrej 2006: 293). In *Muktadhara* "the king's power" politics is contrasted with Avijit's "real" or "true" politics which as per Gandhi "Must be looked upon in terms of social and moral progress" (Iyer 1986: 445). It is not that Gandhi disapproves the search for Absolute Truth through politics. Rather, 'Ahimsa' "denotes the highest and most Absolute Truth, the supreme moral principle within which all other virtues are contained. . . 'Ahimsa' in the widest sense, means the willingness to treat all beings as one's self, a complete absence of ill will and goodwill toward all life" (Godrej 2006: 295). Gandhi strongly felt that without 'Ahimsa' it is not possible to seek or find Truth. But 'Ahimsa' entails Gandhi's concept of Self-suffering and 'Satyagraha' as "postulates the conquest of the adversary by suffering in one's own person" (Iyer 1986: 276). Therefore, Avijit's death in *Muktadhara* may be considered as Tagore's indication towards the reality that 'Ahimsa' as civic virtue may at times demand extreme form of sacrifices from 'Society.' In an historical context the sudden withdrawal of Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922 caused resentment in several parts of India. Probably, Tagore's dilemma over 'Ahimsa,' over the prospective success of 'Ahimsa' as a civil virtue in India, may be manifest in *Muktadhara* as the success of 'Satyagraha' depends on selflessness of Avijit. But could it be expected in context of a vast country like India? If not, could a community fight in a unified manner against the political stratagems of the opponent? (as the strategies employed by Uttarkut fail only because of the selflessness and unity of the people of Shiva-Tarai). Unfortunately, what Tagore indirectly hints in *Muktadhara* happens in the Indian context. The vested interests made Indians succumb to the power politics of the British resulting into a history of unspeakable suffering in 1940s. Thus, it can be said that against the

background of the withdrawal of Non-Cooperation movement in 1922, Tagore writes a play in which he obliquely analyses the weakness as well as strength of 'Ahimsa' as civic virtue. Decoding *Muktadhara* further implies another message of Tagore as well. 'Ahimsa' as theory believes that even the opponents are in pursuit of truth (wrongly perceived by them) and therefore, a 'Satyagrahi' cannot think of punishing the opponent. Tagore's message is clear. If his countrymen do not follow the path of 'Ahimsa' in true sense and involve themselves in Nationalistic propaganda-based movements, it might prove as a curse for the State as happens in *Muktadhara* and later in Indian subcontinent in 1940s.

In the final analysis what is signified by "Muktadhara," meaning literally the free flow of the river, *Muktadhara* symbolizes the union of man and nature based on love. It is observed that "This union based on love and action rests on his philosophical premise "that love and action are the only media through which perfect knowledge can be obtained"" (Peden 1978: 215). *Muktadhara* is union of love and appropriate action leading to free access to knowledge (of self/ Truth/ God). *Muktadhara* is the dream of real freedom as pronounced in Tagore's "Where Mind is Without Fear" (Tagore 2017:199). Freedom is:

"Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not
been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from
the depth of truth
Where tireless striving
stretches its arm towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason
has not lost its way…"

Real freedom is still unattained in a kind of democratic politics wherein thrive narrow sectarianism and "threat culture." Besides, *Muktadhara* embodies dispersed meditations of Tagore on the frailties of State sponsored educational system, as evident in the Guru of Uttarkut's structured methodology of teaching his students how to praise the King, the ultimate power. The Guru upholds religious sectarianism, an anathema to modern world. Dhananjay Bairagi perceives the true spirit of democracy when he says: "One must demand kingship for the sake of King himself" (my translation); crucially important words in view of autocratic decisions and malpractices indulged in by the tribe of political leaders. He understands the

power politics of State while he says: “They kill us bodily by weapons, and religious scriptures kill our minds” (39) (my translation). To the educationist Tagore, educational atmosphere must be “for developing the sensitiveness of soul, for affording mind its true freedom of sympathy” (Peden 1978: 215). In *Muktadhara* Avijit symbolises the awakening, “sensitiveness of soul” as its absence presages recurrence of tragedies on grand scale as is observed in contemporary world.

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