

'Nature's Grandchildren'

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Can we be human in the absence of nature, asked Rabindranath Tagore? **To Civilization** Give back the wilderness, take away the city Embrace if you will your steel, brick and stonewalls O newfangled civilization! Cruel all-consuming one, Return all sylvan, secluded, shaded and sacred spots And traditions of innocence. Come back evenings When herds returned suffused in evening light, Serene hymns were sung, paddy accepted as alms And bark-clothes worn. Rapt in devotion, One meditated on eternal truths then single-mindedly. No more stonehearted security or food fit for kings – We'd rather breathe freely and discourse openly! We'd rather get back the strength that we had, Burst through all barriers that hem us in and feel This boundless Universe's pulsating heartbeat! (Rabindranath Tagore, Sabhyatar-Prati, from Chaitali, 1896, Translated by Fakrul Alam)

Sabhyatar-Prati

is deeply resonant with William Blake's poem,

London

, in which the poet laments "the mind-forg'd manacles" of the great city which left "marks of weakness, marks of woe" on "every face" he met. It was only one among thousands of poems, songs, plays and stories where Rabindranath Tagore illuminates how metropolitan humanity's growing alienation from the natural world continues to enervate it, draining it of the vitality it once had and which it could possess again if ecological integrity could be restored to our relationship with nature. Rabindranath believes that the inevitable ecological alienation involved in metropolitan life cripples our cognition profoundly, leaving humanity in a condition of an ultimately destructive spiritual destitution. Intimacy with the natural world from a formative age is the only way to restore humanity to spiritual and ecological health. This, to him, is the core of his practical religion as well as his pedagogy. Writing about Vishwabharati University (at Santiniketan, Bengal) in his essay **Creative Unity**, he writes: 'The one abiding ideal in the religious life of India has been **mukti**, the deliverance of man's soul from the grip of self, its communion with the Infinite Soul through its union in **ananda** (bliss) with the universe... This religion of spiritual harmony is not a theological doctrine to be taught, as a subject in the class, for half an hour each day. **Such a religious ideal can only be made possible by making provision for students to live in intimate touch with nature, daily to grow in an atmosphere of service offered to all creatures, tending trees, feeding birds and animals, learning to feel the immense mystery of the soil and water and air.**' (Emphasis added). In his insistence that the surrounding presence and participation in and of the natural world is essential to a fully conscious human life, Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps unique among modern philosophers. More than his enormous literary corpus and his music, beloved to millions of Bengalis, it was Santiniketan that Rabindranath regarded as his life's main work. Executed under exacting modern conditions, it was his unique educational experiment with the ancient Indian idea of the forest hermitage, Tapovan. Appropriately, Santiniketan was not synthetically abstracted from the natural world in the manner of modern educational institutions. It was dedicated to the revival of Indian rural life. Without daily instruction in the midst of nature, human education is crippled: this is the long-enduring message of Santiniketan, despite the incursions of the urban mind in its daily working.



Village kids on a birding trip in the Indian Himalayas The only

sensible way to educate children and the young, Rabindranath felt, was to not sequester them in dull, four-walled Macaulayite classrooms (which he himself ran away from at age 14!), but to sit under a **Bargad** (Banyan) or a **Peepul** (Sacred Fig) tree and go for walks with them in the woods and the fields. Children growing up and getting educated in schools in congested, polluted metros around the world – mentally so far from mountains and rivers, meadows and forests – are more likely to damage nature inadvertently as they grow up. Today, this is especially the case, since they are ever more subject to a smartened digitized system, which runs their lives for them. In the process, their minds get distorted, their tastes enslaved and their appetites fuelled: they end up contributing to a culture, which can only hasten ecological catastrophe. In Santiniketan, the transition from one season to another was marked by festivals, many of which Rabindranath himself had

initiated. For instance, there was Briksharopan (tree-planting ceremony), held as part of the Varshanmangala celebrations on the arrival of the monsoons, responsible in no small measure for turning the dry red laterite soil of that part of Bengal to a verdure, which survives a century on. At neighboring Sriniketan, which was a center for rural crafts he started the Hala Karshana or ploughing ceremony, to mark the commencement of the cropping cycle. In a prescient 1938 lecture, **Aranyadebata** (The God of the Forest), given at the **Briksharopan** celebration, Rabindranath speaks of the enormous significance of living in everyday kinship with the natural world. He points out that in the past, humanity used to live physically close to forests. This inspired a relationship of creaturely affection and awareness (**mamtabodh**) towards trees, while it was also dependent on them for a hundred material needs. Thus, it naturally understood the importance of looking after its habitat. With the onset of urbanization and the growth of big cities in the modern era, humanity's material dependence on forests remained (and grew), but the knowledge of this fact became more opaque and remote. Inevitably, the **mamtabodh** mutated into **nirmambhaava** (mercilessness) with increasing and persistent ecological distance. Tagore attributes the progressively hotter summers of North India to the deforestation that it had endured. The **Briksharopan** ceremony, Rabindranath says at the end of his lecture, was meant not only to afforest the region but to feel due regret (**chhatobedana**) of inflicting the pain on nature involved in deforestation, the idea being to restore human intimacy with nature.



Restoration and conservation of our natural surroundings was as much an ecological necessity as it was a moral imperative for Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath's writings in all the many genres (poems, plays, stories, songs, letters) are inextricably intertwined with his intimate experience of the natural world. There is, to take just one instance, the remarkably tender short story *Bolai* about a little boy fostered by his Kaki (aunt), since his own mother is no more. He is ardently in love with nature, and intimately attuned to her inner movements, so much so that he has to hide his true emotions from his friends when they slash roadside shrubs with a cane, or break the branch of a tree, just to tease him. *Bolai* is especially attached to a Shimul (silk-cotton) tree that starts growing in the middle of a path in their garden at home and does not allow his uncle to cut down the tree. Soon, however, he has to leave home for further studies. *Bolai* misses the Shimul tree and sends a letter home requesting a photograph. Sadly, however, his uncle has got the tree removed, to the utter devastation of his wife – for she had begun to see the tree as a symbol of her nephew studying in a far off town. In remorse, she does not eat for two days. In stories like *Bolai* or poems like *Brikshvandana* and *Talgachh* or letters gathered in *Chinnapatrabali*, Rabindranath succeeds in showing the intimacy of the existential bond between humanity and nature. It would seem from so many of his poems, stories, plays, songs and letters that humanity is properly naturalized only when the natural world is duly personified. This is only possible if humanity awakens to its sentient destiny as a witness to creation. For Rabindranath, in keeping with the vision of the ancient Indian scriptures, the Upanishads and the Vedas, the same consciousness that we inhabit as human beings also permeates the entire natural world and the cosmos. However, this great truth is hidden from our perception by our widely shared illusions today. Self-realization is necessary to human freedom and it consists primarily in the realization of the unity of all creation. In this sense, it is impossible to be properly human without the constant daily touch of the natural world of (and to) which we are born, and without which we struggle to live – though we have been led to believe otherwise in a global society stupefied by technological success and the seductive man-made hardware and software it has produced for us to live in. Global metropolitan life and the increasing urbanization of the mind (which now impacts villagers too) involve a physical and psychological alienation from the natural world that supports, among many other things, human life itself. With the physical and psychological distance between human beings and nature, comes a structurally destructive ecological alienation, which nurtures ecological ignorance from a cognitively formative age. In his writings, Rabindranath emphasizes the manner in which modern society routinely represses its feelings for nature to the point where they cease to exist in its consciousness. And insofar as it does this, he is quite clear that it suffers an inner spiritual impoverishment, which allow it to participate blindly and passively in the organized forces that contribute to ecological destruction. Ever the prophet of renewal, Rabindranath's poetic vision is a challenge to the utilitarian ecology in vogue nowadays and an invitation instead to a spiritual ecology urgently essential to face the imperiled human predicament in late modernity. First published by *Radical Ecological Democracy*