

Understanding on Social Utopia: West to East

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of life is the philosophy of creation. Personal and individual freedom can be achieved and only be maintained through creation. Constructive behavior takes man further and further away from the very essence of life. This essay discusses and compares Tagore's evolution with Rousseau's hypothetical evolution, mostly from the *Second Discourses*, and builds upon Marx's *Estranged Labour*, to illustrate that *near* utopia can be achieved through a socialist and creative mindset. Arguments follow such that, such a state and society can be attained by developing man's aspirations through proper nurturing at the initial stages and harnessing the creative spirit within him.

Nowadays, when one opens a popular periodic publication, she will seldom find an article that deals with philosophy and a form of philosophy that one can claim depends heavily on academic findings. There was a time when there was hardly any distinction between thoughts that flow freely and thoughts based on thinkers that have contributed to form the knowledge base of that period. Inquiries, at times, were made on aspects of life that relates to the higher forms of beings, but applicable to the daily life. One can say that thoughts regarding the spiritual aspects of religion are irrelevant and irrational and that mysticism barely has any use to the profitable daily life residing in the fast lane.

Academia has come into existence through philosophy, and one can safely claim that philosophy is the reason for the progress that we enjoy every day. It is our utter and ever-provoking curiosity that has made us enquire and philosophize on what is real, on what we perceive as conscious and even on what we cannot quite perceive, or in other words the *unconscious*. The unconscious mind and our curiosity can be believed to go hand-in-hand. We could have simply been content to be able to feed ourselves and procreate for the survival of our species. Why did we enquire and at times still do enquire about the existential aspects of our being? It had just been mentioned that logic barely sees any profit in matters like spirituality – even though this assertion is to be argued against. Evolutionary theory states that the ultimate goal of any and all species is the very well-known term *survival of the fittest*. When not taken into account scientifically the phrase can have its use in terms of being strong, if not physically then mentally. However, the term scientifically states that the *fit* survives over the unfit. The word *fit* refers to the ability of a species to procreate and increase its gene pool i.e. to spread its genes through its offspring. So, why could not we be kept satisfied to nourishing ourselves and spreading our genes by mating with our opposite sex?

At this point, the scientific validity of the evolutionary theory can come into question. As this piece of literature has begun with spirituality and as spirituality relates to religion, scientific evolution can also be questioned by bringing forward creationist theories that reside on the opposite spectrum of the ideas brought into light by Charles Darwin. The *Origin of Species* is a piece of work that is written in Victorian style; and even though one may not consider one of the most renowned poet's, Rabindranath Tagore, work on religion, spirituality and evolution as scientific, it holds a certain amount of weight in terms of our current discussion and the progress of humanity as a whole.

Tagore technically belonged to the *Pirali Brahmin* caste, but accepted any aspect of any religion that he found to coincide with the rationality he possessed and with his philosophy. His philosophy on life was his religion as he explained in the Hibbert Lectures. Tagore (1958) named the collection "*The Religion of Man*", which he introduced through evolution in the rhythmic flow that his writings possess – English or Bangla. He expresses his ideas in poetic strokes, and his words can be expressed more freely by quoting the theorist as opposed to paraphrasing. He describes how a four-legged mammal defies "the downward force" of gravity and stands up in her hind legs through "an easy balance of his muscles" (Tagore, 1958, p. 52). The hands that are the "most detached of all our limbs [...] become the most graceful, useful and skillful part of our body" (Tagore, 1958, p. 54). This newfound *freedom of action* is accompanied by what Tagore calls a *freedom of view*. According to Tagore, we may have evolved into the perfect beings but we have our limitations. The poet portrays the advantages that the freedoms provide by comparing what we see with the better eyesight of other animals. However, even though they may see better they do not have the *freedom of view* that allows us to have a 'wider view' than our animal predecessors. We have the ability to acquire and transit knowledge that is described by our most valuable possession, *freedom of thinking*.

The perfection that we have acquired through the natural process over time does not make us complete. Tagore highlights that we are "incomplete" but never "imperfect" (Tagore, 1958, p. 59). It is experience that provides us with the 'wider view'; that allows us to understand 'relatedness' among things (that which he identifies as human-ness); that allows us to keep evolving towards achieving the maximum potential of our divine gift. It is our imagination that the *freedoms* (c.f. Sen, 1999) have provided us with that makes us constantly aware of our larger existence. This feeling contradicts with our very "biological meaning of the instinct of self-preservation" (Tagore, 1958, p. 54) freeing our spirit of our objective self into a "godly" (Tagore, 1958, p. 55) state.

Tagore's description of our development may simply be that of transcendence and the realization of the spirit, but the portrayal of the physical change among the living beings provides a strong aftertaste of how natural the process can be. The realization of the existence of the truth within infinity elucidates how we differ from all the other beings in nature in terms of having something special. It is our subjective self that provides us with the luxury of being able to enquire past our conscious being. It makes us the curious beings we are. His philosophy is that of unity. It is the reconciliation of the super-personal, the universal spirit, in the individual being. However, it is filled with dichotomies. There is the animal and the man; the physical and the mental; the objective and the subjective; the finite and the infinite. He provides one analogy after another to portray the relatedness that exists even among the polar opposites. Species have physically regenerated to become more adept to the surroundings; to become a better version. The physical regeneration is compared to mental development through experiences. Our spirituality becomes useful in development as civilizations after civilizations have

gone through experiences to embed within us a greater mental understanding. For instance, the Roman Empire is known for its greatness and even after its demise it has left its mark in the history books as well as through what it had built centuries ago. Even though civilizations may have grown in a divergent manner independently, they have connected themselves with each other over space conquering time. But what is important is what these 'dead' civilizations have taught us, or at least what they should have taught us.

If experience is the path to mental expansion and this experience has been witnessed repeatedly by great civilizations, why was the latter part of the previous sentence asserted? Why has it been indicated that we have not learnt and driven towards mental excellence? Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a man whose philosophy lies at the heart of the hippie movement of the 1970s, also draws on from evolutionary theory hypothetically to portray progress of the physical as well as the mental aspects of man. His philosophy does not hold scientific validity as he portrays humans to be solitary despite the numerous archaeological findings showing that we always have been social. Philosophies or expression of thoughts holds a certain beauty in the fact that it can be interpreted in any manner possible as long as it retains consistency and of course it has to be rational. Scientifically, primates did not turn into humans abruptly. Primates are social and thus the trait had carried on during evolving from a *lower* form of primate to the *perfection* that we are today. However, if one takes the missing-link into account coupling it with creationist theory, Rousseau's (1964) idea that man is solitary, benign and amoral, and it is by chance that she discovers the process of procreation holds. Even scientifically, if the species of our animal predecessor who were/are not social is taken into account, theoretically the traits hold. However, the claims that are significant to the discussion exist in the natural qualities that the Swiss-born (Britannica, 2023) thinker assigns to humans and how they develop, eventually leading to the advancement to the different stages of societies.

According to Rousseau (1964), the most basic qualities are self-preservation and pity, and they can be claimed to be extremely relevant to scientific theory. Self-preservation is self-explanatory and pity comes into play from the claim of the *survival of the fittest*. As it has been initially stated, the end of all species is to guarantee existence and pity works as a feeling that facilitates cooperation when another member is in need. If not cooperation, at least pity should work to prevent harming another for personal gains beyond (sustenance and) subsistence. Unfortunately, it is the development of the arguably stronger trait, self-preservation, which overpowers pity to reap personal benefits. When looked at the matter from Tagore's perspective, it is the understanding of the greater existence and the thirst to aim for the infinite provided by the surplus after achieving subsistence that leads to the heinous progress. Actually, regress would be better suited for this particular description. Rousseau states that self-preservation, after being achieved, develops to *amore propre*, which is love of oneself, and eventually leads to vanity.

As we are freed of our objective self, man develops this love for the self-depicting admiration to perfection. These transformations of the initial trait occur at the nascent stage of the formation of society when man had not experienced enough to pursue something that is completely intrinsic. Even if man can do so, she receives admiration from others and the infinity becomes a symbol of man's existence. With experience the rich devise a plan to retain their wealth, which by now has become the substitute for their existence; hence, the spiritual infinity. The plan is the formal declaration of a social contract to retain their private property on the grounds that the poor are weak and without a covenant that is to

protect all from each other the rich can forcefully take away the subsistence of the weak. Mental development as cunningness can be witnessed to have developed over time and time regenerates the mind through experience. Even though Rousseau's (1964, 1978) final stage ends in tyranny, this can be considered the birth of capitalism through exercising power. And Tagore (1958, 1961) claims that it is the pursuit of power that had caused the downfall of the great civilizations as no society can sustain when its end simply becomes physical existence.

Physical existence only requires *regeneration*, which in this case is production from the Marxist point of view. Production, which our poet would regard as *construction*, illustrates nothing but our narrow sense in utility. Our endeavor to achieve completeness through *creation*, an end in itself, is diverted to merely being the useful man. Marx (1978) moves onto elaborating the dichotomy within a society through two systems of society, the omnipresent one and the ideal one, which are capitalism and communism, respectively. The German provides apt arguments on how labor alienates a person from her subjective self and as a matter of fact even the objective world. Her labor goes into a product that barely provides for subsistence which does not even belong to her. She remains estranged from everything other than her objective self and is no less than an animal. On the other hand, the bourgeoisie turns her surplus into excess. She has not been able come out of the bounds of limiting the infinity to self. Even though Marx maps out a capitalist society with two economically extreme groups, his construction remains quite relevant until what seems is the negation of 'everything' that a modern society has to offer. Despite admitting capitalism to be an essential stage for any human progress he says that "religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art etc., are only *particular* modes of production, and fall under its general law" (Marx, 1978, p. 85). Today one can be quite confident about the improbability of a utopian communist state by removing private property through a revolution by the working class, but complete negation of the concurrent social fabrics can be categorized as simply rash.

Even though Rousseau considers the nascent stage of society where social intercourse does not compromise freedom to be the ideal state, he admits to going back to that state to be impossible (c.f. Rousseau, 1978). One *has* to work for subsistence and what Marx (1978) had stated to be the modes of production in essence would take man back to being animals. It can be stated with quite a strong conviction, if not total assurance, that Tagore would resent such a statement. The poet's political beliefs may have been complex and diverse but his ideas revolved around the concept of socialism. Tagore essentially provides a more realistic path to an equal and socialist society that is quite opposite to that of Marx's – when Marx's was revolution; Tagore's take a longer period of time through evolution, albeit mostly social.

The man who occupied the walls of innumerable Bengalis during the first half of the twentieth century did not regard himself to be anything but a poet. People remember him for his contribution to Bengali art mostly in forms of poetry and stories. Tagore is a man that is portrayed to be a romantic and his immense popularity in the West started to decline when he was started to be labeled as a mystic. The ideas on society and its progress of an artist can be easily dismissed, especially one that originates from a concept relating to the freedom of the spirit, *Mukti*. However, people tend not to highlight one of Tagore's greatest contributions to the society: his school at *Shantiniketan*. The Bengali's progressive system of schooling challenged the "universal" educational system of the colonial masters; argued to have served as epistemic spaces¹ by post-colonial thoughts and ideologies (c.f. Foucault, 1979).

Tagore (1958) believed that a person's life has four stages; and the first one is the most important one. He claims that it is in that stage that a person is defined as the man she is going to become. It is at this stage that schooling prevails, and till date various segments of societies claim that the *Shantiniketan* children's school remains one of the best in the world. There are many criticisms by postcolonial thinkers on the concept of discipline imposed on children by the occidental schooling system. The argument lies in the assertion that this form of discipline exerts power to create a desired mind and can be expected to be not endorsed by Tagore. However, discipline remains an integral and essential aspect of the poet's children's school. The difference lay in the fact that he develops the discipline internally by creating interest through different forms of arts like poetry and literature. The children are read to at the initial stage and when they develop an interest they learn to read on their own accord. In Tagore's institution, the end always aims to achieve a higher ground. The (text-) books follow the progression of his philosophy. *Shohoj Paa'th (Ek)* touches upon the natural aspects of this world whose thesis develops to a more society related commentary in *Shohoj Paa'th (Dui)*. The stories on duties, chores, requirement of discipline, social and natural threats move onto expressing the infinite, portrayed through freedom and sacrifice, in *Shohoj Paa'th (Teen)*.ⁱⁱ

Socialism, as understood from Tagore's works and philosophies, is a dream that can only be achieved through understanding a man's natural yearning for *Mukti* and utilizing her surplus in *creation*. The act of *creation* makes a person devoid of worldly matters and Tagore states that the closest manner a person can feel the presence of godⁱⁱⁱ is through this process. The requirement of science is never denied as evident from the fact that he begins his spiritual commentary with a scientific theory that is accepted mostly by strong supporters of the natural sciences; mostly by atheists during his time. Divine intervention that can truly be understood through *creation* becomes the key ingredient of a society. If the Western political thought is put under scrutiny, the society and man become a product of her own higher power; portrayed by her inherent nobility. And if we look closely into Tagore's work, the nurturing and harnessing of man's aspiration of the greater good may be achieved through education – may just be the philosophies' path to a probable and conceivable utopian society.

Footnotes

ⁱ Webster defines episteme as “a body of ideas which give shape to knowledge of that time”. An epistemic space is a space where the placement and activity of a body is controlled. Torture (fighting for survival can be considered as a form of torture because poverty exists not because of lack of resources but uneven distribution) gives way to more subtle ways of control. This control is made possible through rise of strategies, modes of knowledge, new disciplines, scientific ways of thinking etc. A new epistemic space is the realization that a body needs not to be controlled through a hammer. The power of the sovereign realizes that a subject body is not only a subject body but also a mind that can be moulded. The power becomes infused within the subjects and a crime against the sovereign becomes a crime against the society. An epistemic space gives rise to docile bodies and is essential for control.

ⁱⁱ Ideas on teaching methods and schooling have been derived from intellectual intercourse with Kathleen O'Connell on Tagore at the University of Toronto in the later part of the year, 2006. Furthermore, the copies of the children's texts

(*Shohoj Paa'th*) had been briefly, yet substantially, obtained from her during the same period of time for academic and intellectual use.

iii As understood from Tagore's (1958) Lectures with reference to "godly" state. Also, see Tagore (1928) for greater details and connections between man's godly state and 'god'.

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