
Nature and Travel : A Study of Tagore's Glimpses of Bengal and Japan Jatri
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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore's love for nature and eco-consciousness gets reflected in every genre of his writings: from his poetry, to novels to nonfiction. Naturally, as an avid lover of nature his travel narratives also reflect the deep bond that he shared with nature, which have helped him in negotiating with himself and the world outside. In this paper, I have selected two of his travel narratives: Glimpses of Bengal (1921) and Japan Jatri (1919) in order to highlight how Tagore's travels to various places both within India and abroad reflected his environmental consciousness. We have used the theory of travel narratives and ecocriticism as the theoretical lenses for textual analysis. In his travel narratives, Tagore has examined how his experiences while travelling has shaped his creative abilities and changed his outlook towards life. Further, in this paper we have explored how his encounters with nature in various places and by observing the relationship of the people with nature Tagore has reflected on the basic connection which human beings have with nature. Also, as a person with clairvoyance, he realised that the result of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation is going to destroy nature and therefore he was being far ahead of his time when he preached the need for maintaining a balance between the progress of human civilisation and nature.

Key words: Rabindranath, Nature, Environmental Consciousness, Travel narratives.

Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), has been always known for his love for nature and environmental concerns. We find him writing about his environmental concerns in almost all genres of his writings be it his poetry, novels, short stories, nonfiction and so on. Travel narratives, therefore were no exception. In this paper in order to understand the presence of nature in Tagore's travel narratives, I have selected two travel narratives to compare and analyse. These two are The Glimpses of Bengal and Japan Jatri. In The Glimpses of Bengal, which is a letter collection, Tagore writes about the beautiful serene Bengal countryside marked by the natural glory of nature. In Japan Jatri Tagore wrote about how rapid industrialisation has led to the destruction of nature and how the Japanese people appreciated the beauty of nature. In Japan Jatri Tagore has highlighted the pitfalls of a rapidly increasing industrialisation. He visualized that the decreasing greeneries will have adverse effects on the climate in the future. I have chosen these two travel narratives particularly as I wanted to explore and compare Tagore's perception of nature from his journey within the country and abroad.

According to Tagore, nature is a manifestation of the supreme soul. Throughout his life, he has always desired to be close to nature. During his childhood Tagore could not study in the traditional schools as he felt himself separated from the nature into the confinements of concrete walls. One of the main reasons for Tagore to travel to places

both within and outside the country was his desire to reconnect with nature and explore human-nature dynamics.

Tagore's environmental consciousness is reflected in many of his works. For example, in the poem "To Civilization" or *Sabhyatar Prati* (Chaitali), he wrote:

“দাও ফিরে সে অরণ্য, লও এ নগর,
লও যত লৌহ লৌষ্ট কাষ্ঠ ও প্রস্তর
হে নবসভ্যতা! হে নির্ধুর সর্বগ্রাসী,
দাও সেই তপোবন পুণ্যচ্ছায়ারাশি,... ”

“Give back the wilderness: take away the city-
Embrace if you will your steel, brick and stone walls
O newfangled civilization! Cruel all-consuming one,
Return all sylvan, secluded, shaded and sacred spots
And traditions of innocence.”

(Translated by Fakrul Alam, 277)

In his book titled *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, He talks about how Indian civilisation is unique from the rest as Indians have always valued their kinship with nature:

“But the Indian mind never has any hesitation in acknowledging its kinship with nature, its unbroken relation with all.” (Tagore 23)

In the quoted lines, the poet laments the loss of natural resource in forest to urbanisation which is the manifestation of new civilisation. This paper seeks to highlight the probable answers to the following research questions: (i) how can nature's presence be felt in Tagore's Travel narratives? (ii) How do his travel narratives approach the nature? And (iii) what were his environmental concerns and how are they significant?

In the article titled “Rabindranath Tagore's Eco-consciousness in 20th Century Bengali Literature” the authors write:

Apart from aesthetic and emotional treatment of nature, Tagore shows some obvious ecological consciousness in his poems, dramas, essays and in his songs in a large scale. He did not keep his environmental consciousness limited only to literary works; his rural development effort in Shilaidaha and Patisar villages, establishing krishi Bank (Agriculture bank) for agricultural development at Shilaidaha in 1894 and at Patisar in 1914, emphasis on cottage industry, co-operative enterprise, and micro credit assistance for poor village people show that he had realistic concern upon nature and poor people.

(Rahman, et.al., 13)

Tagore, thus, was not only just concerned about Nature which got reflected in his literary creations, but he has also tried his best to take care of nature and to uplift the underprivileged people.

In his article titled “Tagore's Philosophy of Man and Nature: A Study in Environmental Ethics”, critic Charles B. Berebon writes:

Tagore holds that the ultimate end of humanity is the establishment of relationship with all through the union with the divine. It is love for the entire universe that becomes the background of this spiritual union. (Berebon 111)

One of the important aspects of Tagore's philosophy is to achieve a spiritual union with all living creatures, nature and the Supreme soul. Since nature is an important aspect of this union, hence reconnecting with nature time and again became a significant motto in his life.

An ecocritical reading of travel narratives:

The theoretical framework within which I have situated my work is the theory of travel narratives and ecocritical theory. Ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, xviii) Since we are looking into the representation of nature in select travel narratives of Tagore, therefore, we are exploring the relationship between literature and the actual physical environment and thus we are looking into the texts from an ecocritical standpoint.

In his work *The Perception of the Environment*, Tim Ingold while exploring how human beings perceive the nature and interact with it, mentions that wayfinding (moving from one region to another) influences the experience of nature.

In wayfinding, people do not traverse the surface of a world whose layout is fixed in advance – as represented on the cartographic map. Rather, they 'feel their way' through a world that is itself in motion, continually coming into being through the combined action of human and non-human agencies (Ingold, 155).

In order to travel, one need to monitor their surroundings continuously, which makes it an immersive feeling and this he says is related to their psychological instinct. This results in developing a connection with nature through sensory experiences and then it turns into a psychological bond while travelling through nature. In Yi- Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, he writes:

A brief but intense experience is capable of nullifying the past so that we are ready to abandon home for the Promised Land. Still more curious is the fact that people can develop a passion for a certain type of environment without the benefit of direct encounter. (Tuan 184)

Here he explores the need of human brings to know nature and to build up a relationship with it in order to survive. He says:

Nature may be hostile and enigmatic, yet man learns to make sense of it — to extract meaning from it — when such is necessary to his survival. (Tuan 79)

Human beings not only discern geometric patterns in nature and create abstract spaces in the mind, they also try to embody their feelings, images, and thoughts in tangible material. (Tuan 28)

Thus human beings through travel make unfamiliar spaces familiar through their interaction with the nature or environment. Thus, "Travel writing reflects and influences the way we view the world and ourselves in relation to it" (Youngs 12)

Nature's Presence in the Glimpses of Bengal: Selected from the Letters of Rabindranath Tagore 1885 to 1895:

These are a collection of letters which were written by Tagore about his experiences of travel to various places within Bengal to manage his family's vast ranging agricultural lands. He travelled across these regions mainly in his houseboat on the river Padma. Most of the focus of these letters is the beautiful scenic beauty of the Bengal countryside and the serene village life.

He has used the knowledge that he gained from village life in many of his literary works. The poetic way in which he has described the scenic beauty of nature while travelling in his houseboat can be seen in one of the many descriptions of nature in these letters:

Looking towards the East, there is endless blue above, endless white beneath... But on turning to the West, there is water, the currentless bend of the river, fringed with its high bank, up to which spread the village groves with cottages peeping through-all like an enchanting dream in the evening light. (Tagore 4-5).

While living in the village atmosphere he noticed the tranquil life of the countryside. He describes the village atmosphere and his approach towards it in the following way:

The only thing you want to do in a place like this is to gaze and gaze on the landscape, swinging your fancies to and fro, alternatively humming a tune dreamily, as the mother on a winter's noonday, her back to the sun, rocks and croons her baby to sleep.(Tagore 11-12).

He loved the simple slow lifestyle of the people living in these villages. He describes their simplicity and innocence in the following lines:

These are truly children of the soil, born on it somewhere, bred by the way-side, here, there , and everywhere, dying anywhere. Night and day under the open sky, in the open air, on the bare ground, they lead a unique kind of life; and yet work, love, children, and house-hold duties- everything is there. (Tagore 19)

He admired their capacity of balancing the maintenance of a close bond with nature and maintaining a good family life fulfilling all their responsibilities at the same time. Even the author himself felt like he can gaze over the landscape and allow a free flow of fancy forever. Here he also felt intimately connected to the nature so much so that he could feel her breath on him. Here he could realise the sharp contrast between the vast nature, and the triviality of human existence. He says:

And I came to the conclusion that it is because with us Nature is obviously the more important thing...The contrast between the beautiful, broad, unalloyed peace of Nature- calm, passive, silent, unfathomable- and our own immediate worries- paltry, sorrow-laden, strife- tormented, puts me beside myself as I keep staring at the hazy, distant, blue line of trees which fringe the fields across the river. (Tagore 28-29).

Here he started feeling that human beings, being a part of nature share such a intimate bond with it that it can almost relate to every human feelings or emotions. For example, in one of his letters, he compared the separation of a girl with her parents and relatives to the death of a person and he felt as if the nature could feel their melancholy. Also in these letters, he clearly stated that he loved his stay in the countryside as it helped him to be at close quarters of nature. He could almost feel himself as a part of nature so much so that he says that he cannot differentiate between himself and nature. He compares the life in the countryside with that which he had in Calcutta. He describes how nights in Calcutta are like 'slow river of darkness while the nights in Bolpur is like a vast still lake, placidly reposing, with no sign of movement.'(Tagore 66).

Aseem Shrivastava, in his "An Ecology of the Spirit Rabindranath's Experience of Nature" writes —

Rabindranath believes that the ecological alienation of metropolitan life profoundly cripples our sensibility, leaving humanity in a self-destructive state of spiritual destitution. Engagement with the natural world from a formative age is the only way to restore humanity to spiritual and ecological health. (Shrivastava 331)

So this journey to the countryside was to him a healing experience like never before. In her article titled “If possible, I too shall venture out into the world – that is my desire”: Reading Rabindranath Tagore’s Chhinnapatrabali as Travel Writing” Sarbajaya Bhattacharya writes:

In the letters, as the viewer, Tagore is always outside the landscape, and his eyes and words mediate our reception of nature in its most “natural” state, undisturbed by human hands, but paradoxically, in its literary form, mediated by those very mechanisms. (Bhattacharya 225)

Thus through these letters which reflected his experiences while travelling across parts of Bengal truly shows his expansion of his changed outlook towards life. This was realised by Tagore himself which is why he expressed his doubt about whether he will be able to fit with the life in Calcutta after returning to the city. Since he could see the raw rural life from very close quarters along with the beautiful nature, he could relate human lives against each other and with the wide nature. About these letters, Debarati Bandyopadhyay writes:

Within the space of a few short lines in a letter (significant in itself, because this was not fiction nor a public lecture, but an attempt to share his contemplation with a close relation, and hence, a genuine reflection of private thoughts), Rabindranath offers a critique of the role of humans in this world with respect to ecology and of the relations across species. (Bandyopadhyay 19)

Therefore using a personal form of expression like letter writing, he has expressed his innermost thoughts perspectives and realizations about nature which shows his deep love, admiration and regard for nature.

Nature’s Presence in Japan Jatri:

Rabindranath Tagore went to Japan on May, 1916. After he received the Nobel Prize in 1913, he was invited to visit Japan. Japan Jatri is a book which consists of a collection of letters which were written by Tagore expressing his experiences during his trip to Japan. Here he expresses his environmental concerns in details. For example while being in the ship he thinks of how human beings with their growing industrialisation are trying to conquer the calm stillness of nights. He has also stated that this tendency of trying to modify nature to suit our requirements have started from the time we started when we have started to study using artificial lights to transcend the boundary of light and darkness demarcated by the Sun. He feels that this goes against God and his rules of creation and has started interfering in his rights. He feels that this is human beings’ arrogance in trying to emulate God has resulted in disaster as their activities have diminished the serenity of nature. Tagore here highlights a special way of looking at nature which his sailing through the ocean has provided him with. While looking at the world, subsequently he would look into his own soul as well. The way environmental pollution has affected him can be seen in the way he felt disgusted seeing some of his co passengers polluting the ship by throwing their consumed sugarcane remnants in the same ship instead of throwing it away into the water.

He also provided us with a detailed picture of nature’s terrific aspect when he

described the spectacle and experience of a tumultuous sea during this journey on ship. He was so scared that he could feel the presence of death everywhere. Thus his love for nature can be seen in the way he depicted the wonders of nature and its beauty in his descriptions of the journey. In the letter collection he talked about how travelling is all about movement of both the body and the soul. His love for the environment is what made him feel disgust when he found that in the Aden port, even the seawater seemed polluted with oil floating on water. Here he compared human beings with a monster who are cruel and destructive, so much so that they need Gods' intervention. He expressed his view that the act of taking over nature by force by the industries is the most disgusting and ugly action of mankind.

When he reached Rangoon he could not think of it as part of Bengal, because of the wide roads, clean houses and the clothes of the people. But at the same time he was critical of the excessive congestion of oil industries, the black smoke that these release into the air. He also did not like the congestion of ships and jets in the shore and called them iron leeches sucking the life out of the country. According to him, the true cities and towns are built up of human kindness, whereas business cities are cruel to humanity and it only desires commodities and machines. So it is very clear that he was extremely against the widespread mercantilism in the society which separates human beings from humanity and also separates trades and businesses from humanity as well. According to him all of these are the result of the widespread use of machinery. This is because, before the advent of machineries there was a creative and humanly touch to every good that was produced, but after that the connection between the human beings and the goods produced got lost. This was the reason why he did not enjoy his visit to Rangoon because it lacked the expression of human identity.

His idea of the connection with natural world or nature consciousness is reflected in these letters in myriad other ways as well. For example, in the tenth letter he says that human beings incur huge loss by ignoring the world. He is of the view that our living world (where we interact with our family members, neighbours, etcetera for living day-to-day life) and the natural world outside it are complementary to each other. The completeness is not fructified unless a fusion is made with the living world and the natural world. Thus when we forget the natural world being overtly preoccupied with the immediate world or living world, the loss increases. This loss creates a strong inclination in man to take a corrective course by indulging in renunciation. A sense of denial is created for the day-to-day routine activities and man rushes to the natural world to the forest, mountain and seashore to attain peace, and to enjoy the act of renunciation. In the same letter he confesses that the importance of travel in his life is that it made him realise that we should never ignore or neglect our connection with the big wide world.

His disgust for mercantile society is again reflected when in another letter he says that the appearance of the huge mercantile societies are like cluttered waste. The way he described mercantilism provides us with an image of a huge noisy monster who has limbs, teeth and internal organs made up of iron. The monster consumes everything and digests them continuously without any relief and its blood is made up of gold, which it spreads all over its body. Tagore continues to elaborate how dangerous and disgusting this monster looks. He says that it does not only consume material goods, but also human beings irrespective of their gender and age. He however predicted its downfall by saying that not

anything, which goes against nature, can survive for long. He says that only an individual with a human heart and consciousness can win over the world. Thus this greedy, arrogant and huge monster which lacks aesthetics and humanity will never win. He is of the belief that in today's day and age the arrangement of trade and commerce is the ugliest and worst of all the arrangements and programmes organized by humankind.

However, the thing that he appreciated about the Japanese culture is the fact that they are very patient and are calm and quite in nature. He was impressed with the aesthetic sense of these people and their emotional bonding with it. He found out that even the poorest of them had aesthetic sense, they could live without food but could not live without flowers. He also described in detail how tea parties were like religious ritual. He believed that in Japan, the aesthetic sense is like a meditation. It is the appreciation of beauty that separates human beings from their greed. He attributed their respect for art and beauty and their patience and calmness to their belief in Buddhism. However, he wondered why Indians did not take these ideas and lessons from Buddhism.

In his speech titled, *The Spirit of Japan*, Tagore talks about Japan:

This spiritual bond of love she has established with the hills of her country, with the sea and the streams, with the forests in all their flowery moods and varied physiognomy of branches; she has taken into her heart all the rustling whispers and sighing of the woodlands and sobbing of the waves; the sun and the moon she has studied in all the modulations of their lights and shades, and she is glad to close her shops to greet the seasons in her orchards and gardens and cornfields.
(1830)

Here, he makes a very important point; he says that he believes that Europe's knowledge is something which we should inculcate in ourselves. We should also gain inspiration from everything that is good from Europe. However, he is of the view that many Indians collect ugly materials from Europe and keep them in their house in spite of the fact that they are not good simply because they belong to the Europeans. However they do not collect materials from Japan for the same purpose neither they do imitate Japanese qualities like cleanliness, and beauty.

Conclusion:

Therefore from our analysis of these two travel narratives, we can say that Tagore's love and admiration for nature was so much that he even looked forward to rekindle his relationship with nature wherever he went. Also his concern for environmental degradation and its possible detrimental impact has also got reflected in these travel narratives. According to Fraser, the "bond with and understanding of nature stayed with Tagore, whose multifaceted projects were imbued with his passion for environmentalism." (Fraser, 76). This concern is iconic as the general concerns over deteriorating environmental conditions got impetus only in the modern times, so his thinking about this, predicting its effects from so earlier, proves his farsightedness. This far sightedness is what made him relevant in the contemporary time as well. The environmental concerns with the organized conferences for discussing the ways in which nature can be protected started developing from the mid 20th century, for example, the first international conference on environment was convened by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1968 at Stockholm, which is also known as the United Nations Conference on Human Environment. This makes him all the more special

and unique as he thought of protecting the environment a few decades back even before the world institutions decided that it is a matter of great concern even today.

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