

RABINDRANATH TAGORE WITH EAST - WEST DIALOGUES

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Abstract: R. Tagore (1861 - 1941) was an artist and a great thinker of the 20th century, and one of the “three greatest persons” (M. Gandhi, J. Nehru, R. Tagore) of the Indian Renaissance.

R. Tagore’s works do not thoroughly discuss ideology. But his thoughts naturally penetrate his unique artistic work. The work that shows clearly this ideology is “The Realization of life” (Sadhana). There are also a number of articles, letters, and speeches from countries in the East and the West he had a chance to visit. Throughout these works we find the East - West spirit of dialogue. He dialogued with many philosophers who marked the dawn of the Indian civilization. And with this spirit and state of mind, he dialogued with many Western thinkers in modern times in order to seek harmony between Eastern and Western ideas to expand the base for Indian nationalism.

This paper presents the compact format of the contents of Tagore’s East - West dialogues, such as perception and attitude towards earthly life; the nature of philosophy of humanity; the way people achieve deliverance; and cultural relations between the East and the West. The paper looks into the contribution of Tagore’s ideas to Indian Renaissance and the development of human thought in the 20th century.

1. Introduction

In the early 19th century, the West entered the modern age with brilliant achievements in science and engineering, making great strides toward modernization. Meanwhile, India was still sunk in a long medieval night, stagnant and isolated from the rest of the world. The burden of the past, the good and the bad, was extremely heavy. It pushed Indian culture into a difficult position as an invasive wave of Western culture threatened to eradicate Indian culture. Cultural conflict became more profound. It was basically a conflict between concepts, cultural values, and endogenous and exogenous elements. This situation required a revolution, first and foremost in thought, to rescue Indian cultural from stagnation and to integrate it into the modern world. Many radical thinkers emerged, including notable names such as Raja Rammohun Roy (1774 - 1833), Debendranath Tagore (1817 - 1905), Keshab Chandra Sen (1838 - 1884), Rama Krishna (1834 - 1886), Svamin Vivekananda (1862 - 1902), Gandhar Bal Tilak (1855 - 1920), R. Tagore (1861 - 1941), Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948), and Aurobindo Ghose (1871 - 1950). In the words of Mrs Indra Gandhi, they are “most Indian”. Of them, R. Tagore “exceeded all... gradually reached an unchallengeable height” (J. Nehru, 1990, p. 203) and became “the guide” (J. Nehru) and the founder of the Indian Renaissance.

2. Content

As an artist and a great thinker of India in the 20th century, R. Tagore rarely discussed systems of thought. His thoughts penetrated deeply and were cleverly integrated into his art. Knowledge and action, religion and life, thoughts and actions were unified as one in his mindset and in his works alike, which, systematically presented his central ideology in *Sadhana*, a collection of his lectures at Santiniketan School over the span of three years (1906 - 1909) then at Harvard and many other prestigious universities in the West. His works were translated into English and were published in 1913. Additionally, he wrote some short articles, such as *The Religion of Man*, *A Vision of India's History*, *What is Art?* and *The Centre of Indian Culture*. He presented his speeches abroad and his letters were sent to cultural activists and politicians in the East and the West. He always showed the spirit of India not only in respecting religion but also showing skepticism of things once considered the truth. He dialogued with the philosophers and saints who marked the dawn of Indian civilization. With this spirit and state of mind, he dialogued with Western thinkers in modern times in order to seek harmony between East - West ideas and expand the base of Indian nationalism.

One of the central and fundamental problems expressed by R. Tagore through the East - West dialogues is the concept and attitudes of humans towards the world of reality. These issues were brought up very early in religions and philosophy not only in India but also in the West, basically, seeing it just as an illusion (*Maya*), or an environment to test human nature. The conservative and passive and nearly motionless lifestyle of Indian people throughout centuries was attributed to this conception. For R. Tagore, the nature of life is joy and pleasure, the meaning of the earthly life is to achieve *Sadhana* in connection with life. The correlation between humanity and life is based on love. Because “when personal desires conflict with the universal law, then we suffer and act impractically” (R. Tagore, 1973, p. 88). In R. Tagore’s experience, by dialoguing with Western thinkers, there was a big difference, even opposition, between the East and the West in how nature and the universe is viewed. In the article *What is Art?*, he wrote: “Maybe the West believes in the human soul but does not really believe that the universe also has a soul. But it was the faith of the East and contributions from the East in terms of spirituality in humankind that epitomizes this notion” (R. Tagore, 2004, p. 415).

Like Svamin Vivekananda, R. Tagore visited many Eastern and Western countries around the world. He nurtured a sense of dialogue in search of harmony between Eastern - Western ideals no matter where he went. R. Tagore witnessed technical and scientific achievements in Western countries and the powerful rise of Eastern countries such as Japan. As a result, he grasped an insightful view into the backwardness and stagnation of India. However, he did not overemphasize the power of Western science and engineering. When talking about *Modern times*, R. Tagore gave the warning: “It seems like the West did not realize that, while science gives them strength, it can be their downfall as it does not recognize that the challenges come from a higher source” (R. Tagore, 1981, p. 12). He opposed the utilitarianism and the technocracy which were threatening to spread among Indian intellectuals who were then pursuing Western study. Living in an urban society, their aims became their sexual desire and they split up with nature and the environment, accordingly. Commenting about this in a speech made in China in 1924, R. Tagore said that “The promotion of the physical strength has become

obsolete. It is the development of intelligence that is modern". Development of intelligence is a measure of the level of development and progress of mankind. However, recognizing "the deficiency of the mind" (*Upanishad*), R. Tagore protested strongly the reverence for intellect and absolutization of wisdom, seeing it as the seed of human tragedy. This is the convergence of ideas of R. Tagore and Albert Einstein, who warned: "Take care not to make the intellect our God". The development of 20th century science, as well as its limitations in the discovery and conquest of nature is a testament to the authenticity and validity of the above viewpoint of R. Tagore.

In the West, people often think of R. Tagore's many ideas about pantheism and a representation of the mysticism of the Orient. However, according to N. Chanhdhuri, it was only a myth. In R. Tagore's works, everything becomes immensely clear. Inheriting the idea of *Upanishad* of paying respect to man in the *Veda*, R. Tagore not only sees human as a product of creativity of God (Brahma) but also acknowledges the bond between man and God. For him, God is just an abstract and metaphysical concept with only one meaning: Perfection. The Earthly life of humans, phenomena, and things that exist in the universe are different incarnations of God, He recognized abstract concepts and imbued them with secret and sacred significance. That is the difference between Tagore's ideas and traditional Indian philosophy and religion. In 1924, in a reply letter to German poet A. Hoegman, R. Tagore wrote: "When God created me, it was Him that became me. Today He makes me live and cherishes me with more vigor and beauty in this world". Essentially, R. Tagore's notion concerning man is the inheritance and development of the concept "man - universe" in the Upanishas. It is human - nature, human - spiritual in a close connection with the universe. What is new of R. Tagore is that, in relation to the universe, he highlighted man and worship, seeing this as the expression of his sacred feelings for God. In his art as well as in his works, R. Tagore cares little for the cosmic essence. All his thoughts and feelings are directed toward discovering and interpreting the nature of the spiritual life of humanity. In his view, there is "a basic truth of a spiritual reality" (*My life*). He never allowed himself to lose confidence in the moral value of human and in the inevitable progress of all humanity. R. Tagore's philosophy is intertwined in that of human life and morality. In other words, his philosophical viewpoint of man is the focal point of all his ideological viewpoints, whose foundation is his intense love for, and deep trust of, humanity. This view is embedded in the philosophy of coming to man with love, because only love can understand man. This is a message of ideas, and a basis for R. Tagore writing of "The Religion of Man". Like all traditional religions and philosophies of India, R. Tagore always looked towards the spiritual life, physical nature, and holiness of humans, and always believed in the ability to achieve the unity of personal essence (Atman) and the cosmic essence (Brahmana). However, his interpretation had many differences, reflecting a sense of democracy and equality, the two ideologies that he had absorbed from literature evoking modern Western thought. He did not deny the thought of freedom within religion, but saw very clearly the major barriers of religion to the development of freedom and human nature. For him, freedom was not synonymous with denial of life.

It is a deep proof of the revolutionary nature of R. Tagore's thoughts. Along with giving prominence to man, R. Tagore affirmed the positivity and activity of man in relation to the cosmos and life. In a letter to Professor G. Muray, he wrote: "Let us do

ous best to show that man is not the biggest mistake of Creator”. According to R. Tagore, one will learn that human can reach out to the great world of humanity not by trying to wipe them selves out, but by expanding their individuality. If this individuality is diminished, although no material is lost, nor an atom destroyed, the creative joy which was crystallized therein is gone nevertheless. E. Komarov, a Russian scholar of Indian studies, was convinced, “According to R. Tagore, man is not a grain of sand in the sea of realities, nor the result of prediction. Man is the owner of creativity. If religion of life and nature is the thing that creates man, then, in turn, man continues his creativity and constantly improves himself” (J. Nehru, 1988).

While confirming the independence and self-reliance of man, R. Tagore was not so absolute in his beliefs so as to view man in opposition to the cosmos and the life that surrounds him. According to R. Tagore, man came to this world not to be a master or a slave, but to be a lover. Therefore, he advocated a philosophy of harmony - harmony between individuals and the universe, as well as between an individual and others. Only in such harmony can man affirm his ego, and try to extend his scope of knowledge and talent. This is the demonstration of a true civilization. Material achievements only have relative meaning, bringing happiness to people when they reach the deep level of morality and spirituality. Compared to many Western schools of thoughts, R. Tagore's beliefs were distinctive. In R. Tagore's view, the greatest significance of human life is obtained through action. This is where the ideas of R. Tagore, intersects with those of many Western humanitarians. Prior to R. Tagore's sage, W. Shakespeare affirmed: “love is action”. While J. Goeth stressed that “At the beginning was action”, and that “The deed is everything, the glory nothing”. However, J. Goeth wanted nothing to do with God at all, as the word made him uncomfortable. For R. Tagore, in contrast, action is the way to God, and a way to prove one's love for God and his goodness. Praising the importance of goodness and affirming goodness as the nature of man is an important principle in traditional religion and philosophy, and represents a symbol of the spirit of India. Upanishad asserts that “Goodness is supreme”. Major religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism have a common goal of guiding man towards goodness. However, the promotion of goodness in traditional religion and philosophy is always associated with a respect for personal morality, and the solution is to exercise goodness. Its corollary is a passive lifestyle, where men accept and endure circumstances, seeing this as a sign of reaching the truth. Throughout the centuries, Western colonialist countries have fully exploited this foible of the Indians. And India, in the words of many Western historians, has become “lucrative bait” for the invasion attempts of Western colonialists. Aware of this, R. Tagore adopted the principles of goodness in traditional Indian ideology, especially Hinduism, and gave it a more positive meaning. He combined the perfection of human beings with the philosophy of taking action, in order to realize the aspirations of man. The significance of “enlightenment” and “guidance” lies in R. Tagore's ideas of envisioning a spirit of India. The dynamic characteristic is seen as a manifestation of goodness in humanity. This has contributed to enlightening the people of India, taking them out of the habit of passive contemplation in the metaphysical and forcing them to actively seek happiness and beauty in the earthly realm.

As a huge country of many races, India has a rich and colorful culture, founded on the cradle of the Indus river civilization - one of the oldest civilization known to

mankind. That's the advantage, and also one of the difficulties, of integrating India into the modern world. Like many countries in the East, the pride of India's traditions is always coupled with a fear about the influx of exotic elements. As a consequence, for centuries, India has been isolating itself, preventing its ideologies from spreading outward. Its cultural values are increasingly harmed and facing the risk of erosion... In this context, awareness and explanation of the similarities and differences in Eastern and Western cultures has a very important meaning. It is the basis for the search of harmony between Eastern and Western ideas, and for the eradication of discrimination and cultural invasions. However, the search for solutions to the harmony between East - West ideals again faces potentially divergent views, firstly in the attitudes towards traditional Indian culture and Western culture. Many ideological trends of extremist color have appeared. This makes the crisis worse and worse. Beyond his contemporaries, R. Tagore worked towards harmony, saying that "the whole world is my home". His aim was to seek harmony between the two sets of values. He cemented the philosophy of harmony in India's spirit, in basic rules of conduct, and in cultural ties, in order to achieve harmony between the past and present, the East and the West, and between a nation and the rest of humanity. R. Tagore always put himself in an atmosphere of freedom, an absolute freedom in the spirit and way of thinking. For R. Tagore, only by this kind of freedom can one seek the truth. The revivification of the spirit of India in the limits of a narrow nationalism, according to R. Tagore, was not possible. Looking beyond narrow-minded short-sighted outlooks, R. Tagore was moving towards a culture in which all nations give and take, like with the ocean and rivers. In 1916, in his article "Japan's Soul", read at the University of Tokyo, he wrote: "The responsibility of each nation is to clearly show to the world its true nature. If a nation does not bring anything to the world, it is a sin, more properly, no worse than death, and will never be forgiven by human history. Each nation is responsible for making its finest essence the common property of humankind. The lofty spirit of the nation is its treasure, but its real property is that it knows how to surpass its individual rights and invites the whole world to join with its spiritual culture". In view of this, he said that the path of the Indian cultural renaissance is not to confirm or deny the national traditions and exotic factors, but to combine them. Any differences are only superficial and transient; only unity is eternal.

In 1923, in his article *A Vision of India's History*, R. Tagore wrote: "We will learn that we can reach out to the great world of man, not by removing itself but expanding its own identity" (R. Tagore, 1955, p. 186). The vitality of a culture is to know how to adopt from the essence of both traditional and modern, from a nation and the whole of humanity, and from the permanent and the momentary. History shows that no culture on this earth can be absolutely ancient, pure, and unaffected by any other culture. The development of an individual or a nation can never be isolated from tradition, which is the first and foremost responsible for the accumulation of experience, intelligence and the wisdom of generations. However, alongside tradition, cultural contact and exchange is an indispensable factor of development. Like any other culture, the stature and the great contribution of Indian culture to humanity is the first part of its identity. However, India could only enrich its own humanity in harmony with the mind of humanity. In his study of Indian history, J. Nehru said that "we can measure the growth and progress, as well as the degradation of our culture, by comparing the periods that

India was opening her mind to the outside world to those periods marked by closed door policy” (J. Nehru, 1990, p. 237). For the development of a culture, it needs to achieve a balance between the inside and the outside, the past and present, and the nation and humanity. This is a viewpoint of enlightening significance, not only in relation to the spirit of India but beyond that.

Until the first years of the twentieth century, the West believed in a theory of the existence of a “first race”, a theory that was supported by many people. It was seen as a fulcrum to justify the policy of the colonial empire in the colonized countries. On ideological forums and in his works, poet and philosopher J. Kipling (1865 - 1936) always exhorted to maintain separation between the East and West. According to him, “East is East and West is West, they can never exist in harmony”. Looking beyond this outdated and reactionary idea, R. Tagore advocated a spirit of harmony, and the search for confluence of all cultures. There would be no boundary between the East and the West. Everything would be aimed at realizing the ultimate purpose of advancement for man and life. The isolation of the East from the West (and vice versa) had become outdated and was a hindrance to social development and progression. Only based on a spirit of harmony can we reach a harmony between Eastern and Western ideals.

In his book *The Religion of Man*, R. Tagore wrote: “In the isolation and separation, man is a failed creature; only in expanding relationships with others can man discover a bigger and more realized ego. The human body has its myriad of cells that are born and die, but the human quality in everyone is immortal. In this perfect harmonization of ideals, people can reach eternity and boundless love in their life. Harmony does not become a mere subjective opinion but an encouraging truth” (R. Tagore, 1955, p. 147). With this in mind, in 1921, in a speech delivered in Paris, R. Tagore broadcasted his “Message of East” (*Le message de l’Orient*), calling for a spirit of unity and harmony between the East and the West, towards the same goal of peace, humanity, democracy, and freedom. He made a deep analysis of the differences as well as the limits of both civilizations.

For R. Tagore, no civilization is absolutely perfect. Because of this, he pointed out, only the link between the East and the West can ensure a sustainable existence and suitable development for mankind. Earlier, in 1916 during his visit to Japan, he expressed his admiration for the brilliant achievements of the modernization plan initiated by Japanese Emperor Meiji (1868). To achieve this modernization, he says, thanks must be paid to Japan’s “relationships with and collusion with the West”. What also must be taken into account is the fact that the Japanese live with “the breath of the contemporary era, not by the illusory myths of their past”. The notion that the world is a home for all is the convergence between R. Tagore and other cultural geniuses such as J. Nehru, A. Einstein, and R. Rolland. In 1938, when the Second World War was at its onset, R. Tagore broadcasted a message about the need to unite nations in order to fight for world peace and development. He wrote: “Our future is fated by uniting our forces with the forces of other progressive men - those who are longing for the abolishment of abusive regimes and the dominance of one country over another”. The Nobel Prize Literature (1913) given to Gitanjali by R. Tagore is a world-wide acknowledgment of R. Tagore’s talent and thoughts. It places him in a higher position in the spiritual life of humankind in the 20th century. Many issues of traditional religions and philosophies, such as the nature

and meaning of life, freedom, the path to salvation, and life and death, were given a new perspective by R. Tagore that reflected in modern times, and were made accessible by his artistry and unique poetry. For Gitanjali, R. Tagore's thought and artistic talents went beyond the India border. His talent and thoughts belonged to humanity.

3. Conclusion

Life, in its nature, is a constant change and movement. The active and positive contribution of human talent to the ongoing procession of human culture is found in the capture of its rules and in man's influence to advance its development. Indian culture in the 20th century enjoyed a strong revival. R. Tagore contributed to this achievement as a thinker. He narrowed down the difference gap between the East and West by forcing Indian people to come out of the old way of thinking, towards a greater outlook of the state of humanity.

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TÓM TẮT

RABINDRANATH TAGORE VỚI ĐỐI THOẠI ĐÔNG - TÂY

R. Tagore (1861-1941) là nghệ sĩ đồng thời là nhà tư tưởng lớn của thế kỷ XX, một trong "tam vị nhất thể" (M. Gandhi, J. Nehru, R. Tagore) của Ấn Độ phục hưng.

Ông ít bàn về tư tưởng. Tư tưởng của ông xuyên thấu một cách tự nhiên trong những sáng tạo nghệ thuật độc đáo. Tác phẩm thể hiện tập trung nhất tư tưởng triết học của R. Tagore là "Thực hiện toàn mãn" (Sadhana). Ngoài ra còn có một số bài viết, thư từ, bài nói chuyện của ông ở các nước Đông, Tây khi ông có dịp đến thăm. Xuyên suốt trong đó là một tinh thần đối thoại Đông - Tây. Ông đối thoại với các nhà hiền triết, những bậc thánh nhân đã đánh dấu buổi bình minh của nền văn minh Ấn Độ. Và cũng tinh thần ấy, tâm thế ấy, ông đối thoại với những nhà tư tưởng phương Tây trong thời hiện đại, nhằm tìm kiếm một sự hài hoà cho các lý tưởng Đông - Tây, mở rộng các cơ sở của chủ nghĩa dân tộc Ấn Độ.

Bài viết trình bày những nội dung cơ bản trong đối thoại Đông - Tây của R. Tagore, như: quan niệm và thái độ đối với cuộc sống trần thế; bản chất cuộc sống con người; làm thế nào để con người đạt tới sự giải thoát; mối quan hệ văn hoá Đông - Tây... Từ đó chỉ rõ những đóng góp của tư tưởng R. Tagore cho thời kỳ phục hưng Ấn Độ và sự phát triển của tư tưởng nhân loại thế kỷ XX.