Purabi
The East in its Feminine Gender

Translated by Charu C. Chowdhuri

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY KRISHNA BOSE, SUGATA BOSE
The Guest

(Atithi, from Purabi)

With what infinite sweetness you fill
The days of my sojourn, Woman, and with
What ease you make the traveller from
A distant land as one of your own—with
The ease of those strange stars of the evening
Sky who with a calm and benign smile greeted
Me from heaven. As I stood at the quiet
window
All alone and gazed upon the southern sky,
From high above there came into my soul
In unison, a message of light. And I heard
A solemn voice—‘You are no stranger,
we know
You from when the earth took you in its arms
From the arms of the dark; you are a guest
Of ours, a guest of light for ever.’
Blessed one, you gazed upon my face even as
Those stars and said in the same strain,
Scattered by wet wind in the rains,
And in Summer it is painted in designs of
Colourful flowers.
There the timid bird on the shadow dark
branch
At noon, in a tender voice
Calls its reluctant mate;
The evening star at the horizon's end
Through the chinks of Shirish leaves
Listens with pricked ears as if there was
A sound of footfalls in the southern breeze.
And on the grass strewn with fallen leaves
I play my flute in flower fragrant leisure.

Alone, I gaze at the distance,
I ponder, if I ever I would meet the traveller
Who has picked up the key
On some unknown seashore
Has placed it in her bosom and heard a voice
Coming from eternity.
And since then she is wandering and knows
no respite.
At long last, her journey would end
At the end of this quiet bee-frequented path
And she would open the door which nobody
could discover.

She had a garland in her hand
Made of flowers of smiles
Coloured in so many colours;
I had a burden of fruits of sorrows
Full of the juice of tears.
All of a sudden the damsel came,
Come, she said, and let us exchange.
I looked at her face,
O what a merciless winsome beauty she was!
She took my basket of the wettest rains
And winked with an amused glance,
I took her garland of the newest Spring
And put it close to my heart.
I've won, going along, she said
And smiled and hurried away.
In the evening at the end of the warmest day
I saw, alas, all the flowers had withered.
O Traveller, it was destined you would put
Me out of sight only to seek me again. You
Had received the call to gain the nearest by
The farthest route. And here lies the end
Of your road at my threshold where it began.
Do not feel ashamed, my friend; in my mind
I have not the slightest regret nor do I
Bear the slightest pique. No reproach will
Fall from my lips. The deepest breach I have
Now filled with infinite forgiving. I am
Your newer bride today. Let your first sight
Of me under the veil of separation today
Be as of an unforeseen and sublime bliss.
Let all your searchings have their
consummation
In a pure white as the stars have theirs
In the white of the dawn. Flutes will not play
Tonight nor will there be festoons of lights.
No crimson apparel will I wear. Today's
Festival will be in solitude and unadorned.
The crescent moon has crossed in the sky
The dark fortnight and has gained its
First portion of perfection. Let its thin and
Faded phase at the horizon's end in unuttered
Voice tell all that we have in our hearts to tell.

26

Query
(Prashna, from Parishesh)

My God, age after age, time and time
again,
You have designed to send your messengers
Upon this lovely earth.
They have preached, 'Forgive them all'
They have said, 'Give them your love,
Root out the poison of hate
From your heart.'
Worthy of homage they are,
Worthy of remembrance they are,
Yet on this evil day, with thankless salutation,
From the outer door, I have turned them away,
Because, I have seen the weak stricken
By treacherous hatred under deceitful
Cover of night,
Because, I have seen the voice of justice weep
In silence and aside, for the strong's
unremedied crime,
Because, I have seen tender youths in frenzy
Strike their heads against stone and
Go to death in vain.
Stifled is my voice today,
My flute has lost its song,
And my world swallowed up in a nightmare
By the dark night’s prison.
My God, O my God, I ask you in tears,
Those that are poisoning your air,
Those that are putting out your light,
Have you given them your love, have you
forgiven them all?

Songs of Devotion
Selected letters of
Rabindranath Tagore

Edited by
KRISHNA DUTTA and ANDREW ROBINSON

with a foreword by Amartya Sen

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The conversation was published as 'The nature of reality', MR, Jan. 1931, pp. 42-3, and later in The Religion of Man. The original draft, sent to RT by the New York Times before publication, is kept at Rahindra Bhanu, Shantiniketan.

RT wrote an article about his meetings with Einstein, which was published in Asia, March 1931, pp. 159-60. It contains some interesting hints about their philosophical disagreement but nothing definite about it.

Bohr to Andrew Robinson, 15 March 1933.

See Dutta and Robinson, Rabinrashma Tagore, p. 344.


John Wheeler, At Home in the Universe (New York, 1994), p. 120.

Quoted in Karl Popper, Unended Quest (Glencoe, 1976), p. 97.


For instance, J. S. Bell, Speakable and Unspeakable in Quantum Mechanics (Cambridge, 1987). This paper was first published in 1981.

See, for example, P. Holland, The Quantum Theory of Motion (Cambridge, 1993), and David Bohm and B. J. Clife, The Undivided Universe (London, 1993).


Quoted in Dmitri Marianoff, Einstein: An Intimate Study of a Great Man (New York, 1944), pp. 73-74, a not wholly reliable account of the Einstein-Tagore meeting in July 1930, at which Marianoff was a note-taker.


Prigogine to Andrew Robinson, 26 July 1993.

Quoted in Schomburg Flaman, At the feet of my master, Palestine News, 23 Aug. 1941 (original source unknown).

Appendix to Religion of Man, pp. 224-5.


Russell to N. Chatterji, 16 April 1967 (copy at McMaster).

Josephson to Andrew Robinson, 17 June 1993.

Hilary Putnam, The Many Faces of Realism (La Salle, 1987), p. 1. We thank Amartya Sen for suggesting the idea of comparisons with the work of Putnam and Nagel.

Ibid., p. 9.

Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere (New York, 1990), pp. 7-8, 55.

Galileo to Pietro Dinii, quoted in A. van der Merwe et al. (eds), 50 Years of the KPR Paper (Dordrecht, 1985), p. 262.

Quoted in Przebinda, Letters, p. 40.


Skeh Laka, RR, XXVI, pp. 49-50 (27 July 1941). The translation is by Krishnam Dutta and Andrew Robinson.

Appendix 2: The Bihar earthquake

As described in letter 272, Tagore and Gandhi disagreed about the significance of the Bihar earthquake of January 1934. Gandhi, while on a tour of south India preaching against untouchability, stated that the earthquake was 'divine chastisement sent by God for our sins'. Tagore's response to this, and Gandhi's reaction to Tagore's response, were published together in Gandhi's newspaper, Haritan, on 16 February 1934.

Tagore

It has caused me painful surprise to find Mahatma Gandhi accusing those who blindly follow their own social custom of untouchability of having brought down God's vengeance upon certain parts of Bihar, evidently specially selected for His desolating displeasure. It is all the more unfortunate, because this kind of unscientific view of things is too readily accepted by a large section of our countrymen. I keenly feel the injuriousness to me of what I am compelled to utter the truth in asserting that physical catastrophes have their inevitable and exclusive origin in certain combinations of physical facts. Unless we believe in the exoratibility of the universal law in the working of which God himself never interferes, we find it impossible to justify His ways on occasions like the one which has sorely stricken us in an overwhelming manner and scale.

If we associate ethical principles with cosmic phenomena, we shall have to admit that human nature teaches its lessons in good behaviour in orgies of the worst behaviour possible. For, we can never imagine any civilised ruler of men making indiscriminate examples of occasional victims, including children and members of the Untouchable community, in order to impress others dwelling at a safe distance who possibly deserve severe condemnation. Though we cannot point out any period of human history that is free from iniquities of the darkest kind, we still find even such men and women, however evil, remain unshaken, that the factories that cruelly thrive upon abject poverty and the ignorance of the famished cultivators, or prison-houses in all parts of the world where a penal system is pursued, which most often in a special form of licensed criminality, still stand firm. It only shows that the law of gravitation does not in the least respond to the stupendous load of callousness that accumulates till the moral foundation of society begins to show dangerous cracks and civilisations are undermined. What is truly tragic about it is the fact that the kind of argument that Mahatma Gandhi uses by exploiting an event of cosmic disturbance for better suits the psychology of his opponents than his own, and it would not have surprised me at all if they had taken this opportunity of holding him and his followers responsible for the visitation of Divine anger. As for us, we feel perfectly secure in the faith that our own sins and errors are heavy enough to force us to drag down the structure of creation to ruins.

We can depend upon it, sinner and saint, bigots and breakers of convention, who are immensely grateful to Mahatma Gandhi for inducing, by his wonder working inspiration, freedom from fear and foolishness in his minds of his countrymen, feel profoundly hurt when any words from his mouth may emphasise the elements of unreason in those very minds — unreason, which is a fundamental source of all the blind power that drive us against freedom and self-respect.

Gandhi

When at Tinnevelly I first linked the event with untouchability, I spoke with the greatest deliberation and out of the fulness of my heart. I spoke as I believed. I have long believed that physical phenomena produce results both physical and spiritual. The converse I hold to be equally true.

To me, the earthquake was no caprice of God, nor a result of a meeting of mere blind forces. We do not know the laws of God nor their working. Knowledge of the tallest scientist or the spiritualist is like a particle of dust. If God is not a personal being for me like my earthly father, He is infinitely more. He rules me in the tiniest detail of my life. I believe literally that not a leaf moves but by His will. Every breath I take depends upon His sufferance.

He and His Law are one. The Law is God. Anything attributed to Him is not a mere attribute. He is Truth, Love, Law, and a million things that human ingenuity can name. I do believe with
Gurudev [Tagore] in the ineradicableness of the universal law in the working of which God Himself never interferes. For, God is the Law. But I submit that we do not know the Law or all the laws fully, and what appears to us as catastrophes are so only because we do not know the universal law sufficiently. Visitations like droughts, floods, earthquakes and the like, though we seem to have only physical origins, are, for me, somehow connected with man's morals. Therefore, I instinctively felt that this earthquake was the visitation for the sin of untouchability. Of course, Sanatanists [i.e., the most orthodox Hindus] have a perfect right to say that it was due to my crime of preaching against untouchability. My belief is a call to repentance and self-purification. I confess my utter ignorance of the working of the laws of nature. But, even as I cannot believe in God though I am unable to prove his existence to the sceptics, in like manner, I cannot prove the connection of the sin of untouchability with the Bihar visitation even though the connection is instinctively felt by me. If my belief turns out to be ill founded, it will still have done good for me and those who believe with me. For we shall have been spurred to more vigorous efforts towards self-purification, assuming, of course, that untouchability is a deadly sin. I know full well the danger of such speculation. But I would be untruthful and cowardly if, for fear of ridicule, when those that are nearest and dearest to me are suffering, I did not proclaim my belief from the housetop. The physical effect of the earthquake will be soon forgotten and even partially repaired. But it would be terrible, if it is an expression of the divine wrath for the sin of untouchability and we did not learn the moral lesson from the event and repent of that sin. I have not the faith that Gurudev has that 'our sins and errors, however enormous, have not good enough force to drag down the structure of creation to ruins'. On the contrary, I have the faith that our own sins have more force to ruin that structure than any mere physical phenomenon.

There is an indissoluble marriage between matter and spirit. Our ignorance of the results of the union makes it a profound mystery and inspires awe in us but it cannot undo them. But a living recognition of the union has enabled many to utilise every physical catastrophe for their own moral uplifting.

With me the connection between cosmic phenomena and human behaviour is a living faith that draws me nearer to God, humbles me and makes me reader for facing Him. Such a belief would be a degrading superstition, if out of the depth of my ignorance I used it for castigating my opponents.

Appendix 3: Gandhi the man

As described in letter 316, this article by Tagore was written in January 1938 and printed in the Sunday Statesman, Calcutta, on 13 February 1938.

After my return to India from some months' tour in the West, I found the whole country convulsed with the expectation of an immediate independence - Gandhi had promised Swaraj in one year—by the help of some process that was obviously narrow in its scope and external to its observance.

Such an assurance, coming from a great personality, produced a frenzy of hope even in those who were ordinarily sober in their calculation of worldly benefits, and they angrily argued with me that in this particular case it was not a question of logic, but of a spiritual phenomenon that had a mysterious influence and miraculous power of prescience. This had the effect of producing a strong doubt in my mind about Mahatma's wisdom in the path he chose for attaining a great end through satisfying an inherent weakness in our character which has been responsible for the age-long failure of our political life.

We who often glorify our tendency to ignore reason, installing in its place blind faith, valuing it as spiritual, are ever paying for its costs with the obstruction of our mind and destiny. I blamed Mahatma for exploiting this irrational force of credulity in our people, which might have had a quick result in a superstructure, while sapping the foundation. Thus began my estimate of Mahatma, as the guide of our nation, and it is fortunate for me that it did not end there.

Gandhiji, like all dynamic personalities, needed a vast medium for the proper and harmonious expression of his creative will. This medium he developed for himself, when he assumed the tremendous responsibility of leading the whole country into freedom through countless social ditches and fences and unlimited dullness of barren politics. This endurance has enriched and mellowed his personality and revealed what was truly significant in his genius. I have since learnt to understand him, as I would understand an artist, not by the theories and fantasies of the creed he may profess, but by that expression in his practice which gives evidence to the uniqueness of his mind. In that only true perspective, as I watch him, I am amazed at the effectiveness of his humanity.

As ascetic himself, he does not frown on the joys of others, but works for the enlivening of their existence day and night. He meets poverty in his own life, but no man in India has striven more avidly than he for the material welfare of his people. A reformer with the zeal of a revolutionary, he imposes severe restraints on the very passions he provokes. Something of an idolator and also an iconoclast, he leaves the old gods in their dusty niches of sanctity and simply lives the old worship to better and more humane purposes. Professing his adherence to the caste system, he launches his firmest attack against it where it keeps its strongest guards, and yet he has hardly suffered from popular disapprobation as would have been the case with a lesser man who would have had much less power to be effective in his efforts.

He condemns sexual life as inconsistent with the moral progress of man, and has a horror of sex as great as that of the author of The Kreutzer Sonata, but, unlike Tolstoy, he betrays no abhorrence of the sex that tempts his kind. In fact, his tenderness for woman is one of the noblest and most consistent traits of his character, and he counts among the women of his country some of his best and truest comrades in the great movement he is leading.

He always feels the need to hate evil without hating the evil-doer. It sounds an impossible precept, but he has made it as true as it can be made in his own life. I had once occasion to be present at an interview he gave to a certain prominent politician who had been denounced by the official Congress party as a deister. Any other Congress leader would have assumed a repelling attitude, but Gandhiji was all graciousness and listened to him with patience and sympathy, without once giving him occasion to feel small. Here, I said to myself, is a truly great man, for he is greater than the party he belongs to, greater even than the creed he professes.

This, then, seems to me to be the significant fact about Gandhiji. Great as he is as a politician, as an organizer, as a leader of men, as a moral reformer, he is greater than all these as a man, because none of these aspects and activities limits his humanity. They are rather inspired and sustained by it. Though an incorrigible idealist and given to referring all conduct to certain pet formulae of his own, he is essentially a lover of men and not of mere ideas; which makes him so cautious and conservative in his revolutionary schemes. If he proposes an experiment for society, he must first subject himself to its ordeal. If he calls for a sacrifice, he must first pay its price himself. While many Socialists wait for all to be deprived of their privileges before they would part with theirs, this man first renounces before he ventures to make any claims on the renunciation of others.

There are patriots in India, as indeed among all peoples, who have sacrificed for their country as much as Gandhiji has done, and some who have had to suffer much worse penalties than he has ever had to endure: even as in the religious sphere, there are ascetics in this country, compared to the rigours of whose practices Gandhiji's life is one of comparative ease. But these patriots are mere patrons and nothing more; and these ascetics are mere spiritual athletes, limited as men by their very virtues; while this man seems greater than his virtues, great as they are.

Perhaps none of the reforms with which his name is associated was original in his conception. They have almost all been proposed and preached by his predecessors or contemporaries.
our countrymen, the great leaders of the country and the torch-bearers of freedom, we feel our lives are thrice blessed and that temporary dangers and difficulties do not matter at all.

We are apt to interpret sacrifice wrongly. It looks as if there is in it pain and suffering. In genuine sacrifice there is no pain. Man cannot sacrifice when he has the feeling of pain. The immense happiness in sacrifice has manifested in a big way in your life. Let that happiness inspire and encourage us is our earnest prayer. We seek blessings from you every moment of our lives. Because we know so long as we have your blessings we shall know that we are on the right path. We all feel that your blessings are the greatest asset in our journey.

From Rabindra Nath Tagore*

Uttarayan

Mr Subhas Chandra Bose

Om

My dear Subhas,

Owing to reasons completely beyond control and increasing physical weakness I am compelled to postpone your reception meeting for the time being. You will hear a full report from Suren and Sudhakanta.

Please do not have even the slightest doubt in your mind that my respect and affection for you remains unsullied. I shall end here, 27/1/39

Yours

Rabindra Nath Tagore

* Translated from the original Bengali. Eds.

Subhas Chandra,

As Bengali’s poet I invite you to the honoured seat of the leader of the people. We have the sacred assurance of Gita that from time to time the Divine champion of the good arises to challenge the reign of the evil. When misfortune from all directions swarm to attack the living spirit of the nation, its anguished cry calls forth from its own being the liberator to its rescue...

Wearyed by the concerted conspiracy of sinister forces, both of outside and within, we are increasingly losing the vital power to resist them and recover from their attack.

At such a juncture of nation-wide crisis, we require the service of a forceful personality, the non-chalant confidence of a natural-born leader, who can defy the adverse fate that threatens our progress.

Subhas Chandra, I have watched the dawn that witnessed the beginning of your political Sadhana. In that uncertain twilight there had been misgivings in my heart and I had hesitated to accept you for what you are now... Today you are revealed in the pure light of midday sun which does not admit of apprehensions. You have come to absorb varied experiences during these years. Today you bring your matured mind and irrepressible vitality to bear upon the work at hand. Your strength has sorely been taxed by imprisonment, banishment and disease, but rather than impairing, these have helped to broaden your sympathies—enlarging your vision so as to embrace the vast perspectives of history beyond any narrow limits of territory...

Bengali mind is nothing if not logical. It takes enormous pleasure in spinning out subtleties of argument for their own futile sake and proudly asserts the independence of its intellect by contradicting all schemes of enterprise from their inception. No practical proposal, no organisation, is safe from its destructive casuistry. But this is not the time for idly indulging in the sterile game of
polemics, splitting things to pieces. We need the creative inspiration that would rouse the nation into a unity of will. Let this united will of Bengal ask you to take your place as our guide and also seek to create you by the force of its claims. Through that creation will be revealed the spirit of the people in this individual personality of yours.

The vision of this will I did once realise during the Bengal partition movement. The sword that was raised to divide her living body into two parts was baffled by its resistance. On that day Bengal did not sit down vainly to argue like a wiseacre, weighing her pros and cons against the decree of mighty imperial power. She willed and the obstruction vanished.

In the following generation we have witnessed the manifestation of this will in the heart of the Bengali youth. They were born with the sacred flame that could light the torch of freedom; but they burnt themselves, they missed their path. Despite the fatal futility of the tragic mistake, they made it reveal the magnanimity of their martyrdom, the kind of which was rare in the other provinces of India. This fact will ever remain luminous in our history, that these young souls personated in their lives the irresistible will of their country and suffered.

The negative testimony of the weakness of our country must not be allowed to breed pessimism in our minds. Wherever the signs of her strength have ever made themselves evident we must know that there lies her truth. They are like living seeds that keep the promise of the future in their core. It should be your life's work to make fruitful in the soil of Bengal all nascent hopes that are waiting in obscurity. Your task will be to know and give recognition to those traits in Bengali character that have permanent worth—their fine sensibility, imagination and understanding, their receptivity—which will guide them into the constructive work of nation building.

The born leaders of men are never alone and they never belong to the fugitive moment. The eternal message of the sunrise of the future they carry in their own lives . . .

As I feel that you have come with an errand to usher in a new light of hope in your motherland, I ask you to take up the task of the leader of Bengal and ask my countrymen to make it true . . .

Let nobody make such a grievous mistake as to think that, in a foolish pride of narrow provincialism, I desire to see Bengal as an entity separate from the rest of India, or dream of setting in my own province a rival throne to the one on which is seated a majestic figure representing a new age in the political history of the world . . .

Let it be your unifying mission to claim of your countrymen the resoluteness, the unyielding will to live and to conquer, strengthened by the inspiration of your own life. Let Bengal affirm in one united voice that her deliverer's seat is ready spread for you . . . May she offer you honour worthy of a leader by retaining her self-respect in trials as well as triumphs . . .

Long ago at a meeting, I addressed my message to the leader of Bengal who was yet to seek. After a lapse of many years, I am addressing at this meeting one who has come in to the full light of recognition . . . I may not join him in the fight that is to come. I can only bless him and take my leave knowing that he has made his country's burden of sorrow his own, that his final reward is fast coming as his country's freedom.

(This address was written by Rabindra Nath Tagore in January 1939 and was also printed. But for reasons still obscure it was not circulated and the reception Tagore had planned for Bose in Calcutta was postponed. After the end of World War II it was published in newspapers. Tagore died in 1941 and Bose never saw the address. At a reception to Bose at Santiniketan, Tagore made an extemporaneous speech and Bose gave a reply which were reported in newspapers. The speeches have been published in this volume. Eds.)
From Rabindra Nath Tagore

Subhas Chandra Bose

Calculta

My dear Subhas,

After coming to Calcutta a few days ago I have had the opportunity of assessing the mental attitude of my countrymen. The whole country is waiting for you—if you lose this favourable chance due to hesitation you will never get it back. You will be deprived of the strength that you may get from Bengal, on the other hand the other side will all the time try to sap your strength. Do not by any means commit this big mistake. I am saying not for your own sake but for the sake of the country. Please demand firmly of Maharmaji to let you have his final answer at an early date. If he procrastinates then you may give up your post on that ground. Tell him that you will have to decide upon your future programme soon, therefore the matter brooks no delay. I hope your health is on the way to recovery. I am returning to Santiniketan today. I shall end here, 2/4/39

Yours
Rabindra Nath Tagore

Tagore gave the date of the letter as 2/4/39 by mistake instead of 3/4/39. Tagore's message of greetings to Bose on his resignation as Congress President has been printed on p. 109 of this volume. Eds.

* Translated from the original Bengali. Eds.
THE ESSENTIAL
TAGORE

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Edited by
Fakrul Alam & Radha Chakravarty

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where you make use of your opponent’s strength to trip him in law one uses to one’s advantage that piece of legislation which is supposed to put one at a disadvantage. To reverse the force that is being used against oneself is the intricate strategy used in law as well as in wrestling. There are some pretty deft wrestlers who are now using the law in this manner. Consequently, till most tenant farmers can rely on their own intelligence and finances, the law that is considered to be such an exalted thing will become a means of casting the tenant farmers into deep waters.

It does not seem right to say or hear that it is one’s duty to prevent the tenant farmer from buying and selling his land freely. Looked at from another perspective, however, to give a person complete freedom may also mean giving him the right to harm himself. Only he who is not a child in his thinking should be given complete freedom. If you prevent an adult from travelling on a highway where there is constant motorized traffic you are being tyrannical; but if you fail to put some restraints in the movement of a child on such a highway you are acting irresponsibly. From what little experience I have I can say that to give the ignorant tenant farmers of our country the right to transfer their land freely will be tantamount to giving them the right to take their own lives. No doubt there will come a time when they must be given that right but if they are granted that right at this time will they have any rights left? What I am articulating here are my reservations about your ideas on this issue.

\[V\]

I know that the landlord is not above temptation. That is why wherever the tenant farmer is in a fix the landlord is able to get a rich haul of fish at that spot. In our country there are rigid limits imposed in marrying off girls. It is precisely these limits that become a source of income for the groom’s side. Our tenant farmers share a similar predicament. But there is no reason to be happy at the loss incurred when the money-lender is appropriating the tenant farmer’s land. For the farmer the fist of the money-lender is much more forceful than that of the landlord. If you don’t agree with me on this point, concede at the very least that that is an additional fist he has to contend with.

It is absolutely correct to say that the land of the tenant farmer should not be subject to increased revenue collection. There is no increase in the amount of revenue the landlord has to pay the government; it is therefore unfair to impose a comma or a semicolon on the fixed amount that the tenant farmer has to pay. Besides, this arrangement is a major obstacle to the natural desire that the farmer has to cultivate his land more effectively. As a result, such an imposition would affect not only the farmer but the whole country adversely. In addition, no one can support any obstacle put up in the bid to clear trees for cultivation, build better homes, and dig more tanks.

But these are all minor points. The main thing to keep in mind is that no law can help someone to survive if he himself lacks the desire to live. This desire to live must be made part of the desire for wholeness in life and must not be located in any out-of-the-way system. It cannot be found in a special piece of legislation, in the spinning wheel, in home-spun clothes, in the limited right that enables one to vote for the Congress. It is only when rural life is completely rejuvenated that the instinct for self-preservation which one has will be activated within oneself.

How this can be achieved is something that I have been thinking about for some time. I don’t know whether I will be able to come up with a satisfactory answer to the question—it takes time to come up with such an answer. But whether I am able to do so or not the answer to the question must be sought out. The answers to all the miscellaneous questions will be found in the answer to the main question. If no answer is forthcoming we will spend our days putting each other on the back, but it is to be doubted whether the person for whom we have all been trying to patch up things will survive our efforts.

1937

(From Kalantar)
Translated by Fulfil Alum

Crisis in Civilization

Today I complete eighty years of my life. As I look back on the vast stretch of years that lie behind me and see in clear perspective the history
of my early development, I am struck by the change that has taken place
both in my own attitude and in the psychology of my countrymen—a
change that carries within it a cause of profound tragedy.

Our direct contact with the larger world of men was linked up
with the contemporary history of the English people whom we came to
know in those earlier days. It was mainly through their mighty literature
that we formed our ideas with regard to these newcomers to our Indian
shores. In those days the type of learning that was served out to us was
neither plentiful nor diverse, nor was the spirit of scientific enquiry very
much in evidence. Thus their scope being strictly limited, the educated
of those days had recourse to English language and literature. Their days
and nights were eloquent with the stately declamations of Burke, with
Macaulay's long-rolling sentences; discussions centered upon Shake-
peare's drama and Byron's poetry and above all upon the large-hearted
liberalism of the nineteenth-century English politics.

At the time though tentative attempts were being made to gain
our national independence, at heart we had not lost faith in the generosity
of the English race. This belief was so firmly rooted in the sentiments
of our leaders as to lead them to hope that the victor would of his own
grace pave the path of freedom for the vanquished. This belief was based
upon the fact that England at the time provided a shelter to all those who
had to flee from persecution in their own country. Political martyrs who
had suffered for the honor of their people were accorded unreserved
welcome at the hands of the English. I was impressed by this evidence
of liberal humanity in the character of the English and thus I was led to
set them on the pedestal of my highest respect. This generosity in their
national character had not yet been vitiated by imperialist pride. About
this time, as a boy in England, I had the opportunity of listening to
the speeches of John Bright, both in and outside Parliament. The large-
hearted, radical liberalism of those speeches, overflowing all narrow
national bounds, had made so deep an impression on my mind that
something of it lingers even today, even in these days of graceless disillusion-
ment.

Certainly that spirit of abject dependence upon the charity of our
rulers was no matter for pride. What was remarkable, however, was the

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wholehearted way in which we gave our recognition to human greatness
even when it revealed itself in the foreigner. The best and noblest gifts of
humanity cannot be the monopoly of a particular race or country; its
scope may not be limited nor may it be regarded as the miser's hoard
buried underground. That is why English literature which nourished our
minds in the past, does even now convey its deep resonance to the re-
cesses of our heart.

It is difficult to find a suitable Bengali equivalent for the English
word "civilization." That phase of civilization with which we were familiar
in this country has been called by Manu "Sadachar" (lit. proper con-
duct), that is, the conduct prescribed by the tradition of the race. Narrow
in themselves, these time-honored social conventions originated and held
good in a circumscribed geographical area, in that strip of land, Brâhma-
vartâ by name, bound on either side by the rivers Saraswati and Drisad-
vati. That is how a pharaonic formalism gradually got the upper hand of
free thought and the ideal of "proper conduct" which Manu found estab-
lished in Brâhma-vartâ steadily degenerated into socialized tyranny.

During my boyhood days the attitude of the cultured and edu-
cated section of Bengal, nurtured on English learning, was charged with
a feeling of revolt against these rigid regulations of society. A perusal of
what Rajnarain Bose has written describing the ways of the educated
gentry of those days will amply bear out what I have said just now. In
place of these set codes of conduct we accepted the ideal of "civilization"
as represented by the English term.

In our own family this change of spirit was welcomed for the sake
of its sheer rational and moral force and its influence was felt in every
sphere of our life. Born in that atmosphere, which was moreover colored
by our intuitive bias for literature, I naturally set the English on the
throne of my heart. Thus passed the first chapters of my life. Then came
the parting of ways accompanied with a painful feeling of disillusion
when I began increasingly to discover how easily those who accepted the
highest truths of civilization disowned them with impunity whenever
questions of national self-interest were involved.

There came a time when perforce I had to snatch myself away
from the mere appreciation of literature. As I emerged into the stark light
of bare facts, the sight of the dire poverty of the Indian masses rent my heart. Rudely shaken out of my dreams, I began to realize that perhaps in no other modern state was there such hopeless dearth of the most elementary needs of existence. And yet it was this country whose resources had fed for so long the wealth and magnificence of the British people. While I was lost in the contemplation of the great world of civilization, I could never have remotely imagined that the great ideals of humanity would end in such ruthless trysting. But today a glaring example of it stares me in the face in the utter and contemptuous indifference of a so-called civilized race to the well-being of creases of Indian people.

That mastery over the machine, by which the British have consolidated their sovereignty over their vast Empire, has been kept a sealed book, to which due access has been denied to this helpless country. And all the time before our very eyes Japan has been transforming herself into a mighty and prosperous nation. I have seen with my own eyes the admirable use to which Japan has put in her own country the fruits of this progress. I have also been privileged to witness, while in Moscow, the unspiring energy with which Russia has tried to fight disease and illiteracy, and has succeeded in steadily liquidating ignorance and poverty, wiping off the humiliation from the face of a vast continent. Her civilization is free from all invidious distinction between one class and another, between one sect and another. The rapid and astounding progress achieved by her made me happy and jealous at the same time. One aspect of the Soviet administration which particularly pleased me was that it provided no scope for unseemly conflict of religious difference nor set one community against another by unbalanced distribution of political favors. That I consider a truly civilized administration which impartially serves the common interests of the people.

While other imperialist powers sacrifice the welfare of the subject races to their own national greed, in the USSR I found a genuine attempt being made to harmonize the interests of the various nationalities that are scattered over its vast area. I saw peoples and tribes, who, only the other day, were nomadic savages being encouraged and indeed trained, to avail themselves freely of the benefits of civilization. Enormous sums are being spent on their education to expedite the process.

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When I see elsewhere some two hundred nationalities—which only a few years ago were at vastly different stages of development—marching ahead in peaceful progress and amity, and when I look about my own country and see a very highly evolved and intellectual people drifting into the disorder of barbarism, I cannot help contrasting the two systems of governments, one based on co-operation, the other on exploitation, which have made such contrary conditions possible.

I have also seen Iran, newly awakened to a sense of national self-sufficiency, attempting to fulfill her own destiny freed from the deadly grinding-stones of two European powers. During my recent visit to that country I discovered to my delight that Zoroastrians who once suffered from the fanatical hatred of the major community and whose rights had been curtailed by the ruling power were now free from this age-long repression, and that civilized life had established itself in the happy land. It is significant that Iran's good fortune dates from the day when she finally disentangled herself from the meshes of European diplomacy. With all my heart I wish Iran well.

Turning to the neighboring kingdom of Afghanistan I find that though there is much room for improvement in the field of education and social development, yet she is fortunate in that she can look forward to unending progress, for none of the European powers, boastful of their civilization, has yet succeeded in overwhelming and crushing her possibilities.

Thus while these other countries were marching ahead, India, smothered under the dead weight of British administration, lay static in her utter helplessness. Another great and ancient civilization for whose recent tragic history the British cannot disclaim responsibility, is China. To serve their own national profit the British first doped her people with opium and then appropriated a portion of her territory. As the world was about to forget the memory of this outrage, we were painfully surprised by another event. While Japan was quietly devouring North China, her act of wanton aggression was ignored as a minor incident by the veterans of British diplomacy. We have also witnessed from this distance how actively the British statesmen acquiesced in the destruction of the Spanish Republic.
On the other hand, we also noted with admiration how a band of valiant Englishmen laid down their lives for Spain. Even though the English had not aroused themselves sufficiently to their sense of responsibility towards China in the Far East, in their own immediate neighborhood they did not hesitate to sacrifice themselves to the cause of freedom. Such acts of heroism reminded me over again of the true English spirit to which in those early days I had given my full faith, and made me wonder how imperialist greed could bring about so ugly a transformation in the character of such a great race.

Such is the tragic tale of the gradual loss of my faith in the claims of the European nations to civilization. In India the misfortune of being governed by a foreign race is daily brought home to us not only in the callous neglect of such minimum necessities of life as adequate provision for food, clothing, educational and medical facilities for the people, but in an even unhappier form in the way the people have been divided among themselves. The pity of it is that the blame is laid at the door of our own society. So frightful a culmination of the history of our people would never have been possible, but for the encouragement it has received from secret influences emanating from high places.

One cannot believe that Indians are in any way inferior to the Japanese in intellectual capacity. The most effective difference between these two eastern peoples is that whereas India lies at the mercy of the British, Japan has been spared the shadow of alien domination. We know what we have been deprived of: That which was truly best in their own civilizations the upholding of the dignity of human relationship has no place in the British administration of this country. If in its place they have established, with baton in hand, a reign of “law and order,” in other words a policeman’s rule, such mockery of civilization can claim no respect from us. It is the mission of civilization to bring unity among people and establish peace and harmony. But in unfortunate India the social fabric is being rent into shreds by unceasing outbursts of hooliganism daily growing in intensity, right under the very eyes of “law and order.” In India, so long as no personal injury is inflicted upon any member of the ruling race, this barbarism seems to be assured of perpetuity, making us ashamed to live under such an administration.

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And yet my good fortune has often brought me into close contact with really large-hearted Englishmen. Without the slightest hesitation I may say that the nobility of their character was without parallel—in no country or community have I come across such greatness of soul. Such examples would not allow me wholly to lose faith in the race which produced them. I had the rare blessing of having [Charles] Andrews—a real Englishman, a real Christian and a true man—for a very close friend. Today in the perspective of death his unselfish and courageous magnanimity shines all the brighter. The whole of India remains indebted to him for innumerable acts of love and devotion. But personally speaking, I am especially beholden to him because he helped me to retain in my old age that feeling of respect for the English race with which in the past I was inspired by their literature and which I was about to lose completely. I count such Englishmen as Andrews not only as my personal and intimate friends but as friends of the whole human race. To have known them has been to me a treasured privilege. It is my belief that such Englishmen will save British honor from shipwreck. At any rate if I had not known them, my despair at the prospect of western civilization would be unrelieved.

In the meanwhile the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconfessed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. From one end of the world to the other the poisonous fumes of hatred darken the atmosphere. The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man.

The wheels of Fate will some day compel the English to give up their Indian empire. But what kind of India will they leave behind, what stark misery? When the stream of their centuries’ administration runs dry at last, what a waste of mud and filth they will leave behind them! I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe. But today when I am about to quit the world that faith has gone bankrupt altogether.

As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of filth. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to the opening of
a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice. Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises. A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.

Today we witness the perils which attend on the insolence of might; one day shall be borne out the full truth of what the sages have proclaimed:

"By unrighteousness man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root."

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