



RABINDRANATH TAGORES THOUGHTS ON RURAL RECONSTRUCTION: SILAIDAHA AND PATISAR

Kasturi Roy Chatterjee

Assistant Professor, Department of History,
Sundarban Mahavidyalaya, Kakdwip, South 24-parganas.

ABSTRACT :

In India, most of the people live in villages and yet it is deprived of various opportunities that the cities enjoy. Rabindranath was one of the pioneers to thought of reconstructing the villages in such a way that they not only get the opportunity of education , medical treatment and other facilities but above all can themselves think of their betterment in life and it is not imposed to them from above. Rabindranath had found through practical experiences that the villagers are afraid of seeking justice for their own selves so he tried to cater self respect among them, which he think would be the main weapon of the villagers which he thought would help the villagers in reconstructing their life. In my article I have tried to show the early thoughts of Rabindranath regarding the reconstruction of villages in Silaidaha and Patisar which came under his Zamindari.



KEYWORDS : Reminiscences, Swadeshi, Indigenous, Mela, Silaidaha, Patisar, Zamindari, Kaligram, Pathshalas.

INTRODUCTION:

Rabindranath Tagore from his early childhood was deeply influenced by the spirit of Swadeshi that had developed in the nineteenth century. Rabindranath's own political and social philosophy largely developed in his boyhood.¹ (Tagore's Reminiscences (Jibansmriti) Government, pp41-51). Tagore's family as he had described was cosmopolitan in its living which included a liberal measure of foreign customs, but at the same time as Tagore had explained was strongly motivated by patriotic feelings. In Nineteenth Century it is observed that a section of Bengali educated society was Westernized both in habits and ideas but at the same time there grew up a sturdy sense of self- respect and self reliance among these educated society. Tagore's family was no exception, side by side with the rich cultural life which flourished in the family began the series of great achievements in the field of literature and fine arts. efforts were first made by the educated Indians to stem the tide of foreign influence and to reconstruct the country on social and economic basis in an indigenous way.

EARLY MOTIVATION OF RABINDRANATH:

A Hindu Mela was introduced in 1867, in the last day of the Bengali Calendar year. The objective of the fair was to spread and strengthen the spirit of self-help. The organisers laid stress on the revival of crafts, cultivation of literature, music, physical exercises etc. The first national songs of India were composed and sung in this annual fair. Tagore himself had composed a poem for this Mela in its eighth year when he had

just entered his teens. The influence of this Hindu Mela had effected the social philosophy that Tagore which he developed later, especially his rural reconstruction programme which he upheld before the country and sought to translate in to practice had its origin in what he had experienced in his child-hood and in his youth at this Mela. The emphasis of Tagore on awakening of mind for liberating its creative forces. mingling of utility and beauty, work and joy no doubt grew with age and assumed various literary forms, but in all these thinking he agreed with those pioneers of Swadeshi whose enterprise had led to the Hindu Mela.

Rabindranath was also greatly influenced by his fifth brother Jyotirindranath Tagore who was thirteen years senior to him. His intense love for country and boundless enthusiasm found expression in diverse enterprises, of which the poet left vivid account in his Reminiscences (jibansmriti). Jyotirindranath founded 'Sanjibani Sabha', with the object of stimulating patriotic ideas and activities. Other than enthusiastically organising hunting, he also launched a number of Swadeshi enterprises such as weaving, match making, running the first India- owned Steamer along the Khulna- Barisal river-route etc.²(Jiban smriti pp49-51). However it would be unfair to draw a business balance-sheet of Jyotirindranath's swadeshi venture as he undauntedly marched from failure to failure. As, Tagore humorously says, the first Swadeshi matches manufactured outwardly looked all right, but the burning patriotism could not increase their combustibility and it was hard to light unless there was a flame nearby.³ (jibansmriti p51). Rabindraath spent some of his most impressionable years with Jyotirindranath and told us how much he owed to this influence for his later development. He in 1884, in a public meeting read a paper entitled "In Actual Practice"(Hate Kalame), he made the following remark: "It is the following work that makes it most difficult of all; an imposing programme is often but an evasion of real work..... Our sphere of activities," he continued, "lies near us, in our homes and in our neighbourhood."⁴(Extracts of Hate Kalame, Vide Tagore Memorial Number of the Calcutta Municipal Gazette). Thus is the clear indication of the ideal on which his work of rural reconstruction was to be based.

TAGORE'S REALIZATION FOR THE NEED OF RURAL RECONSTRUCTION:

In the early nineties a new phase of the poet's life started, born and brought up in an urban atmosphere the poet now came in direct contact with the villages. He was given the task of managing the ancestral properties for which he had to undertake frequent visits to such villages as Silaidaha and Patisar (These two villages were under Rabindranath's ancestral Zamindari where he started his experiments with rural reconstruction). The beauty of rural Bengal now unfolded in all its splendour before the poet's eye which enriched no doubt his poetic life but at the same time he now came into contact with men on a scale as never before his life. The sombre realities of rural life imparted a new tenderness to his outlook. His sensitive mind reacted spontaneously to the sufferings he saw around him. In his writings of this period we find the soothing thoughts that spring out of human sufferings. Many years later referring to his experiences of this period he said us:⁵ (An address delivered at the 'ploughing ceremony' at Srineketan in 1939. A summarized version, authorised by Tagore, was published in Prabashi, Asvin 1346 B.S. p747-49) The people 'used to come to me with their joys and sorrows, their claims and complaints. All this enabled me to form a true picture of the village. The outward appearance with rivers and wide plains, rice fields and huts nestling in the shelter of trees became familiar to me as also the inner story of rural life. the sufferings of people became more and more intertwined with my daily work.' Thus the more the poet saw poverty and suffering of the village people he felt the strong obligation to do something for them. This inner craving to do something for the villagers continued in him till the last days of his life.

Rabindranath's strong plea for rural reconstruction first came up in his well known essay 'Swadeshi Samaj' in 1904.⁶ (Collection of essays called Atmashakti in Rabindra Rachanabali 2nd volume Poush 1410 B.S. Visva Bharati, Naba Press Ltd, Kolkata 6 Pp625-58). In this essay he analysed the causes of the disintegration of village life and made concrete suggestions for its reconstruction. As a sequel to the essay 'Swadeshi Samaj' Rabindranath prepared a complete scheme to give practical shape to his idea of reconstruction of village life through concerted efforts. The poet gave emphasis on three things, rural life must be developed in all its varied aspects, the people must be induced to exert themselves and the people must be cheerful.

He thus said, "our object is to try to flood the choked bed of village life with the stream of happiness. For this the scholars, the musicians, the artists, have to collaborate, to offer their contributions."⁷ (City And Village, Visva Bharati Bulletin No 10 p24-25) . The dull and mundane life of the villages, as we have seen distressed the poet most. In his writings and speeches he had mentioned it various times. The poet's love for his country did not exhaust itself in words, true love, he believed can only be manifested through service. In one of his letters from Russia he tells us how he first took up the work of rural reconstruction. At the end of Pabna conference he shared with one of the influential political leader about how to develop the manhood of those who now live in the lowest layer of the society. But the leader laughed away poet's idea so easily that he could not help feeling that our leaders had their conception of the country borrowed from some foreign school. The poet deeply felt that the moment one admit that the country is his own then only he gets the responsibility to go in to solid work on their behalf without further loss of time.⁸ (Russiar Chithi pp582-88) This was the time the thought of setting aside his pen for a while and thought of undertaking the work about which he had said in 'Swadeshi Samaj'.

TAGORE'S EXPERIMENTS ON RURAL-RECONSTRUCTION AT SILAIDAHA AND PATISAR:

Silaidaha is a district in Nadia district which comes under the zamindari of the poet, from here started the work of the poet. An agricultural there was founded in 1893-94 A.D., for the purpose of funding the cultivators, especially in seasons of cultivation in reasonable rate of interest. With the help of young workers like Kalimohan Ghosh, Tagore now tried to solve the rural problems in a very systematic fashion. The workers lived in different villages keeping in close contact with the villagers. The workers and the villagers together did various works like repairing roads and drains, excavating tanks, clearing jungles etc.⁹ (Sachindranath Adhikari, Sonar Bangla, Bhadra, 1348 B.S.)

The poet tried to set up a number of 'divisional offices', instead of managing the estate from a Centralised office. This system was in certain respects reminiscent of the old Panchayat system that rendered a more intimate relationship between the tenants and the managing staff where the interest of the former be better safeguarded. This system however enhanced the cost of expenditure and so the system was later suspended at Silaidaha. A weaving school was established at Kusthea. The poet also encouraged for cottage industry. Besides in order to improve the economic conditions of the tenants and thereby also to increase the income of the estate was introduced. The tenants of the estate used to make an extra contribution of three pies for every rupee of the revenue paid, known as 'Kalibritti'. This fund realized was used on a fair and religious festival. In 1312 B.S. at a meeting held at the memory of Late Debandranath Tagore, the poet in consultation decided to establish an entrance school and a charitable dispensary as Tagore memorials and for that purpose was raised an additional six pies with the original three pies per rupee. This was the beginning of the Welfare Fund at Kaligram. (This name stood both for the fund and the body which organised it. To remove this anomaly the latter was renamed in 1319 B.S. and called the General Welfare Society. The organisation consisted of three branches at Patisar, Ratwal and Kamta respectively.) The welfare levy a few years later was increased to a total of fifteen paise per rupee.

Along with jute and cloth trade, brick kilns, sugar crushing mills were introduced at Kusthea. Attempts were also made to introduce new commercial crops and practical demonstrations of use of manures were given. To that effect experiments were made on an area of eighty bighas. Special attention was paid by Tagore to the spread of education, in addition to girls schools were introduced 'tols' for Sanskrit education and many primary schools were run within the area with grants from the estate. Tagore also laid emphasis on physical exercises for which gymnasium were introduced in the area.

In 1919 the zamindari estate of Tagore was divided up and the Silaidaha estate was allotted to other members of his family. The poet now shifted his rural work to Kaligram which represented his share of the estate. A welfare fund as described earlier was already running in Patisar, in Kaligram Parganas early as 1312 B.S. (1905), with the immediate objective of running a high school and a charitable dispensary. The poet earlier in a lecture in 1322 B.S. invited the educated Bengalis of the time to share ideas to him about the

rural upliftment of Bengal, "The minds of the educated now soar in from the realm of thought, like clouds in the sky, far away from the earth. The two could be brought together in a fruitful union if they were to melt and descend in the shape of rain.....Your grand display of ideas all your stored up knowledge, it can only be for me!....."

I shall give it all back a hundredfold."¹⁰ (Pallir Unnati or Rural Uplift, Prabashi Baisakh,1322 B.S.) See also(Sanibarar Chithi Asvin,1348 B.S. Pp 906-8). The poet in 1915, accumulating the ideas given to him by the educated bengalis of the time introduced another full scale experiments in rural reconstruction in Patisar with the help of another group of workers. In a letter written to Lady Abala Bose,poet said "....At present I am preoccupied with the problems of our village society. I have made up my mind to provide an example of rural reconstruction work in our own Zamindari. A few boys from East Bengal have volunteered for the purpose. They live in villages in the midst of the people and are trying to organise the villagers so that they may make themselves make provisions for their own education, sanitation settlement of disputes etc..."¹¹(letter to Lady Abala Bose) The poet himself drew up a programme which closely followed the lines of the scheme he had submitted to the 'Bangeeya Hitasadhan Mondoli". It included various schemes like medical treatment, provision for primary education, clearance of jungle construction and repairing of roads and various other public works. The scheme also tried to protect the cultivating class from the ruinous effect of indebtedness and settlement of all quarrels through arbitration.

The Welfare Society worked a lot to give success to the proposed scheme of the poet. The three centres of Patisar ,Kamta and Ratowal were successful in running hospital and medical dispensary. The medicines distributed were free and arrangement of doctors and also a few beds for the hospitals were done. The Welfare Society Fund was run by the tenants and poet as zamindar himself. The poet also showed certain ingenuity in enhancing the income of the fund. For example it was a custom of different villages that if someone is found guilty for breaking any social rule he had to pay a penalty which sometimes took the form of an expensive feast. Tagore arranged it in a different way, the guilty person he said from now on would pay a moderate sum to the Welfare Society which would be utilized for public service. Thus the new system of social punishment lessened the strain on individuals, while it brought funds which could be spent for general welfare.

In the field of education the poet also tried to bring a change. To remove illiteracy and to make the students familiar with the alphabets more than two hundred pathshalas were established. Other than mere reading, writing and arithmetic new subjects like history, geography etc were introduced. Rabindranath always in his life had advocated the principle of learning by doing so instead of only subjective knowledge he introduced oral lessons on first aid, on the improvement of agriculture, on fire fighting, social duties on flood etc. The poet also believed in rational system of education where the motto should be; from the concrete to the abstract and from one's own country to the world and not the way around. Thus he introduced the reading of world news in the leisure time of the students so that they can go for comparison with other countries. In the of public welfare that needed a huge finance the poet consider to reduce expense by taking the help of the labour of the tenants in certain cases so that the laborious works like clearance of jungle, excavating tanks etc. can be smoothly done. As regard the mitigation of the crippling burden of debt a good deal was achieved at Kaligram . The position of the tenant here is same as in other portions of Bengal. The crop raised was not enough to carry throughout the year. The peasants had to borrow from the money lenders at usurious rates of interest and the payment of the interest alone took a large part. As a remedy to such a situation certain arrangements were made. The poet decided to extend loan to the cultivator's from the agricultural bank of the estate and the borrower here will get loan at nine percent interest but he will have to explain the actual requirements in detail. Thus the risk of reckless borrowing decreased to a large extent. It was a general practice to write off three percent of the interest at the time of clearing of debts and the cultivators took the opportunity to a great extent. Finally the plan of settlement of quarrels by

arbitration without appealing to the court met with an outstanding success, for it did not took them long to realize that in this way they can get speedy and secured justice and also can save a great deal of wasteful expenditure if every case were to be referred to some law court.

The work however did not continued for long as the workers actively involved in it were called away for various reasons. The Welfare Society however continued and has substantially contributed to the development of the rural community. Tagore had always shown a keen interest on rural reconstruction programme and had tried to look after the general welfare of the rural people. The work that he started at Silaidaha found its maturity at Patisar and Kaligram, and finally it can be said that Rabindranath's work on rural reconstruction got its culmination at Srineketan.

CONCLUSION:

Two thoughts clearly emerges from Tagore's thought of rural reconstruction programme that rural reconstruction is what he thought of other than any of the social questions of the time. This was far important to him than 'pure politics'. In 'Swadeshi Samaj' the poet first expressed his thoughts on social questions. In this writing he first advocated the rehabilitation of the village society. He fully realised that a complete restoration was not possible as the circumstances had changed and the exigencies of modern times called for certain reforms. restoration of the Yet he appealed in 'Swadeshi Samaj' , to restore the old system and the traditional values with whatever modification might be necessary to meet the requirements of a new age.¹²(Swadeshi Samaj,625-58) He believed that keeping the old foundation of the village intact if changes are made then people will again look village ward.

In the years that followed a feeling of disappointment gradually crept upon the poet. Repeated appeals from him could not move his countrymen. The educated portion of the society did not pay heed to the poets appeal. The educated society and the well to do society continuously moved to the town in search of comfortable life and cared very little about the village people, he took up the work of his village organisation alone. He started his work first at Silaidaha and Patisar and later at Srineketan which was his silent protest against his countrymen. The natural question that raise in our mind is that how far was the poet successful in fulfilling his ideas of rural reconstruction. Tagore himself did not have any exaggerated opinion about the work initiated by him rather he said that he had only turned out songs. He frankly admitted that he undertook the work of rural reconstruction not because he could do it better than others , but because those who could do it better did not came forward. The task he himself has pointed out was a hard one as he had tried to create a model village for future India. Thus what he said was "What is true today in the world of thought, will be true to-morrow in our life".¹³(On Constructive Work-A Letter, Modern Review, December, 1921.) Thus the conventional way of measuring success or failure has only a limited applicability in poet's work o rural reconstruction. If we see in reality there were heavy odds that the poet had to face to carry out his dream of rural reconstruction and thus the immediate result was not a glorious one yet what should not be overlooked is the poets deep feeling for the villages and its people and the practical effort made by the poet to evoke self confidence on the villagers who traditionally look down upon themselves. Thus to Rabindranath Tagore, the so- called village problem was not of the village but of its men. The poet therefore through his work of rural reconstruction tried to rebuild man. The greatest truth about man is his own humanity, which he found that the villagers were lacking and which he tried to rebuild through his various constructive works.

REFERENCES:

1. Tagore's Reminiscences (Jibansmriti) August 1989 Rabindra Rachanabali 11th Volume,West Bengal Government, Saraswati Press pp41-51).
2. Tagore's Reminiscences (Jibansmriti)August 1989 Rabindra Rachanabali 11th Volume,West Bengal Government, Saraswati Press pp49-51).
3. ibid p-51.
4. Extracts of Hate Kalame, Vide Tagore Memorial Number of the Calcutta Municipal Gazette.

5. An address delivered at the 'ploughing ceremony ' at Srineketan in 1939. A summarized version, authorised by Tagore, was published in Prabashi, Asvin 1346 B.S. p747-49.
6. Collection of essays called Atmashakti in Rabindra Rachanabali 2nd volume Poush 1410 B.S. Visva Bharati,Naba Press Ltd, Kolkata 6 Pp625-58.
7. City And Village, Visva Bharati Bulletin No 10 p24-25
8. Russiar chithi ,Rabindra Rachanabali 10th Volume,West Bengal Government, Saraswati Press pp582-88.
9. Sachindranath Adhikari, Silaidahe Rabindranather karmajiban,Sonar Bangla, Bhadra, 1348 B.S.)
10. (Pallir Unnati or Rural Uplift, Prabashi Baisakh,1322 B.S.) See also (Sanibarar Chithi Asvin,1348 B.S. Pp 906-8).
11. Letter to Lady Abala Bose,though not dated it was presumably written from Silaidaha 1908, published in Prabashi ,Sravana,1345 B.S.
12. Swadeshi Samaj, Rabindra Rachanabali 2nd Volume,West Bengal Government, Saraswati Press pp625-58.
13. On Constructive Work-A Letter, Modern Review, December, 1921.



Kasturi Roy Chatterjee

**Assistant Professor, Department of History , Sundarban Mahavidyalaya,Kakdwip,
South 24-parganas.**