

# Always towards : development and nationalism in Rabindranath Tagore

**Himani Bannerji**

Professor of Sociology, York University, Toronto, Canada and Honorary Visiting Professor  
Institute of Development Studies Kolkata

May 2008



## **INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES KOLKATA**

Calcutta University Alipore Campus (Block A, 5th Floor)  
1 Reformatory Street, Kolkata - 700 027

Phone : +91 (33) 2448-1364/8178, Fax : +91 (33) 2448-1364

e-mail : [idsk1@vsnl.net](mailto:idsk1@vsnl.net), Website : [www.idsk.org](http://www.idsk.org)

*The moral right of the  
author has been asserted*

# Always towards : development and nationalism in Rabindranath Tagore

Himani Bannerji

## Introduction

History reveals that institutions or artifacts produced by human beings can lead to the exploitation or the loss of freedom of other human beings. Thus the celebration of the good life of an Athenian citizen in Plato's time can hide the wretchedness of vast numbers of slaves whose labor made it possible for the few free citizens to enjoy that good life. Our criteria then must apply to all, or at least the vast majority of the vast of the human group concerned, if they are to lay claim to universality.

Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Perilous Passage*<sup>1</sup>

At the end of Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera* the chorus laments the fate of those who sink, nameless, into the shadows under the stage or society's glaring footlights. Narratives of both dramatic and economic development generally name the 'successful', the 'heroic', those captains of capital and class who know how to profit from the misery and poverty of others. It is of this same darkness in the heart of light, the moral and social ethos of capitalist industrialism and its state, that two Indian authors, Manik Bandyopadhyay and Mahasweta Devi, speak.

In his short story, *The Reptiles*,<sup>2</sup> Manik Bandyopadhyay tells the story of human reptiles, of petty Bengali *bhadralok* of colonial Calcutta, who lure to his death a handicapped orphan child, sinking their claws into him to gain his inheritance. Manik ends his story by expanding this trope of deep penetration in search of property, through the image of an airplane flying to the jungles of Sunderban where animals are cowering in front of human 'civilizing' and 'development' missions.

Masesweta Devi portrays the developmental predations of postcolonial capitalist India by the same class agents in her stories in *Nairite Megh*.<sup>3</sup> One, in

particular, tells us of the devastation of adivasi rights, appropriation of their land and forest fights through describing their punishment for resisting forces of development. They are barred from buying salt. Assaulted by the trinitarian forces of law, order and capital, adivasis retreat deeper into the forest, blood thickening in their veins. One dimly lit forest night witnesses them crawling on all fours sharing the salt lick with animals. This turn of the story is no more a trick of magic realism than the factual one preformed on the adivasis of Jajpur, Orissa, cursed by the presence of uranium under their soil. They were not only murdered by the forces of state and capital, but returned from the police morgue to haunt their relatives with hands chopped off for the purpose of an enduring identification meant for the lowly and the nameless.

It is against this kind of 'development', of long shadows under the proscenium lights of patriarchal, casteist and communalist capitalism, national and international, that various critiques of development have been enunciated.<sup>4</sup> Mine is no exception, but not without signaling that there are other ways of developing, of projecting another development, the basis of which is articulated under other theoretical/political horizons than those advanced by the U.S. modernization theorists which provide in some form the present neoliberal development. I, on the other hand, insist that 'another world is possible' - a demand uttered by the militants of Chiapas, Mexico.<sup>5</sup> But this refusal of conventional and now neoliberal corporate anti-human development cannot be actualized without exposing and resisting once again its destructive and seductive paradigms and practices. The lure of 'India Shining', the glitter of hyper shopping malls, miles of highways, development of vedic villages and health spas, SEZs, among other instances of 'development', clearly indicate who the beneficiaries of this development are. Remembering the dire results of the then much vaunted 'green revolution', we are moving into destruction of agriculture, facing a food crisis on extended premises of the same. Contrary to what Marx said, that tragedy did not just become a farce, but a much deeper and darker tragedy - with mind-numbing levels of dispossession, including of life for the majority in India.<sup>6</sup> So history cannot, and should not, be replayed, but as Walter Benjamin in the dark days of techno-fetishism of the Nazis said, it must be witnessed even as we move forward towards resistance or abyss.<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that Paul Klee's angel of history, driven forward by the winds of progress, looks back while debris of burning cities pile up ahead.

Let me begin with the sense of paradox I regularly experience when teaching my seminar on women and development. We are all struck by the complexity

and contestation encoded in this concept, this hold-all category, and how differently it is understood by scholars and practitioners coming from their divergent knowledge spaces and social and geopolitical locations.<sup>8</sup> And how long this contestation has been going on – we can remind ourselves of the old, now almost forgotten debates and critiques of modernization produced by Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, or Amiya Kumar Bagchi. We see their confirmation in the works of Utsa Patnaik and Jayati Ghosh, or in the world wide debates reincarnated between neo-liberal globalizers, the market worshippers, and those who see through the mystifications and contortions into neo-liberalism as a more developed version of neo-colonialism. Going along with them, with theorists and critics such as David Harvey, Amiya Bagchi, David McNally, James Petras or Prabhat Patnaik, one can see that ‘development’ as we know it, has always needed an adjective. The fight is between two developments, with radically opposed adjectives, capitalist and human - and Amiya Bagchi’s new book, *Perilous Passage*, bears witness to this struggle. Unless consciously fought for, in the full light of contradiction between these two kinds of development, horrifying peril has been the lot of most people, while capital has razed its way into a triumphal passage. As Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia indicate, this is how it is going to be for quite some time to come, until resistance in the name of the human, the inherent value encoded in that concept, gathers volume enough to challenge the ruthless principles of property and their related proprieties. It is amazing how this bland expression ‘development’, or its correlate ‘growth’, have come to hold so much menace. Was it always so? How did ‘development’ come to acquire these perversions? What were its earlier names?

### **Development: a conceptual composite and a practical contradiction**

Let us begin by remembering that ‘development’ is an ambiguous space, quite specific in its intentions and procedures, its subject-agents and object-receivers. It operates in many registers which include convergences of socio-economic, cultural and political forces, their coherences as well as downright contradictions. As such any mention of ‘development’ should be pluralized, though certain politics and practices have driven it in a singular direction. Inscribed in it are many definitions and many objectives and desires, which historical changes have brought to an eventual singularization and incorporation within the grand narrative of industrial capitalism and imperialism. In its reduced singular common usage it has lost all its humane and ethical properties, its location in demands for equality and sharing, and become conceived and shaped as the instrument, the

end, and the legitimation of capitalism and its global outreach. Historians of the concept, such as Jorge Larraín, or even literary critics and etymologists who trace the social changes in words/concepts, such as Raymond Williams, have placed its earlier incarnation as social and qualitative 'improvement' of life in the era of Vico, and outline its progress through much of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western social thought.<sup>9</sup> And, undeniably, in its earlier phase, before the high noon of English industrial capitalism, it contained deeper moral and cultural dimensions. Emma Rothschild's *Economic Sentiments*, for example, shows the world of ideas where moral economic concepts and practices evolved.<sup>10</sup> But with time 'development' came to signify technocentrism at the service of capital.

In its earlier phase as 'improvement' this notion was secular, social and humanist. Though technology as the new horizon already beckoned it, technology had not become the director and governor of 'improvement'. The late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century appropriated 'development' or 'improvement' for the purpose of signaling an individual or organically social wholeness – for example, as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's or William Wordsworth's writings, while industrial revolution with its utilitarian and Whig perception emphasizing skills education and wealth signaled it elsewhere.

This mixed ground also was a forked road. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century rolled in, the dawn of 'progress' was signaled by an emphasis on moral pedagogical improvement, in particular, of the child. Education, including of imagination, of sentiments and sensibilities, came to mean, as Coleridge said, 'educing the whole soul of man', while utilitarian rationalist, technological pedagogical impetus co-existed side by side as displayed and critiqued by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*. A metaphysical pedagogy, perhaps most eloquently captured in the modern myth of Dr. Frankenstein, the only equal to the older and constantly reworked Faust myth, came to offer a contrast to the utilitarian social engineering version of pedagogy. It is perhaps important to note that the educational projects aimed at the lower middle class working class children were generally christian and utilitarian. The elite children's education could be more humanistic, imaginative and child-centred. In this romantic approach 'development' meant for the middle classes did not emphasize education as 'techne' for wealth, as a strategy for ruling and disciplining. This kind of education was not seen as an adjunct to producing cogs in social and economic wheels, but rather as a deep moral and aesthetic pleasure, in the scheme of which it was better to travel than to arrive.

The meaning of development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century shed much of its romanticism

as it not only incorporated utilitarianism, but also the growing interest and research in biological/natural sciences. It resonated with fallout effects of evolutionism, including eventually a large dose of social darwinism. Sandra Harding in *The Racial Economy of Science*, Sander Gilman in *Difference and Pathology* or Stephen J. Gould in *The Mismeasure of Man* told us about the knowledge/power or ideological and governing dimensions of this type of 'developmentalism'.<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, it gave rise to the notion of developmentally retarded individuals, peoples and cultures and the notion of the 'abnormal', eagerly seized upon by the medical profession<sup>12</sup>. The horrific consequences of such thinking were found in the extermination of physically and mentally disabled people in Haar in Nazi Germany, where the 'underdeveloped' were eliminated. So technologism, on the one hand, and a racially and pervertedly humanistic biologism, on the other, told narratives of horror and development in one breath.

The dark side of development is also, in my opinion, reflected and rooted in what Marx called the myth of primitive accumulation, the myth being that the present day rich, the owners of capital, gained their seed money from the hard labour and sacrifice of their ancestors.<sup>13</sup> This myth of the hardworking, deserving capitalist was most notably and sustainedly critiqued by Marx as he spoke of the reality of primitive accumulation as being one of forced/violent/relentless, extralegal and legal separation of the majority of humankind from their means of livelihood, and their eventual reduction to the status of wage labour, the state of competitive commoditization of labour power, of human capacity for creating, for the purpose of capital accumulation. The terror of this primitive accumulation has echoed through centuries – and most who have been pushed out of land and productive resources, their social and cultural spaces, have faced pauperization, not proletarianization. This situation was powerfully captured in poems, prophecies and illustrations of William Blake. What is obvious, and remarked upon by many scholars, ranging from political economists to critical geographers and scholars of urban studies, is that the process of 'primitive accumulation' is far from over.<sup>14</sup> The current 'globalization' with its financial/military compulsions should be read in this perspective. What Hardt and Negri call 'Empire' is an entity none other than this.<sup>15</sup> So what Marx called the 'genesis' of capital, whose history is written in annals of blood and fire, both internal to the West and outside in the colonized, enslaved and even genocidal spaces, are annals of predatory dispossessions ranging from early colonialism and slavery to the invasion of Iraq. Separating peoples, even nations, from their resources, territorial,

social and cultural creativity and control, eliminating, marginalizing and degrading whole populations in the process, still continue. They fall, as Ellen Wood shows, well within the 'logic of capital'.<sup>16</sup> This 'little matter of genocide', as Ward Churchill calls it,<sup>17</sup> has been widely documented, and King Leopold's ghost<sup>18</sup> still haunts us in the quagmire of sub-Saharan Africa.

The current neoliberal, corporate driven 'development' conducted by expelling people from the land in primarily agricultural countries, such as India, should be seen as a part of this process. 'All that is solid melts into air',<sup>19</sup> taking with it land and livelihood, introducing people-hostile technology for corporate capitalist agriculture, introducing seed, pesticide and fertilizer packages all in the service of Cargill or Monsanto: this can only lead to the thousands of farmer suicides that we have heard of.<sup>20</sup> Putting profit before people, erasing knowledges that stand in the way, the market becomes the only way of conducting social relations of fulfilling desire and achieving identity. Those who cannot buy, namely the poor, whose governments refuse to buy their basic amenities for them and divert revenues collected from the public to subsidize local and foreign capitalists, must stand away from and die facilitating the path of 'development'. In the world we live in, technology has been pitted against people, creating workers' redundancy irrespective of the size of the population. That what I am saying is not just marxist rhetoric is proved by simply reading one day's newspaper. Any newspaper – even the Kolkata English newspaper, *The Telegraph*, will do.

So 'development' under these circumstances is not of the people, by the people or for people. It does not create or augment human capacity, but the very alienation of this capacity, creating of the most poor a separate species. This objective externalization of human capacity against the very producers themselves is breathtaking. Of course science and technology are of the essence of this development. But it should be made clear, as Walter Benjamin did in his "Work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction",<sup>21</sup> that it is not either science or technology that itself constitutes the problem, but the social relations, objectives and modalities within which they are activated. But then the content and the direction of research at the behest of giant corporations are decided and prioritized by them while the elected so-called democratic governments subsidize them at the cost of ordinary people. So making and selling armaments, corporate agri-research, health and pharmaceutical research driven by profit, conversion of objects of basic needs like water into profit-making commodities,<sup>22</sup> and finally, the low price of nationally corralled or migrant/trafficked/refugee labour – all contribute to this type of development's darkness.<sup>23</sup>



As consciousness is ultimately socially produced, needless to say that this development generates a culture – a glittering vacuous culture of techno-romanticism and consumption – extending from aesthetics of war to big dams, cars and diamonds steeped in blood and showing up as a woman’s best friend, forever. From the ethical fountainhead of progress, the driving force of development, a vista of incremental prosperity springs forth. Since statistics and economics work with averages, it has been omitted by the discourse of ‘development’ to ask for whom is this development, by whom, with what means and towards what real object. A great deal of triumphalism went on in the past and now reaches a roar in the project of domination of nature, but it is a rationality, a transcendence that spirals out the very existence of humans on earth in a nuclear glow, while trying in laboratories to create human beings and immortality.

What I am saying is, of course, not new. In the case of India ‘green revolution’ and Nehruvian romance with big dam projects, have come up for sustained and trenchant criticism. If being right meant being effective, things would have changed a long time ago through the ‘green revolution’, and not spell out as corporate agribusiness’s recipe for farmers’ suicide and pauperism. Nor did the barrage of feminist critiques of development make a real impact,<sup>24</sup> though much of its criticism and authors got co-opted to serve ‘femocracy’<sup>25</sup> and national and international non-governmental projects for applying band aids to the violence of development. Yet there are feminist activists and scholars who are still concerned with the fate of peasants and farmers, of environmental devastation and degradation, who continue to tear apart the façade of ‘development’ or try to wrest from the state the justice that is owing to the “objects” of development by means ranging from political struggles through public interest litigation for human rights. I need to only cite a few names to show how social research has been enriched by gender analysis, how it has exposed the Cartesian dualism of masculinist dimensions of development’s goal of domination of nature and indigenous peoples. Let us remember, for example, Maria Mies, Geeta Sen, Arundhati Roy, Veronica Benholtz, Swasti Mitter, Sheila Rowbotham, Beena Agarwal, Virginia Vargas, Domitila Barrios Chungara, and Rigoberta Menchu, among others.

We also need to remember that even those who are with establishments of capital (local and international) have been forced to admit the horrendous price that poor people, and women in particular, pay for ‘development’.<sup>26</sup> Criticism has ranged from sweatshop labour to aboriginal or poor peasant women foraging for a living in the jungles of the cities or the countryside – Bombay or Rio de

Janeiro or the Amazon. The victimization of poor women has also been profound in their bodies – their reproductive apparatus bondage to various ruling apparatuses. Susan George and others have repeatedly insisted that the poor, poor women, in particular pay the price of foreign debt and so-called economic reforms.<sup>27</sup> Authors in India, such as Utsa Patnaik or Madhura Swaminathan, have written about public distribution system and food security in India.<sup>28</sup> The list goes on.

Yet, after this litany of horrors, if we should still wish to redeem this notion of ‘development’ (though there is no compulsion about why we should, we could altogether switch to other concepts). But if we just should want to retain it, reclaim it and refashion it, then we could still hear the small voice of the early romantic, non-colonial, non-oppressive humanism that once inscribed the cognates of this notion. The human-centric, child-centric, sociality-motivated use of this concept of development could push out the other adjective – capitalist. It could also be enhanced with the developmentalism of human capacity that C. B. MacPherson spoke about. We could get off John Stuart Mill’s “see-saw” between human developmental and market/capitalist democracy and settle for participatory democracy,<sup>29</sup> nurturing and celebrating human capacities for creativity and good life. Progressive liberal thought has read into ‘development’ in a sensitive, humanist way but has not given us a way of actualizing these ideas.<sup>30</sup> Social democracy of capitalism has not been able to create conditions against class and capital to give a full participatory status to ordinary people and to create conditions for real physical and social well-being where development would be realized for the majority. But to accomplish this even marginally, even at the level of conceptualization, the notions and practices of universal citizenship, human rights and imaginative growth are directions that need to be followed. The contradiction that is integral to capitalism, and corporate capitalism in particular, between social well-being and a political economy of profit, is found even by those who want to produce for us capitalism with a human face, fashion responsible ‘corporate citizens’ and ‘empower’ poor women. But whether they can do so or not, by using these discourses of ‘improvement’ and a non-profit orientation they acknowledge the need to redeem ‘development’ to a human purpose. We have long lived in a world where capitalist techno-romanticism has become hegemonic in many guises. For the left subscription to ‘development’ with a progressivist techno-rationality, the motivation has not been profit before people, but rather a fetishization of ‘science’ and ‘progress’. This is indicated by a part of the left’s constant use of the discourse of ‘backwardness’, and some in

the Left Front governed state of West Bengal have succumbed to the highly limited aim of what is 'realistic' in capitalist terms. From the now defunct Soviet Union to present day China there are lessons for the Left to learn. Why failure, and what price success?

It is perhaps not too presumptuous for me to say that the end of all social endeavour, including that of development, should be people themselves. Nothing can be an alibi for their well-being, their happiness for their short allotted time on earth. We have to bridge the gap that lies between the ideals of human development and the impediments in social and political conditions that prevent these ideals from being even barely actualized. But first we should hear further how one Indian social thinker, poet-philosopher and pedagogue took up that project. I am speaking of Rabindranath Tagore.

### **Rabindranath, Development and Decolonization**

Decolonization never takes place unnoticed for it has an effect on being, it changes being fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, caught in a spectacular manner by the floodlights of History. It introduces into being a peculiar rhythm, heralded by new people, a new language, a new humanity. Decolonization is a veritable creation of new human beings.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*<sup>31</sup>

One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight... The invisible screen of the common place was removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind; and this is the definition of beauty. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man.

Tagore, *The Religion of Man*<sup>32</sup>

Though the notion of 'decolonization' was most prominently articulated in the context of Algerian and other African revolutions, especially in the writings of Frantz Fanon, I have chosen to use this term in relation to Rabindranath's

proposals for and achievements of postcoloniality. Decolonization is a more apt expression for what Rabindranath aimed at than either anticolonialism or nationalism, for reasons that we will see below. In fact Rabindranath's refusal of nationalism in general, and its Indian manifestation in particular, has been remarked upon by many scholars, the most searching and early presentation of which is to be found in Sumit Sarkar's *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*<sup>33</sup>. Equally notable, however, is Rabindranath's untiring and lifelong effort to create cultural identities and social subjectivities that are substantive and independent of colonial inflections. It seems to me that his vision of human development, termed by Sarkar and others as 'constructive swadeshi', is best captured by the idea of 'decolonization', which involves a proposal of social transformation, along what could be called humanist/'modernist' paths of the civil society itself. The emphasis was on the development of various aspects of the civil society with a concentration on the development of a self, and positive self-other relations. In the perspective of colonialism this self-other relation goes well beyond the personal to a wider public sphere, to the society as a whole. Rabindranath was especially perturbed by these types of cultural identities, political and moral subjectivities which were circulating among middle class Bengalis, and particularly in the templates for 'national' identity. In *Gora*, for example, we find how he reacted to this Hindu ethnicist national imaginary and its sense of self and politics and engaged in a narrative of a decolonizing process of formation of this identity, thereby leading to a constructive swadeshi social transformation.

Rabindranath devised a 'pedagogy of decolonization' rather than engage in conventional politics, in both practical and conceptual-aesthetic terms. His pedagogical institutions - Shantiniketan, Sriniketan and Visva Bharati - were evolved along such decolonizing humanist developmental visions. His intentions may be surmised from the statement: "...I have no distrust of any culture because of its foreign character. On the contrary, I believe that the shock of the outside forces is necessary for maintaining the vitality of our intellect."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, he stated that "...all the elements of our culture have to be strengthened, not to resist the culture of the West, but to accept it and assimilate it. We must...not live on sufferance as hewers of texts and drawers of book learning"<sup>35</sup>.

In fashioning this vision of autonomous, evolved and open social subjectivities Rabindranath obviously wanted to chart a path away from colonialism and its binary nationalism, which he saw emerging in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea was to open up a space of creative self and social formation marked by receptivity and mutuality. The critical knowledge bases for these transformative

proposals and efforts were clearly in the tradition of social reformism heralded by the towering figure of Raja Rammohan Roy, whom Rabindranath admired deeply. His intention/desire was to go well beyond simple social and institutional reforms towards the construction of an aesthetic and moral typology for a 'new man' and a 'new society'. This is not so different from the romantic utopian impulse of social pedagogy that marked his time and the century into which he was born. He not only wrote about a redemptive social pedagogy, but sought the means to practicalize such visions which entailed the redemption of a violated and violent space of colonialism and nationalism. In the schools he established in Shantiniketan and Shriniketan he experimented with building a model for a decolonized and world society. This complex situation, capturing the dialectics of the colonial experience, is noted by Amiya Bagchi in his charting of the 'perilous passage' of capitalism: "Throughout the history of colonialism, there was a dialectical relationship between the civilization mission of the colonizers and the absorption of the learning of the Europeans; many of the new perspectives and knowledge were used by the colonized for resisting oppression and cultural imperialism."<sup>36</sup> Thus even the violence of the classroom and rote learning, which he rejected since childhood, were shunned. In his parable *Tota Kahini* he remarked on the dire consequences of feeding children with facts and numbers in the name of education, much as Dickens criticized utilitarian schooling in *Hard Times*. What Rabindranath sought to develop in and through his pedagogic space and practice was a creative-ethical environment in which the mind and imagination thrive, not wither. His project of a decolonizing human development aspired at once to free the mind, culture and society.

It is important to note that Rabindranath's developmental philosophy and practices were not only romantic and liberal, but that they were so in the teeth of colonialism. He not only sought to unbind the liberatory and creative potentials of children and adults, but had to steer a course between being mindful of colonialism and all that is entailed in it and yet not being caught in a simplifying reactive and referential relation to it. For a colonized subject to aspire to a universalist humanism was indeed a project against the grain - a gesture that could be, and was, misunderstood by both the nationalists and the lofty pretension of the colonialists. His metaphysical modernism/humanism aspired to a universalist morality posited in the social background of a casteist and communalist society, inscribed and reinforced with colonialism. He called for constant rejection of narrowness, chauvinism, binary worldviews and other forms of particularism, which become an easy reflex for colonized peoples. But

this was no vacuous transcendence as it retained the lineaments of strong specificities of its socio-historical origins and the political bondage of India. His dynamic social and aesthetic pedagogy marked a journey between what is and what ought to be.

It is obvious that this humanism, with its modernist aesthetic, a form of aesthetic metaphysics, demands a breakthrough between the self and other, nature and culture, emotion and reason. If this task is not possible, then neither is pedagogy, self creation or social transformation. It would appear that Rabindranath was largely successful, at least at the creative-moral level, in doing this. A few words need to be said here about Rabindranath's notion of the self, whose recognition and aesthetic-spiritual construction forms the basis of his personal, social and political pedagogy. The achievement of the substantiveness of this 'self' in himself and others, his students and readers/interlocutors, could be conceived as his decolonizing task, his surpassing the identity of a colonial subject. His notion of the self is both personal and specific while it is indivisible from 'life', to which his and other personal lives are referenced. This life-self is obviously not static, it is a poesis, a becoming, in and through imagination. The nature of this self, which personally and experientially takes the form of personality, follows also "the path of human evolution" which connects with others and displays "the qualities of creativity" which embody and project an excess or surplus of affectivity and formal evocation.<sup>37</sup> In this formulation reason, for Rabindranath, need not only be utilitarian rationalism, a faculty for abstraction, but can also be a reflexive and critical faculty. It is with this recognition and ability that Gora grows up from a narrow nationalist to a humanist and Bimala or Nikhilesh in *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) learn to go beyond their initial, immediately reactive selves. This form of reason need not be antithetical to nature, if nature itself can be comprehended as Rabindranath seems to think, of having two aspects or levels. On one level nature, for him, is physical, primordial or instinctual; but on the other hand nature also has an aspect of nurturing, of inherent sociality. And both nature, in this sense, and reason cross over into each other at the level of the imaginative, which is simultaneously empathic and aesthetic :

I have expressed my belief that the first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with Nature...not that Nature which has its channel of information for our mind and physical relationship with our living body, but that which satisfies our personality with manifestations that make our life rich and stimulate our imagination in their harmony of forms, colours, sounds and movements. It is not

that world which vanishes into abstract symbols behind its own testimony to Science, but that which lavishly displays its wealth of reality to our personal self having its own perpetual reaction upon our nature.<sup>38</sup>

This possibility of a constitutive relationship between nature and reason through the mediation of imagination is productive of subjectivities, self-other relations, and cultural identities which are positively social and humane. This worldview of nature and reason as human and social nature and social reason is beyond the reach of Hobbes or social Darwinism. The triad of reason, nature and imagination together form the building blocks of sociality, the basic ground for a universalized identification. It is this realization that Gora comes to by the end of the novel and expresses in his idea of 'India' and in his feeling of oneness with its millions of impure, nameless, non-brahminical people. For Rabindranath the social being of this human self is susceptible to empathy and universalist humanism, unless it is ideologically distorted or deformed through both colonialism and nationalism. Both colonial hegemony and nationalist ideology, incorporated in binaries of power, thus become mirrors of each other. But this intimation of one's own and the other's humanity is not an automatic or unconscious/instinctive natural reflex. On the contrary, it involves practice, a critical, reflective, gradual and constructive process. It entails not simply joy, but sorrow and sacrifice, painful learning. Even when the universal human cannot be approximated, as it cannot for those subject to colonial or any other form of domination, it still remains at the level of a socially awakened desire, as what Ernst Bloch called 'the principle of hope'. As shown in *Ghare Baire*, for example, Rabindranath could not celebrate the visceral passions of nationalism as embodied in Sandip. He could, as Bimala, feel its seduction, but equally as Bimala, feel its repulsion and a deep affinity with Nikhilesh's non-sectarian humanist/modernist outlook.

This homology Rabindranath established between social Darwinian naturalism and nationalism, his perception in it of passion without compassion, of a ruthless negative bond between the self and the other, as between the colonizer and the colonized, allowed Rabindranath to read and construct nationalism through the trope of both an aggressive and yearning sexuality. His stance is remarkable in dissociating women from the Indian/Bengali nationalist trope of motherhood. Themes of domination and subordination, the problematic of freedom, the vicissitudes of self-making, the pedagogy of the self, are all thematic presences in his novels. The plots of his novels which are mostly triangular narrativize and

dramatize his project. They generally consist of two closely connected men, attached to the same woman, on whom rests the burden of choice between them. Almost allegorically the men embody dominant qualities of reason and nature in antithetical proportions. This allegorical, poetic and parable-like structure, for example of *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters), allowed Rabindranath to write the painful reflexive *bildungsroman* of arriving to imaginative reason which can achieve decolonization in its fullest sense, and the exposure through the characters and their conflicts and consonances of divergent moral and political imperatives. By transparently bringing together the personal and the political he pushed his narrative to the edge of lived time, and placed his characters on the cusp of being and becoming – the journey of human development.

These novels share thematic and philosophical grounds with Rabindranath's plays. *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleander), for instance, establishes a creative, developing and struggling relationship between nature and the social. The techno-authoritarian and utilitarian abstraction of the king's world of extraction of the earth's resources and of calculation of production of wealth is finally overcome by a popular revolt brought about by imagination resonating with empathy, poetry and music. In the character of the king we see the transformation of a techno-fascist into a lover of the human, the other and the aesthetic. If we consider politics of decolonization in these terms, the question of politics includes the immense realms of desire, affirmative social relations and relationship to creativity/imagination, all of which constantly shape the self and provide content for subjectivity.

Rabindranath's complex evaluation of nationalism and decolonization, or considerations of postcoloniality, reveal to us the double face of what has come to be called 'modernity'. Sharing a principle of secularism in common, rooted in different and distinct notions of the individual, these two faces of modernity are those of colonial, dominating, technocratic power, and a humanist, democratic or socially creative impulse. One runs on the principle of hate and acquisition and the other on empathy and crossing over spaces. In one difference causes aggressive narcissism, and in the other empathy and coexistence. It is the colonial modernity of imperial Japan that Rabindranath condemns in his letter to the imperial poet Yone Noguchi and not the other. He opens up to us the paradox of modernity, the pitfalls of the project of self-making, of self-other relations, in the contexts of domination or empathetic coexistence, of friendship.

At this point a comparison with European modernity, which also sought to develop the new man and society, is called for. Rabindranath's self-creation is



radically different from that of Nietzsche, for example. Though both display the same intense concern for self-making, may even be called obsessed with the aesthetics of the self, and are both concerned with the theme of the surpassing the immediate, with the creation of a more than life size overman who constantly transgresses the boundaries of the now and the given, they play out this theme of human development in very different ways. It is here that we can lean on David McNally's insight in *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation*, where he discloses the anti-social character of Nietzsche's notions of the self, self-development or the new man – the result of human development from the stage of non-humans/animals, personified by Zarathustra:

For millennia, claims Nietzsche, human history has been a story of the victory of the weak over the strong, herd-instinct over individualism, slave morality over aristocracy, the subjugation of the rare and the exceptional to the vulgar and the common. But today...the development of hard, courageous individuals ready to accept the challenge of thinking against truth and morality requires reversing this state of affairs...and establishing a new race of masters. And Nietzsche does not shrink from spelling out the politics of his attack on slave morality, socialism, and democracy. 'We simply do not consider it desirable that a realm of justice and control should be established on earth...' He continues: 'We count ourselves among conquerors; we think about the necessity for new orders, also for a new slavery...''<sup>39</sup>

Nietzsche's stance, his recommendations and aspirations, are the exact antithesis of Rabindranath's.

The self and the subject that is sought to be developed by Rabindranath is also an idealized human persona, idealist in its epistemology, but it is not that of a master of the master race. Rabindranath's stance of idealism, his metaphysics, his type of social humanism, is never compromised by being conflated with the immediately actual, and thus as uncompromised metaphysics has a critical edge. Nietzsche, on the other hand, compromised his idealist vision and its potential for critique with a peculiarly 19<sup>th</sup> century European colonial empiricist twist by making his ideal man the archetypal colonial capitalist man. This is done by switching his position of an emancipatory creative modernism to one of colonial

modernity, from the creation of an individualizing self to rabid individualism and a racialized view of civilization with an extreme display of colonial discourse. It is this empiricist and bourgeois colonialist stance that made Nietzsche's superman, his philosophy of a surpassing self, so vulnerable to later Nazi and generally fascist appropriation. Compromise with an anti-social humanism, scientism and racist evolutionism exacted its toll. Instead of empathy and imaginative identification, hatred of the 'other(s)', whom he calls 'the herd', marks his typology of the surpassing man. His specialness turns out to be an elitism, a posturing, a personalized version of competitive capitalist ethos. Thus the loneliness of Zarathustra is a proclaimed badge of pride.<sup>40</sup> Zarathustra had traveled only in order to arrive to his singular, solitary mountain top, to be away from ordinary mortals. He had reached the stage of a reified identity – that of the colonial ideal white man, so to speak, who would never be able to open himself to other(s) influence. Rabindranath's *mahamanab* (the great human), on the other hand, is replete with potential because he is incomplete and seeks others for his completion in an ever extending gesture of embrace. He is in a process of constant becoming, his physiognomy is not fixed, he is never always already there. His transcendence is a constant unfolding which always moves beyond the immediate and the local. Unlike Zarathustra, he is never an achieved human type and he is not even temporarily compromised with the actual. In this formulation development is by nature 'human development' and it is an incomplete project to be carried out through time and social participation. Its pedagogy is never over nor fixed. If it were to be, the pedagogue would become a pedantic spewer of clichés, a fool that forgets that the educator too needs to be educated.

### **Conclusion**

It is obvious that so far I have presented an alternative vision of development. It is the human side of development, a contrast to the other, techno-romantic, profit developing acquisitive one. And I may be questioned by diehard realists, kings of numbers, about my utopianism, spun off from Rabindranath's own. I can only reply in Yeats' words – that 'in dreams begin responsibility'. Ultimately this utopia, this humanist universalism, will have to come to terms with the embodied, social dimension of the realization process. And that is where the test lies. The process of this human development will have to dismantle existing structures and ideologies, cultures and psychic reflexes of property and propriety, of habitual rendering of others into objects of service, of self-gratification. It will signal a moment when George W. Bush's advice to cheer up by going shopping

in the face of the disaster will be inconceivable. Rabindranath's vision and small practical experiments will have to fuse with Marx's vision, analysis and politics against capitalist alienation. Marx, in the *Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, spoke about social relations of accumulation and power which produce alienation in us – an alienation from one's own self, from others and from creations of one's own hands. This needs to be challenged with an anti-capitalist development with a 'new humanist' vision and deeds. For this 'new humanism' we can return to the theme of decolonization and the pedagogy of a decolonized self and society. Once more we can remember Frantz Fanon, who forged the idea of a substantive human subject in the fire of Algerian struggle for independence. About this 'new humanism' Ato Sekyi-Otu, in his *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, has something important to say, since it is the goal of decolonization: "Fanon...tells us that it is from the vortex of lived political experience that a novel idea of humanity would be refashioned: 'In the objectives and methods of the struggle...is prefigured this new humanism.'"<sup>41</sup>

Now, Rabindranath never forgot the fact of India's colonized condition, nor the deformation introduced by it. The struggle for decolonization that he undertook through his aesthetic and ethical pedagogy was political in a highly nuanced and social way. It seems unlikely that he would have rejected Fanon's 'new humanism', his "partisan universalism".<sup>42</sup>

## References

1. Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Perilous Passage: Mankind and the Global Ascendancy of Capital*. Delhi: Oxford University Press (2006). p. 4.
2. Manik Bandyopadhyay, "The Reptiles" (Sarisrip), in *Shreshtha Galpa*, Kolkata: Bengal Publishers Ltd. (2002).
3. Mahasweta Debi, "Salt" (Nun), in *Nairite Megh* (Clouds in the Southwest). Kolkata: Karuna Prakashani (1979).
4. See for example, for general critique, Samir Amin, *Unequal Developments: An Essay on Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press (1976); Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Political Economy of Underdevelopment*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press (1982). See also, Caren Grown and Gita Sen, *Development, Crisis and Alternative Vision: Third World Perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press (1987). For feminist critiques, see Swasti Mitter, *Common Fate, Common Bond*. London: Pluto Press (1986); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale.; Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books (1986).
5. See David McNally, *Another World is Possible*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring (2002); Malini

- Bhattacharya (ed), *Globalization*. New Delhi: Tulika (2004), in association with School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.
6. On agricultural crisis and food (in)security, see Utsa Patnaik, "The New Colonialism: Impact of Economic Reforms on Employment and Food Security in India", in *Ibid.*; "Global Capitalism, Deflation and Agrarian Crisis in Developing Countries", *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3, 1-2 (January & April 2003).
  7. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books (1968).
  8. On location and situation of knowledge production, see Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press (1996), p.11. On standpoint of knowledge and issues of ideology, see also Dorothy E. Smith, "Women's Experience as a Radical Critique of Sociology", in *Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1995).
  9. See Jorge Larraín, *Theories of Development: Capitalism, Colonialism and Dependency*. Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell (1989), and also, for the concepts 'the modern' and 'modernity' see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana Paperbacks (1983).
  10. Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Concordet and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press (2002)
  11. Sandra G. Harding (ed), *The "Racial" Economy of Science: Towards a Democratic Future*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1993); *Science and Social Inequality: Feminist and Postcolonial Issues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press (2006); Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1985); see also, *Freud, Race and Gender*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (1993); Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: Norton (1993).
  12. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal*. Edited by V. Marchetti and A. Salomoni. New York: Picador.
  13. For the concept of 'so-called primitive accumulation' see Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, chpt. 1. Trans. by S. Moore and E. Aveling. Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House (1955).
  14. For critical geography and urban studies, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernism: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell (1989), and Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso (2006). See also Bagchi, *Perilous Passage* and John S. Saul, *Development After Globalization: Theory and Practice for the Embattled South in a New Imperial Age*. Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective (2006).
  15. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press (2000).
  16. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital*. London: Verso (2003).

17. Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring (1998).
18. Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1998).
19. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Penguin (2006). See also Marshal Berman, *All That is Solid: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Penguin (1988).
20. For reports on farmers' suicides in India, see reports by Navdanya, <http://www.navdanya.org/news/04july15.htm> and P. Sainath, <http://www.indiatogether.org/2007/nov/psa-mids1.htm>.
21. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *op.cit.*
22. For conversion of water into a profitable commodity and dire consequences of this globally, see Maud Barlow, *Blue Gold: The Battle against Corporate Theft of the World's Water*. Toronto: Stoddart (2002).
23. For a useful study of migrant and undocumented workers, see Nandita Sharma, *Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of 'Migrant Workers' in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press (2006).
24. For a feminist critique of development and land related issues, an important contribution is that of Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1994).
25. 'Femocracy' is a term originated in Australia, source unknown, to describe mainstream liberal feminists, who have become administrators or bureaucrats of the state and other ruling institutions.
26. See for example Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York: Norton (2003)
27. Susan George, *How the Other Half Dies*. Harmondsworth: Penguin (1977); *A Fate Worse than Debt*. New York: Grove Press (1988).
28. Utsa Patnaik, *The Long Transition: Essays on Political Economy*. New Delhi: Tulika (1999); Madhura Swaminathan and V.K. Ramachandran (eds), *Agrarian Studies: Essays on Agrarian Relations in Less-Developed Countries*. London: Zed Books (2003).
29. C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. London: Oxford University Press (1962); *Democratic Theories: Essays in Retrieval*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1973).
30. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1977).
31. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press (1991), pp. 36-37.
32. Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man*. Boston: Beacon Press (1966), pp. 93-94.

33. Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*. New Delhi: Popular Prakashan (1973).
34. Tagore, quoted in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-minded Man*. New Delhi: Rupa (2000), p. 221.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 222
36. Bagchi, *Perilous Passage*, p. 48.
37. Kathleen M. O'Connell, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati (2002), p. 106. Though O'Connell does not speak in terms of a 'decolonizing' pedagogy, the book gives us an account of Rabindranath's pedagogical trajectory in a detailed and straightforward manner which speaks in terms of transcendence and humanism.
38. Tagore, *Religion of Man*, p. 18.
39. David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation*. Albany: State University of New York Press (2001), p. 23.
40. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollindale. Harmondsworth: Penguin (1961).
41. Sekyi-Otu, *op.cit.*, p. 21.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 118.