

# Tagore's views on the Religion of the Forest and relationship of Man and Nature

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## ABSTRACT

*RN Tagore is a well known name in the field of literature. His poems, novels short stories, critical essays and other writings have vastly enriched the cultural environment of India. This paper explores Tagore's ideas and views on the religion of forest. It also shows the relationship of man and nature. Rabindranath Tagore's love of nature was profound. For him the wide-open skies, spaciousness, and tranquility of the countryside symbolized freedom. Forests were central to Tagore's works and institution building as they have been for India's creative expressions through the centuries. The luxuriant woodlands surrounding Santiniketan, where Tagore lived and built a school and university system, were his inspiration. At Santiniketan classes were held outdoors, because he believed that "nature [is] the greatest of all teachers" and that "children should be surrounded with the things of nature which have their own educational value." Tagore believed that man should live in harmony with Nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements of the universe including plants and animals. From his writings about the relation of man to Nature, we discover that the experience of the world is not isolated from the experience of Nature. Along with her beauty and appeal, Nature's meaning and purpose were equally important to him where both were indispensable elements. Nature was not merely a showcase of objects but a habitation wherein man had a significant place. Nature without man would be a 'broken arch' and man without Nature a 'deserted land'.*

**Keywords:** Nature, Forest, Elements, Relation, expression.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a practitioner of psychological and social realism. He wrote number of essays in English and Bengali language. One of his famous essays is "The Religion of Forest". It depicts the authors view on the relationship of an individual being with that of that forest and nature. Tagore wrote in The Religion of the Forests, "The ideal of perfection preached by the forest dwellers of ancient India runs through the heart of our classical literature and still dominates our mind". The forests are sources of life and they are the storehouse of biodiversity. The biodiversity of the forest teaches us lessons of democracy, of leaving space for others while drawing sustenance from the common web of life. (In his essay Tapovan, Tagore writes: "Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fuelled culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization."

It is this "unity in diversity" that is the basis of both ecological sustainability and democracy. Diversity without unity becomes the source of conflict and contest. Uniformity without diversity becomes the ground for external control. This is true of both nature and culture.

In Tagore's writings, the forest was not just the source of knowledge and freedom it was the source of beauty and joy, of art and aesthetics, of harmony and perfection. It symbolized the universe. In The Religion of the Forest, the poet says our attitude of mind "guides our attempts to establish relations with the universe either by conquest or by union, either through the cultivation of power or through that of sympathy".

For Tagore, our relationship with the forest and nature is a relationship that allows us to experience our humanity. He says that Humans and nature are not a separate entity. We are one living in the same world. "In our dreams, nature stands in her own right, proving that she has her great function, to impart the peace of the eternal to human emotions".

This permanence, peace, and joy of living but by co-existence and cooperation are at the heart of a forest culture. The forest also teaches us to be contented, to enjoy the gifts of nature without exploitation and

accumulation. No species in the forest takes the share of other species to nutrients, water, and the sun's energy. Every species lives in mutual cooperation with others. This is what symbolizes the Earth Democracy. The conflict between greed and compassion, conquest and cooperation, violence and harmony that Tagore wrote about centuries ago are still relevant today. And it is the forest which can show us the way beyond this conflict by reconnecting to nature and finding sources for own freedom. For the powerful it means freedom from greed. For the excluded it means freedom from want, from hunger and thirst, from dispossession and disposability.

Harmony in diversity is the nature of the forest, whereas monotonous sameness is the nature of industrialism based on a mechanical worldview. This is what Tagore saw as the difference between the West and India. He said;

“The civilization of the West has in it the spirit of the machine which must move; and to that blind movement human lives are offered as fuel, keeping up the stream power” (The Spirit of Freedom). Globalization has spread the civilization based on power and greed and the spirit of the machine worldwide. And the global spread of the “passion of profit-making and the drunkenness of power” is spreading fear of freedoms.

A civilization based on power and greed is a civilization based on fear and violence.

Every forest area has become a war zone. Every tribal is defined as a “Maoist” by a militarized corporate state appropriating the land and natural resources of the tribes. And every defender of the rights of the forest and forest dwellers is being treated as a criminal.

If India is to survive ecologically and politically, if India has to stay democratic, if Indian citizen is to be guaranteed, we need to give up the road of conquest and destruction and take the road of union and conservation, we need to cultivate peace and compassion instead of power and violence.

We need to turn, to the forest as our perennial teachers of peace and freedom, of diversity and democracy.

Tagore started Santiniketan as a Tapovan – a forest school – both to take inspiration from Nature and to create an Indian Renaissance. He wrote, in *An Eastern University*: “The unfortunate people who have lost the harvest of their past have lost their present age. They have missed their seed for cultivation, and go begging for their bare livelihood. We must not imagine that we are one of those disinherited peoples of the world. The time has come for us to break open the treasure trove of our ancestors, and use it for our commerce of life. Let us, with its help, make our future our own, and not continue our existence as the eternal rag-pickers in other people's dustbins.”

Today, just as in Tagore's time, we need to turn to the forest for lessons in freedom and liberation. As Tagore wrote in *The Religion of the Forest*, the ideal of perfection preached by the forest dwellers of ancient India runs through the heart of our classical literature and influences our minds. The forests are sources of water and life. They are the storehouse of a biodiversity that can teach us the lessons of democracy; of leaving space for others while drawing sustenance from the common web of life. In his essay “Tapovan” (‘Forest of Purity’), Tagore writes: “Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fuelled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization.”

It is this ‘unity in diversity’ that is the basic thing of both ecological balance and democracy. If there is unity without diversity it becomes a source of conflict and contest. Similarly, Uniformity without diversity becomes the ground for external control. This is true of both Nature and culture. The forest is a unity in its diversity, and we are united with Nature through our relationship with the forest. In Tagore's works, the forest was not only the source of knowledge and freedom: it was the source of beauty and joy, of art and aesthetics, of harmony and perfection. It symbolized the universe. In *The Religion of the Forest*, the poet says that our attitude of mind “guides our attempts to establish relations with the universe either by conquest or by union, either through the cultivation of power or through that of sympathy”. The forest teaches us union and compassion.

Tagore was of the view that, our relationship with the forest and Nature is a relationship that allows us to experience love among human beings. He writes: “In all our dramas...Nature stands on her own right, proving that she has her great function, to impart the peace of the eternal to human emotions.” We can live

in peace and harmony only through co-operation and love, and not by the dominating nature of humans..” Harmony and unity in diversity is the nature of the forest, whereas being monotonous is the nature of industrialism based on a mechanical worldview. This is what Tagore saw as the difference between the West and India: “The civilization of the West has in it the spirit of the machine which must move; and to that blind movement human lives are offered as fuel.”

If India is to survive ecologically and politically, if India is to stay democratic, if each Indian citizen is to be guaranteed a livelihood, we need to give up the road of conquest and destruction and take the road of union and conservation; we need to cultivate peace and compassion instead of power and violence. We need to turn, once again, to the forest as our perennial teacher of peace and freedom, of diversity and democracy. This will be the greatest tribute to Tagore. India needs to do more than pay lip service to this great visionary. We need to follow his ideals.

In “The Religion of the Forest,” the poet says that our frame of mind “guides our attempts to establish relations with the universe either by conquest or by union, either through the cultivation of power or through that of sympathy.”The end of consumerism and accumulation is the beginning of the joy of living. The conflict between greed and compassion, conquest and cooperation, violence and harmony that Tagore wrote about continues today. And it is the forest that can show us the way beyond this conflict. Tagore said; “According to the true Indian view, our consciousness of the world, merely as the sum total of things that exist, and as governed by laws, is imperfect. But it is perfect when our consciousness realizes all things as spiritually one with it, and therefore capable of giving us joy. For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our own selves in it through expansion of sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.”

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