

Tagore and Roy: Two Cultural Polymaths in Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian*

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Abstract

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate Indian economist and a versatile genius in his book *The Argumentative Indian*(2005) exhibits myriad thematic discussions in the form of sixteen essays about India which are put under four Sections – Voice and Heterodoxy, Culture and Communication, Politics and Protest and Reason and Identity. And in the second section Amartya Sen presents Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Roy basically as cultural figures. This paper ,therefore, will deal with Prof. Sen's presentation of Tagore and Roy as cultural polymaths laced with Indian argumentativeness and heterodoxy or openness.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Polymaths, Film, Argumentativeness, Heterodoxy or Openness

In the midst of extensive discussion on Indian argumentative nature and openness of mind Prof. Sen's exclusive presentation of two renowned literary-cum-cultural figures, Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Roy, smacks of crucial significance. In this paper I would like to focus on how Prof. Sen through these two figures' orientations to diverse cultures tries to highlight India's heterodoxy or for that matter openness, thereby foregrounding them as two cultural polymaths.. I would like to begin with Tagore and then I would discuss Satyajit Roy.

Rabindranath Tagore, very often hailed as 'Visva Kobi'(world poet), is, in fact, a towering figure in the millennium old literature of Bengal, a distinguished part of India which is highly rich in culture. In *The Argumentative Indian* Prof. Sen presents Tagore not primarily as a literary figure; rather he focuses on Tagore's views about Indian life and culture. Tagore came from a notable Hindu family and for this reason ,perhaps, Anna Akhmatova, one of Tagore's later admirers, sees him to be one who takes his strength from Hinduism. However, this view is lop-sided and narrow. And this is because Tagore himself described his family, as noted by Sen, as the product of "a confluence of three cultures- Hindu, Mohammedan and British"(Sen 90). Sen further notes Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath's good command of Arabic and Persian. Tagore grew up in a family atmosphere where knowledge of Sanskrit and ancient Hindu texts were combined with an understanding of Islamic traditions as well as Persian literature. Tagore, to all intent and purposes, was a non-sectarian; his works- "some two hundred books -show the influence of different parts of the Indian cultural background as well as that of the rest of the world"(Sen 90). Tagore was in fact very proud for India's greatness in accepting people from the rest of the world for centuries after centuries. He was also greatly interested in diverse cultural values. And this is well reflected in his establishment of a typical educational institution by the name of Visva -Bharati that, apart from an institution of quality education, is a great cultural hub. According to Sen who himself self was a student at Visva -Bharati where was "something remarkable about the ease with which class discussion could move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western

thought, and then to the culture of China or Japan or elsewhere”(Sen115). He always believed in accepting different cultures in constructive ways:

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine. Therefore it hurts me deeply when the cry of rejection rings loud against the West in my country with the clamour that Western education can only injure us. (Sen 119).

Tagore, unlike Gandhi, though he respected him a lot and gave him the title ‘Mahatma’, for cultural issues was quite liberal and open-minded. Neither he, like Gandhi, encouraged people only to become preoccupied with indigenous culture or lifestyle nor he criticized the West as Gandhi did. In this respect it is worth-recalling that when in England Gandhi was asked about his views regarding the Western civilization, Gandhi replied, “It would be a good idea” (Sen 107).

In fact, Tagore was very willing to promote integrity and brotherhood through cultural activities among the Indians irrespective of their class, caste or creed. In this respect it is worth- recalling that during the time when the Britishers wanted to divide Bengal, it was Tagore who introduced ‘Rakhi Bandhan Utsav’ in which people from different religious background and culture would put a kind of thread on each others’ hand as a token of love and brotherhood. Interestingly the occasion is still celebrated today both in India and Bangladesh. In this respect Bangladesh deserves especial mention. It is a country where most of the people are Muslims. Nevertheless, the national anthem of Bangladesh is a song of Tagore. And this fact, no doubt, evinces Tagore’s popularity as well as his acceptance by both the Hindu and the Muslim.

In fact, People would love and still love Tagore too much. And in this respect I would like to highlight an interesting incident narrated in the Ananda Bazar Patrika, a leading Bengali news paper, by Subodh Sarkar, a notable Bengali poet, who a few years ago went to America and there two Americans asked him about Rabindranath Tagore. In reply, what Subodh said is quite interesting : “Why will I take the responsibility to make you understand Tagore? Did you make us understand Frost Whitman and Allen Ginsberg”(translated by me), (Sarkar XXCE 4)?This reply, no doubt, is from excessive affection towards Tagore.

Apart from his literary works another important creation that attracts the Bengali and the others alike is Tagore’s ‘ Rabindra Sangeeth’. Once in Santiniketan’s ‘Konark’ in the evening it was raining Tagore, Nandalal Bose,Pundit Vim Rao Shastri of Maharashtra were all immersed in the discussion of sangeeth. Another incident was in the West. At a garden in Cambridge in the afternoon of June, “Prof. Loyce Dickinson was there, Bertrand Russell was there and Tagore was in between, singing and the two so-called sahibs were rhythmically tossing”(Ananda Bazar Patrika XXCE 4).It is interesting to note that Amartya himself is also so much fond of Tagore’s sangeeth. And this is well echoed in the mouth of Konika Bandopadhyaya, Amartya’sMohordi, “You talk about Amartya’s scholarship. Do you know in Ashram how beautifully he used to sign Rabindra Sangeeth, sitting in the first row”(translated by me), (Ananda Bazar Patrika XXCE 2)?

Prof. Sen's another foregrounded figure is Satyajit Roy, the first Indian film maker to get the Academy Award in 1992, who was born in an intellectual and culturally enriched family in Calcutta. He had, indeed, a great legacy of cultural intellectualism, for his grandfather Upendra Kishor Roy was a distinguished writer, painter, a violin player and a composer. On the other hand, his father Sukumar Roy was an eminent poet who used to write poems, stories in 'Sandesh', a children magazine started by Upendra. Despite having been lost his father when he was barely three he was encouraged enough by his mother and thereupon built a great interest in many things related basically to cultural activities. While at school, he became a film fan, reading regularly movie trivia in magazines like Picturegoer and Photoplay. In addition, Western classical music, calligraphy and painting were his all time favourite. While he was leaving his study after B.A with a view to becoming a commercial artist, his mother Suprabha Roy insisted him to study at Tagore's Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan.

Initially Roy was unwilling to leave Calcutta but he had to succumb to his mother's persuasion and respect for Tagore and he finally joined Santiniketan in the year 1940. Roy's joining to Santiniketan was so much valuable for his life and he praised it, as quoted by Sen, in his words about Santiniketan:

I consider the three years I spent in Santiniketan as the most fruitful of my life . . . Santiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendours of India and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. Santiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am (Sen 115).

The above words evince that Roy was so much fascinated by Western art and before coming to Santiniketan he was lacking in adequate knowledge in the Eastern or more precisely Indian culture. And it is Tagore's Santiniketan that added this missing spirit to him and it continued till the end of his life. In addition, Tagore's emphasis on diverse cultural orientations got well incorporated into him. Here it is interesting to note that during Satyajit's studentship Amartya, though then a ten year junior to him, was himself a student there and he had a curiosity and respect for Roy. In an interview in Ananda Bazar Patrika, a leading Bengali daily with his trademark politeness Prof. Sen recalls : "Then I knew him primarily as Sukumar Roy's son- that great Sukumar Roy. From here and there I used to listen this boy's talent"(translated by me),(Bhattacharya XXCE 1). Therefore , it is quite natural that in *The Argumentative Indian* he has especially focused on Satyajit Roy.

In the sixth essay, 'Our Culture There Culture' in *The Argumentative Indian* Prof. Sen exclusively talks about Satyajit Roy and his films and writings and in course of his discussion Prof. Sen brings to the fore three general themes of all cultures and their interconnectedness. According to Prof. Sen they are the importance of distinctions between different local cultures and their respective individualities, the necessity to understand the deeply heterogeneous character of each local culture and the great need for intercultural communication while recognising the difficulties of such intercourses. And it is interesting to note that Roy was as if quite aware of that. And that is why, while Roy was focusing on local culture, he at the same time found no cause to keep the door shut to the outside world. Rather he was, as noted by Prof. Sen, "always willing to enjoy and learn from ideas, art forms and life styles from anywhere within India or abroad"(Sen 121).

Prof. Sen presents how Satyajit Roy insists on retaining the real cultural features of the society he portrays in his films and how his view of India and Bengal is tinged with immense heterodoxy or openness at every level. The native culture emphasized by Ray is simultaneously tradition bound and heterogeneous in India. Therefore, according to Sen, this recognition of heterogeneity makes Roy's stance clear and he is found to have decorated with a wisdom of 'critical openness' including the valuing of a dynamic, adaptable world. The acknowledgement and emphasis on the culture of Roy's people in the film prove his interest in ideas and practices originating elsewhere: "Our culture can draw on their culture as well as their culture can draw on us"(Sen129). Roy's heterodoxy or openness is, however, not new; rather it is also an Indian tradition. To elucidate this Sen presents the example of matters of day-to-day living. The fact that chili, basic ingredient of Indian cooking was actually brought to India by the Portuguese. Tandoori came from the Middle East to India and it is from India it went to Britain to become a staple diet. Sen's observation is quite right and this cultural influence as a two way process is well captured by Edward Said who in his *Culture and Imperialism* giving example of India with Britain and Algeria with France says, "Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things cultures actually assume more foreign elements, alterities, differences than they consciously exclude"(Said 15).

Throughout the discussion we see Sen presents both Tagore and Roy to be quite liberal or unallergic regarding different cultures. And Roy like Tagore believed in cultural 'give and take policy'. Now the question arises- did the inclination towards other cultures affect Roy's Indianness? Sen notes that though Ray took inspiration from the rest of the world, he never fashioned his works to cater to what the West expects from India. For example, Ray did not hesitate to indicate how strongly PatherPanchali - the profound movie that immediately made him a world famous film-maker -was influenced by Vittorio Desica's 'Bicycles. Despite this influence Pather Panchali is quintessentially an Indian film, both in subject matter and in the style of presentation and yet a major inspiration for its exactly organization came directly from an Italian film. However, the influence did not make Pather Panchali anything other than an Indian film, it simply helped it to become a great Indian film, thereby reminding us of what Bhaba says in *The Location of Culture*, "It effectively displays the separation, makes it more visible"(Bhaba 83)

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