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ADDRESS BY

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# Education and the Identity of Man

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It is needless to say that there are many branches of education. Similarly, Man has not just one identity, but many. Of these some identities stick to him since birth. For instance, from the moment of his birth, a man in our country is a Bengali or an Oriya or an Assamese or a Bihari or a Gujrati or a Marathi of something else. And it is again by birth that he is a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Sikh or a Christian. These are inborn identities. But our man might also have other identities which have not been given to him by birth, but which he has had to earn. Thus, from the school, college and university in which he has studied and spent years of his life, he gains additional identities from being the student of these institutions. His profession gives him another identity — perhaps as a merchant, or as a lawyer, or as a teacher, or as a doctor or as a journalist or as a sculptor or as something different from all these.

To all these many identities of which we have spoken, we may add others. But it is unnecessary. Because we know that all these are only partial and fragmentary identities, they do not tell us about Man's complete and ultimate identity, about what he truly is. What is then his true identity? We shall give the answer a little later, before that let me tell you an anecdote. The celebrated writer Annadashankar Ray, at the beginning of his career as a civilian, had once gone to Shantiniketan. He told Rabindranath Tagore that he had chosen Bengal as his workplace. He thought that the poet would be pleased to hear this. But the poet was not pleased. He remarked, "Why did you choose Bengal? I would have chosen UP". UP, that is, what we now call Uttar Pradesh, and what used to be then referred to as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh.



Tagore's comment on choosing UP might shock many. One might wonder why did Tagore say such a thing? Was he anguished with Bengal and did his remark reveal such suffering? I do not think that was the case though. It is unlikely that he should have felt such despair or distress against the part of the country where he was born, from whose people, whose nature and whose cultural landscape he had breathed the inspiration for his creative life, his vitality and the will of his creation. His songs, his poetry and indeed all his creation exhibited a passionate love for the province that had given him birth. Of course he had protested against stagnant traditions and had criticized the tide of sterile contemporary social belief. But this does not mean that he had turned his face against Bengal. What then is the true significance of his remark?

To understand the significance, we must remember that a little more than a century ago, it was in this eastern part of India that a reawakening of thought and consciousness was born which, in spite of many limitations, we proudly call the Bengal Renaissance. And this renaissance is deeply related to Tagore's worldview. The reawakening of the mind insisted that Man must not live like a frog in a well, his address was not circumscribed by narrow frontiers, but was the vast expanse of the free cosmos, indeed it was the universe itself. Whatever fragmented identity is given to him by his community, language, region, religion, caste or territory, the ultimate identity of a man is above all this — it is his identity that He is Man. Tagore knew that partial identities are not false and he loved the Bengal where he was born. And yet he could also transcend his identity as a Bengali to affirm his identity as an Indian. So he could easily say, "I would have chosen UP".

This identity as an Indian is articulated by Gora, the hero of his novel bearing the same name. Towards the end of the work Gora says, "Today I am an Indian. I have no more within me the conflicts of the Hindu, Muslim or Christian societies. Today the

caste of all Indians is my caste, the food of all is my food.” We realize that what Gora had spoken is the word of Tagore himself, a cry from the depths of his heart. We also know that once he had transcended his identity as a Bengali, even the identity of an Indian would not satisfy him, he needs that expansive identity which transcends all. We realize that once he desires that supreme and all-encompassing personality, he shall seek it and he shall find it. We can hear his voice:

“সব ঠাই মোর ঘর আছে, আমি সেই ঘর মরি খুঁজিয়া;  
দেশে দেশে মোর দেশ আছে, আমি সেই দেশ লব যুকিয়া।”

We understand his need, his relentless and passionate need as an artist, as a seer, and above all as a rational man, to make a journey toward to transcend toward that final identity which is the essence of our existence.

Tagore does not reject his identities either as a Bengali or as an Indian, he natures them rather fondly, yet at the same time he transcends into a world citizen, a cosmopolite, a man whose final identity is that he is Man. One who can embrace this truth faces no conflict between his final identity and his partial and fragmentary ones.

Let me now say that like our identities as Bengali, or as a Hindu, Muslim or Christian, this identity as Man is also given to us by birth. Yet we sometimes forget this ultimate identity. We sometimes forget that we are kin to those that live in other lands, speak in other tongues, pray in other faiths or have a different colour of the skin or culture of the mind. We forget that we are their blood-kin, that we belong to one human family, that we are members of one human race. We cloak ourselves in our little identities, we cover our humanity by the thin layers of difference. All who lie outside our constructed frontiers, we call them our enemy.

Not that we along think and act like this, throughout the world such conflicts appear from time to time. The little, partial and fragmentary identities become the exclusive markers of who we are. Under their dark shadow are eclipsed the sign of our all-encompassing humanity, our final and highest and most exalted identity as Man. Then there are riots, then there are wars, on the basis of religion, on the basis of caste, on the basis of territory. History is witness to that. Man, the wisest of creation, still contains within himself the nature of that frog in the well. From his hiding place in the dark well, he was let loose on the free and sunlit fields. Great artists, saints and thinkers told him that he was not a frog but a man. His address was the universe. Yet he forgets it soon and he loses his address as a citizen of the world. He regresses, he leaves the open field for the soggy and dark well from where he came.

What we have called a well, we may also call a narrow lane. When someone goes out for work during a riot, his family becomes anxious for him. They wait in fear. They wait for the hour when he will return from the outside world to his narrow lane and familiar house. He who had stepped on to the vastness of the universe, he who was given the mark of supreme humanity, comes back to his narrow lane. Not the sunlit universe, not the infinite, eternal and free universe, but the narrow lane and the walls of his house become his safest address. What greater misfortune than this can befall man?

It is because such misfortunes strike us again and again that we must again and again turn to the great teachers. We must return to visionary poets, to creators, to philosophers, to those who see the shining mark of our supreme and highest identity as Man. They are our greatest teachers, for when we are lost and ask which way we shall go, they show us the path. But, I ask, do we really go to them, follow them? Do we follow those that bear witness to the light?



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