

**Inaugural address of Shri Pranab Mukherjee, H'ble Finance Minister,  
on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2011  
at the Tagore International Conference on  
“Tagore’s Vision of the Contemporary World”  
at Azad Bhawan, ICCR**

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am happy to be here today at the inaugural session of this event to commemorate the 150th Birth Anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Let me start by commending the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in organizing this International Tagore Conference to honour Gurudev’s literary and intellectual contributions to our culture and society and indeed to the world at large. The theme of this conference “Tagore’s Vision of Contemporary World” is a relevant one. His ideas and worldview is as relevant in today’s world as it was when they were articulated through his work.

2. The celebrations marking his 150th birth anniversary have renewed our engagement with the phenomenal quantity and quality of Rabindranath Tagore’s work in the service of our society. It has rekindled the interest of today’s generation in this apostle of humanism, peace and human solidarity. It has presented an opportunity to the people in different parts of the world to understand and appreciate the life and works of Gurudev and his contribution of humanity.

3. Rabindranath Tagore received worldwide acclaim for his literary works. But he was a multi-faceted genius who made important and pioneering contributions to different facets of Indian culture. He was a poet, an author, a composer, a superb visual artist and a philosopher. He left behind a legacy of words and music, of art and thought that will be cherished for a long time to come.

4. A hundred and fifty years after his birth, and seventy years after his demise in 1941, Tagore remains a radiant presence in our lives. This abiding interest in Tagore has at its source his own passionate involvement in the world around him. He fashioned a universal, inclusive vision of solidarity and harmony, with the human person at its centre. It is thus that he has something to say to each one of us irrespective of our age and social context.

5. Tagore championed for India’s and indeed for the world at large to seek and attain global unity. He stood for shunning the politics of nationalism, which violates an individual’s inherent bond with each other by generating hatred between nations and locking each in a separate geographical cage. This notion was the basis of his most celebrated and world-wide acclaimed novel, ‘*Ghare Baire*’, or ‘Home and the World.’ The main character of the novel Nikhil articulates this view with deep conviction, so much so that one can see Gurudev speaking, “I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, and reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity.... Now, when in the present time of political unrest the children of the same great India cry for rejection of the West I feel hurt....

We must discover the most profound unity, the spiritual unity between the different races. We must go deeper down to the spirit of man and find out the great bond of unity, which is to be found in all human races.... Man is not to fight with other human races, other human individuals, but his work is to bring about reconciliation and peace and restore the bonds of friendship and love.”

6. Let us not forget that just three years before he wrote ‘Gitanjali in 1912, he had written the famous novel ‘Gora’ which gives a most vivid account of the most anguished debates that were raging within the Hindu society at the beginning of the 20th century. Gora in his journey from communalism, sectarianism, religious conservatism to the ideals of humanism says at the end of the novel, “For me there is nothing bigger than my country- I am not beyond the pain and happiness, knowledge and ignorance of the total India. In me exists both Hindu and Muslim ---- All the castes of India are my caste.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. This is India’s all-embracing age old vision of human unity, the oneness of human race. It reaches out to the entire world and rejects all kinds of narrow nationalism. Tagore pointed out that we may have missed the character of India as one related to the world. India has always sought to find the oneness of existence through the multifariousness of the universe. Tagore poses the idea that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship. Freedom and unity of mankind are the two voices of Tagore’s thinking that are the two very important aspects of India’s civilizational values.

8. In fact, his nationalistic zeal called for the acceptance of a radical social programme as described in his essay ‘*Byadhi o Pratikar*’ (Malady and Cure) written in 1907 against the divisive forces of caste, creed, poverty, and alienation between the elite and the masses. He sought to move towards a more abiding freedom than what the political movement could attain. At the same time, his approach to nation and nationalism was very different. He remained anti-imperialist all through his life, but went against any kind of violent or narrow nationalism. He spoke about a world-embracing and inclusive nationalism, which became the basis of Pt. Nehru’s vision of India’s future as a liberal secular democracy. The fact that independent India chose, for good reasons, to be a part of the Commonwealth of Nations with its erstwhile colonial masters was a reflection of such thinking.

9. Gurudev Tagore was spiritually close to Mahatma Gandhi and both affirmed the supreme necessity of a moral regeneration as a preparation for the political ends. As a result, both Tagore and Gandhi became unpopular when they opposed extremism. Gandhi in Transvaal when he opposed extremism of his political associates and later in India on several occasions in the course of the struggle for freedom. Tagore was criticised by a large sections of people in Bengal for his plea for restraint in politics. In fact, both were against ethnocentric nationalism or exclusive and violent nationalism. Gandhi said, ‘Indian nationalism is not exclusive,’ it is ‘humanitarian’ and sought to carry on the mission of brotherhood of men. Similarly, Tagore’s universal nationalism is an inclusive plural concept of a nation which goes beyond the idea of exclusive nationalism and where the whole earth is a family. Though Tagore differed from Gandhi on some issues,

both placed truth above everything and thus had the courage and spirit of speaking alone and walking alone.

10. Tagore was firm in his opinion that for the sake of our humanity, for the full growth of our soul, we must turn our mind towards the ideal of the spiritual unity of mankind. This unity gives the human being the message of truth. While talking with Einstein Tagore said, '*when our universe is in harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty*'. In the meditative Upanishadic times, we are told, that this earth is a human family (*vasudhaiva kutumbukam*) and the divine spark is the guiding principle and we are the divine spark. This concept of the world as a family is also different from the present creation of the western civilization of a global order or a global village, a point in the relentless process of westernization of the world.

11. The idea of India, as Tagore describes in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize, which he received after eight years of its declaration in 1921, is the spirit of unity of all races. By quoting Upanishad he gave his message, which he said was the message of the East to the West:

“He who sees all beings in his self, and his self in all the beings, does not hate any one, and knows the truth”

12. In 1922 in Pune in the Kirlosker Theatre he gave a lecture on Indian Renaissance, elaborating this idea. He said, “A man who is alone or one is meaningless because there is no unity in one. The one with many is truly one because in that one, one can see the unity and this unity gives the message of truth.”

This thought resonates in '*shikkhar milan*', the Bengali version of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In Beijing, in 1924, Tagore asserted this very view and said, “The impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of the spirit in man is modern. I am on its side, for I am modern.”

This is Tagore's vision of the contemporary world.

13. Let me conclude with another thought from our poet-philosopher Tagore. He said 'where knowledge is free' and 'where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way in the dreary desert sand of dead habit', there and then the worldly self is united with the universal self to create a world of love, peace and prosperity. I, for one, firmly believe that his message and ideals have more significance today than ever.

14. I wish you all constructive and meaningful deliberations in this conference and look forward to your thinking and conclusions on Gurudev's relevance to the contemporary world.

Thank you.