

International Conference on Tagore's Vision of the Contemporary World
Inaugural session on 10th October, 2011
Presidential Address by Dr. Karan Singh, President, ICCR

Only rarely has an individual been endowed with so many gifts - a lover of beauty, a musician, a poet par excellence, a novelist, a dramatist, a creative thinker, a man who despite several personal tragedies was able, like Lord Shiva, to absorb the poison and convert it into the ambrosia of love and the apotheosis of beauty. Such a man was Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

We have just heard an insightful address from Shri Pranab Mukherji. While elucidating the theme of the conference he rightly pointed how Tagore advocated that India's and the world's objective should be to attain global unity and shun the politics of petty nationalism, which violates man's inherent bond by generating hatred between nations and locking each in a separate geographical cage. It was because of Tagore's antipathy towards violence that he was so much against an ideology based on the concept of a nation-state which does not hesitate to kill in the name of national sovereignty. Rather, he was dedicated to a universal humanism. This is the most important challenge which the contemporary world is facing today, when the nation-state is sandwiched between trans-national structures, such as the European Union, and sub-national regional aspirations. Perhaps the most significant way to contain violence is the displacement of the subconscious patterns of violence by introducing the time-tested universal laws of ethics, love and humanity, and by introducing spiritual humanism in our educational system.

An artist of genius, Rabindranath Tagore gave humanity his vision of one world. He used his great gifts of imagination and art for fostering faith in the unity of man and forging bonds of kinship with others. Today Tagore's ideas of universal humanism can be seen resonating in the contemporary world. His belief in the spiritual unity of the East and West was a powerful message of redemption for a society beset by greed, callousness and irreverence. He believed in the energy and discipline of the West and had a vision of West and East meeting in cooperation. He elaborated this vision in a Bengali essay 'Bangalir asha aur nairashya' well before his visit to England and said, "The European idea in which freedom predominates, and the Indian idea in which welfare predominates; the profound thought of the Eastern countries and the active thought of the Western countries; European acquisitiveness and Indian conservatism; the imagination of the Eastern countries and the practical intelligence of the West - what a full character will be formed from a synthesis between these two."

On another occasion, Tagore said in his forceful voice.

"One day, the Western and Eastern man shall combine to support each others' strength, and supply each other's deficiencies. By uniting the materialism of the West with the spiritualism of East I believe much can be accomplished." But at the same time he was very candid in stressing that the meeting of East and West will succeed only when inner harmony between the two is achieved. This idea of unity is vividly described in his vision, about which he wrote to his son Rathindranath;

"I want to make Shantiniketan the connecting thread between India and the world. The days of petty nationalism are numbered - let the first step towards universal union occur in the

fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography."

Tagore had not so much a message to deliver as a vision to set forth, and that vision was man's growth in the Infinite. Gurudev elucidates his conception of the Infinite in 'The Religion of Man'. 'The Infinite', he says, 'is the unity which transcends the many through which it expresses itself.' He adds that 'in order to have a clear vision of truth, one should not allow one's perception to become a prisoner of innumerable fragmentary objects, but learn to visualize the one in many, and to realize that all events of life are held together by the power of truth, and the same power holds all the objects together.'

This world being proof of the creative activity of the Infinite should not be rejected out of hand. It is the Infinite that has expressed itself through the finite world. We, therefore, stand in a relationship of joy and love with this world. His vision of the contemporary world, was to bring harmony between the Infinite, man and the world. This was Tagore's intense concern - concern for the relationship between the unity of the universe and the uniqueness of man. This is his deepest message to mankind which has made him so relevant to people of the new millennium, highlighting important issues of the contemporary world such as abandoning narrow nationalism, paving the way for multiculturalism and connecting to ecological conservation.

I am sure this international conference will bring once again to the collective consciousness of a new generation of the greatness of a poet who was amazing in his versatility and universal in his integrated vision of life. As he writes in a letter to the Dutch poet Frederick Von Eeden, "The superconscious self of mine which has its expression in beauty, is beyond my control." As we hurtle into an uncertain future astride the irreversible arrow of time, Tagore's message can give us a sense of meaning and a perception of timeless beauty to inspire us on our journey. He was truly the prophet of the triune concept of *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* - Truth, Auspiciousness and Beauty.