



Humanism in Tagore's *A Half-acre of Land*

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore is a priest of humanism and in his extensive philanthropic activities it is clearly revealed. Tagore as zamindar executed his responsibility of managing and administering the estates he had acquired from his predecessors. His benevolent activities like promoting education among the illiterate ryots, introducing health facilities in his estates, running small banks in the villages to arrange loans for the poor farmers and many such generous steps established him as an unconventional and unprecedented zamindar. He saw that his contemporary zamindars were blood-sucking leeches and their greed for exploiting the poor ryots who honoured land as mother-image knew no bounds. In the timeless poem, 'A Half-acre of Land', Tagore's satirical treatment of an all-devouring zamindar and his humane representation of a poor farmer, Upen, realistically depicts the plights of the helpless ryots during Tagore's times.

Key Words : zamindar, ryots, land, humanism, education

Tagore as zamindar is an admirable and incomparable exception. Over many decades, he had experienced the pennilessness, curses of illiteracy, limitless exploitation, and sense of dispossession in the life of the *ryots*. But what made him different from other tyrannical zamindars was that he had placed himself in the position of a *ryot* and tried to feel the pains of their life as a sensitive and responsible person. As a humanitarian, he worked hard in his own way for the social and economic uplift of the *ryots*. Unequal distribution of wealth in the country, the greed for more affluent life by the pleasure-loving zamindars, and many-divisions in the society had aggravated the difficulties of the *ryots*, and Tagore, being a zamindar, had felt immense shame. Tagore wrote in the introduction to the book, *Ryoter Katha* (1920-1926) that zamindars were the bloodsucking parasites, they were like leeches feeding off the hard-working *ryots*. Tagore was successful to earn his livelihood from the royalty of his books and refused to use the money extorted from the *ryots*. The Tagore estates were spread over Birahiimpur pargana of undivided Nadia (now Silaidaha of Kustia), Yusufsahi pargana of Pabna (now Sajadpur), kaligram pargana of Rajsahi (now Patisar of Naongan), Orissa and Bihar. There were two sides of his character. Tagore who delivered a speech on 'Religion of Man' in Oxford, was sincerely engaged in potato cultivation on the bank of the river, Padma. On the one hand he strongly protested the Hijli killing, on the other hand, he started a sugarcane factory in Kustia. He had philosophical discussions about the eternal beauty with Bernard Shaw, Romain Rolland, and the same man spent hours in the huts of Kafiluddin Ahmed, Jalaluddin Sekh discussing about how to get rid of the pests and diseases of paddy fields. In 1890, when Tagore was only 29 years old, he was entrusted with the responsibilities of the estates by his father, Debendranath Tagore. When he reached the estates, the *ryots* started to believe that the new zamindar would exploit them financially and socially like other unscrupulous and oppressive zamindars. The ravenous zamindars used to demand unauthorized cesses from the *ryots* in unmerciful manner. But to their dismay they experienced something extraordinary. The new zamindar was very much down to earth and made his *ryots* believe that he was one of them. In a letter to his niece, Indira Devi, he wrote on 11 May, 1983, that he felt pity for the poorest *ryots* because they were as helpless as children. He also wrote that in a healthy body blood flows through all the veins, if it is transmitted to the mouth only, it is a bad sign of a serious disease.

His father, Debendranath Tagore, advised him to live in the remote part of the rural East Bengal. The idea of living in the interior, crisscrossed by so many rivers, rivulets, creeks, marshes and swamps, requiring burges, boats, ferries to travel from one place to another did not primarily appeal to him. But the challenges in the newly appointed tasks enriched and endowed him with an uncommon perception, kindhearted outlook and broadmindedness marked by



humanism and charitable attitude. Tagore as zamindar between 1890 and 1904 and between 1905 and 1940 was not the same person. His humanism for the poor *ryots* was eloquently expressed in a speech which he had delivered at Pabna as a President of the Bengal Provincial Congress in 1908. He earnestly requested the landlords to empower the helpless and agonized *ryots* so that they could save themselves from the clutches of the landlords and others wanting to exploit them. If they were not made independent, no law of the land or government would save them from perpetual exploitation. Some critics are of the opinion that Tagore's tour to Russia helped him grow as a more sensible human being during his expansive travel in the rural areas. He wrote in a letter from Mosco on 20th September, 1930, that most of the people in the country lived on the leftover things by the rich. They did not have the opportunity to grow like civilized persons. They served the rich with great care, but they remained half-fed, half-clad, and under the distress of illiteracy. They were the pillars to the society, they held the light of civilization on their heads as the lampstands do, but they remained under darkness.

Tagore's poem, 'A Half-acre of Land' realistically depicts the homelessness of a farmer whose land had been illegally and unlawfully grabbed by a voluptuous zamindar. A poor farmer in a village had a little plot of land and the local zamindar asked the farmer, Upen, to sell the plot of land to him as he was building a big garden and to give it a good look he demanded the land. As this plot of land was like a mother to Upen and as he had nowhere to go, he begged Zamindar for mercy and requested him to give up the idea of grabbing the land. Upen also told him pitifully that he had been cultivating the land for seven generations and he could not sell it on the ground of poverty. He had emotional and sentimental attachment with the land. The cunning zamindar kept mum for a while and told 'smiling cruelly,' 'All right, we'll see.'(12)

The strength of a zamindar was immense. Under a false court decree Upen was forced to handover the ancestral land to the zamindar and he had to wander about the world being a disciple of a medicant for fifteen years. But wherever he went and whatever he saw, the memories of the small plot of land haunted him everywhere. An eternal philosophy of life dawned on him :

For those want most, alas, who already have plenty:

The rich zamindar steals the beggar-man's property. (Radice 15-16)

When Upen was away, the image of his motherland imprinted in his memory tore him day and night:

I bow, I bow to my beautiful motherland Bengal!

To your river-banks, to your winds that cool and console:

Your plains, whose dust the sky bends down to kiss;

Your shrouded villages, that are nests of shade and peace;

Your leafy mango-woods, where the herd boys play;

Your deep ponds, loving and cool as the midnight sky;

Your sweet-hearted women returning home with water;

I tremble in my soul and weep when I call you Mother. (Radice 25-32)

In 1881 Tagore wrote, 'This Bengal sky full of light, this south breeze, this flow of the river, this right royal laziness, this broad leisure stretching from horizon to horizon and from green earth to blue sky, all these were to me as food and drink to the hungry and thirsty. Here it felt indeed like a home, and in these I recognized the ministrations of a Mother'(Radice 134). City-based Tagore was attracted by the stupendous beauty of the rural East Bengal and he was a worshipper of Nature.

Therefore, Upen finally reached home leaving the 'pottery,' 'festival carriage,' 'temple,' 'market place,' and 'granary' behind. 'The fact that asceticism does not bring peace to Upen's heart shows Tagore's distrust of those forms of religion that seek to separate God from the world.'(Radice 134)

Returning home he saw the land in a new look and all signs of poverty were vanished. He scolded the land under the stress of despair:

But shame on you, shame on you, shameless, fallen half-acre!

What mother gives herself freely to a chance seducer?

Do you not remember the days when you nursed me humbly

With fruits and herbs and flowers held in your sari?

For whom are these lavish garments, these languorous airs?

These coloured leaves stiched in your sari, this head of flowers?

For you I have wondered, homeless, world-weary, pining,

Whereas you, you witch, have sat here idling and laughing. (Radice 37-44)



He accused the Nature-mother that she had changed completely in the hands of a wealthy zamindar and she who was like a 'goddess' to Upen had been a 'servant' to zamindar. 'The half-acre of land, personified as a mother when she belonged to Upen and as a fallen or kept woman (*kulata*, 1.37) after the landlord has turned her into a garden, shows, as in 'Broken Song,' two kinds of human relationship. One, based on love....The other is an unequal relationship...in which woman tries to mitigate her state of bondage 'by rendering herself and her home a luxury to man.'"(Radice 134)

The feeling of homecoming made him overjoyed and he sat under a mango tree beside the wall. Sitting under the cool shade of the mango tree, he reminisced the childhood memories about what he used to do under this tree when he was a boy:

How after a storm that had kept me awake one night
I had dashed out at dawn to gather all the fallen fruit;
Memories of playing truant in the sweet, still noon –
Alas to think those days can never return. (Radice 53-56)

All on a sudden there was a gust of wind and he found two mangoes fallen on the ground beside him. He took the mangoes out of reverence for the mother land. But the guard to the garden suddenly appeared 'like a messenger of death' and considering Upen a thief he caught him red handed. The guard led Upen to the landlord when the landlord was fishing 'with his retainers.' Tagore writes :

When he heard what had happened he roared, 'I'll kill him.'

In each vile thing he said his retainers exceeded him. (Radice 67-68)

Finally, Upen was established as a thief ironically and the powerful zamindar who forcefully made Upen lonely and homeless remained a gentleman in the society.

Tagore driven by his firsthand experiences of the pathetic conditions of the poor *ryots* composes this poem as a mark of his humanism and generosity. Tagore invested the huge amount of Nobel prize money which he had received in 1913 in the Patisar Krishi Bank for the benefit of the poor *ryots* under his zamindari. When he was questioned about this decision, he told that along with his family members, his *ryots* had also no less right to it. L.S.S. O'Malley wrote in Rajshahi District Gazetteer about Tagore's philanthropic activities as zamindar :

It must not be imagined that a powerful landlord is always oppressive and uncharitable. A striking instance to the contrary is given in the Settlement Officer's account of the estate of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet, whose fame is worldwide. It is clear that to poetical genius he adds practical and beneficial ideas of estate management, which should be an example to the local Zemindars.

A very favourable example of estate government is shown in the property of the poet, Sir Rabindranath Tagore. The proprietors brook no rivals. Subinfeudation within the estate is forbidden, raiyats are not allowed to sublet on pain of ejection. There are three divisions of the estate, each under a Sub-manager with a staff of tahasildars, whose accounts are strictly supervised. Half of the Dakhilas are checked by an officer of the head office. Employees are expected to deal fairly with the raiyats and unpopularity earns dismissal. Registration of transfer is granted on a fixed fee, but is refused in the case of an undesirable transferee. Remissions of rent are granted when inability to pay is proved. In 1312 it is said that the amount remitted was Rs. 57,595. There are Lower Primary Schools in each division, and at Patisar, the centre of management, there is a High English School with 250 students and a charitable dispensary. These are maintained out of a fund to which the estate contributes annually Rs. 1250 and the raiyats 6 pies to rupee in their rent. There is an annual grant of Rs. 240 for the relief of the cripples and the blind. An agricultural bank advances loans to raiyats at 12 percent per annum. The depositors are chiefly Calcutta friends of the poet, who get interest at 7 percent. The bank has about Rs. 90,000 invested in loans. (qtd. in Chowdhury 44-45)

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