

Two Friends : Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes

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A great friendship is a pleasure to recall, and the editor has invited me to remember one I knew and to try to perceive and tell of its meaning for the two friends, for India and for a wider world. The two men met when Geddes, having passed through Suez on his sixtieth birthday (October, 1914) had entered a new field in his planning cities and universities in India. To his regret Geddes was denied the opportunity of replanning villages and rural regions, as he had wished. In this centenary year [1961] Tagore's life is fresh in the minds of his fellow countrymen. It may help understanding of the friendship if Geddes' work and aims, first in Scotland, then in India.

Together, Patrick Geddes and his wife Anna spent the first ten years of their married life in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town, among a mixed community of working folk: respectable artisans, rough but decent labourers and also the demoralised and the 'down and out', while nearby the barracks in the Castle, spread its fringe of 'pubs' and prostitution. The folk dwelt packed into small crowded flats of one to three or four rooms, opening off a multi - storeyed common stair. As a boy thirty years later, I had said of the Old Town's poverty, suffering smells and squalor, "This is almost more than I can bear". I still remember the look on my mother's face as she answered quietly, "This is nothing to what we knew!" And when my children say much the same to me I can recall her answer and echo it to them: though all too slowly, improvements have been going on, partly due to the personal efforts of my parents together. What was distinctive in this was that they dwelt and worked among those they wished to help, to teach, and to learn from. With their own small capital for a start, they bought historic dwellings and also ancient ruins which they cleared to make courtyards letting in a glimpse of the sun, where children could play and old folks rest, and graced with a tree and a few flowers, green and bright against the dark, high tenement walls. They lost their capital, of course. But when in later life Geddes replanned old cities with citizens' money, with 'public funds' in Scotland and then in India he remembered that in the end "it [is] always the poor who pays". No home was ever pulled down without good cause, unless it could be replaced by a better one. No neighbourhood, no community, should ever be uprooted unless transplantation will renew its life. With the ruins of the past to clear away like rubbish, there is always an element of half-forgotten, half buried heritage to conserve, respect and cherish.

It was at the invitation of a former Secretary of State for Scotland, who became Governor of Madras as Lord Pentland, that Geddes came to India, And it was in this respect for men, women and children as fellow-human beings, and as one another's neighbours that Geddes looked about him, surveyed and set to work. He moved afoot through each neighbourhood in every city, from the paras of Untouchables to those of the caste artisans and craftsmen, merchants, gentlefolk and groups of every class, caste or religion.

For many years we had enjoyed Indian friends. I can just remember Swami Vivekananda in Paris in 1900. And we welcomed lovable student friends to Edinburgh, Boses and Sircars, with whose parents my own were some day to stay.

Wide reader, Geddes had long studied the philosophy, arts and architecture of India with the mingling of sympathetic respect and of criticism with which he viewed the religion of the future, a religion for life, a religion of life. Hence it was natural that he should send me Tagore's *Sadhana*: the Realism of life, deeply impressed by the vision it offered for India and the world, toward an affirmative and living faith. Always a lover of poetry, in Scots, English, French and German, Geddes enjoyed and admired not only Rabindranath's prose renderings of his poems but his great gift for song. Geddes was wont to quote a great Scots legislator - who had pled, in vain, that Scotland's Parliament should be retained in 1707 - "A wise man" one can guess who! - "once told me that he cared not who made a nation's laws so long as he can make their ballads," their lays and songs. Geddes was moved not only by the literary message of 'the Poet' but by the way his fellow countrymen, literate and illiterate, old and young, enjoyed and sang his ballads and songs.

And so, when in 1915, Geddes came to Calcutta, bringing the Cities and Town Planning Exhibition, it was natural that Tagore should come to see it and meet its maker, and that Geddes should seek Tagore. They met and their friendship began and grew. Those that remember the Tagores' joint-family home at Jorasanko in northern Calcutta with its dignified arcaded houses will understand Geddes' appreciation and respect for the aristocratic tradition which contributed to the making of Rabindranath. But only those who have really entered into the spirit of Tagore's songs and his search for God "not among the proud but among the poorest and humblest" and into the spirit of passages in "Patrick Geddes in India" will fully understand why the two men cared for the life within miserable mud-built bastis and squalid mohallas. Hence the appreciation with which Tagore and Geddes' endeavours to respect and renew community life within the poorest neighbourhoods. In renewing their physical shell Geddes insisted upon at least a minimum of courtyard space in sun and shade, of verandah and womanly privacy, even though the building material must of stark necessity be humble. Tagore himself, though at home in his arcaded city mansion, built for himself at Santiniketan a three-room mud-walled and thatched roofed cottage and at Sriniketan a delightful wood-walled, thatched house on the boughs of a spreading banyan. When British engineers or Brahmanic administrators would say of the poor in some ruinous slum, "These people are dirty," Geddes would break out, "Look at the woman's work: find me, if you can, if you can, a single house which is not swept from hearth to doorway. No, it is we men who fail to carry on the work of women, and from their doorways clean up the lanes and streets of the city's poor!" Geddes himself had often handled a broom in a garden or a slum and used a good whitewash brush to good effect with his working neighbours. And although sixty years ago it was made difficult for a Hindu gentleman to soil his hands, Rabindranath in song had likened worship to a woman sweeping her cottage floor in welcome to her expected Lord. And Sriniketan the student lads, what ever their castes, learned not to push 'dirty' work on to others but to do their fair share as 'sweepers', nor with loss but with gain of self-respect and, in so doing, bring back fertility to India's exhausted soil.

Seeing the two men together, you perceived striking outward differences, and yet you could feel that the two men were profoundly attuned. During one of the many of our long talks together, Tagore spoke of what he meant by the word relationship. "When you and I are

together we are more than merely one plus one: together we make a third thing, something new, a relationship." The relationship of the two men grew as each in turn received and gave and, in so doing, contributed to an intellectual synthesis, a harmony of the spirit. Tagore, tall, dignified and calmly pacing, contrasted with Geddes, short, eager, rapid and tireless afoot. The Poet's silken robe, flowing hair and beard and his movements full of expressive grace, contrasting with Geddes' latterly untidy clothes, short beard and shock of hair and his swift telling gestures. Yet within both men there flowed a life-renewing source of peace, sought by disciplined meditation on waking. Both friends realised throughout their lives the truth of the saying which Geddes reinterpreted; "He giveth to his beloved in sleep." Yet the night's gift must be garnered at dawn, whether it were a melody with words to be completed as a song or a fresh scientific concept to be developed and hammered out as 'a vision verified' Each insisted on the importance to him of uninterrupted concentration at the start of the day. Yet both enjoyed the stimulus, the giving and return of true teaching. And both men were splendid when one was, 'producing' his own wonderful song dramas or the other an intellectual synthesis dramatised as a masque, such as Geddes' "Masque of Learning or Pageant of Education through the Ages", which in Edinburgh in 1912 brought 1200 performers linked by a common enthusiasm for its maker and its purpose. In India both men were called by their students, master, Guru: and if Rabindranath was known as holy master, Gurudev, his humility and his insistence on mutual respect by all made him accept the traditional title for a beloved teacher none too willingly.

Tagore's deep interest in Geddes' triad Place-Work-Folk, and its development into a theory of life-in-environment to be renewed in every land by each succeeding generation, led to my being invited to come from the Department of Sociology at the University of Bombay to Santiniketan for the summer of 1923. There I found receptive students, whose friendship I renewed in 1938 and 1956. In practice at the University of Indore (1919) Tagore found common ground with Geddes, who appreciated Tagore's vision of learning and the arts, of native, national and international life. At Geddes' suggestion an able young Indian architect trained in European construction linked to traditional building, came to Santiniketan. It was with difficulty that I was able at last to persuade Rabindranath Tagore that a true architect is a master builder, not merely a draftsman able to represent a pretty façade to conceal some iron girder structure drawn by an engineer of Public Works (or Waste) department. Both Tagore and Geddes were at one in their love for the wide spaces of a great horizon such as is commanded by the site of Santiniketan, and of the welcome shade of a living grove the original meaning (as Geddes was wont to remind us) of the pregnant Grecian word academe. The olive grove under which Socrates spoke with Plato 'Aristotle and their fellow disciples was, as it were replanted at Santiniketan with tall and robust sal trees and flowering evergreen amlaki. Here as so often, both men found life with poetry is no mere adornment, still less a luxury: to be at one with living nature and the landscape is to shed unnecessary expenses and discard wasteful construction. Economy to a public or private purse is best brought by respect for the native economy and developed by great tradition.

Few in Europe realise that Tagore the visionary stirred men not only to art, to thought, to aspiration, but to action guided and controlled by science. And few in Europe may be aware that chief architect of India's Second and Third Five Year Plans is he who was Gurudev's deeply appreciative and discerning critical disciple, Professor Prasanta C. Mahalanobis. Having toured India with the guidance of the National Sample Survey I have seen the worth of their scrupulously careful fact-finding. And for many years in watching Mahalanobis

developing from regional to national surveys and planning, I have had good fortune to be made aware of this growing achievement, and also its creative inspiration. And now in seeking to carry out the behest made to me by my loved and valued Gurudev, that of translating his Bengali into singing words to his own melodies, his songs renew themselves for me. They may, I hope, make known to lovers of the Bard throughout the English speaking world, what gave to him "The highest sense of achievement, the making of a song".