



The Tagore-Geddes Correspondence

Compiled and edited by
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This book is about the coming together of two great polyglot geniuses who were also autodidacts, who were concerned with the other's nation, but though glorified in their own countries, remain relatively unknown in the nations of the other. Their friendship is, in many ways, a representation of the friendship of the East and the West, albeit more of a conceptual exchange than cultural. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were witness to the interchange of ideas among the East and West at various levels and at an enormous magnitude. Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes are great representatives of that era. Their interaction led to an influence on their works, even outside of the topics they discussed. Geddes influenced Tagore's writings and Tagore influenced Geddes's architecture, both subjects, which they did not discuss among them, at least not in depth.

Bashabi Fraser brings out in all beauty, the Tagore-Geddes relationship, through their correspondence in this slim but significant volume. Her contribution helps us get a glimpse of these geniuses, who otherwise would have remained, like many other geniuses, 'misunderstood' and 'lonely souls' (4).

It is interesting to note that one of the first Geddes's introductions to Eastern thought was through his meeting with Swami Vivekananda in 1893. Later, Swamiji's disciple Sister Nivedita worked as the secretary to Geddes in the Parliament of Religions at Paris in 1900. Impressed by the vast abilities and understanding of Geddes, she tried to learn as much as she could from this Scottish polymath. Her focus was to integrate local elements of knowledge into Indian university curricula. Adapting the local wisdom being an innovation of Geddes, he charted detailed frameworks of Indian sociology for being translated into action by Nivedita. He drew parallels to his Outlook

Tower and also explained his ideas of 'Synthesis'. Understandably, Nivedita was enthralled by these inputs. However, the unfortunate souring of their relationship and later, the untimely death of Nivedita, left these ideas unworked. Her attempts to create an indigenous structure for studies on Indian sociology, also did not gain currency.

This is one of those numerous instances of an East-West dialogue going unheeded, such neglect not restricted to the other side. Tagore's dream of reinventing education and its modes, which was given shape in the form of a university in Visva-Bharati, has become the hotbed of political turmoil and the play of vested interests. Fraser laments that this national university 'never really mirrors Tagore's ideal of seeing the interplay of thought between itinerant gurus from both the East and the West, meeting and saying there for short periods' (32-3). The very fact that this book has not gained its deserved visibility even after more than a decade of its publication shows how apathetic we have become to the interchange of ideas that Tagore, and earlier, Swamiji had envisioned.

The extent of the collaboration that Geddes and Tagore had in mind can be gauged by these lines from one of Geddes's letters: 'You wish contact with Western science; and we have it here, at this University [Scotts College, Montpellier] as well among ourselves. More living science, history too, and geography as well, and one of the best traditions and atmospheres in medicine, and even in law!' (140-1).

What with our obsession with the playthings that present-day gadgets have become, why is it that we fail to find constructive and creative uses for them? Why is it that Indian institutions supposed to be centres of higher learning and seats of vibrant interplay of thought have instead become decrepit reminders of stale bureaucracy and inertia? The likes of Fraser need to be noticed and encouraged to highlight, extract, and enliven such seeds of East-West dialogue that remain lost in many 'heritage' organisations. This book should be read by anyone who aligns oneself with the tradition of learning seen in the Rig Veda: 'Let noble thoughts come from all directions' (1.89.1).

Editor

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