Liberating the River: Land and Politics in Tagore’s Plays

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Abstract:

In matters of development and progress, it has always been a question of the acquisition of land. As history shows, control over land—extendable to different metaphors—and its resources has been instrumental in the development and destruction of human civilisation. Tagore’s *Muktadhara* dwells on the principle of identifying how the manipulation of a river-course could change the destiny of two neighbouring states and establish the rule of one man over others. So, in the character of Abhijeet, a typical Tagore-protagonist, one who breaks the dam to put an end to the authoritarian regime, a prototype of modern day environmental activists could be seen. The text goes beyond a mere pantheistic and humanist quest for the freedom of man as Tagore politicises the concept of land into a geopolitical space, and relates it to the imperialist policies and hegemonic propaganda that he experienced personally in his travels across Europe, Japan and America during this time.

From *Muktadhara* (1922) to *Raktakarabi* (1924), Tagore seems to continue with this politics of land. If the former text represents the appropriation of nature for political benefit, the latter shows how industrialisation destroys the agricultural base, forces migration, and how these steps would be the only logical progress of the economy that advocates rampant capital accumulation. Interestingly, a play set in a mine uses a theme song about ‘pous’—a month of cultivation and opulence. The essays written by Tagore during this period, like his Introduction to Elmhirst’s ‘The Robbery of the Soil’, also reveal his vision of a sustained and inclusive human development.
In his book on Tagore's internationalism, first published in 1982, Chinmohan Sehanobis identifies four different phases of the poet's oeuvre that mark the evolution of his thoughts on international and domestic politics and their interface. These four phases are 1878 — 1901, 1901 — 1912-1913, 1913 — 1928, 1930 — 1941. Though the evolution of a poet's mind can hardly be compartmentalised into such time-specific structures, yet the study proves to be helpful to systematise a reading of the poet's works, both polemical and poetic, to show how from a typical and traditional Indian perspective Tagore moved towards a more international model in politics. For instance, Sehanobis argues, that in the works of the first phase (including essays and monographs like: ‘Europe-Jatrir Diary’, ‘Prachya o Pratichyo’, ‘Socialism’) Tagore shows his growing awareness of the foreign domination, the economic models at work and the unholy entente between the financial well-being and xenophobic tendencies that imperialism promotes. The democratic principles that the Western states use for themselves are curiously absent in their colonial policies. Thus, his works reflect an East-West binary model which to some extent is carried forward to the next phase as well. In texts like, ‘Pather Sanchay’, ‘Imperialism’, and ‘Bharatbarsha’, the argument of the supremacy of Indian spirituality over Western imperialist politics is easily discernable. The major shift in Tagore's thought comes in the third phase, which also coincides with his receiving of the Nobel Prize and extensive foreign tours, chiefly for raising funds for Visva-Bharati which officially began as a university in 1921. In 1922 he establishes the Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Sriniketan, Santiniketan's sister institution at Surul. The writings of this period shows a few basic principles: first, the realisation that certain ideological principles have the ability to corrupt even the Eastern/Indian society and nationalism is one of them; secondly, nationalism justifies the growth of an uncontrolled chauvinistic approach to the self, which when combined with effective economic tools, can lead to fascism. At this time, his friendship with Romain Rolland deepens and in his various public statements two themes seem to be uppermost in his mind, the concept of an intellectual discourse that would bring the East and West together and his notions of peace. I will refer to two specific incidents that would throw light on his works discussed in this article. First, he was one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence of Thought which was drafted in 1919. He wrote to Romain Rolland:

It is enough for me to know that the higher conscience of Europe had been able to assert itself in one of her choicest spirits through the ugly clamour of passionate politics; and I gladly hasten to accept your invitation to join the ranks of those free souls, who, in Europe, have conceived the project of a Declaration of Independence of Thought.

The second event takes place much later in 1936, when he sent his response to the World Peace Conference that was organised by Rolland and Barbusse: ‘We cannot have peace until

1 Chinmohan Sehanobis, Rabindranather Antarjatik Chinta (Kolkata: Papyrus, 2017), p. 30.
2 Sehanobis, Rabindranather Antarjatik Chinta, p. 62.
we deserve it by paying its full price, which is that the strong must cease to be greedy and the weak must learn to be bold.\(^3\)

Arguably then, Tagore’s idea of the West was not entirely based on negativity and rejection and his notion of the East is not of uniform appreciation either. Though writing from a different perspective, Alaistair Bonnet, in his book *The Idea of the West* studies Tagore along with radical Islamic scholars like Sayyid Qutb, Al-e Ahmad and others to show that the rejection of the West is an important facet of the postcolonial politics, though the approaches and means could be varied. He specifies two such approaches: one that is national-political as found in Japan, China (post-1911 revolution) and India (after 1920s), and transcendental-cultural, a pan-Asian identity that was established by the eastern scholars like Tagore and Okakura. However, Bonnett’s sympathetic study Tagore has a few contradictory claims, for instance he writes that for Tagore, ‘the West was not freedom but a spirit of repression and coercion’\(^4\) and almost in the same breath he asserts ‘Tagore was not an anti-Westerner’\(^5\). He finds an epistemic break between Tagore’s imaginative and polemical works — the former he believes has used several Western genres like novels, (though it is hard to say if Tagore was not following the example of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who had already established and popularised novels in Bengali literature) as well as ideologies like romanticism, (once again a problematic supposition since there is a distinct strain of romanticism in Indian classical literature), while in the latter he endeavoured to represent himself as the indigenous Indian ideologue.\(^6\)

My aim over here is not to show the points of differences between the two scholarly studies made above but to point out the difficulty of typifying Tagore to any one school. Sehanobis has tried to find the socialist principles in Tagore’s internationalism, and complains of his lack of practicality in approach,\(^7\) while Bonnett sees him as the transcendental-cultural ideologue, who has consciously upheld his identity of a sage from the East, rejecting both capitalism and communism as soulless Western doctrines.\(^8\) Taking these two standpoints as the boundary within which my reading of Tagore’s texts is to be located, I would like to premise the enquiry of the present study on the following arguments: first, the typical East-West binary is a fruitless attempt to understand Tagore because he accepted both and rejected none; such confluence of principles will be found in all his works, imaginative, polemical and practical; for Tagore transcendental is political and philosophy is praxis, which can only be understood if we read his works in totality. Therefore, while reading *Muktadhara* (The Waterfall)\(^9\) or *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleanders) one need not wonder whether the instances of

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3 Ibid, p. 85.
4 Alaistair Bonnet, *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 86.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, p. 98.
7 Sehanobis, *Rabindranather Antarjatik Chinta*, p. 11.
8 Alaistair Bonnet, *The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics and History*, pp. 101 – 103.
9 Tagore translated *Muktadhara*, the play as ‘The Waterfall’. However, when he referred to the actual stream he used ‘free current’.
protests recorded are essentially political or philosophical, dramatic or lyrical, communitarian or individualistic, for Tagore transcends such binaries with ease and confidence. For him nature, man and community are all subservient to an overriding principle of ethical and moral imperative. Thus, Tagore’s philosophy of nature and man can be equally related to the Vedas or relevant to the contemporary discourse on deep-ecology and eco-socialism.

Itself a nature religion, the ancient Sanskrit texts have underscored the importance of natural resources and their judicious use. Nature in the Vedantic texts both appears as part of the physical world and as the part of the \textit{chetana} (self). This element of chetana operates through the \textit{achetana} (non-self). ‘Although these two are opposite entities, they co-operate in such a smooth manner that our life and dealings with the world are harmonised’.\textsuperscript{10} Between the \textit{chetana} and \textit{achetana} operates the \textit{manas}, which helps the individual to ‘realise the aim of creation’.\textsuperscript{11} Tagore’s philosophy of nature is deeply rooted in the pantheistic creed. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the various manifestations and appropriations of the traditional Hindu texts in Tagore’s writings, a point should be noted that any over-zealous assertion of this aspect would lead us to the categorisation of the poet’s writings into the transcendental-cultural paradigm associated with the East. Rather, one needs to understand that Tagore’s use of the Hindu cultural ideas and texts is a practice of the collective consciousness that participates in the creation of a poetic creed and specificities at a given time, space and historical moment. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay makes a succinct observation in this regard. He compares the poet’s attitude to shastra to Plato’s attitude to his predecessors. He quotes from Plato’s \textit{Theory of Man} and refers to John Wild who observes: ‘He [Plato] himself had no interest whatsoever in the thoughts or words of his predecessors, except in so far as they aided him in understanding himself and the world around him, though he often consulted them and wrestled with them at great length when in difficulties’. Tagore uses \textit{shastra} in the same manner, Mukhopadhyay reflects.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, Tagore could at once transcend the ideological restrictions of religiosity and translate the cultural and ethical concepts into political connotations, where by political I mean ‘contingent construction of social links’.\textsuperscript{13} The idea can be more fully asserted when one takes into consideration how religious worship could be politically motivated as the opening of the play \textit{Muktadhara} shows that the people of Uttarakut are going to celebrate the construction of the dam which is going to stop the flow of the river downstream and thus deprive the people of Shiv-tarai, the neighbouring kingdom situated in the plains below, of their due river water for irrigation. Ranjit, the proud king of Uttarakut believes that this would make the subjugation of the delinquent neighbours complete and irrevocable for they will be forever dependent on his state for their staple need of life, water. Here worship of the machine is symbolic of the consolidation of power, similar to the worship of the \textit{dhwaja} (the flag or ensign) in \textit{Raktakarabi}. Any worship that does not heed to the cry of the millions is unacceptable to the poet. A number of characters in the play reflect on this point.

\textsuperscript{10} Umesh Mishra, ‘Nature of the Physical World’, in \textit{The Cultural Heritage of India} Vol 3, ed. by Haridas Bhattacharyya (Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2001), p. 497.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, \textit{Rabindra Jibani} Vol 3 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1397 b), p. 502.
\textsuperscript{13} Ernesto Laclau, \textit{The Rhetorical Foundations of Society} (London and New York: Verso, 2014), p. 169.
For instance, the stranger who talks with a citizen at the beginning of the play says that it is blasphemy to allow the engine towers to ‘soar so high above the temple tower’. Amba, the mother who has lost her son Suman in the construction work of the dam which has killed many other workers observes: ‘that is where I went that day, to evening worship. Since then I have been afraid to go to worship. And mark my words, our prayers don’t reach the Father, they get snatched away on the road’. Viswajit, the King’s uncle reflects ‘I have come to tell you that Bhairava will not accept today’s worship’. When Ranajit protests and says that it is Bhairava who has helped him to punish the delinquent residents of Shiv-tarai by denying them of their drinking water, Viswajit quips, ‘Then your worship isn’t worship, but wages’. Thus Abhijit destroys the engine tower of the dam that soared passed the trident of the Shiva temple, just as Raja, the king himself tears the dhvaja and danda (sceptre), emblematic of his unquestionable power and domination in Raktakarabi.

Of all the names that he had in mind, like Path (the path) and Path-mochan (In search of a path), Tagore finally opted for ‘Muktadhara’ - the free current is more symbolic than real. He writes:

The waterfall round which the action of this play revolves is named Muktadhara — the free current. Such a descriptive name may sound strange in English, but those who are familiar with geographical names prevalent in India, will at once be reminded of the Pagla-Jhora — the waterfall of Darjeeling, whose meaning is Mad Stream.

The name Free Current is sure to give rise in the reader’s mind to the suspicion that it has a symbolic meaning; that it represents all that the word freedom signifies in human life. The interpretation will appear to be still more obvious when it is seen that the machine referred to in the play has stopped the flow of its water.

Freedom, as Tagore asserts is a psychological achievement since freedom is not simply an opposition to the repressive apparatuses of an unjust state but also every trace of consent that is embedded in the mind of the man who has been dominated for a long time. Abhijit, the crown prince who is sent to collect the tax from the people of Shiv-tarai, realises the grief and economic deprivation that the lack of water has resulted in. His love for freedom involves him in a conflict of loyalties from which he, as a typical Tagore hero, chooses the truth which is beyond the political. Muktadhara leads him to the search for a greater truth, a philosophy of life:

14 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Mukta-dhara’, in Three Plays: Mukta-dhara, Natir Puja, Chandalika, Trans. Marjorie Sykes (Glasgow: Oxford, 1961), p. 10. I have used the English translation of Muktadhara, titled, Mukta-dhara, as done by Marjorie Sykes, first published in 1950. I have used the fifth impression made in 1961. All the subsequent references to the text are made from this translation.
15 Rabindranath Tagore, Muktadhara, p. 11.
16 Ibid, p. 19.
17 Ibid.
18 Tapashya Ghosh, Rabindranath Thakur Muktadhara: Prateek Theke Bastabe (Kolkata: Pustak Biponi, 2007), p. 72.
Somewhere or other in the external world, God writes for us the secret mystery of each man’s spirit. *Muktadhabara* is His word to me, bearing the secret of my inner being. When her feet were bound in the iron fetters, I was startled out of a dream. I realised the truth — the throne of Uttarakut is the dam which binds my spirit. I have taken the road in order to set it free.\(^{19}\)

It is revealed in the course of the play that Abhijit is an adopted son of the King. He was found under that very waterfall that he sets out to liberate with divine signs of kingship on his person. Once the mystery of his birth is revealed to him, he realises that his first duty is not towards the throne but towards nature and its people. He strikes the dam at its weakest spot, thereby liberating the stream which carries away his body in its turbulent and leaping torrent of water. Kripalani says, ‘The socio-political motif of the play, if such there is, seems to dissolve at the end in an undefined sense of mystic self-fulfilment...’\(^{20}\) but it can be argued that mysticism is not free from a greater political reality which asserts that man’s first duty is not towards the continuation of the power-structures and hence to the reproduction of the forces of production, but to resist the power that opposes the basic human principles, both literally (the dam stopping the natural flow of life), and metaphorically (denying the authority of the king/state when it goes against common human good). Tagore’s brand of renunciation is actually a resistance to a system, a revolution with a difference. I shall revert to this point again in the course of my study.

Tagore finished writing the play on 14 January 1922. He read it first to his ashramites in Santiniketan and then with some minor corrections read the play in Kolkata, at Gaganendranath Tagore’s home in the early weeks of February. He planned staging it which was unfortunately postponed as the news of Gandhi’s arrest and imprisonment came.\(^{21}\) The play was first performed by the students of the Presidency College in 1926\(^{22}\) and then as late as in 1959 when it was directed by the well known thespian of Bengal Sambhu Mitra, but the production was not successful. His group again performed the play in 1996 under the direction of Kumar Ray. However, the play was better received among the rural populace, as street theatre in Delhi, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. It was most popular among the social workers who work against the indiscriminate dam construction and displacement of people. For instance, Shyamali Khastagir, active member of the Narmada Bachao movement, directed the play in Delhi in 1993. The play was also performed at Santiniketan, in honour of Medha Patkar when she visited the university.\(^{23}\)

The symbol and the relevance of the dam in present ecological and social context has increased the relevance of the play in the present times because over 1554 large dams have been constructed in India since independence\(^{24}\) and approximately 1 crore 40 lakh

19 Rabindranath Tagore, *Muktadhabara*, p. 27.
20 Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1980), p. 311.
21 Kripalani, Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography, p. 312.
22 Tapashya Ghosh, Rabindranath Thakur Muktadhabara, p. 8.
23 Ibid.
24 Vandana Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts over Natural resources in India* (New Delhi: Sage
people have been displaced due to such developmental programmes.\textsuperscript{25} The incident like the conflict between the two states of Shiv-tarai and Uttarakut has seen many parallels in both internal politics (like the Cauveri water dispute between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) and international politics (the Padma river issue between West Bengal and Bangladesh or the Sindh river issue between Punjab and Pakistan). However, to read the play only as an ecological metaphor of how the dam could be instrumental in manipulating the diplomatic relationship between two states could be limiting the play to a certain level of relevance that does not take into consideration the \textit{realpolitik} and deep philosophical comments on the greed of man and the freedom of the individual. Even the issue of use and abuse of natural resources was particularly relevant at the time of writing the play since the colonial power was instrumental in effecting change in the state’s attitude to natural resources. Prior to the arrival of the British and consolidation of power the utilisation of natural resources was in the hand of local communities, based on equal distribution and aimed at better and smoother process of agriculture. The colonial rule introduces a different type of economic pattern that destabilised the indigenous economic reality. For instance, the allocation of water within the villages was managed by cultivators themselves through indigenous methods like \textit{parabandi} (equal distribution of water from common source), tank system (both prevalent in South India), \textit{abar}, \textit{pynes} (irrigation methods practised in South Bihar), \textit{bandharas} (in Maharashtra) and separate water communities functioned for the maintenance of the systems. The notion of collective labour like \textit{goam} (South Bihar) or \textit{kundimarammatham} (South India) was practised. Arthus Cotton, the founder of modern irrigation has shown deep respect for these indigenous mechanisms.\textsuperscript{26} The British attitude to the natural resources of a colony was obviously different: it was to be tailored for the direct and non-local demands of Western Europe. Thus, ’[c]olonial domination systematically transformed the common vital resources into commodities for generating profits and growth of revenue’.
\textsuperscript{27} The state assumed total control over the natural resources which could be transformed for generating revenue. For instance the Sambhar Lake in Rajasthan was monopolised for the flourishing of the salt trade and in Bengal the river course and canals were used for better transport network. That nature could be used at its optimum level for the benefit of a few irrespective of what it could do to the masses of people is what \textit{Muktadhara} presents so brilliantly. In the play, the Messenger from the crown prince asks Bibhuti, the Master Engineer:

\begin{quote}
After all these years, you have finished the dam on the Muktadhara waterfall. Again and again it has burst, many men have been crushed under earth and sand, many others have been swept away in floods...Was that not the purpose of your dam — to make their [people of Shiv-tarai] fields wither and die.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

To this Bibhuti replies:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{25} Shampa Mitra, \textit{Muktadhara: Muktsatranter dike Yatra} (Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, 2008), p. 121
\textsuperscript{26} Vandana Shiva, \textit{Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts over Natural resources in India} (New Delhi: Sage and Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1991), p. 190.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{28} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Muktadhara}, pp. 11 – 12.
The purpose of my dam was that human intelligence should win through to its goal, though sand and stone all conspired to block its path. I had no time to think of whether some farmer’s paltry maize crop would die.\textsuperscript{29}

If the reading of the play once again support a binary between Bibhuti, one who creates a machine and Abhijit, one who demolishes such construction, the problem will not be resolved, rather one would move on to Tagore’s principles of mysticism and self-annihilation, none of which can lead to any practical solution of the crisis. It is true that in \textit{Muktadhara} he has described the machine as a ‘demon’s head’, a grinning skeleton head, lying in wait to devour your city in its sleep,\textsuperscript{30} or he has made the citizens of Uttarakut sing about the terrible nature of power of the machine: ‘A vulture thou, whose talons tear/ The bowels of earth, and lay them bare’,\textsuperscript{31} but it would be unwise to consider that the demolition of the machine by Abhijit is actually the East’s whole-hearted rejection of the machine-driven civilisation (\textit{kalbalsambal sayyata}) of the West. Tagore was not against the machine but the process of machination. Even when he criticises the machine he does not criticise it for itself but how it is employed without any consideration for human well-being. Two decades before Gandhi entered into the national politics of India, and half a century before the Indian government thought of any holistic community oriented programme, Tagore, as a result of his hands on experience as a Zamindar, experimented with rural community development. He was not a traditionalist, or a blind adherent to indigenous practices irrespective of their practicality of application in the modern context. He rather spoke about the use of scientific approaches to agriculture. He sent his son, Rathindranath abroad to learn about Agricultural Science and also employed Leonard Elmhirst, the fresh graduate from Cornell University at his farm in Surul to change it into a model village. He writes:

\begin{quote}
man worked with small tools until the advent of modern machinery driven by steam and electricity. The time has come for our cultivators to consider the use of machinery....and considerable funds are needed for their procurement and use.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

He also knew that the British would not help the Indians to modernise their equipments, hence self-help was the only means. Thus the concept of the co-operative system that he put into practice in Sriniketan was conceived by him.\textsuperscript{33}

The process of machination is thus inalienably bound to the notion of a political reality that Tagore theorised on in his fictional and polemical writings though the practicality of these ideas have been severely criticised. \textit{Muktadhara} represents that a certain social consciousness, and percolation of power among the masses is required to resist the ideologies that work behind such constructions. It joins politics with ethics. Abhijit may be the

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\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, p. 12.  \\
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, p. 10.  \\
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, p. 15.  \\
\textsuperscript{32} Tapati Dasgupta, \textit{Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore: A Historical Analysis} (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993), p. 117.  \\
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, pp. 117 – 118.
\end{flushright}
proponent who physically destroys the dam, but Tagore paralleled his character with that of Dhananjoy Bairagi, a well-developed character from an earlier play Prayashchitta (Atonement), who creates an alternate reticule of power that is more accessible to the common mass to create a counter-ideology. While heading a group of citizens from Shiv-tarai who have come to meet the King to ask him to release the crown prince Abhijit so that they can re-instate him as their ruler of their own province, he asks them: ‘What will you ask of him?’ As the citizens are confused, he further asks them: ‘Will you not ask for your kingship?’ The barbed irony of his question perplexes his followers, who are then told:

Kingship is crippled, if it is the King’s alone, and not the people’s. You may shiver with fright to see that one-legged kingship limp along, but the eyes of the gods fill with tears. For king’s own sake, men, you must demand your kingship.

The idea expressed by Dhananjoy constitutes the core of Tagore’s concept of power-politics that forms the basis on which all his works and his philosophy are based. From the conservation of nature for the benefit of the human race or colonial domination and the nationalist politics to international power relations or the East-West debate, he has always criticised the excessive use of power, and proposed for an equilibrium which can only be achieved when the powerful leaves his greed and the powerless his nonchalance and passivity. Dhananjoy can go to the extent of refusing payment of taxes for that year as there has been severe drought due to the inconsiderate resource management. He says to King Ranajit: ‘Our excess food is yours; the food of our hunger is not’. The problem of appreciating Tagore lies in the fact that such bold assertions are not matched with any physical action of assertion, a fact that is ruled by his contemporary nationalists and present day critics alike.

Tagore believed in non-violence, but he never theorised adequately upon it. Tapati Dasgupta in her work has referred to a conversation between Saumendranath Tagore and Romain Rolland, where the former said:

When Rabindranath Tagore was in Europe in 1930, I discussed the questions of non-violence with him and he told me that he would write an article about it. But he has not done so. His idea of non-violence is as incomplete as that of Gandhi, for they believe in the necessity of class division. They are not with the masses. Tagore sees that problem from the intellectual point of view — Gandhi does not see it at all.

It would be out of the purview of the present paper to elaborate further on the Gandhi-Tagore debate, however, a few crucial points can be made regarding the appreciation of Tagore among his contemporary and later day critics. That Tagore’s attitude was of an intellectual cannot be wholly accepted for his practical developmental works at Sriniketan and Santiniketan. Definitely he had no pan-Indian agenda as a politician, may be these ideas

34 Rabindranath Tagore, Muktdhara, p. 36.
35 Ibid.
36 Rabindranath Tagore, Muktdhara, pp. 36, 37.
37 Ibid., p. 44.
38 Tapati Dasgupta, Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore, pp. 93, 94.
were only applicable in the small range of the village, but one must bear with the fact that he wanted to make a model out of his villages and to some extent he succeeded in that. Secondly, since Tagore showed no penchant for violence, or because he was a zamindar by class and a poet by profession it does not mean he was in favour of maintaining the status quo. Even if he uses the mysticism of the *Upanishads*, which was used as a weapon against the working class, ‘Rabindranath was definitely free from the bias of feudal ideas’.  

I would once again refer to the first proposition with which I began this discussion that Tagore cannot be read within binaries, and at this point I would like to extend the binaries to include Gandhian and socialist nationalism (both of which were actually gaining momentum in Indian politics at that point of time) to further suggest that he steered away from both of these two extremes. I would like to propose that of his many ideas the notion of ecological preservation vis-a-vis development, a debate that *Muktadhara* so well establishes is an adept expression of a separate and indigenous political philosophy that owes its roots both to the western principles and colonial experiences. The recognition that nature can be colonised and subjected to injudicious experimentation and thoughtless enterprise, stops Tagore from romanticising the landscape as a passive receptacle and brings him closer to the early Marxist writings that modelled itself on humanistic principles. Arguably, Tagore’s association with the socialists at this point of time, his views on peace and an egalitarian society made him lend his support to Henri Barbusse, who in his *Clarté* magazine published a fifteen-point manifesto regarding the failure of contemporary politics and the need of a revolutionary politics.  

Similarly, Dhananjoy and Abhijit in *Muktadhara* have both resisted the appropriation of natural resources for state politics. Not only has Abhijit conducted the demolition of the dam, but he has also opened the pass through the Nandi Hills that would help the people of Shiv-tarai to access the market directly to sell their products and not remain dependent on the whims of Uttarakut. This would definitely increase the price of food and clothing in Uttarakut, but self-reliance is what is most important in the brand of politics that Abhijit believes in. Dhananjoy also approves of this in his own way. He does not want to remain the leader on whom people would blindly depend, thus he chooses to leave the citizens to themselves, though time to time, he interferes on their behalf so that they are not intimidated by the rampant violence of the King. ‘When the right hand is niggardly enough to close the road against them, men cannot be saved by the bounty of the left.... I cannot bear to see a poverty that depends on charity’, Abhijit criticises the policy of his own state. This brand of self-reliance is also what Tagore wanted to practice in Sriniketan. The landlord is like the father, but it is the duty of the father to make his children self-reliant. Thus, to reject Tagore on the basis of class-politics would be difficult. The question is the nature of resolution that Tagore offers. As I have already pointed out that it is non-violent, indigenous, and therefore it cannot be categorised as the typical socialist paradigm but I would like to propose that the causal parameters that he employs to find out the root cause of the crisis is comparable to the principles of Marx’s writings.

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39 Ibid, p. 9.  
40 Sehanobis, *Rabindranather Antarjatik Chinta*, pp. 63, 64.  
41 Rabindranath Tagore, *Muktadhara*, p. 20.  
42 Ibid, p. 45.  
43 Ibid, p. 30.
To prove my point I shall discuss one essay that has been written by him in 1922 as an introductory comment to Elmhirst’s ‘Robbery of the Soil’ which was first read out by Elmhirst at Rammohan Library in Kolkata on 28 July, 1922, with Tagore presiding, and printed in *The Modern Review* in October 1922, and later included in Elmhirst’s volume titled *Poet and Plowman*. Tagore’s essay also prefaces Elmhirst’s essay in the volume with the title *Introduction by Rabindranath Tagore to Elmhirst’s Lecture on the Robbery of the Soil*.44

There are three moot points that Tagore raises in his essay, the first is the essential difference between wealth and personal property, the greed of human beings and the rising estrangement of the city and the village. He begins the essay with the observation that modern civilisation has raised the average level of our necessity. This increase is not based on necessity but on our greed, which leads to a distinction between wealth, something which is collective and is to be shared among all, and private property, which needs to be hoarded. This distinction is a new phenomenon for previous rulers and rich people willingly took a share of the developmental work, but ‘...property itself, with what is called material progress, has become intensely individualistic, the method of gaining it has become a matter of science and not social ethics’.45 This idea is further extended in his distinction between two godheads in *Raktakarabi*, where Kuber is associated with mining and hoarding of wealth that necessitates ‘unlimited production’ whereas Laxmi is associated with general well-being and wealth that needs to be distributed and not accumulated. Interestingly, he titled one of his essays ‘Bhumilaxmi’ (also the name of a journal that was published from Birbhum that Tagore referred to in this essay). In his collection ‘Palliprakriti’ the land is compared to Laxmi, and the work of the land needs to bring together the goddess of wisdom Saraswati and of wealth Laxmi, thus making the association clearer by associating knowledge with wealth.

The rift between wealth and property comes because ‘civilisation today caters for a whole population of gluttons’.47 Wealth now is self centred. “This creates envy and irreconcilable class division. In other words property becomes anti-social.”48 Interestingly, Tagore’s use

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44 There is a serious scholarly debate about the time of writing of this essay. Abhra Ghosh in his criticism of Sandip Bandyopadhyay’s book, titled *Sampatti o Sampad: Bhusampader Bittobaran*, where Bandyopadhyay translated Tagore’s essay into English has pointed out the anomalies. According to him, the time of writing has not been recorded by the biographers of Tagore like Prashanta Kumar Pal or Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay. Also, the introductory comments given by Tagore on the day of Elmhirst’s lecture is not this essay. Hence, when and how he had written this essay could be questioned. The Visva-Bharati edition of Elmhirst’s *Poet and Plowman* however includes both the essay and the text of Tagore’s speech given on the day of Elmhirst’s lecture. The ideas seem to overlap, and Ghosh himself has referred to the letter that Elmhirst wrote to Tagore that gives a hint of this particular essay (Abhra Ghosh, *Ganatranter Rabindrik Paradigm* [Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi, 2009], p. 48). Thus, it is included in this study with the references provided by the Visva-Bharati publication.

45 Rabindranath Tagore, Introduction to Elmhirst’s lecture on The Robbery of the Soil, *Poet and Plowman* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2008), p. 18.

46 Ibid, p. 19.

47 Ibid.
of human behaviour can be paralleled to that of Marx. In his Economic and Philosophical Manuscript, while discussing the nature of private property and capitalist crisis and competition Marx writes:

The only wheels that political economy sets in motion are greed, and the war amongst the greedy — competition.

...we have to grasp the intrinsic connection between private property, greed, the separation of labour, capital and landed property; the connection of exchange and competition, of value and devaluation of man, of monopoly and competition, etc.—the connection between this whole estrangement and the money system.  

The point of overlapping with Tagore’s idea is noteworthy, for Ranajit in Muktadhara monopolises the river water. In Raktarabi Tagore has made the division between the karshanjibi (the labourers/peasants) and akarshanjibi (the hoarders/miners), which once again is an extension of the Kuber/Laxmi dialectics. Though in traditional Marxist approach the focus is more on historical materialism and techno-centrism, David Pepper in his seminal work on Eco-Socialism argues that in the early works of Marx, the concern for the allocation of exhaustible resources is present, though it is placed within a certain paradigm. According to Marx, the man-nature relationship is dialectical, they are dependent on each other for their survival and growth — a point of departure from the traditional deep ecologists who believe that nature exists on its own; I find the dialectical relation closer to Tagore for the traditional Hindu religious philosophy also speak of a symbiotic relationship between man and nature; it is never nature versus man in Tagore. A similar point resonates in Marx’s writing:

Nature is man’s inorganic body... man lives on nature — means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.  

Thus the labour that estranges man from nature ultimately estranges him from himself, from his active functions, his life activity. Thus at the opening of Muktadhara, the stranger says that the machine makes him feel that it would dry up his ‘soul like dead wood’, the life of the individual that exists in the cosmic vitality. It is once again comparable to the notion of the metabolic rift that Marx associated with ecological degradation caused by capitalist agriculture, which Tagore compared with rift in the individual and in collective life, the loss of ‘collaboration and helpfulness’ in his Introduction to the Robbery of the Soil. He

48 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), p. 28 <http://www.marxist.org> [accessed 29 April 2018].
49 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical, p. 31.
50 Rabindranath Tagore, Muktadhara, p. 10.
51 Tapan Kumar Chattopadhyay, Man and Ecology In Marx and Gandhi (Kolkata: Mitram, 2006), pp. 103, 107.
furthers the argument that this basic rift would cause a greater social malady, that would infect the entire administrative machinery and ideological construction of the social opinions, where power will be in the hands of the few and development will be restricted to zones that they occupy, namely the city. Though the idea is not fully developed in Muktdhara yet one can get an idea of a discriminatory development of Uttarakut (land of the dam or machine) at the cost of the agricultural fields of Shiv-tarai.

I have already argued that Tagore’s interaction with socialist faith did not turn him into a socialist for his ideas were equally tempered by his understanding of Indian soil and clime, to which all the principles of Marxist approach could not be included. However, it can be proposed that the metaphors that stem from a European perspective needs to be translated and re-read in the Indian context. Marx never detailed on the Asiatic mode of production, as Ashok Rudra opines, and such a history of India could only be written when we take into consideration the caste system, the rationalism of its ancient texts and the influence of Puranas. Thus, instead of rejecting Tagore’s ideas as ‘poetic licence’, one can argue that he realised the intricacies of the colonial and capitalist interface, from an indigenous perspective that was informed by Western scientific systems, and could show the effects of evils of the present economy both on man and nature, on individual and the collective and on nationalist politics and society.

I would conclude the paper with a reference to two very different incidents: one factual, another fictional. The Srisailam project in Andhra Pradesh began in 1960, removing an ancient temple dedicated to Srisailam, or Lord Shiva or Bhairava. It began as a power project, and the dam was to provide water to an estimated 4,95,000 acres, with sure irrigation to 1,95,000 acres in Kurnool and Cuddapah districts. But it required that 106,925 acres of land had to be submerged, which meant that 117 villages would lose all the land and the people would have to be relocated. In a compelling study, Vandana Shiva shows the layers of injustice done to the people of those 117 villages. From an agriculturally vibrant community, they were evicted out of their houses and forced to vacate their villages. The compensation was either meagre or inadequate, reaching just a handful, and mostly lost in unplanned business ventures, or loan repayment or injudicious expenditure, the farmers, potters, toddy-tappers, fishermen, and others dependent on agricultural activities, had to look forward to non-agricultural occupations. They mostly shifted to nearby villages or towns and got engaged in construction activities that were on the rise due to the dam construction.

Tagore’s Muktdhara, in spite of its positive end, led to the writing of Raktakarabi (1926), where the mine workers are engaged in a soulless work of mining resources out of the belly of the earth. The very act of mining — stripping resources without worrying about their

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53 Rabindranath Tagore, Introduction to Elmhirst’s lecture on The Robbery of the Soil, Poet and Plowman (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2008), p. 20.
54 Ashok Rudra, Non-Eurocentric Marxism and Indian Society (Calcutta: People’s Book Society, 1988), p. 55.
55 Vandana Shiva, Ecology and the Politics of Survival, pp. 208 - 209.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Vandana Shiva, Ecology and the Politics of Survival, pp. 215 - 222.
future productivity — is a capitalist trend, which has been upheld by the very structural pattern of the Yakshapuri. Here, the labourers are reduced to numbers. Here the king is invisible and omnipotent. But, outside, the season of Pous (Spring) is resplendent in its glory. Nandini, the protagonist comes to the land of the miners to talk about the glory of the world, the happiness in the wealth that the earth gives willingly to man. The play with its complex and intensely symbolic action ends with the song of Pous, where, the call of the earth makes the unwilling labourers resist the fetters of domination that the system has generated and implemented.

Rabindranath Tagore, in spite of his optimism, had realised that it would not be easy to resist the system which is so steeped in unnatural activities. It would require the active participation of the ruler and the ruled alike. The only hopeful aspect is that once people are aware of the happiness that lies in renunciation, in living in harmony with nature, they will not be afraid to sacrifice their lives. For ultimately, living well is not accumulating money for individual benefit as Aristotle said, and non-mechanical mode of consumption is not poverty and ‘[t]rue happiness is not expensive’. Goodness can be only realised when it can be applied to all and forever.

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59 David Pepper, Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 93.
60 John O’Neil, Ecology, Policy and Politics (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 8.
61 Vandana Shiva, Ecology and the Politics of Survival, p. 346.
62 Rabindranath Tagore, Introduction to Elmhirst’s lecture, p. 21.
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