

## **Memorial Lecture on Rabindranath Tagore – Monday 7 May 2018**

**The Chairman of the MGI/RTI Council – Mr. Jaynarain Meetoo**

**The Director General, MGI/RTI Mrs Soorya Gayan**

**The Rector of Rabindranath Tagore Institute**

**Teachers, parents and students**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is indeed a great honour for me to be given this opportunity to speak on such a towering figure in the literary and artistic world as Rabindranath Tagore in this auditorium that bears his name and on his 157<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary.

Who am I to speak on a winner of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913? an illustrious poet, writer, philosopher and painter, the composer of two National Anthems, one of India and one of Bangladesh, and who is the pride of his native state of West Bengal and of his great country, India?

My presentation, Ladies and Gentlemen, is not going to be a scholarly research paper, but my humble tribute to a beautiful mind and a beautiful soul.

It's going to be my personal admiration of his poetry wherein lies a great philosophy of life which for anyone who lets himself be inspired and influenced by it, can only be led to become a better person, a more successful person and a peaceful citizen of the world.

As far as I am concerned, I am pretty sure that Tagore's ideas and ideals have definitely influenced me in my thinking and in my actions, in my practical life. This is what I would like to share with you, in the thought and hope that you too must have been touched by his greatness and that students will further get interested in knowing more and more of Tagore's thinking and wisdom and let themselves be influenced by his thinking for success and fulfilment life.

My first encounter with Tagore was when I was a college student and one teacher from India, Professor Ramprakash, gave us copies of Tagore's poems to read.

Those first poems I got exposed to were:

***“This is my prayer to thee my Lord”***

and the signature poem of Tagore:

***“Where the mind is without fear”***, both from Geethanjali.

Although, at the young age of 15, I was not mature enough to grasp the deep meanings of the ideas expressed in those poems, still they did strike a great feeling appreciation in me.

The second encounter was when, a year later I attended a variety programme to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Tagore on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1961 at the Port Louis Theatre, organised by the Tamil League.

I must say that the Rabindra Sangeet in Bengali and the poems in English had a great impact on me already.

I do not understand Bengali but the sweet sounds of the language and the melodious music was most appealing to my young ears. Tagore is indeed a great composer. The poems that were recited on the stage by the members of the association kindled a great interest in me to know more.

As I think of this I cannot help thinking I must have had a feeling like Mahatma Gandhi when he said that “*on hearing the sermon on the Mount for first time*”, it went straight to his heart.

For me, the little Nobel Prize winning book *Geethanjali* has since always been at arm’s reach. Later, as a teacher I have enjoyed sharing Tagore’s poems and wisdom with my students.

So, when the Director of the MGI/RTI, Mrs Soorya Gayan requested me to give this year’s Tagore Memorial lecture, it was a big challenge for me and I welcomed the opportunity, with the intention of sharing with the audience the effect that Tagore’s Poetry, mainly *Geethanjali*, has had on me as an individual and also on me as a teacher. Teaching has been my main occupation for nearly forty years.

I would also like to take this opportunity to impress upon students what they stand to benefit in terms of personal development and cultural upliftment, on parents and teachers on how they too stand to gain not only in terms of personal enjoyment and personal development for themselves but also as substance for the upbringing of their children and students respectively. I have to emphasise here that parents are the first and most influential teachers for their children.

I say all this because each and every Tagore poem carries lofty ideas about our human nature, about our relationship with nature and the divine.

In fact the *Geethanjali* is a sublime expression of the divine in Nature. And Man is an integral and a very influential part of Nature.

Friends,

I am a keen listener to speeches given by a number of motivational speakers, many of whom have come to Mauritius. Mention can be made of Stephen Covey, Shiv Khera, Robin Sharma. I also like to listen to Jim Rohn, John Maxwell, Les Brown and others.

All of them are famous and very much sought - after Gurus who go round the world meeting and speaking to thousands, sometimes millions of people to tender ideas and formulae of how to succeed in life, be it at home in the family, at work among colleagues and the boss, and in society.

The ultimate aim of all these motivational speakers is to give to people a formula for success.

Well, in my opinion, Tagore has offered to the world a great formula for success in life. And it is his signature poem "*Where the mind is without fear*".

*Where the mind is without fear*

*And the head is held high*

*Where knowledge is free*

*Where the world has not been broken into narrow domestic walls*

*Where tireless strivings stretches its arms towards perfection*

*Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way*

*into the dreary desert, sand of dead habit*

*And where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and  
action*

*Into that heaven of freedom, my Father,*

*Let my country awake.*

It is my conviction that if we can apply the lofty principles contained in this poem, we can be sure to be successful in all aspects of our human life.

Tagore wrote this poem at a time when India was still under colonial rule. He found that the people of India were too subservient to the oppressors and did not realize their own potential. He wanted them to rise up and be free and he gave that formula and prayed that his country awakes to that heaven of freedom. For him freedom means knowing your potential and working towards fulfilling it. For him freedom was like being in heaven. But my contention is that if today, we adopt this poem and live up to its ideals in our own lifetime we can make of our life a success.

First of all, to have a *mind without fear* and to be able *to hold your head high* it requires self confidence, self pride for being who you are.

As from the second stanza, Tagore continues to tell us *how* to develop that self confidence and that self pride.

Firstly, it is through education, which to him is free, or should be free. It is up to us to find it and benefit from it. True it is that education may *not* have been free in the past but today there is an abundance of opportunities for the taking.

However, what kind of education does he profers? He says:

*“We have to come to this world to accept it, not merely to know it. We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy. The highest kind of education is that which does not merely give us information but make our life in harmony with all of existence”.*

And here is how to obtain that fullness by sympathy. He tells us not to build *narrow domestic walls*. Very often we **do** build walls, not realizing that, in so doing, we imprison ourselves within these same walls.

We think that we should build walls in order to keep our belongings, beliefs and traditions all to ourselves because if we open our doors to the world and to others we run the risk of losing what we have. Well, the contrary is true according to Tagore. He thinks, like St Francis of Assisi, “C’est en donnant que l’on recoit” -“It is by giving that we receive”.

This ideal is well reflected in Tagore’s Poem No. 31 of Geethanjali.

*“Prisoner, tell me who was it that bound you?”*

*“It was my master”* said the prisoner.

*“I thought I could outdo everybody in the world in wealth and power, and I amassed in my own treasure house the money due to my king. When sleep overcame me I lay upon the bed that was for my Lord, and on waking up I found I was a prisoner of my own treasure-house”.*

The next principle Tagore wants us to uphold is Truth. Truth entails honesty, integrity and self-respect. For Gandhiji – God is truth. Truth is divine. Indeed life experiences have shown that Truth is a better choice than falsehood. Because experience has shown that, sooner or later, the truth will be out and anyone who has survived with falsehood, ultimately loses face and loses his honour and himself. Winners know that it is better to be on the side of truth. Abraham Lincoln, in his letter to the head teacher of the school that his son was attending informs the teacher of what kind of teaching he would like his son to receive from the school:

*Teach him that it is far more honourable to lose than to cheat.* Here, Lincoln is linking truth with one’s honour, one’s conscience and one’s self-respect.

In poem No. 4 of Geethanjali

Tagore in a prayerful mood says:

*“I shall ever try to keep all untruths out of my thoughts,  
knowing that thou art that truth which has kindled the light of reason in my  
mind”.*

One cannot have a mind without fear and keep his head high if he does not uphold the truth. A clear conscience and the knowledge that one’s honour is not tainted contribute to a mind without fear and the confidence to keep one’s head high.

In that letter Abraham Lincoln also asks:

*To teach him that a dollar earned is worth far more than a dollar found.*

He is referring to **effort**. This is exactly what Tagore means in the ensuing lines of his poem:

*Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection.*

Not only work and effort but giving it your all, going to your limit, doing your best, working with passion in order to achieve your objective. Go for gold, *stretch your arms towards perfection.*

You will agree with me that when that kind of attitude is deployed there is no reason why we should not be successful in what we do. Shiv Khera takes the example of Mohammed Ali the great boxing champion to exemplify how effort brings success.

Mohamed Ali used to say:

*“I am the greatest”*

*“I am the champion”*

That is positive thinking.

But according to Shiv Khera, positive thinking alone does not guarantee success.

Mohammad Ali did not become the champion by just shouting “*I am the champion*”. He trained himself until exhaustion. It is positive thinking **with** extra effort.

Before the match, he was constantly in the ring, punching the bag till complete exhaustion, day after day.

Shiv Khhera says: Winners bring that extra effort even when it hurts.

But in our effort to succeed, sometimes we fail. But even if we fail we can learn from that failure. Winners never give up. Winners let themselves be tired. We should be tireless, says Tagore. *Tireless efforts help us strive towards perfection. Towards success. Failures are stepping-stones to success.*

*Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection.*

Now, going forward.

We, human beings are endowed with a mind that can think and analyse and on the basis of our reasoning, take decisions. We take decisions, good or bad, every minute. We have liberty of choice, we have, the freedom of choice.

Some decisions that we take can lead us to success and other decisions do not take us to success. Sometimes even to failure. Failing a test or an examination or failing to achieve some objectives one sets out to achieve are common occurrences that one should accept and take as a challenge. Learn from the failure and take necessary steps, strive harder to turn failure into success – is the golden rule.

Here I have to mention a few decisions that can only lead to **failure in the end**, although it can bring transitory pleasures. I am referring the excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs especially synthetic drugs. It is our mind that lead us towards these – But that decision lead towards self-destruction.

Tagore entreats us to use our reasoning power, our sense of discrimination, of discernment.

He expresses the wish that *the clear stream of reason is not lost into the dreary desert sand of dead habit or shall I say deadly habit.*

Some habits, Tagore warns, lead us to the dreary desert sand, i.e. the unproductive, sterile, dull situation of the loser.

He is telling us what *not* to do. In other words what we have to avoid, that is developing some habits that are deadly, that can only lead to destruction and death.

In poem No. 4. Tagore says: *I shall ever try to drive all evils away from my heart and keep my love in flower,*

*knowing that thou hast thy seat in the innermost shrine of my heart.*

On the other hand, he entreats us to use our mind and he wishes that we let *our mind lead us forward into ever widening thought and action.*

He does not say the person or the individual but he says the **mind**. That's because it is our **mind** that makes us take decision and which makes us who we are.

Psychologists and motivational speakers say that **we are what we think**.

“Whatever thou thinketh and believeth, thou can achieve”, they say.

Such is the power of the mind. And Tagore knows it. He advises that we use our mind judiciously and indulge in ever-widening *thought and action*. Thoughts that allow us to grow in knowledge and understanding. But not just abstract thoughts. Thoughts must be translated into action. Productive concrete activities that make a difference for the better.

I interpret this couplet as entreating us to indulge in literary, cultural, social and spiritual activities – all of which are subsumed in what we call culture.

Again in Poem no.4

Tagore says:

*“And it shall be my endeavour to reveal thee in my actions, knowing it is thy power gives me strength to act”.*

**Culture**, according to David Whitehead, a renowned educational psychologist is:

*activity of thought*

*and receptiveness to beauty and*

*humane action.*

Not only do we humans have a mind that can think, learn and acquire knowledge and understanding but we also have a heart that can feel and appreciate.

Wordsworth says:

*“Thanks to the human heart by which we live*

*Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and tears*

*To me the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that*

*Do often lie too deep for tears”.*

The next line in Geethanjali reads – *Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought an action.*

Ever-widening thought and action here means that these activities of thought like discussions, debates, competitions, and other activities that help us to be receptive to beauty like admiring a painting, or enjoying a piece of music, being happily entertained by a concert, a drama piece or a film that widens our horizon, make us grow and develop.

But then the question is: who is that thee. Where the mind is led forward by thee.

Is it God? How does he act? Will God talk to us? Do we expect God to physically take our hand and lead us forward?

My interpretation is "thee" stands for our own divine self which is our Atma. Our own free will or our Conscience".

I would say that for Tagore the thee in the poem "Where the mind is without fear" is the same as the "Life of my life" that he refers to in poem no. 4

*Life of my life, I shall ever try to keep my body pure,  
Knowing that thy living touch is upon all my limbs.*

We are the *atma* which is in the image of the *Paramatma*

The poem ends on a prayerful note:

*Into that heaven of freedom, my father let my country awake.*

For Tagore, it was a cry from the heart for his people, the Indian people, subservient to the British masters to awaken and take their destiny- that is their personal development in their hands.

I am here to say to you that we can take our destiny – i.e our own personal growth and development - in our hands.

But then it should not be a prayer to an inaccessible God. But to that Divinity which is in us; Our own free will. Our soul force.

Wordsworth says:

*"Trailing clouds of Glory do we come from God who is our home"*

To summarise the analysis of this Poem, I would say that Tagore extols personal qualities like:

1. Acquiring the right kind of education
2. Having an open mind
3. Abiding to truth
4. Hardwork, that is tireless strivings
5. Being reasonable in taking decisions
6. Be involved in cultural, social and spiritual activities

are prerequisites to freedom that will give the person self-esteem and to have a mind without fear and able to hold his head high and be a successful, attractive and happy person – a productive citizen who can contribute to his country rising to new heights.

I also find that

The very same ideas, expressed in a different way, echoed in the great poem **IF**, which is the most popular poem in the world.

This poem starts with:

*“If you can keep your head  
when all about you are losing theirs  
and blaming it on you”*

and after a number of other **Ifs**, ends with these lines:

*“If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run”.*

*“Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it”.*

*“And what is more, you’ll be a man, my son”.*

i.e you will be a successful, proud person with a mind without fear and a head held high.

With this, Ladies & Gentlemen, I can say I am done. That was my essential message, especially to young students but also to teachers and parents, who for their children are the first and always the most important and effective teachers.

But additionally I would like to say that:

Geethanjali is a treasure house of wisdom and lofty ideas on a number of important topics.

Specifically on Children, on Nature and on his concept of God, among others.

### **On Children**

In Poem No. 8, I take it that Tagore is addressing himself to parents and teachers and speaking about how to raise a child.

He says that parents must not pamper their children and keep them indoors not wanting them to be stained with dust. He would like to see children play in the open, in the healthful dust of the earth, in the great common fair of human life-i.e in open air, in nature and among his friends. He would like to see children listen to stories told by the elders, he would like to see them play and participate in activities such as singing, dancing and drama.

### **On Nature**

Children need to be exposed to a number of stimuli to arouse their curiosity. Children are naturally curious – a fertile type of curiosity that allows them to learn about the world. In their early years, children are very receptive. When Tagore was a boy he had all around him in his home – literature, music and gardens.

Tagore lived very close to nature.

Tagore's Father relates how:

Once upon a river, Tagore fell into contemplation because of the beauty of landscape; and the boat rowers waited for eight hours before they could continue their journey.

The father also talked about how the squirrels come from the boughs and climb on to his knees and the birds alight upon his hands.

### **Tagore's concept of God**

Tagore calls God- *the life of his life*. He says “*Our finite intellect cannot reveal the nature of the infinite. God is within us but we wrongly search for him in the outer world*”.

Tagore finds God in Nature and in Man, in the toil of Man, working to produce food for everyone, in man's work of art and science.

Tagore is all out against blind faith and superstition.

*“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads”* he says:

*“Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?”* He asks.

And he says:

*“Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!”*

*“He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground”*

*“and where the path-maker is breaking stones”.*

*“He is with them in sun and in shower”*

*“and his garment is covered with dust”.*

*Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil.*

*Come out of thy meditation and leave aside thy flowers and incense!*

*What harm is there if thy clothes become tattooed and stained?*

*Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.*

This description of God in the work of Man finds an echo in Subramania Bharathi's poem entitled Sarasvathi.

Bharathi says:

*“Sarasvathi is in the bird's song; in the Gopuram of the Kovil; in the work of Art and Literature. Build a school, give letters to the poor. This is the kind of worship that would please Sarasvathi”.*

### **A Story**

There was that very rich and successful planter and his poor but hardworking, honest labourer. One day the planter had promised to the high priest in the Kovil uphill that, as usual, we would make a donation to the Kovil. That time it was a big bunch of yellow ripe bananas. He had counted the number of bananas, exactly 100 – and he promised to send those 100 bananas as donation.

So he asked his worker to take the bunch uphill and to hurry up as the prayer time was near.

The worker agreed readily but asked to be allowed to have his lunch first. The planter got furious and forced the worker to climb the hill with the heavy load of bananas without wasting time.

So, the worker had no choice but to obey.

After climbing some 12 steps, the labourer got very very tired and was feeling terribly hungry. He stopped for a while; placed the bunch on the step and sat down. Looking at the juicy bananas, he could not resist taking two of them and ate. Reinvigorated he resumed his climb. He felt tired and hungry again. Repeated the scenario, eating two other bananas. Finally, he reached the Kovil at the top of the hill and delivered the donation.

Reaching down the hill, he immediately went to see his boss to confess what he did.

The planter was out of himself.

“How could you do that to me? I have promised 100 bananas. I will be cursed, because of you”.

And he tied the poor fellow to a tree and gave him a good beating as punishment. Back home the planter was still mad with his worker and in his sleep he kept thinking and asking God for forgiveness.

“I had promised you 100 bananas, my Lord, but you got only 96. Please pardon me. Do not curse me.”

In his sleep God replied to him:

**“I got only 4 bananas”**

Ladies and Gentlemen you can make your own conclusion as to where God manifests Himself!

I totally espouse these Teachings of Rabindranath Tagore and Subramania Bharathi when it comes to – where to find God – and what kind of prayer would please Him.

In this memorial lecture, I have wanted to celebrate Tagore’s legacy in the form of a living and a potent formula for success in our present day life.

Tagore’s teachings through Geethanjali is mainly focussed on the development of **character**.

‘According to motivational speaker, Stephen Covey, personal development is expressed in two fundamental overarching descriptions of a person – his **personality** and his **character**.

*Personality* stands for *competence* – what you can do,

for *position* i.e social status

for *possessions* - what you have

**Character** stands for humility,

- integrity,
- courage,
- service,
- responsibility,
- education and wisdom – what we call soft skills

Covey believes that **character** is more important than personality.

Personality is important but it is secondary to character. He says personality is secondary greatness but *primary greatness* is **character**.

I would like to conclude by reading to you a poem on Rabindranath Tagore's presence here at RTI. A poem written by my friend Ramesh Ramdoyal.

***Gurudev,***

*Now that we have built a house for you on this land,  
Please make yourself at home in our island,  
Where your countrymen in their hundreds of thousands came  
and planted the lore of our ancient motherland.*

***Gurudev,***

*Harken to our prayer, you who know the depths of our hearts,  
You who have pondered on past, present and future paths,  
Let your blessings fall on this land like the gentle rain  
Let the winds fill its nooks and corners with your melodious strains.*

***Gurudev,***

*Fill our ears with words that come from the depth of truth  
Fill our hearts with yearnings nobler than material belongings  
Lift up our spirits with the Shakti that nurtures  
our ancestral culture  
Help us discover within ourselves mankind's spiritual treasure.*

***Gurudev,***

*In our long journey from the lap of Mother India  
to the global world of the diaspora,  
Show us how we can build the house of the future  
on the bedrock of our millenary culture.*

Ladies & Gentlemen,

I have tried to explain that Tagore's signature Poem – "*where the mind is without fear*" is a potent programme for developing that *primary greatness* – CHARACTER.

And I would consider myself fulfilled if, through this lecture, I have been able to kindle a greater interest in Tagore's works among all or at least some of you Students, Parents & Teachers.

Thank You.