

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE ON THE OCCASION OF INAUGURATION OF CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS OF THE AWARD OF NOBEL PRIZE TO KABIGURU RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

Santiniketan, West Bengal: 19-12-2012

I am extremely happy to inaugurate the centenary celebrations of the award of Nobel Prize to Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore which is beginning with this international seminar "Vibrations between Tagore and the World: Culture and Literature with special reference to China" being organized jointly by Visva-Bharati, SANTINIKETAN and the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

As we stand on the threshold of the centenary of Asia's first Nobel Prize to Gurudev in 1913, we remember with reverence his idea of the vibration between the self and the world, especially with reference to his special regard for China.

The Nobel citation noted Rabindranath's "profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the west." The 'spellbound contemplation of divinity and his love of all life' that the Nobel Committee Report had noted was complemented by "the descriptions of the life of common people of his own country" as it

touched "the ever increasing harmony of the soul with the life of nature itself".

The idea of civilizational meeting of the world through knowledge of each others cultures and literature was an idea that had fascinated Tagore. At Visva-Bharati, he had asserted that in whatever is the best of civilization, every single individual can state his right. The ideal of Visva-Bharati '*Yatra Visvam Bhavati eka needam*' – *where the world makes its home in a single nest*" was the visualization of a multicultural cosmopolitan space of equality, exchange and harmony across borders of caste, creed or nation. The 'unwavering faith in global man' was what the Nobel Prize had recognized.

Tagore had realized the special role of Asia in the pattern of vibrations between the self and the world. Consequently when he had received the invitation by the Peking Lecture Association he wrote, "*When the invitation from China reached me, I felt it was an invitation to India herself and as her humble son, I must accept.*" He later added that "*a poet's mission is to attract the voice which is yet inaudible in the air; to inspire faith in the dream which is unfulfilled ... I ask your help in joining hands in opening this path of friendship between China and our neighbors all over Asia*". It is with this mission that he wrote on March 20, 1924 prior to his departure to China, "*I am hoping that our visit will re-establish the cultural and spiritual connection between China and India*".

What did Tagore seek within China? He had noted from 1881 onwards the oppression suffered under imperial rule by both nations. But he had also carefully noted the movements of the ideas of spirituality, non-violence and tolerance across the borders especially through the message of Buddhism. It was this historical bond that he sought to revitalize.

Interestingly Tagore's winning the Nobel Prize was also a moment of reassertion of an Asian dignity within China. As early as 1915 his poems and stories had been translated into Chinese. The tumultuous reception that he received from poets and intellectuals in 1924 served as testimony to the appeal of his ideas among the Chinese literati. The title accorded to him *Zhu Zhen Dan* – “the Indian Sun” put him in the ranks of the ancient Indian monks who had initiated the seamless movement of ideas across borders. The keynote of Tagore's *Talks in China* in 1924 emphasized the necessity of the two Asian neighbours to strengthen bonds across culture and together strive for the welfare of its citizens rather than look for material greed or power.

Tagore's attempt to build bridges was however not a mere utopian dream. At Visva-Bharati, where he had initiated the study of world cultures, he started the programme for Chinese studies in 1921, with the help of Sylvan Levi, Vidusekhara Sastri and Lin Wo Jiang. The turning point arrived when Tagore met Tan Yun Shan in

1927 at Singapore. Tan Yun Shan's visit to Santiniketan in 1928 saw the founding of the Sino Indian Societies in China and India leading to the inauguration of Cheena Bhavana in April 1937. The vibrations that Tagore had dreamt of had attained reality with the able help of Tan Yun Shan. Over a period of time the Cheena Bhavana in particular has housed rare books, bridged cultures and been a first in the people to people relationship with China that is so vital for global harmony. In 1957, the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai was conferred the *Deshikottama* by Visva-Bharati creating a new chapter in Sino Indian relations.

We often see nations as monoliths with rigid boundaries. But visionaries like Tagore have made us realize that literature, histories and cultures represent common ideals of humanity that transcend national limits. It is this sense of a shared humanity, a *Visva-Bodh* that Tagore sang of in his literature and music and attempted to realize at Visva-Bharati. It is thus fitting that the celebration of Asia's first Nobel prize should be initiated at Visva-Bharati and be an occasion, not only to reiterate our historical bonds, but the need for cooperation and close exchange of ideas in the future.

India and China stand on the threshold of a leap into an exciting phase of global exchange, where harnessing of ideas and resources for global welfare can serve as a major fulcrum for world peace and welfare. This seminar

thus will not merely celebrate the award of a Nobel Prize to an individual; it will celebrate the potential of the idea of exchange, co-operation and multiculturalism.

I congratulate Visva Bharati for the true spirit of universal cooperation and inclusion that it has displayed while celebrating Gurudev's 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary. Under the guidance of the National Committee headed by the Prime Minister and the National Implementation Committee, that I had the honour to head as the then Finance Minister; Visva-Bharati has worked in perfect collaboration with governmental agencies, so as to bring out Tagore's vision, achievements and works before the entire world.

Let us use this occasion to remember the abiding idea of his life: *"I feel what we suffer from in the present day is this calamity of obscurity, of seclusion, that we have missed our opportunity of offering hospitality to humanity and asking the world to share the best things we have got ... The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity. This ideal of unity never rejects anything, any race, or any culture"*.

On 26 May, 1921, in an impromptu speech delivered in Stockholm, Rabindranath Tagore had asked the question, *"What the reason could be of my poems being accepted and honoured so much?"* In the same speech, Rabindranath suggested that, *"my countrymen would*

*share with me, the honour which had been awarded*". Clearly, for the poet it was not merely a personal recognition – in colonial India it was an assertion of a new Indian identity, that could synthesize the traditional and the modern in the global space. At the same time, it was a recognition that in his texts, the reflection of the deepest truths and cadences of Indian philosophy and literature could restart itself in the world.

It is Tagore's perfect sense of synergy and joy – the joy of submission to a divine power, the joy of surrendering the self, of participating in the vast expanse of nature and realizing the nooks and corners of humanity that made him relevant in 1913, and continues to make him relevant today.

Tagore received the Nobel award with nonchalance and humility because it was testament to his ideas of global harmony, exchange of cultures and an assertion of the joy and dignity of life. A hundred years have passed. This centenary celebration will pay homage to the beauty of that idea of collapsing boundaries, human love and selfless service.

Let India and Visva-Bharati pay its tribute by actualizing Tagore's own verses:

*"Where the mind is without fear,  
where the Head is held high,  
Where knowledge is free;*

*Where the world has not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls”*

Ladies and Gentlemen, let that dream be ours as we enter this centenary celebration.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.