

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE
AT THE FIRST RABINDRANATH TAGORE MEMORIAL LECTURE ON
THE OCCASION OF THE INAUGURATION OF THE TAGORE CENTRE**

Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS),

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I am extremely happy to be here in Shimla to deliver the First Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Lecture. Nearly five decades ago, my predecessor Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan inaugurated the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS). He envisaged it to be a place where scholars could pursue the larger questions of life and thought; where, in fellowship, a body of ideas would emerge, and be debated, so that the intellectual fabric of this great nation would be enriched. Dr Radhakrishnan was a man of ideas. He valued them and drew upon authors and texts, from both the East and the West, to talk about the human personality and its destiny. Today, nearly fifty years later, I have the privilege to inaugurate, in this campus, and within the precincts of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, the Tagore Centre for the Study of Culture and Civilization.

As Chairman of the National Implementation Committee to mark 150th Birth Anniversary of Tagore, I had opportunity to examine the proposal for this Centre. I was enthused by its conception and endorsed the idea that the IIAS was the appropriate institutional home for the new Centre. There was a clear affinity between the IIAS and the vision outlined in the proposal for the proposed Tagore Centre which would be dedicated to celebrating the vision of Gurudev. The new Centre would allow for intellectual excursions into the human condition by exploring, in addition to his written work, the new idioms of art, poetry, fiction, drama, and music that he developed in the vast body of his work.

I compliment the IIAS, and those who helped curate the exhibition of his life in such an innovative way and for filling the inner spaces of the Centre with Tagore's life in pictures. The Tagore Centre, I believe, would not limit itself to just study Tagore's work, although this will be a key activity. It will also seek to define a space within the IIAS where the sensibility of the poet, the creativity of the artist, the vision of the seer, the anxieties of the educationist, the questions of the philosopher, and the hopes of

the cosmopolitan would be examined. I am confident it will carry out the above task in conversation with other writers, thinkers, poets, and artists from across the world.

Tagore was a renaissance man and such men are found rarely in history. In their personality, they capture not just the times they live in but also the complex questions of the human mind, the questions that transcend locations and are pertinent for all communities across the world. To therefore have a Centre where one of India's greatest sons, would be in conversation with the world, is indeed a fitting tribute to him. Permit me to recall Dr Radhakrishnan's observation on Tagore: I quote

"He has not so much a message to deliver as a vision to set forth. This is the rarer and greater task, to lift man out of the stale air of common life to regions where great verities are seen undimmed by self and sophistry and man's ordinary existence becomes a life, a passion and a power". Unquote.

Let me, in my lecture today, reflect on two passages, drawn randomly from Tagore's voluminous works, which I believe are relevant to the India of today.

The status of morals in our public domain, or rather the nature of our public morals, and the forces that undermine and weaken them has been a matter of concern for me for some time now. While Tagore's views on nationalism and its pathologies are well known and have been debated extensively, his comments on modernity, which I found in a passage from Tagore's little book on **Nationalism** have not received the same attention.

*"History has come to a stage when the moral man, the complete man, is more and more giving way, almost without knowing it, to make room for the political and the commercial man, the man of the limited purpose. This process, aided by the wonderful progress in science, is assuming gigantic proportions and power, obscuring the human side under the shadow of the soulless organization. We have felt its iron grip at the root of our life, and for the sake of humanity we must stand up and give a warning to all"*Unquote

The 'complete man' being replaced by the 'man of limited purpose' is more true today than it was in Tagore's own time, and constitutes a severe indictment of the consumerist society that we have become. There is, not enough discussion among scholars in the humanities and the social sciences in India on the drivers and implications of this consumerist society. In addition to its consequences for climate change, and the pressures on natural resources that it entails, I am concerned with its

impact on our social and cultural institutions. Perhaps the violence that grips our society today can be attributed to the emergence of this man of 'limited purpose' replacing the 'moral man' particularly since the commercial man is an individualist, and a pleasure maximiser, unconstrained by the norms governing the public interest and the common good. If the Tagore Centre can help in decoding what Tagore meant by 'limited purpose', map its topography, identify the processes that produce it, and give us guidance on what we could do about them, it would be a valuable contribution to our understanding of the human condition in a situation of modernity. The other disturbing phrase in the quote 'shadow of the soulless organization' which is growing and obscuring our moral selves, also needs to be explored.

This brings me to the second passage which conveys my own aspiration for India. In recent years as I have reflected on India's cultural and intellectual heritage, as I have read its many literatures and visited its monuments, as I have listened to its music - both folk and classical - and enjoyed its varied cuisine, I feel that India has the responsibility of giving the world its intellectual leadership by celebrating its plurality and the sources and forms that it has taken. India cannot be diffident about this role. The time has come for us to draw from this intellectual heritage the insights of thought and of practice that the world needs to understand. The study of India's heritage has to go beyond Indology and become the intellectual resources that mainstream studies in philosophy, aesthetics, drama, linguistics and ethics etc., across the world draw upon. The world of knowledge, to use Tagore's brilliant phrase must be, 'illuminated by a festival of lights'. I strongly believe that India can illumine this world with a brightness that is almost magical and I believe that the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, and its Tagore Centre, can be at the forefront of this exercise.

To quote Gurudev from a letter to C.F Andrews on 13 March 1921.

'... Today, at this critical moment of the world's history, cannot India rise above her limitations and offer the great ideal to the world that will work towards harmony and cooperation between the different peoples of the earth? Men of feeble faith will say that India requires to be strong and rich before she can raise her voice for the sake of the whole world. But I refuse to believe it. That the measure of man's greatness is in his material resources is a gigantic illusion casting its shadow over the present-day world – it is an insult to man. It lies in the power of the materially weak to save the world from this illusion and India, in spite of her penury and humiliation can afford to come to the rescue of

humanity ... I feel that the true India is an idea and not a mere geographical fact.'

We must assimilate Tagore's belief that 'wealth is not a precondition of wisdom'. Tagore's ideal is a moral leadership that comes not from power or riches but from ideas and truth. I believe that the requirement of our times is for intellectuals to engage with moral issues and provide guidance to the people.

I am troubled by a sense of moral drift that has beset us and begun to dominate our public lives. We do not seem to have exemplars, such as Tagore, today from whom to learn. They say a society needs its exemplars because they serve as the moral compass in uncertain times. We are going through troubled times. In such a phase of moral uncertainty, we should go back to great minds such as Tagore to see what direction he has to offer us.

Tagore was referred to as the sage of Calcutta. He was regarded as the Kaviguru of Bengal. Poets see more deeply what most of us cannot see. They see the true meaning of things around us and of life and society. Tagore was specially gifted in seeing beyond and he made these insights available to us in many forms, through his music, painting, theatre, poetry and prose.

In an imaginary conversation between Kalidasa and Rabindranath, Sri Parmathanath Bisi in his book *Vichitra Samlap* has Kalidasa 'express his deep gratitude to Rabindranath and explain that for all his fame he is celebrated only as a supreme poet of beauty and enjoyment. It is only Rabindranath who has taken his readers to the innermost soul of his poetry ... And he had to wait fifteen centuries for a critic of the genius of Rabindranath for this'.

The new Tagore Centre will I hope have many grateful Kalidasas. I am delighted, hereby, to gift it to the nation.

Jai Hind.