

Welcome Remarks

by



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at

International Conference

on

**‘Rabindranath Tagore- Envoy of India:
His Vision of India and the World’**

at

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It gives me great pleasure to welcome this distinguished audience. A specially warm welcome is extended to scholars who have come from abroad to participate in this conference on one of the greatest luminaries of modern times -- Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. A towering figure, he continues to evoke immense respect and admiration all over the world. We are happy that this occasion has brought so many of us together to discuss his many contributions.

2. Tagore was not only a poet, writer, philosopher, painter and educationist but also perhaps the most able and astute goodwill ambassador of modern India, who acquainted the world about its vast and rich cultural ethos. The world celebrated the 150th birth anniversary of this multi-faceted genius last year. We are gathered here today not only to appreciate his personality and works, but also to analyse his thoughts and vision and examine their contemporary relevance, especially in the global domain.

3. As you are no doubt aware, ICWA is the oldest and premier foreign policy think tank of India. It enjoys easy access to vast resources of the large strategic and academic community of our country. ICWA has contributed immensely to debates and discussions on India's role in international affairs. The historic Asian Relations Conference, which was addressed by Mahatma Gandhi, was hosted by ICWA in March 1947. The conference was organised under the inspiration of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu and many others of that generation and of subsequent generations were greatly inspired by Tagore's ideas and writings.

4. Nehru's pan-Asianism, articulated through the Asian Relations Conference and the subsequent creation of Non-aligned Movement, following the Bandung Conference, bears the mark of Tagore's thought. Nehru was greatly inspired by Tagore's idea of Asian Unity. Tagore's ideas also provided significant inputs to the policy of decolonisation, racial equality, civilisational commonalities, unity of the decolonised, re-engagement with Asia and the 'Panchsheel' or the five principles of co-existence. Similarly South-South cooperation, universal education and tolerance of dissent, draw sustenance from Tagore's philosophy.

5. Tagore was a great votary of universal brotherhood and an advocate of a global order where man is not restricted by the narrow boundaries of nationalism. His vision was reflected in his simple words and I quote:

‘Where the world has not broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic wall...’

6. Tagore’s openness towards other cultures and nations, an ardent fight against prejudice and injustice, his patriotism as well as progressive ideas made him an iconic figure. He believed that inclusivity and synergic interaction between cultures would propel the world towards harmony and global fellowship.

7. A passionate traveller, Tagore visited 34 countries on five continents between 1878 and 1932. Rabindranath Tagore, noted Humayun Kabir, was the first great Indian in recent times who went out on a cultural mission for restoring contacts and establishing friendships with peoples of other countries without any immediate or specific educational, economic, political or religious aim. Travel not only broadened his sense of self, it also contributed to his philosophy of internationalism and the establishment and development of his university -- Visva-Bharati. Interactions with the brightest minds of that time helped Tagore to forge personal and intellectual bonds abroad that reinforced the idea of international brotherhood. His mission was to synthesize the East and the West. He was India’s greatest cultural envoy.

8. No one had a deeper sense of the value of history and the historical past than Tagore. Yet, he had the ability to think through the horizon of the future, to imagine India and the world's future possibilities in terms at once universalist as well as rooted in the particularities of myriad cultures.

9. In this context, it is important to evaluate his travels to 34 countries ranging from Japan to Argentina and examine how he conveyed the essential values of India to the world. It is also necessary to assess the extent to which his journeys influenced his own views of the Universal Man and his world view.

10. Tagore's aspirations for free India and his vision of global and Asian unity contributed to shaping the tenets and ethos of the foreign policy of independent India, and ignited the debate regarding their relevance in the contemporary world. This is a facet of Tagore that does not seem to have been extensively explored yet. There is a need, therefore, to analyze Tagore's ideas on how India should engage with the world and the degree to which these influenced the makers of India's foreign policy from Nehru to Indira Gandhi and later, and how they were translated into foreign policy initiatives by India. Above all, we should introspect their relevance to unfolding developments in the 21st century.

11. Once again, ICWA welcomes you all and I wish you satisfying and successful deliberations.

