

postulating an affinity: Amartya Sen on capability and Tagore

Mahatma Gandhi was visiting Rabin-dranath Tagore's School in Santiniketan, just outside Calcutta, India. A young girl approached him for an autograph. In her book he penned this entry: "Never make a promise in haste. Having once made it fulfil it at the cost of your life." His words have crossed my mind more than once, especially the first part of the entry "never make a promise in haste" during the composition of this essay. I wondered whether the promise to deliver a keynote address¹ was made too quickly, and whether I could deliver on it even at the cost of my life.

As Amartya Sen recounts² the occasion to which I have referred, there is more to it. Tagore, seeing Gandhi's entry, became agitated and wrote in the girl's book a Bengali poem to the effect that no one can be made "a prisoner forever with a chain of clay." The concluding line of the poem, however, was done in English for Gandhi to read: "Fling away your promise if it is found to be wrong." It too caught my attention, and made me come to realize that I was not quite ready to give up. So, I decided to make at least one more try to see whether I might have something interesting to say about Sen's idea of capability and development from a different angle, as one working from the academic study of religion. Perhaps it may open up new possibilities for reflection on the question of why indigenous peoples of Latin America, despite their accessibility to political power, continue to make little economic and social progress, according to a World Bank Study for the period 1994-2004.

Thus, what I seek to do here is to propose a line of influence, not hitherto discussed, on Amartya Sen's thinking of the capability concept. It is done by postulating that the childhood or background scenes of his idea of capability are not exclusively that which we have come to know in discussions thus far. For concepts, as with individuals, have histories. Their histories, reminded Soren Kierkegaard, "are just as incapable of withstanding the ravages of time." But in and through all the ravaging they "retain a kind of homesickness for the scenes of their childhood."³ Our proposal contends that the Indic intellectual tradition and civilization, in so far as Rabin-dranath Tagore is representative

and a continuation of it, also plays a role in forming the childhood or background scenes of the concept that is at the heart of much of Sen's thinking on economics and development.

Capability is a crucial concept for Sen's book, *Development as Freedom*. He began to broach that idea in his 1979 Tanner Lectures, following it up in a book, *Commodities and Capabilities*, in 1985, and then in collaborated studies with Martha Nussbaum during 1987-89.⁴ Academic discussions on his capability concept reference a western intellectual tradition represented by a line of thinkers that include Rawls, Marx, Adam Smith, Hume, and Aristotle. Occasionally, Sen himself has alluded to them, to Aristotle in particular, following, as it were, a cue from Martha Nussbaum.⁵ For, her discussion of the capability focussed approach is assuredly in the spirit of Aristotle, especially with reference to the human good or functionalities by which we flourish. Both Nussbaum and Sen note that the Greek *dunamin* can be rendered in English as either "potentiality" or "capability of existing."⁶ Sen, however, acknowledges in a footnote to his essay "Capability and Well-Being," that he was simply not aware of any Aristotelian link when he was proposing the capability approach.⁷ What then might have influenced his thinking on capability? Where are to be found the childhood scenes of his capability concept?

This question is all the more pressing when we inquire about the idea of human nature or person that Sen's capability presupposes. That one is presupposed becomes clear from his response⁸ to a criticism by Nussbaum for Sen to be more radical in his critiquing of utilitarian and well-being accounts. Sen has no objection to an Aristotelian route to capability or human functioning. His difficulty is with accepting that as the only route, and as implying that what constitutes human nature has a fixity or objectivity. He maintains that the capability approach must have an incompleteness or open-endedness with respect to intrinsic human activities that are constitutive of good living. Unlike Nussbaum, he avoids offering a list of central capabilities to generate political principles or social goals. Why then does Sen resist any definiteness or

objectivist framework of understanding the human person, and instead opts for a broader understanding of being human in his discussion of capability? The answer to this question may very well lie in his exposure to the philosophical insights and tendencies of Rabin-dranath Tagore, one of his early mentors and at whose school Sen spent most of his childhood and adolescent years.

Thus, what is argued for here is that Sen's capability concept, at the minimal, reflects the spirit of Rabin-dranath Tagore's philosophical thrust on becoming a person. More substantively, central to the argument is that his capability concept has for its moorings a view of human development, freedom, and well-being that is more in the spirit of Tagore, the poet-philosopher. Paramount to Tagore is that freedom of mind and thought is quint-essential for childhood development and forming of the human personality. His play *King of the Dark Chamber* opens with a dialogue alluding to the spirit of freedom in this way: Visitors approaching a city's gate, ask the guard how to reach the festivals. The guard replies "One street is just as good as another here. Any street will lead you there. Go straight ahead, and you cannot miss the place." One of the visitors remarked to a companion, "Just hear what that fool says: 'Any street would lead you there!' Where then would be the sense of having so many streets?" The companion thoughtfully responded:

"You needn't be so awfully put out at that my man. A country is free to arrange its affairs in its own way. As for the roads in our country – well, they are as good as non-existent: narrow and crooked lanes, a labyrinth of ruts and tracks. Our King does not believe in open thoroughfares. He thinks the streets are just so many openings for his subjects to fly away from his kingdom. It is quite the contrary here; nobody stands in your way, nobody objects to your going elsewhere if you like to, and yet the people are far from deserting this kingdom."⁹

The companion's response has a noticeable affinity to how Sen conceptualizes cultural diversity relative to his ideas of capability, choice, and well-being.

Though direct evidence for Tagore's influence is sparse, some is evident in

Development as Freedom (1999), a book whose organizing principle is the idea of freedom. Sen marshals a quote from Tagore to underscore both our basic capacity to enjoy cultural objects from other lands, and to warn of the danger of the image of regional self sufficiency in cultural matters. The quote impressing Sen is from a letter by Tagore to friend about cultural diversity, and reads:

"Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own."¹⁰

Sen had in fact become acquainted with this cultural give and take, marking Tagore's vision of the contemporary world during his student years at Santiniketan. He acknowledges in the essay "Tagore and His India," (1997) his partiality to seeing Tagore as an educator, and explains why. His learning at Santiniketan during pre-university years had a cultural openness to it. "There was," he reports, "something remarkable about the ease with which class room discussions would move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western thought, and then to the culture of China or Japan or elsewhere."¹¹

Cultural openness was part of the larger picture of what Santiniketan nurtured. It sought to nurture in the pre-adolescent age, a freedom to explore, to be curious, and to cultivate thought and imagination, to be creative, to develop awareness of values, to see the world and life in terms of interrelationships and unity. Tagore, in his essay on a poet's school, called for educational institutions to have as their main task that of nourishing our faculties "to give the mind its freedom, to make the imagination fit for the world that belongs to art, and to stir our sympathy for human relationships"¹² According to that picture, the freedom of the mind and spirit is quintessential to educating the whole person with an eye to broader social engagement and personal fulfillment. Sen found himself in such a setting that became in part the childhood or background scenes for the capability concept and approach that he would later develop. His autobiography for the Nobel Lectures Series acknowledges how fundamental this educational setting was for him. For he reported having "had a fairly formed attitude on cultural identity (including an understanding of its

inescapable plurality as well as the need for unobstructed absorption rather than sectarian denial)"¹³ by the time he arrived in Calcutta to begin studies for his undergraduate degree.

I turn now to look more closely at the specific philosophical insights by Tagore that may have influenced Amartya Sen's understanding of the capability concept and approach. The insights are primarily about two ideas that are for Tagore a mutual fit: freedom and personhood or self. It is my contention that what Tagore has to say about freedom may in fact have a regulative significance for Sen's conceptualizing of capabilities and of the capability approach as being open-ended to allow for breath and sensitivity. The insight on freedom may help us gain a deeper appreciation of Sen's resistance to providing a list of central capabilities to serve as the normative basis for policy evaluation. It may also explain what Martha Nussbaum considers to be complex, namely, Sen's supporting in India a secularism that "gives the religions a large political role."¹⁴ But first, the capability approach – how does Sen understand it? And what exactly does he mean by "capabilities?"

Sen's capability approach, according to *Development as Freedom*, is a freedom centered one. It takes into consideration agency or people's freedom to lead the kind of lives that they have reason to value, or to do the things they value doing as part of the good life, of living and doing well. Alternative approaches focus on achievements, income variables, or utility. But this approach has a broader reach in that it directs evaluative attention to a variety of important concerns that are presumably missed by the others. It considers freedom of persons from a twin perspective – both processes and outcomes those persons "have reason to value and seek"¹⁵ Alternatively conceived, the approach is a space that allows for information to make better value judgments. For its information takes into consideration the situation where people are at as they launch into becoming actively involved in shaping their own destinies, given the different options or opportunities realistically available to them.¹⁶ This agency-focussed approach keeps in its evaluative sight two factors simultaneously: the pursuit of the overall agency goals, and the freedom of the agent to achieve the goals.¹⁷

Choosing to live the way one would like has an intrinsic value according to the

capability approach. The act of choosing, and hence the freedom to choose, must therefore be constitutive of a person's being. More light is shed on this becoming of a person through what Sen has to say about the concept "functionings." This concept is also considered to be integral to the capability approach and is anticipated by agency. Basically, a functioning refers to what a person is actually able to do or be, in leading a life that he or she values. There are many kinds of functionings ranging from being adequately nourished, free from avoidable diseases, able to read and write, to being able to participate in community life and so on.¹⁸ "So understood, a functioning has to stand dialectically related to the idea of capability that in turn is determined by a number factors: personal characteristics, social arrangements, personal goals, to name a few. Put slightly differently, capability is essentially the freedom to choose from possible combinations of available functionings. Since a functioning refers to what I am actually able to do or become with respect to well being, then capability must imply also an existential choosing. For its conceptual reach includes not just the range of alternative functionings available to me, but also **how** I value or choose from possibilities in the range."¹⁹

It is this **how** in choosing that holds significance in the way that Sen understands the concept capability, and in fact for his notion of well being. Sen considers that judgement about the **how** has to occur simultaneously and in an integrated way with judgement about the adequacy of the range of available functionings. For the quality of life one enjoys depends both on what one achieves, and on the freedom to choose from a wide range of alternatives.²⁰ Now, in the "**what** one actually achieves" inheres the idea of the **how**. There is an implicit knowing **how** that is a determinative factor in actualizing the **what**. This **how** as a factor does not always come through in what Sen is saying, since he translates human development in terms of substantive freedoms: liberty of political participation and dissent, opportunity to receive basic education and healthcare, and being able to avoid deprivations, destitution, oppression, starvation, and undernourishment. As economist, he is focussing primarily on the material matrix for the enjoyment of a fuller life. But there is in Sen a philosopher alluding to an epistemological distinction between the knowing **how** and the knowing **what** or **that**, with respect to agency-achievement.

Observing that epistemic distinction between the **how** and the **what** would assist in broadening an understanding of what Sen says about human development with respect to cultural diversity. Development has to be taken as coterminous with enhancing the lives of the reasoning agency as well as the freedom to enrich the lives we value. That is, expanding freedom is essentially widening the range of functionings by reducing the conditions contributing to destitution, deprivation, and oppression. The more reduced they are the better the matrix for developing the freedom to achieve the actual living one values. Still, the combination of well-being and freedom may vary considerably from culture to culture as a result of factors such as physical disparities among individuals, environmental diversities, variations in social arrangements, differences in communal behaviour patterns, and the way in which income is distributed within a family.²¹ Taking into consideration that such factors vary from culture to culture even within an economic or geographical region, would impart a semblance of indefiniteness to the capability approach when compared to either a welfare or a resource approach. But that indefiniteness has its roots mainly in the idea of the person or human nature that the capability concept and approach presuppose. The act of evaluating and actualizing what we value in the range of functionings is constitutive of personhood, of living and being well. Such acts evidence a subjectivity or immediate consciousness of our being or self as aspects of human development. Alternatively put, they enlarge our consciousness of a unity that is integral to understanding ourselves and, in fact, reality.

The inspiration for this seemingly thin view of person comes in some measure from Tagore. Sen mentions in one of his essays that Tagore, in conversation with Einstein indicated a view that truth is a quality of persons, realized through men. Expounding it Sen writes: "To assert that something is true or untrue in the absence of anyone to observe ... appeared to Tagore to be deeply questionable."²² It maybe that Tagore was quite perceptive to realize that when philosophy is concerned with reality its concern is with meaning and not truth. Hence the arrival of truth regarding reality²³ has to be a personal matter. Poet-philosopher Tagore, no systematic thinker or metaphysician, cared much about art, poetry, plays, music and activities that give free reign to thought and imagination. Implicit in what he has to say about

such matters is his perspective of becoming a human person. That perspective is best referenced by three concepts that are made to inter-relate: art, surplus, and vision. To limit our considerations here to what Tagore has to say about art is sufficient to make an acquaintance with his understanding of person or self for the purpose of showing Sen's affinity to him on the idea of capability.

Personality and its expression is the primary object of art for Tagore. In reflection on the question "What is art?" he considers that art is born of the heart's relationship with the world,²⁴ He repeatedly mentions the connection between the two, referring to art as having for its "vital point a principle of unity, and its harmonics in the personality."²⁵ Continuing in that vein, Sen expands on the idea of person through an analogy that bears somewhat on aesthetics. He writes: "When we want to know the food-value of certain of our diets, we find in it their components parts; but its taste-value is in its unity, which cannot be analysed. Matter, taken by itself, is an abstraction which can be dealt with by science; manner which is merely manner, is an abstraction which comes under the law of rhetoric. But when they are indissoluble one, then they find their harmonics in our complexity of matter and manner, thoughts and things, motives and actions."²⁶

In reflecting on art and personality, Tagore drew on Upanishadic poets for inspiration. One of their lines referencing income and capability, reads "Wealth is dear to us, not because we desire the fact of the wealth itself, but because we desire ourselves."²⁷ Explicating it, Tagore asserts that wealth is one of the items that can arouse our emotions and that we feel ourselves in it is the reason we love it. It is hardly wealth for wealth's sake. Nor is wealth the only item that arouses the emotions. Whatever does so arouses also our self-feeling. For, when the emotions are in excess of what can be absorbed by the object arousing it, the surplus returns to us making us conscious of ourselves.²⁸ Using old fashion economic idioms, Sen points out that in poverty, attention is directed to objects that have to be acquired to meet needs. But once the needs are surpassed there is a feeling of being rich, of having a wealth of goodness. It is on this excess or fund of surplus that science and philosophy thrive, and that ethics is founded. For in Tagore's estimate, honesty is valued "not for being the best policy,

but because it can afford to go against all policies."²⁹ Ability to experience intensely the surplus or "efflux of consciousness" in the personality is a distinguishing feature of our humanity, separating us from creatures with only basic biological drives, instincts, and needs. Not just ethical behaviour but also art is outlet for the surplus "in our heart's relationship with the world,"³⁰ An outlet is a way of managing how we choose to express a surplus, and is therefore both a capability and expression of the infinite dimension of the self or human person.

Continuing to reflect on "what is art?," Tagore unambiguously notes that human life has a finite and an infinite side. The finite is where we exhaust ourselves, for it relates to the material and biological aspect of us. The infinite is the inexhaustible in us, for it relates not to accumulation of wealth or the world of materiality, but to our subjectivity: aspiration, enjoyment and sacrifice, revealing and perfecting itself in symbols that have elements of immortality.³¹ Tagore remarks that the point at which man feels his infinity, he is in truth, "divine, and the divine is the creator in him."³² That, for Tagore, is Reality – living in his own creation and thereby making the world his own world – making truth one's own through action.³³ The more one does this, the more is actualized that which is latent in him. Tagore expresses our infinitude through subjectivity in his essay on the realization of action this way: "in that actualization man is ever making himself more and more distinct, seeing himself clearly under newer and newer aspects in the midst of his varied activities, in the state, in society. This vision makes for freedom."³⁴

Tagore, defines human nature in terms of our consciousness of the inexhaustible abundance within, and thereby paradoxically wanting to be more than oneself. Using the idioms of commerce, he remarks that "man is a spiritual being and not a mere living money-bag jumping from profit to profit, and breaking the backbone of the human races in its financial leapfrog."³⁵ Our consciousness of the infinite, a distinguishing mark, encompasses also the finite aspect of our being. We are striving to make immortal the consciousness of the infinite is us by making the whole world ours, the universal within us to consummate in the unique.³⁶ This seeking or striving has multiple realizability, and a variety of functionings including ones that are ethical and aesthetical – art,

poetry, drama, music, monuments, museums, symbolic representations of various kinds. Capability is the manner or **how** we choose among the variety of realizable ways (functionings) to bring about that unity or inner harmony of ourselves with the world – how we chose to shape ourselves to live long and well.

Sen's *Development as Freedom* begins with that very question that the Upanishadic poet frames rhetorically in a dialogue: How far can wealth go to obtain what we desire, reasoning in freedom, namely, living long and well? The question of a wife to a husband draws a negative answer. This gives Sen a window to focus on the broader question of lives that we can lead or develop, rather than merely on issues of economic wealth, gross national product, and income indices. But he eschews grappling directly with what might pertain to subjectivity, and thus does not have to articulate a robust view of human nature. There is enough, however, demonstrated here to sustain a hypothesis that his view of person in the approach to development as freedom, to poverty and to conceptualizing capability is in the spirit of Tagore.

According to a Tagorean spirit, the human person at a minimum is more than a mere biological being. For the self has the capability to gain an "inner" and "outer" knowledge of itself through evaluating how it relates itself harmoniously with its environment. The human is simultaneously creature of its environment and creator of its own values. More specifically, the inner and outer corresponds to the dual set of desires in us that have to be harmonized. One set relates to our immediate sensate desires. The other to our physical system as a whole and includes our unconscious seeking of health and well being, and our establishing a link between the past and the future. Tagore refers to the latter set as "the wish in us which does its work in the depths of our social being. It is the wish for the welfare of society," transcending the "limits of the present and the personal. It is on this side of the infinite."³⁷ Whoever is wise, for Tagore, is seeking to harmonize the two and can thus realize the higher self.

Clearly, recovery of a fully human life occurs within and not outside the context of a social structure. The human is playful as in artistry, and is at the same time a social being. Having economic sense is one of the capacities exercised in dealing with wider social problems. It was

just such a sense that led Tagore to view suspiciously and rejected the proposal by Gandhi to alleviate poverty by all of India making home-spun yarn. To consider home spinning as the only route to eradicating poverty would be a failure to hold before the mind of his people a complete picture of welfare. Tagore conceptualized that picture in this way: 'The people's welfare is an amalgam of several ingredients. To take one of them by itself cannot do much good. Health, recreation, the activities of the body and mind – thrown together in one combination they make the picture complete.'³⁸

He went on to note also the importance of having in the many parts of India "examples of different types of revived life,"³⁹ in short, a plurality of lives we value.

This Tagorean view of human person resonates in Sen's thinking about religions vis-à-vis India as a secular state. The claim by Nussbaum that Sen's position on religions is complex may have to do less with perplexity and more with the fact that it does not fit to the paradigm of Western secularism, discussed as the secularization thesis.⁴⁰ His position is not at all at variance with the *dharmic* tradition of Indian civilization and culture, once the philosophical anthropology sketched here for Tagore is kept in mind. That anthropology takes into account the human as a social being, with duties and welfare obligation. According to India's historical tradition, the society, and not state or government, looks after the welfare of the people. The state for Tagore regulates in conformity to the laws it makes based on the use of force and in that sense it presupposes disagreement. Society, however, is the well-spring of constructive activity, a living organism that develops practices of social service, sacrifice and cooperation to promote the welfare of the people.⁴¹ Social cohesiveness or *dharma* (a spiritualized secularism awkwardly rendered in English as "religion") upholds an organic unity out of a plurality. Society is in effect a self-expression of man and is interpreted by Tagore to mean that India's problems are of a social kind and have to be approached through social system and cooperation, and not through government. Modern constitutional India preserves that interpretation in so as it understanding its secularism not as demise of, or indifference to religion, but as symmetry in its treatment of all religions, showing partiality to none.

Sen, arguing from worldly affairs, takes a similar position to Tagore on tolerance of religious diversity, which he sees as part of the long tradition of public reasoning and dialogue in Indian civilization. This means that the India as a state could be secular, while still relating to all religions in a neutral way.⁴² Why tolerance of religion and religious pluralism? Religion understood as *dharma*, is the source of energy for social change that removes life-threatening risks. The liberty of religious beliefs is among one of our capabilities. Sen explains India's symmetry in treatment of religions by the example of the state offering financial support to all hospitals, irrespective of their religious connections.⁴³ But this secularism of India has incompleteness, for it does not specify the distance at which the state must keep all religions. While the lack of specificity may create problems it may lead also, as Sen remarks, to opportunities as well.

To conclude, the capability concept and approach by Sen subtend from views of human development, freedom, and well being that are in the spirit of the philosophical insights of Tagore, the poet philosopher. That is, the recovery of a fully human self is understood in terms of living and doing well, and hence the removal or reduction of destitution, deprivation, and oppression. In short, human development and life imply more than meeting just the minimal required for biological existence.

What is seemingly puzzling is why there is a relatively thin view of the concept person implicit in *Development as Freedom*, if Sen has an affinity to the spirit of Tagore. An answer would require recalling that for Tagore the self or person has two polarities that must be kept in harmony. At one pole, the strength is "in the fullness of its community with all things" and is subject "to the rule of universal law."⁴⁴ At the other, the strength is in self-transcendence in which the self reveals to itself its own meaning.⁴⁵ Sen has avoided this latter pole in his treatment of development and capabilities, thereby imparting the semblance of a thin view of the concept person. But, as shown here, resonances of the avoided pole persist in his conceptualizing of capability. For, in so far as his capability approach takes into consideration **more than opulence and income indices**, Sen is making a point similar to what Tagore has rendered this way: cultures and societies are to be

judged not by "what they have and in what quantity but [by] what they express and how."⁴⁶ They are enough such resemblances, I would suggest, to warrant postulating an affinity between Amartya Sen and Rabindranath Tagore.

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- Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), p. 99. Gandhi visited Santiniketan in 1925 and 1940. The incident may be in connection with the first visit, for Tagore refused to become involved with the charka (spinning movement) Gandhi was proposing for all India as a means to attain self-respect, self-responsibilities, and capacities for self realization and the alleviating of poverty against British rule and institutions that they considered to be socio-economically and spiritually dehumanizing. See also body of this text referenced by note 37 below.
- Soren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1965), p. 47. For the Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), rendition see p. 9.
- See note 1 above, and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 11.
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- Sen, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 53, 56.
- Sen, "Capability and Well-Being," p. 35
- Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 75.
- In *Quality of Life* essay, Sen makes this point but not as sharply as it is put here. p. 34.
- Ibid.
- Sen, *Development*, pp. 70-72.
- Sen, *Argumentative Indian*, p. 104.
- To note, in Sanskrit the word "satya" may refer to either "reality" or "truth," and the latter is connected to the idea of values. Tagore refers to reality as one with three phases designated as sat, chit, ananda (being, consciousness, and bliss). See his *Creative Unity*, p. 48
- Rabindranath Tagore, *Lectures and Addresses* (Delhi: Macmillan Pocket Tagore Ed., 1995), p. 93.
- Ibid., p. 87.
- Ibid. pp. 87f.
- Ibid., p. 84.
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- Tagore, *Sadhana*, p. 120
- Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity* (Delhi: Macmillan Pocket Tagore Ed., 1995), p. 107.
- Tagore, *Sadhana*, p. 70
- Ibid., p. 83.
- Tagore, *Towards Universal Man*, p. 282.
- Ibid.
- Contemporary exponent of the thesis include Peter Berger, Bryan Wilson, and Steve Bruce.
- Tagore, *Towards Universal Man*, p. 51. On society and state Tagore writes "the reservoirs of the country did not run dry if the king alone was negligent." This is because the people or society has the obligation to hold together its interconnectedness. Two concepts of the Indic tradition have to be kept in mind for a fuller understanding of the social obligations: *lokasamr-gaha*, and *svadharma*. The first refers to the interconnected of society. The second is to inherent duties, what is of one's nature or is commensurate with one's capacities and drives to achieve. It is a type of dharma or "holding together."
- Sen, *Argumentative Indian*, pp. 16,19
- Ibid., pp. 296f.
- Tagore, *Sadhana*, p. 69
- Ibid., p. 76.
- Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 22.