

Sir Patrick Geddes: Modernity, Romanticism and Humanism

A.C. Mohapatra

"We will fight for the ideals and sacred things of the City, both alone and with many.

Thus, in all these ways, we will transmit this City, not only not less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."

Oath of the Athenian Youth, in CIE, 1949 ed., viii

"The old city leaps to life again, ... it becomes a promise of the future, a vision of the City Beautiful, with squalor banished, with learning and life no longer divorced, but going hand in hand to the complete triumph over the misery and confusion of things."

The Valley Section, in CIE, 1949 ed., xiii

The world in 2004 celebrates the 150th birth anniversary of Sir Patrick Geddes, one of the greatest of Scottish men, idealist, humanist, a staunch vanguard of the modern world, modernity. Except the full-length text of *Cities in Evolution* (1915), most of his prolific ideas and work remain either in writings of students and friends or in artefacts created by him, in changing the world (for better).

Protagonist of Modernity:

Geddes was born (October 1854) under modest circumstances, into a rapidly changing, 'modern world'. Modernity (in the West, especially in Europe) was ushered in by the 'triumph of rationality' (science), 'political freedom' (especially, after the French Revolution) and rise of democracy (and 'individualism') and 'industrialism' (industrial capital). They, of course, marched in 'simultaneity of progress'. Geddes

came to picture when the 'modernity agenda' has been firmly embedded in European scientific, cultural and social ethos. He firmly believed in Western Science, studied under T.H. Huxley, a great follower of Charles Darwin and taught Botany at Dundee College (for 30 years). However, his evolutionary thinking (CIE) was not about the past that has given rise to the present, rather 'the future in the womb of the present'. "Geddes was a child of his generation in that his mission was to foretell the future and ensure that it would bring improvements in the quality of life for all." That was his idealism, giving rise to often his utopian idiosyncrasies.

His concept of (individual) freedom was essential to his creativity and idealism. He was undoubtedly a creative genius, which was impossible without his acute sense of the 'free spirit' of man. His exhibitions, unorthodox thinking and interpretation of culture, obsession with a better living (city) environment (garden cities) and faith in future were all reflection of his genre of freedom.

Finally, his encounter with modernism was a mixed bag of disenchantment and despair (of 'industrialism'), and acceptance of the emerging reality and practical wisdom. "... in the mid-1880s, technological advances and urbanisation had already altered profoundly the relationship between man and his natural environment. Great Britain, by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, had become the prototype of a modern, industrial, urbanised civilisation, which was to be experienced in differing degrees by many other countries of the world. Geddes set himself the task of acquiring and understanding particularly of the process of urbanisation, which

he called ‘city development’, in the hope that, through such knowledge, there was a chance of directing change away from trends which were destructive to the individual, to the community, and to the human spirit.”

His practical wisdom had two components, (a) demonstration through practical projects and creating public awareness about the threat industrialism poses to a healthier, aesthetic life, and (b) second, his concept of choice by the (urban or rural) communities about the way they interact and change the natural environment, especially the built environment. Influence of Demolin (Human Geographer) and Le Play (the Sociologist) in the initial years at Paris and the abiding friendship with Prince Kropotkin (the anarchist geographer) had clear imprints on his praxis of engagement with the society.

Romance of a New Culture:

Sir Patrick Geddes represented a “romantic-new-world”. For Geddes, not pitfalls of the past, nor woes of the present that bothered, but an agenda of a new future, an idealism of a brave-new-world set on ‘culture of the future’. This new agenda was based on the praxis of action and not revolutionary theory current in the contemporary European youth. It was peppered with a deep sense of humanism, environmental empathy and morality, charting a new destiny for the humanity, making the earth more habitable, human welfare at the fulcrum of the new agenda.

His romanticism was typical of his genre. The nostalgia of the beauty of the Scottish countryside where he grew up and that lived in the inner recesses and the images of the despair of rapidly urbanising and the decaying city – was a conflict of allegiance to the countryside and the faith in the new (future) culture. What happened around him during his lifetime and on its aftermath is unimpeded march of industrialism and urbanism without that “soul” of a new world of culture, aesthetics and human well-being.

Geddes was simultaneously many things; a Botanist, an Ecologist, a great Town Planner (part of the “Garden City” movement), a Sociologist, a Geographer, a philanthropist, inspiration of the avant garde (culture), a social reformer, a humanist, and practitioner of a great social agenda – fountain head of action in the rapidly changing world. His enthusiasm and faith in his romanticism brought many adherents and followers; his non-conformism made many detractors. However, what pushed him further was his faith in “inherent goodness of man” and “human creativity” and ability to transcend the current owes to a beautiful future.

“Beauty, whether of nature or art, has too long been without effective defence against the ever advancing smoke-cloud and machine-blast and slum-progress of Paleotechnic industry... Too much lost by our predecessors of the industrial age, and as yet all too seldom realised by themselves, the returning conception and ideal citizenship is offering us a new start-point of thought and labour. Here, in fact, is new watchword, as definite, than those of liberty, wealth and power, of science and of mechanical skill, which have so fascinated our predecessors; one, moreover, transcending all these—one enabling us to retain them, to co-ordinate them with a new clearness, and towards the common weal.” (italics by the author)

Humanism:

Geddes’s humanism developed from many strands, a childhood in the Scottish countryside that led to an intrinsic empathy with Nature. Later, in his “idiosyncratic” career he studied Botany and taught biology and ecology and was under enduring influence of Darwinian evolutionary biology (especially, under the tutelage of Huxley).

This further buttressed his values towards “life”. He states:

“After long and perplexed thinking of how has it come to be that life... Wellnigh in despair

he makes sign for silence: he begins to play, but none listen; he can reach no ear! ... Yet first it was a dream of hope, indeed of full confidence in the Muse-world of life; and that in its unified material and psychic expression it could not but reach all minds – the aesthetic, the mechanical, and the learned alike: ...”

His stay at Paris (1878-79) from marine biology (Roscoff), 1878 Paris exhibition and the Paris Commune, art and aesthetic, social theories of Edmond Demolin (human geographer) and Frederic Le Play—“Here he found a capital city which was everything that London was not, a city in which the university had a leading role, both in educating the students and in advising governments – a city where culture and city life had reached new levels of integration and achievement.”

However, most of his later life was concerned with bettering others lives, rich and the poor, the city-dweller and the villager, in Le Playean sense of creating “habitability” by educating the community, the peers, the governments (in UK, France and later in India and Palestine), ushering a social movement on hygiene, civics, aesthetic and functional cities – a goal of universal well-being.

Encountering India:

To the modern generation of Indians, this great Scottish intellectual-reformer who shared a considerable part of his otherwise hectic life in India (1914-25) teaching sociology and human geography and practising planning of Indian towns and cities (52 of them), is practically unknown.

He came to India in 1914 with wife Anna (Morton) at the invitation of the Governor of Madras Presidency, Lord Pentland with his Cities and Town Planning Exhibition, he reached but the ship carrying the exhibition (35 years of his work) sank off the Island of Minicoy – the World War had started. He wished to carry his agenda of “Civic Reconstruction”, but also to find work in the vast Indian Sub-continent – his

pecuniary circumstances having deteriorated over the years because of his projects and prodigal life style.

However, Geddes’s ideas (plans) and humanism did not much endear him to the British administrators. “His ‘Reconstruction’ message appeared to many in British Administration to be superfluous and even dangerous.”(Meller, 204) He found admirers among the Indian leadership (Tagore, Gandhi, J.C. Bose) and work in many princely states like, Baroda, Indore or cities in British territories like Lucknow, Kanpur or Calcutta. He wrote in January 1917 to Norah (his daughter) from Lahore:

“– a whole continent with each province like one of the European countries in population and with cities of the greatest variety and interest, and all needing human planning to cope with the devilries of the engineers, and their wastefulness and bungling and vandalism, for the greater part.”

With his experience and experiments with the Edinburgh Improvement Trust, Geddes found the Indian experience and ‘improvement methods’ quite different. The European tenements were in former palaces and middleclass homes in centre of the city, whereas the India poor lived on the periphery of the cities on unsuitable land in kutcha huts and shanties with – “... no proper access other than narrow twisted lane which was mire and slush in rainy weather and dusty beaten track in the dry season. Drainage was totally absent and protected water unavailable.” On his advice the first town planner (H.V. Lanchester) was appointed for Madras (1915). Geddes and Lanchester worked closely for many years, on many projects and town plans.

Three aspects drew Geddes to India, its ‘mysticism’ (as to many Europeans), a sense of adventure (in the vast land mass and equally vast humanity) and the ‘Indian Cultural Renaissance’ as C.F. Andrews described. But the Imperial Britain, Indian art, literature and architecture was

of a defeated people, inconsequential as compared with the 'achievements of the white races'. Therefore, the architectural style imported were those of Imperial Rome or Greek. This did not interest Geddes. "What he was seeking he found in the south, the great temple cities of the ancient Dravidian culture. He wrote a euphoric article about the temple cities as examples of the integration of culture, history, and the urban form at its best, ..."

Geddes eulogised the ancient Indian 'urban form', e.g. the courtyard, the usual demolition target of British sanitary engineers. On the other, the educated Indians and political leaders were moving out of the traditional houses to 'European Bungalows' (Nehrus, e.g.). He encountered Gandhi in Indore in 1917 and subsequently sent him the Indore plan. Both agreed on a role of religion in social and political life – to Gandhi more political, to Geddes an essential ingredient of 'social evolution'. His interaction with Rabindranath Tagore was more enduring, both visionaries, both educators of a different kind – a belief to nurture creativity than killing it.

Geddes's tryst with Bombay University, in one word, was a 'failure' (1918-24, chair of Sociology). Geddes, imbued to his ceaseless idealism and praxis of 'reconstruction', was not cut-out for a typical teaching role. His projects and travels took their toll, his assistants (G.S. Ghurye and N. A. Toothi) were unwilling and his sociology was out of tune with discourses in Europe and America (the Le Payist sociology was getting wiped out after Durkheim and Weber).

It was the friendship with Sir J.C. Bose (the eminent natural scientist) that sustained Geddes in the last years in India, both emotionally (after death of son Alstair in 1917, RAF and wife

Anna, in 1925 at Darjeeling) and materially. He wrote a biography of Bose in 1920.

Undoubtedly, Sir Patrick Geddes was remarkable, unique in his unorthodoxy. What distinguishes him, from an Indian perspective was his 'universality of human values' and his 'idealism', undying optimism in the future of humanity. His imprints on India may be found in the forgotten dusty plans of Indian cities or etched out on the walls of Osmania University, Indore city, Santiniketan or the Lucknow Zoo. But, he also sided with the native, his culture and poverty, ceaselessly striving to reconstruct a 'social evolution' in turbulent times in its social and political life, making many endearing and enduring friends.

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Dr. A.C. Mohapatra
Professor Department of Geography,
North-Eastern Hill University,
Shillong – 793 014, INDIA.