



Six zoomorphic forms in a line, exhibited in Paris, 1930

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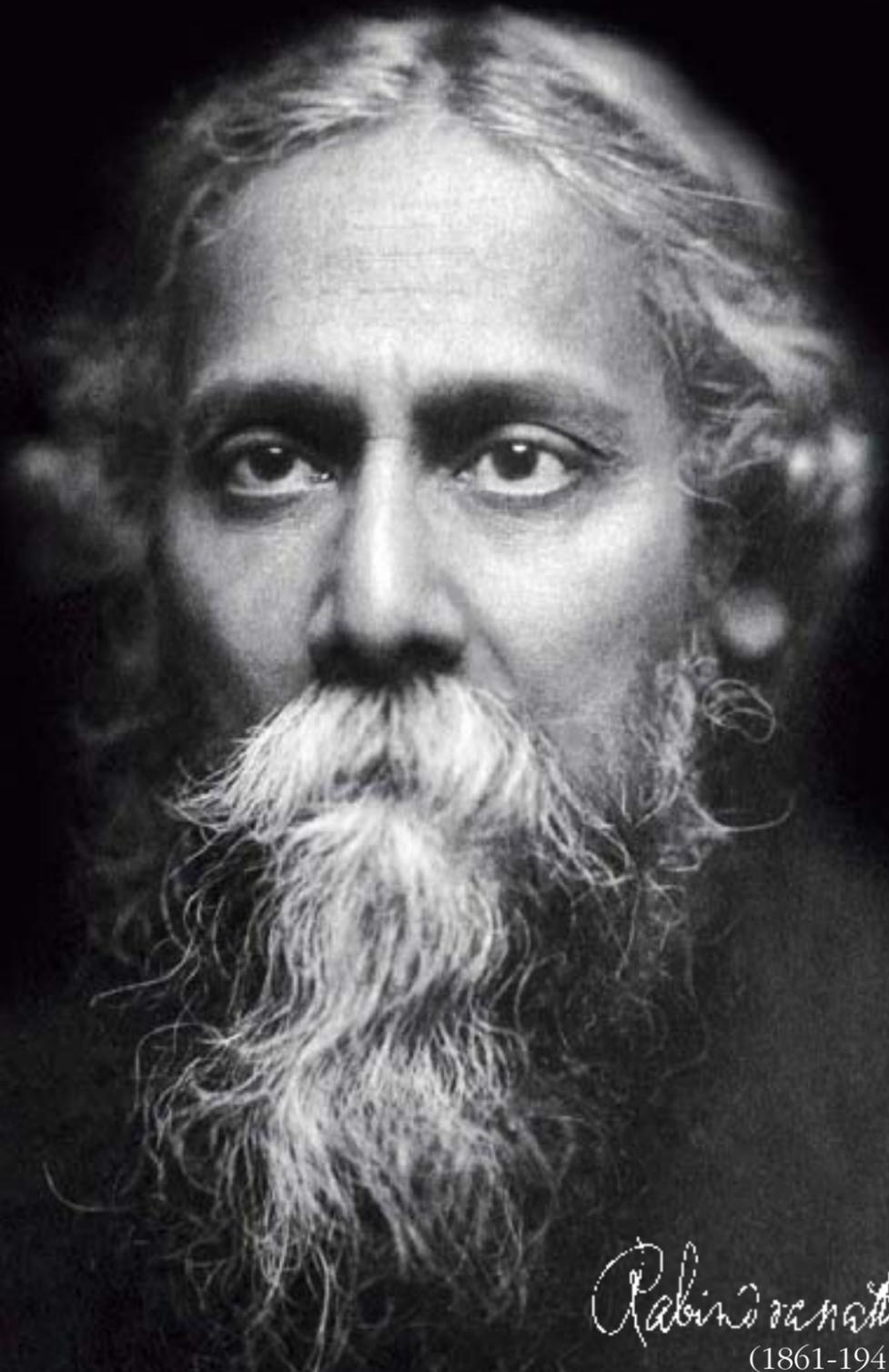
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*Rabindranath Tagore*  
(1861-1941)

## Editorial

*In this Special Issue we pay tribute to one of India's greatest sons – Rabindranath Tagore. As the world gets ready to celebrate the 150th year of Tagore, India Perspectives takes the lead in putting together a collection of essays that will give our readers a unique insight into the myriad facets of this truly remarkable personality. During the course of an eventful life spanning eight decades from 1861 to 1941, Tagore won international acclaim as a playwright, poet, song writer, novelist, educator, philosopher and humanist.*

*Tagore wrote his first drama opera – Valmiki Pratibha – when he was barely twenty. He went on to write over 2000 songs and create Rabindra-sangeet as an important genre of Bengali music that is named after the poet himself. He translated a selection of his own poems, Gitanjali, from Bengali to English and became the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in 1913. His short stories and novels occupy a place of their own in Bengali literature. And he is probably the only poet to have composed the national anthems of two countries: Amar Shonar Bangla for Bangladesh and Jana Gana Mana for India. At the age of 60, he turned his attention to painting and managed to produce a remarkable oeuvre during the twilight years of his life.*

*As an educationist, he emphasized the notion of complete and holistic education and established the Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan as an institution where “the illusion of geographical barriers disappear from at least one place in India.” The ‘world poet’ traveled widely, winning friends and admirers as he traversed thirty countries across five continents. As Tan Chung says in his essay, “The Chinese have always liked Tagore’s writings and songs for the richness of love, hope, harmony and the humanness. A ‘Tagore Fever’ was created in China in the 1920s, especially in the wake of his 1924 visit. We see another rage of ‘Tagore Fever’ surging in China with the universal celebration of the 150th birth anniversary...”*

*As a philosopher, Tagore sought to balance his passion for India's freedom struggle with his belief in universal humanism and his apprehensions about the excesses of nationalism. He could relinquish his knighthood to protest against the barbarism of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919. And he could, as Prof. Amartya Sen points out in his essay, critique Mahatma Gandhi's Swadeshi campaign and his advocacy of the spinning wheel or charkha.*

*Always positive and oriented towards action, he gives us much to reflect. “I have become my own version of an optimist. If I can't make it through one door, I'll go through another door – or I'll make a door. Something terrific will come no matter how dark the present,” he once said. For me, though, here's the thought that almost invariably brings a smile to the face: “I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.”*

*We are grateful to Visva-Bharti University and in particular to Prof. Udaya Narayana Singh for joining me as the co-editor of this issue. In addition to the articles illuminating key facets of Tagore's personality, Visva-Bharti have also provided us with rare photographs that have been painstakingly restored to provide a visual delight. The fact that several of these photographs are being published for the first time makes this issue a true collectors' edition. For Tagore, anything less would be unthinkable.*

*As always, we look forward to our readers' feedback and comments.*



Navdeep Suri

## Tagore in the 21st century



The face of the world is changing, and as time passes, the changes are visible with a lot of disturbing images. But each time one feels an element of doom and despair, one's faith is rekindled to see that there are thinkers and doers like Tagore who firmly believed that ultimately the truth and beauty would prevail. It is not surprising to see Einstein sharing the same beliefs as the doyen of Indian literature, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Einstein said: "The ideals which have lighted my way, and time after time have given me new courage to face life cheerfully have been kindness, beauty, and truth." The progress of mankind is crucially dependent on this realisation. In exchanges with Einstein, Tagore had commented: "The progress of our soul is like a perfect poem. It has an infinite idea which once realised makes all movements full of meaning and joy. But if we detach its movements from that ultimate idea, if we do not see the infinite rest and only see the infinite motion, then existence appears to us a monstrous evil, impetuously rushing towards an unending aimlessness." No amount of personal loss could make Tagore deviate from his

own trajectory of working for his own country, his own times and for his own mother tongue – Bangla, or Bengali that holds together two nations, India and Bangladesh. He knew that after the dark comes light, as he said: "Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm, but to add color to my sunset sky."

Whereas reason and logic have an important place in Tagore's scheme of things, the inner strength and the belief in one's own self and an intuitive knowledge are of equal importance. Tagore had once said: "A mind all logic is like a knife all blade. It makes the hand bleed that uses it." How true it is in the context of creating a space for finer elements in one's life as well as in one's learning processes. Creative writing, meaningful performances, imaginative art, and soulful music have a major role to play in shaping the human mind as much as tools, technology and tangible instruments such as earthly riches.

At a time when the world celebrates the onset of the 150th year of Rabindranath Tagore between May 2010 and 2011, it was thought appropriate to pay a tribute to this great son of India who made us proud. We have, therefore, put together a special issue in his honour with close to two dozen essays together with extremely important and rare visuals – from photographs to images of his paintings. Some of these essays have been published earlier – mostly in Visva-Bharati publications, but most of them have been written for this edition. We are hopeful that the offerings we are making will be received well by the international readership of India Perspectives, and this issue will be a collector's item which would be remembered and discussed for a long time. We are thankful to the authors as well as to Visva-Bharati in general, and to the staff of the archives of Rabindra Bhavana, in particular. We take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the Public Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs for their interest and cooperation in putting this issue together.

Udaya Narayana Singh  
Santiniketan; March 2010

“

*In common with thousands of his countrymen I owe much to one who by his poetic genius and singular purity of life has raised India in the estimation of the world. But I owe also more. Did he not harbour in Santiniketan the inmates of my Ashram who had preceded me from South Africa? The other ties and memories are too sacred to bear mention in public tribute.*

”

M.K. Gandhi  
Sabarmati, Ahmedabad

Tagore with Gandhi at Santiniketan



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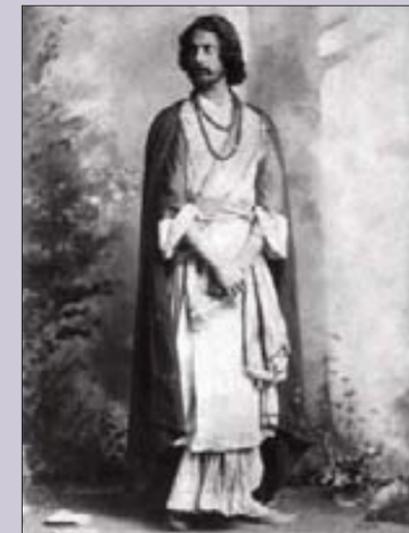


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# Winged Surprises: Lyrics and Melodies of Tagore

LADLY MUKHOPADHYAY

*Rabindranath Tagore had once said: "Our music is music for one, music for solitude", but it is not meant for one in a corner. It is the 'one' representing the universal whole. Tagore's music developed upon this foundation of the increasing desire to merge individual oneness with the universal whole.*

Rabindranath Tagore's music added a new dimension to the musical concept of India in general and Bengal in particular. Rabindrasangeet, being the cultural treasure for Bengalis (including Bangladeshis) has an everlasting and all encompassing appeal for the listeners. It is said that his songs are the outcome of centuries of literary and cultural churning that the Bengali community has gone through.

Rabindranath Tagore had once said: "Our music is music for one, music for solitude", but it is not meant for one in a corner: it is the 'one' representing the universal whole. Tagore's music developed upon this foundation

of the increasing desire to merge individual oneness with the universal whole. In fact his compositions reflect beautifully the agony of failure to attain this union as well as the intense joy upon achieving it.

The body of music created by Rabindranath Tagore in the 64 years between 1877 and 1941 may be broadly classified into two main categories. Those that are melody based – 'Suradbarmi' and those that are lyric based – 'Kavyadbarmi'.

Let us first explore the melody-based compositions. Tagore grew up in the classical tradition of Hindustani classical music ('raaga sangeet'). From his autobiographical sketches, we come to know of the musical training he went through in his childhood. He was the disciple of Jadunath Bhatta (1840-1883), the famous Pundit of Vishnupur Gharana. In this gharana of Indian classical music, the artist excels in unfolding the beauty of the *Raaga* through the initial introductory notes known as '*Aalaap*'. It is simple, devoid of heavy, cumbersome ornamentation and is famous for

Right: Tagore singing with an accompaniment by Abanindranath Tagore



Rabindra-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati

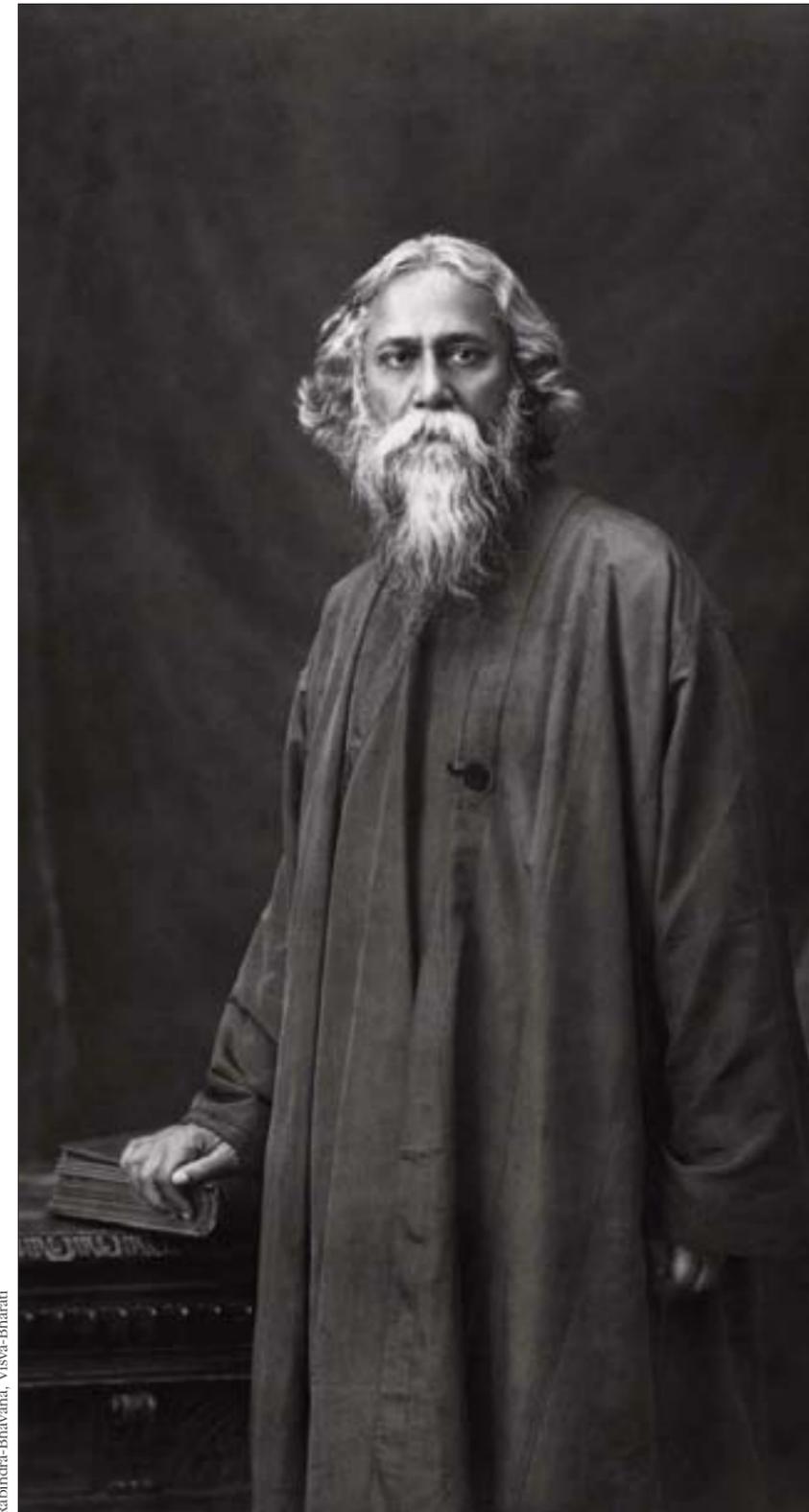
the 'Dhrupad' tradition (literally, *dbruva* 'fixed' and *pada* 'words' – the oldest surviving tradition). Rabindranath was groomed in this tradition and later on used it with mastery without abiding to its strictures. For example, we can think of a well-known dhrupad '*Mababiswe Mabakashe mabakala majbe*'. He experimented with dhrupad tunes using various rhythms (such as, '*Jortal*', '*Jhanptal*', '*Sur Phanktal*' and '*Teora*' – usually known only to the connoisseurs of Hindustani classical music) and composed 104 songs.

Tagore used the classical form of *khayal* and *thumri* to create almost 300 songs, encompassing all the styles of the classical traditions. For example he used the '*tappa*' style in his music, where the song-text is very short and not as elaborately structured as a *khayal* or a *thumri*. There have been two different styles of *Tappa*, one that evolved in Punjab, in the lineage of Shori Miyan, and the other, adapted by Ramnidhi Gupta, better known as Nidhubabu in Bengal. Tagore from his early age was exposed to both styles. Tagore adapted his '*tappas*' from both the styles, he relinquished the Punjabi '*tappa*' but when he wrote in his mother tongue the songs became soft and sweet. For example we can consider the song, '*Ke bosile hridayasane aaji, bhubaneshwara prabhu*', which is influenced by the tune of a Punjabi *tappa*, but becomes much softer in melody.

Rabindranath used the folk based tunes extensively. His stays at the estate of Silaidah and Patisar brought him in close contact with the rich, vibrant folk tradition of Bengal, the *Bhatiyali*, *Kirtan*, *Ramprashadi*, *Shari*, *Baul* and *Jhumur*. He was introduced to the songs of Lalan Fakir (1774-1890) and his disciple Gagan Harkara (dates not known) and was greatly influenced by them. During India's Freedom movement he composed numerous songs in different styles of folk music. These songs immediately touched the hearts of common people and became a source of inspiration. The National anthem of Bangladesh '*Amar Sonar Bangla*' influenced by *Baul*-song is an example.

Tagore's first ever musical endeavour was '*Bhanusingher padabali*' the compositions of which were influenced by the medieval age style of *Padabali Kirtan*. He composed some famous songs in this style but his adaptations made the songs modern. '*Je chilo amar sapano charini*' is an example of this style.

Tagore adapted tunes from different regions all over India – Gujarati, Kannada, Punjabi, Tamil as well as Hindi light music, including *Bhajans* – and created his own music. These songs are known as *Bhanga Gaan* (literally meaning 'Broken songs'). The famous song '*Basanti, hey bhubonmohini*' evolved from



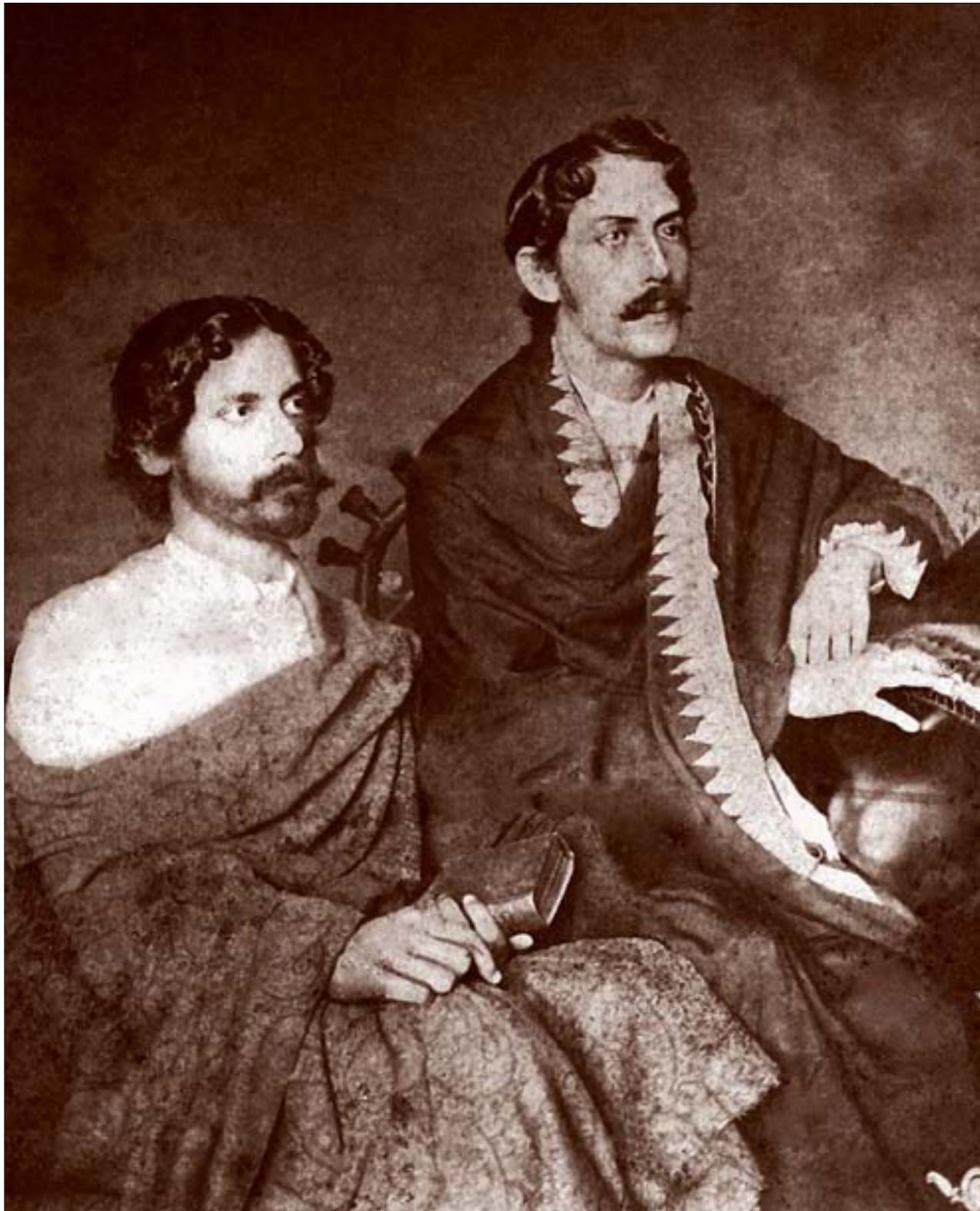
Rabindra-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati

a song from the Meenakshi temple of Madurai (an ancient song written by Muthuswami Dikshitar) is an example of '*Bhanga Gaan*'.

The songs inspired by western music also come under this category. His understanding of the character and distinctive features of Indian and Western music of the time enabled him to create a perfect blend. '*Purano sei diner katha*', his adaptation from a Scottish folk song is a well-known example of such tunes.

*Taal* or beat is one of the important aspects of a song. Tagore experimented with the existing beats like *Dhamar* – a 14-beat *taal* and composed 16 tunes using this type. He also created some new beats or *taals*. One of this is *Shasti-taal* which has 6 counts, but unlike the standard 6 beat where *Dadra* divided in 3/3 it is divided in 2/4. *Nava-taal* is another such beat created for '*pakhwaj*' (a two headed drum).

Tagore always emphasized that an ideal song is a perfect marriage of lyric and melody, where they go hand in hand. Tagore's songs present a smooth blend of melody and lyrics where these two are inseparable, and evolve together in a unique musical language. Suchitra Mitra said once, 'singing only the notes of Tagore's songs does not mean anything... the singer must understand the lyrics... he used tunes or created new beats as the



rhythm of his poetry demanded.' Rabindranath's melodies go only as far as the lyrics, the emotion and impulse of the words, allow them.

This idea becomes clearer if we examine the songs based on poems or lyrics – the songs in *Kavyadharmi* or lyrical category. In fact, while working on his compendium of all songs – *Gitabitan* (1938), Rabindranath had said that he wanted to develop it in such a way that it should not be seen only as a collection of songs but should also be acceptable minus the melody, as reading material. But in his musicals like *Valmiki Pratibha*, *Shyama* or *Chandalika* we could see how he uses the colloquial language with suitable modern melody.

As far as structural variation is concerned, Rabindranath's musical compositions show three main phases. The first phase consists of those songs composed between 1881 and 1900. During this period his songs strongly reflect Hindustani classical music influences as well as other regional and Western music influences. The next two decades between 1900 and 1920 mark the 2<sup>nd</sup> or experimental phase, where the classical structure remained intact but he added his own musical comprehension and maturity to it. He wrote many of his patriotic songs (about 62) during this

Left: Rabindranath with his elder brother Jyotirindranath.

time. It is a source of great pride to Bengalis that the National Anthems of two South Asian nations, India and Bangladesh are both Tagore's compositions. The period, 1921 to 1940, mark the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase in which his songs displayed the virtuosity and his distinctive character of that genre of music that has come to be known as 'Rabindrasangeet' and have gained recognition worldwide with their own particular style and feel of singing.

In *Gitabitan* he designated a section as *Puja* containing the devotional songs (almost 650 in numbers). Some of these songs are known as 'Brahmasangeet'. '*Bipula taranga re*' (Oh these gigantic waves) is one such composition based on the raaga '*bhim palasri*' or, *bhim palashi*. Rabindranath's youngest son Samindranath (1896-1907) passed away when he was only eleven years old. A few days after his demise he wrote this song. But this song is not at all about any loss, on the contrary it talks about the mystery and eternal joy of the unending cycle of life and the melody is befittingly awe-inspiring.

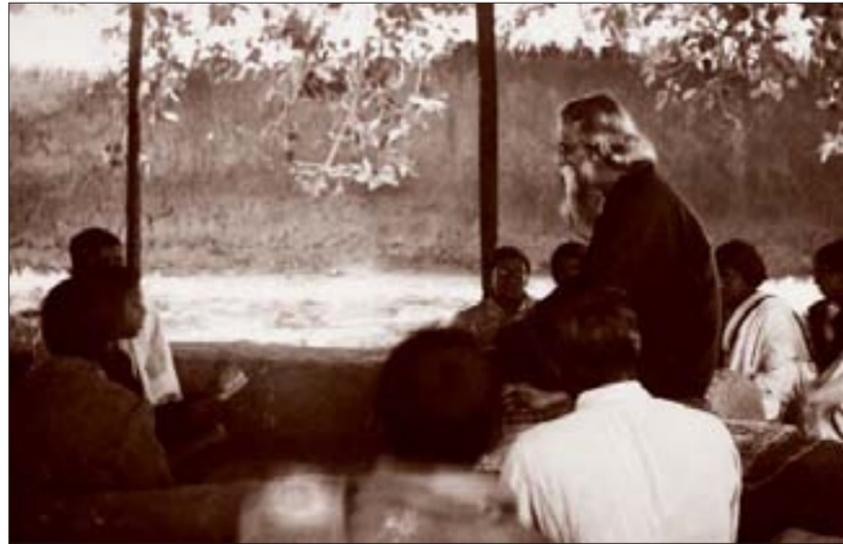
Songs of love and adoration (in the section '*Prem*') also number well over 150. Many opine that it is very difficult to categorize the songs in this fashion. Many of the love songs can be perceived as songs of spiritual devotion, and many *Puja* songs can be perceived as songs of intense love.

Tagore wrote almost 140 exquisite songs commemorating the 'seasons'. He taught us to see nature in many ways at the same time, through his intricately woven words and melodies. He also wrote songs for different occasions centred on birthdays, weddings, ploughing, harvesting, tree planting, New Year etc.

When we listen to his songs it becomes difficult to find out which part of it is Western and which part is purely Indian classical or which is from the folk or Baul tradition. Ultimately the mixture that he presents is something which is purely his own creation, 'Rabindrasangeet'.

When we study this prolific collection of compositions it becomes clear, as explained by the well-known Tagore music maestro, Santidev Ghosh (1910-1999), "The words of Rabindrasangeet are eternally thrilling and enchanting. They bring forth a vast panorama of human life and experience encapsulating joy and sorrow, love and languishment, pleasure and pain, union and detachment besides a look beyond." ...That is why his music becomes a companion through all the various moments of life.

◆ The author is a film maker and has featured in the Indian Panorama in several international film festivals. He has also authored several volumes of essays in Bengali, and has made about 14 short documentaries on various aspects of Tagore.



Rabindra-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati

Tagore teaching at the *Patha-Bhavana*, the open-air school in Santiniketan

## The Poet's School

SUPRIYO TAGORE

*Tagore wanted his school to be on the model of Tapovana (hermitage) of ancient India, and he wanted to borrow from the Tapovana idea.*

The school founded by Rabindranath Tagore is known as the '*Patha-Bhavana*' today. The school celebrated hundred years of its existence nine years ago. It is a fairly big school today. It draws students from all over the state of West Bengal and remains a reputed institution. However, the school had a rather modest beginning. In December 1901, Tagore started the school with only five students; one of them was his own son.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Tagore had already become a reputed Poet. Why then did he think of starting a school? Experts in the field have different explanations. Some feel that Tagore's own tragic experience in schools, modeled by the then British rulers of the country could be the reason. Others feel that he thought of starting a school, because he had the education of his own children in mind. Some others thought he was a visionary in the field of school education, and that he wanted to set up a model.

All these explanations might have some elements of truth. But one thing was clear: Tagore wanted his school to be in the model of *Tapovana* (hermitage) of ancient India. Does that mean that he wanted us to go back to the past? The answer is in the negative. Tagore was too modern to wish to shun the present.

What Tagore wanted to borrow from the *Tapovana* idea was the following: (a) a close proximity to nature, away from the din and bustle of the urban life; (b) a close relationship between *Guru* and the disciples – in almost a family like atmosphere;

(c) a quest to achieve higher truth – something that was hinted at in different *Upanishadic* texts of ancient India.

Thus, he moved from Kolkata to a place called Santiniketan, which his father, Maharshi Devendranath had chosen for his meditation and other religious activities. Soon the school started to grow. Students from different walks of life and even other states of the country came to join the institution. Parents who could not control their children sent them to Santiniketan.

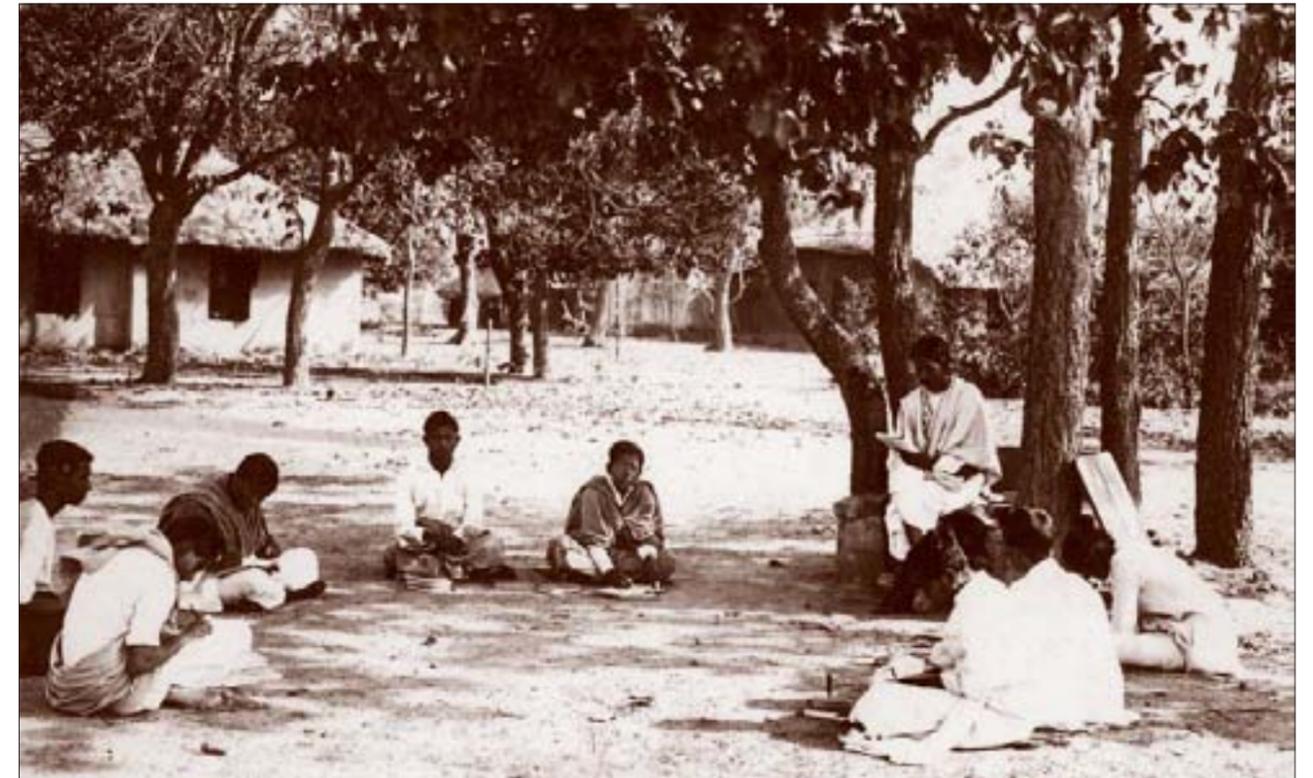
Santiniketan was a place that was far away from the crowded

cities; there was no barrier here between man and nature. Children could feel the impact of different seasons; they got wet in the monsoon rain, basked in the sun, and enjoyed the moonlit nights.

The classes were held outdoors, under the trees. At the end of each period children moved from one place to another and did not feel cramped. Teachers had a fixed place for their classes – whereas the children enjoyed the movement.

Along with the usual academic subjects of a school, children were exposed to music and dance, various crafts and

An open-air class at the Santiniketan school in the early years

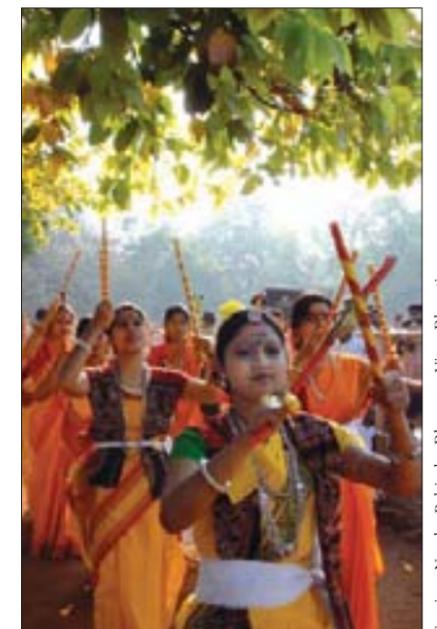




Samiran Nandy, Rabindra-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati

play-acting in the school. They played games in the afternoon. Tagore thought that man is born in the world with only one advice from God – that is – ‘Express yourself!’ Therefore children of the ‘Poet’s school’ were allowed to express themselves through tune and rhythm, lines and colour, and through dance and acting. Every Tuesday there would be literary meetings in the ‘*ashrama*’ where children read out their stories and poems, sang and danced and put up short plays in the presence of all the ashramites (the inmates of the *ashrama*). In their classes too it was the self-expression that would be encouraged and not cramming of possible questions and answers. They were encouraged to use their limbs

An open-air class at the *Patha-Bhavana* today (left) and *Basantotsav* celebration (below).



Samiran Nandy, Rabindra-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati

in craft classes and gardening classes. It was the belief of the poet that by using their limbs even dull students improved in their academics.

Tagore thought that children had a three-fold relationship with their environment, especially in the relationship between Nature and Man.

At the lowest level children learned to use their environment. This was the level of '*Karma*' (action). Man uses his environment for a living – he has to till the soil, build his house, weave his clothes. Therefore, children must be trained in various physical activities. At the next level they must gather knowledge about their environment. They must search for natural rules and correlations, and form conclusions. They have to look for unity in the world of diversity. Only then would they be able to achieve the true '*Jnana*' or 'knowledge'. This way, they would try to gather knowledge about Nature and Man.

At the highest level, it was '*Prema*' (love) that binds an individual to Nature and to the world of Man. Through love an individual loses his identity and becomes one with the world. In the Poet's school all such relationships were cultivated.

Tagore was a believer in unity where each element

had its own space. Thus, compartmentalization of one's knowledge of and skill for a particular work and love for it were not exclusive to one another – they always overlapped. But for the sake of better understanding, these divisions are made.

Tagore also believed that none of these three levels could be ignored for a proper development of personality. One must give its due to '*Karma*', '*Jnana*' and '*Prema*' for the fullest growth of man.

The finer things in life can never be taught in a class. Children imbibe them from the environment or from the personalities around them. Tagore believed that these qualities were already there in the child. Therefore, it was thought essential to create a proper environment in the school to bring out the dormant qualities in a child. The environment created at Santiniketan was, therefore, most appropriate for the education of children. The children grew up in the midst of nature, however, only close proximity to nature was not enough. It had to be a conscious encounter.

Santiniketan was a beautiful place with shady mango and other fruit-bearing trees, under which children attended their classes. Tall Sal trees shaded the avenues. The



Kala Bhavana Painting class in progress in early years

Rabindra-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati

children had their gardens to look after. There were Nature-study classes as part of their curriculum. They learnt about trees, birds and insects at the '*Asbrama*'. Also, seasonal festivals were celebrated to make the children conscious of the spirit of the season, and establish a connect to the agricultural cycle.

It was an experience for the children to sing Tagore's songs, going round the '*Asbrama*' in the moonlit night to feel the spirit of spring in their minds. What could be a better way of

growing up in nature? Tagore felt that a person was not fit to be a teacher if the child in his mind was not alive still. They had to share their experiences with the children.

Then the children were made aware of the problems of the villagers living around Santiniketan. They regularly visited nearby villages to study their life and problems.

The school subjects were taught through experiments and different types of experiences as far as practical. Creativity

in children was always encouraged.

Wednesday was the weekly holiday in the school instead of Sunday.

The children in the morning attended the weekly service in the prayer hall. The service essentially was non-denominational – not catering to one or the other dominant religions. Devotional songs by Tagore were sung. Carefully created and crafted, these prayers would be such that they would be acceptable



to everybody. Once Tagore was asked if he would like to recommend the kind of religious training the schools should ideally impart. He clearly replied that no religious instruction should be given in schools. There should rather be an effort to cultivate a 'sense of infinity' in the minds of children. That we are a part of a very vast and wonderful creation should somehow be conveyed; a sense of awe about this huge creativity should be given to the children.

Santiniketan has always been like a big family. Teachers know all the students personally, and vice versa. The wives of the teachers are like mothers to the students. Therefore, the institution had to be small for Tagore's ideals to be fruitful. Big institutions have a different logic of their own. It is, thus an environment of beauty, love and co-operation. Competition has no place here. Tagore used the word 'becoming' which he thought was more important than anything else in the Poet's School.

◆  
*The author was the Principal of Patha-Bhavana, the school set up by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan.*

Prayer in progress today in the heritage *Upasana-griha* (Prayer hall).



## Tagore, Gitanjali and the Nobel Prize

NILANJAN BANERJEE

*Tagore felt “homesick for the wide world.” Further, he was constantly struggling to overcome the barriers of language.*

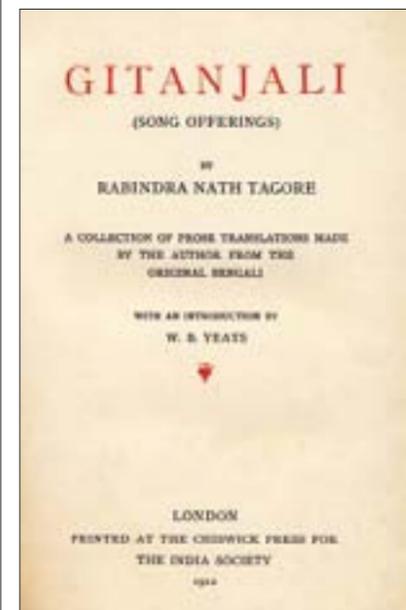
*He thought that the Nobel Prize awarded by the Swedish Academy “brought the distant near, and has made the stranger a brother.”*

Rabindranath Tagore, in a letter to E.J. Thompson, wrote in 1916, “I feel homesick for the wide world.” A few years before his death, he criticized his own poetry for not being universal in expression, arguing that his paintings had rather overcome the barriers of language. It was likely that Tagore, a seeker of universal concord, would not have been satisfied in restricting himself to an audience in the colonial, undivided Bengal where he was born and raised in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rabindranath, who translated Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* at the age of thirteen, turned out to be a prolific bilingual writer of his time often taking pleasure in translating his own works into English.

It was in June 1912 that Rabindranath desired to share the English translations of his poems with his British painter friend William Rothenstein (1872-1945) in London, (Rothenstein later went on to become the Principal of the Royal College of Art). A leather

case, containing the translated manuscript entrusted to Tagore’s son Rathindranath (1888-1961), was discovered to be missing. Rushing to the Left-Luggage Office of the British underground, Rathindranath managed to retrieve the baggage that he had left in the train by mistake while getting down at the Charing Cross tube station. Rathindranath wrote in his autobiography, “I have often wondered what shape the course of events might have taken if the manuscript of *Gitanjali* had been lost due to my negligence.” The recovered translations came to be published in the form of a book *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), on 1 November, 1912 by the India Society of London with an introduction by the English poet W.B. Yeats (1865-1939).

In 1910, Tagore published a book of poems in Bengali titled *Gitanjali*. By that time he had established himself as a poet, an essayist, novelist, short story writer, a composer of numerous songs, and a unique educator with an experimental school for children at Santiniketan. He underwent a number of personal tragedies by the time *Gitanjali* was published. Tagore lost his mother Sarada Devi (1875), adored sister-in-law Kadambari (1884), wife Mrinalini (1902), second daughter Renuka (1903), father Debendranath (1905), and youngest son Samindranath



Nobel Medallion (top), the reverse of the medal (middle) and the title page of the 1912 *Gitanjali*.

(1907) within the short span of thirty two years. This experience with death refined his sensibilities and gave him the impetus to consider life in its contrasting realities with joy and wonder.

In the beginning of 1912, Tagore became seriously ill. Cancelling a planned visit to England, he went to his ancestral home in Silaidah (now in Bangladesh) on the banks of the river Padma for a change where he translated some of his poems from their original in Bengali. After his recovery he sailed for England in May 1912, without any specific mission, with the mind of a wayfaring poet, primarily obeying his doctor’s advice. During his long sea voyage to England, he continued his experiments with translations presumably with a desire to connect to a distant and wider horizon. Before 1912, Tagore had translated only a couple of his poems.

William Rothenstein, who knew Rabindranath since his visit to India during 1910-1911, introduced Tagore and his poetry to his illustrious circle of friends including W.B. Yeats, Thomas Sturge Moore (1870-1944), Ernest Rhys (1859-1946), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), May Sinclair (or, Mary Amelia St. Clair, 1863-1946), Stopford Brooke (1832-1916) among many others. They were instantly carried away with



"Where the mind is without fear!": A poem from *Gitanjali* in Tagore's calligraphy

the mystic vision and rhetoric splendour of Tagore's poetry. Yeats suggested minor changes in the prose translations of the *Gitanjali* songs. Speaking on the charm of *Gitanjali*, Yeats wrote in his introduction:

"... These prose translations have stirred my blood as nothing has for years. ...I have carried the manuscript of these translations with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me."

While the Bengali *Gitanjali* had one hundred and eighty three

poems, the English version contained one hundred and three poems from ten previously published anthologies including fifty three poems from its Bengali namesake. It was due to Rothenstein's efforts that the India Society of London brought out these translations as a book. A limited edition of seven hundred and fifty copies was printed, among which two hundred and fifty copies were for sale. The book was received with much enthusiasm in England and the Macmillan Press of London did not miss the opportunity of

buying its rights, publishing ten subsequent editions of the title within nine months between March and November, 1913. While the Bengali *Gitanjali* was brought out without any dedication, Tagore dedicated his first English anthology of poems to Rothenstein as a token of their friendship that lasted till the death of the poet in 1941.

Tagore, left England in October, 1912 for America before his English *Gitanjali* could be published and returned to India in September, 1913. Ezra Pound and Harriet Monroe (1860-1936)

took the initiative in publishing six poems of Tagore in the prestigious American magazine *Poetry* with a note by Pound in December, 1912. *Gitanjali* received wonderful reviews in some of the leading newspapers and literary magazines including *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Manchester Guardian*, and *The Nation* among others, shortly after the publication of the book.

The British littérateur Thomas Sturge Moore, in his individual capacity as the Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature of the

Nobel Prize citation



United Kingdom recommended Rabindranath Tagore's name for the Nobel Prize for literature to the Swedish Academy while ninety seven other members of the Society collectively recommended the name of novelist Thomas Hardy for the award. Initially Tagore's nomination was strongly opposed by the Chairman of the Academy Harald Hjarne. Vocal members of the Academy like Per Hallstrom, Esais Henrik Vilhelm Tenger (who knew Bengali) and Carl Gustaf Verner von Heidenstam, familiar with Tagore's literary genius, wholeheartedly supported his nomination. Tagore's name was finalized for the award from a total of twenty eight nominations "because of his 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."

A cablegram from the Nobel Committee arrived in Kolkata on 14 November 1913 and the news was communicated to Tagore at Santiniketan through a series of telegrams. Memoirs reveal that the whole of Santiniketan rejoiced at this achievement of the Poet.

While some students debated that Tagore had secured the 'Nobel Prize' for his profound nobility, others



held that the 'Nobel' prize came to Santiniketan only for the deserving novels that Tagore had written. Amidst this unprecedented storm of excitement, a grand felicitation was organized on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November in 1913 at Santiniketan in honour of the Poet, presided over by his scientist friend Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937). A special train reached Bolpur from Kolkata with five hundred enthusiasts. Tagore was led to the venue where he noticed some of his critics who had criticized him personally on various occasions in the past. These individuals were now gathered to felicitate him as the Poet had received recognition overseas. Tagore's speech, which echoed his immediate ill-feelings at the sight of his detractors, disappointed many of his genuine admirers when he expressed, "I can only raise this cup of your honour to my lips, I cannot drink it with all my heart." Overnight, Tagore was inundated with attention and praise which made him write to Rothenstein in 1913, "It is almost as bad as tying a tin can to a dog's tail making it impossible for him to move, without creating noise and crowds all along."

Facsimile of a page from *The Statesman* (daily) of Nov 15, 1913 announcing Rabindranath getting the coveted Nobel Prize.

Tagore could not be present in Sweden to receive the Nobel Prize as the first Asian recipient of the award and a telegram from him was read out at the traditional Nobel Banquet which stated "I beg to convey to the Swedish Academy my grateful appreciation of the breadth of understanding which has brought the distant near and has made the stranger a brother." The Nobel medallion and the diploma were sent to Lord Carmichael (1859-1926), Governor of Bengal, who

A portrait of Tagore by William Rothenstein, his painter-friend (right) and Tagore with Rothenstein and son, Rathindranath.

handed them over to the Poet at a ceremony on 29 January, 1914 at the Governor's House in Kolkata.

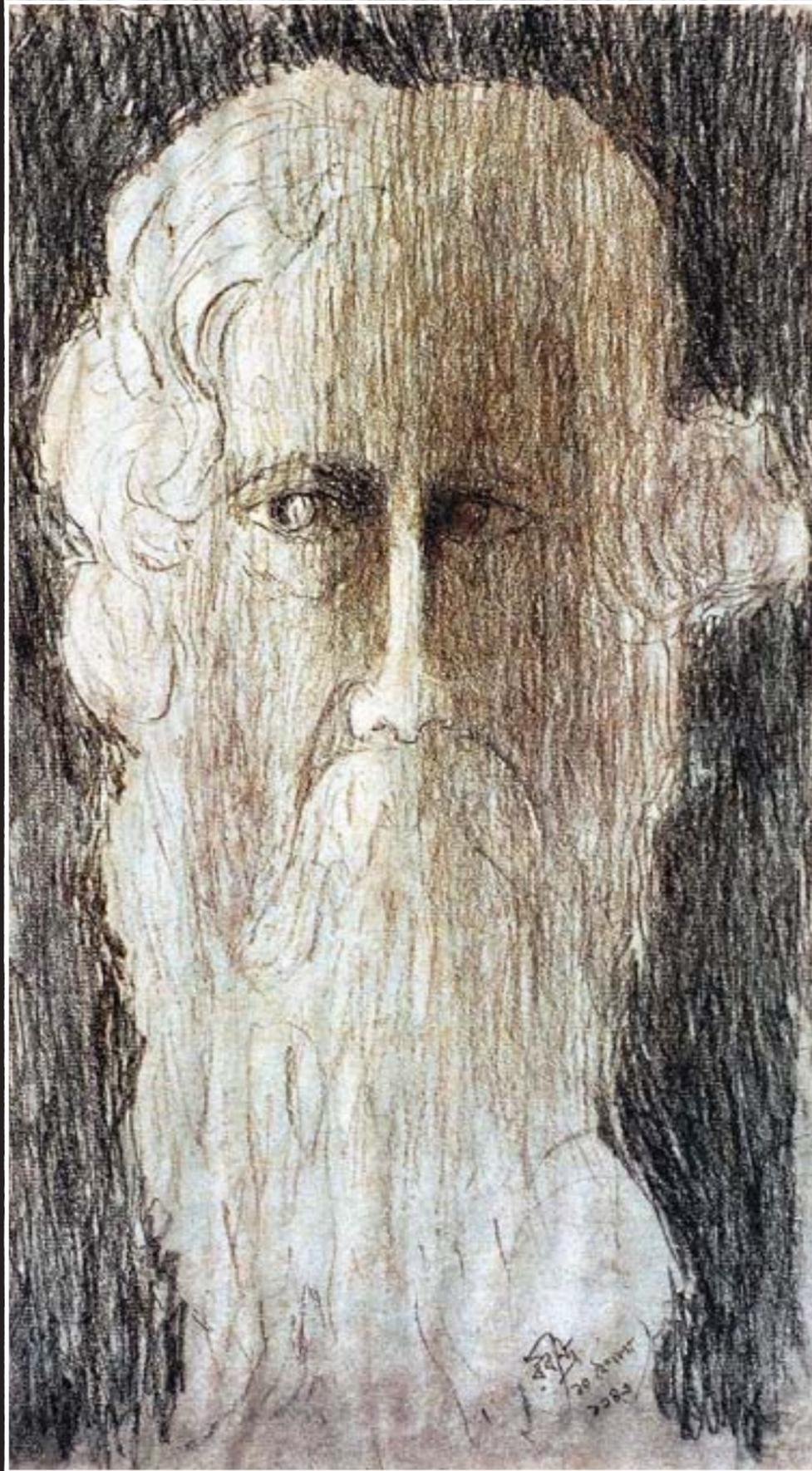


*Gitanjali* and the Nobel Prize set Tagore on the world stage raising him to the glorified status of *Visva Kabi*, the World Poet, who could celebrate life beyond any boundaries:

"I have had my invitation to this world's festival, and thus my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen and my ears have heard." (*Gitanjali*, 16)

◆ The author is a poet and a painter who is currently designing several museums on the life and times of Rabindranath Tagore for *Visva Bharati*.





## RABINDRANATH TAGORE AS A PAINTER

SANJOY KUMAR MALLIK

*The multifarious personality of Rabindranath covered diverse terrains of creative expression, but he ventured into the world of painting quite late in life.*



In a letter to his daughter, Rabindranath Tagore had once commented that painting wasn't really his forte – had it been so he would have demonstrated what needed to be done. But much before this lament, in an earlier epistle addressed to J.C. Bose (1858-1937), he had mentioned in an ebullient tone that it would surprise the latter to learn that he had been painting in a sketchbook, although the effort with the pencil was being overtaken by the effort with the eraser, such that Raphael could lie peacefully in his grave without the fear of being rivaled.

The multifarious personality of Rabindranath covered diverse terrains of creative expression, but he ventured into the world

of painting quite late in life. The pages of his manuscript titled *Purabi*, a book of poems published in 1924, is conventionally identified as the first evidence of articulation through full fledged visual images. In the process of editing and altering the text of these poems, the poet began joining together the struck-out words in rhythmic patterns of linear scribbles, with the result that these connected erasures emerged into consolidated, united and independent identity as fantastic visual forms. About this process, he later wrote: "I had come to know that rhythm gives reality to that which is desultory, which is insignificant in itself. And therefore, when the scratches in my manuscript cried like sinners, for salvation

Tagore selecting his paintings in Moscow



Tagore at his exhibition at the Gallery Pigalle with Victoria Ocampo (seated).

and assailed my eyes with the ugliness of their irrelevance, I often took more time in rescuing them into a merciful finality of rhythm than in carrying on what was my obvious task." ('My pictures', 1; 28<sup>th</sup> May 1930).

The *Purabi* corrective cancellations, deleting the unnecessary and unwanted, finally fused together into a unity of design; but more than that, this rhythmic interrelationship gave birth to a host of unique forms, most often queer, curious and grotesque. This nearly subconscious birth of forms, springing up unpremeditated on the sheet of paper, is a necessary corollary to the poet's innate concern with rhythm. It was not the sheer delectable beauty of swirling arabesques



All paintings illustrated in this essay are by Rabindranath Tagore.

that interested the poet, but the emergent unpredictable that delighted him. These creatures may certainly defy classification according to strict conventions of zoology, but are very much valid as entities in a painter's world. They even possess

distinctly identifiable moods, emotions and characteristics, such that they become personalities rather than blank-forms.

The manuscript is a private and personal domain; as the presence of these emergent forms began to demand more independent existence, the poet-painter turned to full scale paintings. However, having originated from the subconscious playfulness of the erasures, somewhat unfortunately and for a considerable time, Rabindranath's pictorial practice tended to carry the stigma of being a dilettante's dabble. While it is true that he did not possess any academic initiation into the domain of the visual arts, he did take lessons in painting in his childhood, as most children do, from home-instructors. In his reminiscences titled *Chelebela* (my childhood days) Rabindranath had recalled how in the interminable sequence of home-instructors, an art teacher would immediately step in once the instructor in physical education had just left. While that is no pleasant recollection that may inspire later indulgence in the visual arts, in the *Jeebansmriti* (My reminiscences) he had recorded a slightly different childhood memory – at bed-time he would stare at the patterns of peeling

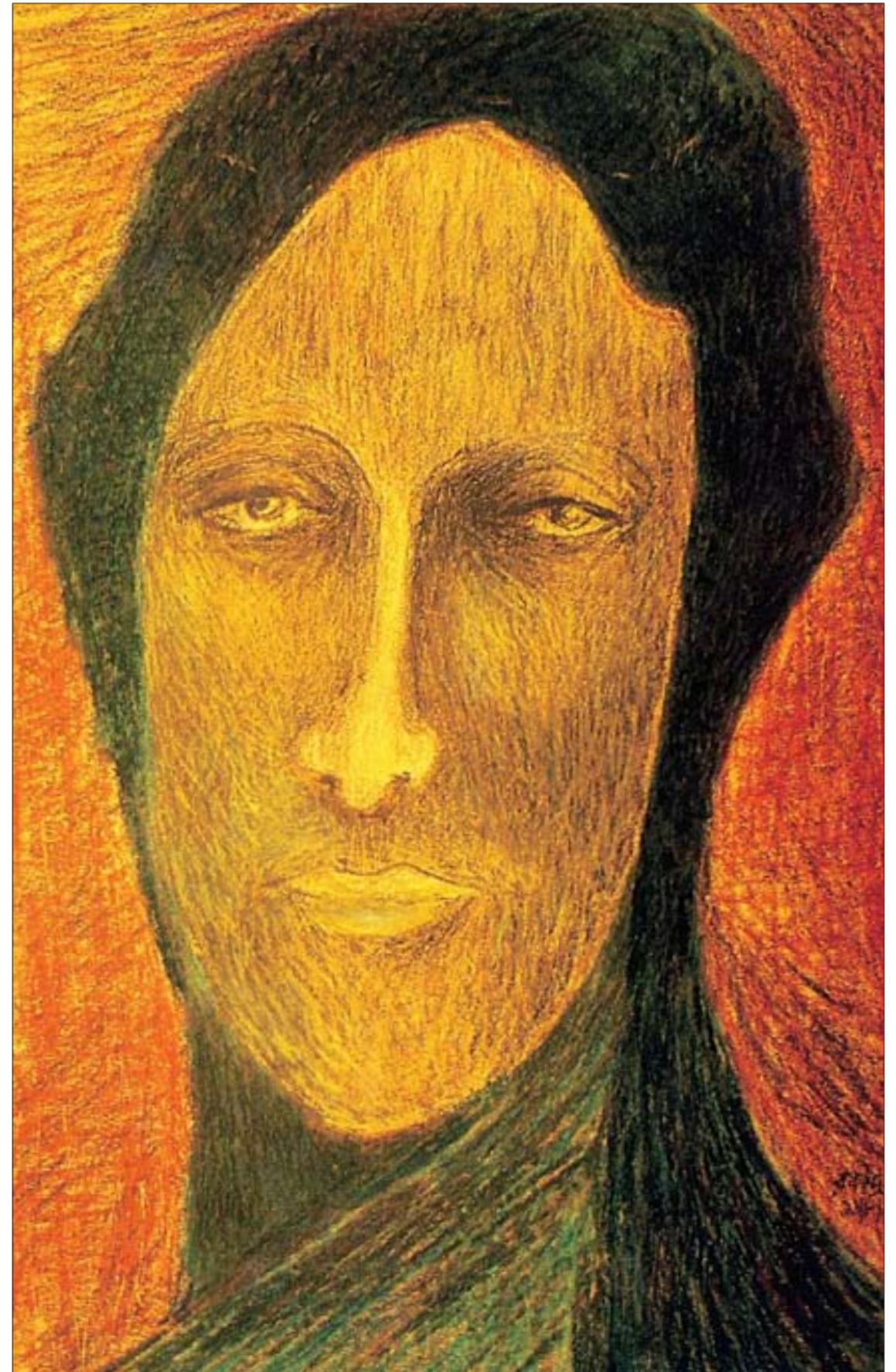
whitewash on the walls, and these would induce a range of visual forms in his imagination as he drifted off to sleep. One may infer that Rabindranath did possess the elemental faculty of visual imagination.

By 1930, however, Rabindranath was relatively confident of his efforts as a painter. In a letter dated 26<sup>th</sup> April addressed to Indira Devi (1873-1960), he wrote that it would surprise

the latter to learn the entire story of how the once-poet Rabindranath's current identity was that of a painter, though he would rather modestly wait for posterity to bear that news to her rather than declare his own achievements. He went on to mention that the inauguration of his exhibition was scheduled on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, 1930 – that the harvest at the year-end had been collected together on these foreign shores. But, he

wrote, he would prefer to leave them behind, considering it fortunate that he had been able to cross over with these from the ferry-wharf of his own land.

Rabindranath's acclaim from the series of foreign exhibitions (1930) even before one was held in his own country has been the other long-standing cause for suspicion of indulgent praise. What counters these doubts is the consistency of





his pictorial quest and the enormous output – scholars claim that he had brought along as many as four hundred paintings for the 1930 exhibitions. What is of interest beyond numbers, are the choices exercised by Rabindranath as a painter. In a period when nationalist revivalism was triumphant in the country, he had the strength of will to propose

a larger vision beyond the restrictive criteria of national/geographical boundaries in matters of creative expression. In fact, it is tempting to view Rabindranath's pictorial practice against the phrase that assumed the role of a guiding motto for Visva Bharati, the university he instituted: *yatra viśva bhavati eka nidam* – where the whole world comes to meet as in a single nest. This catholicity

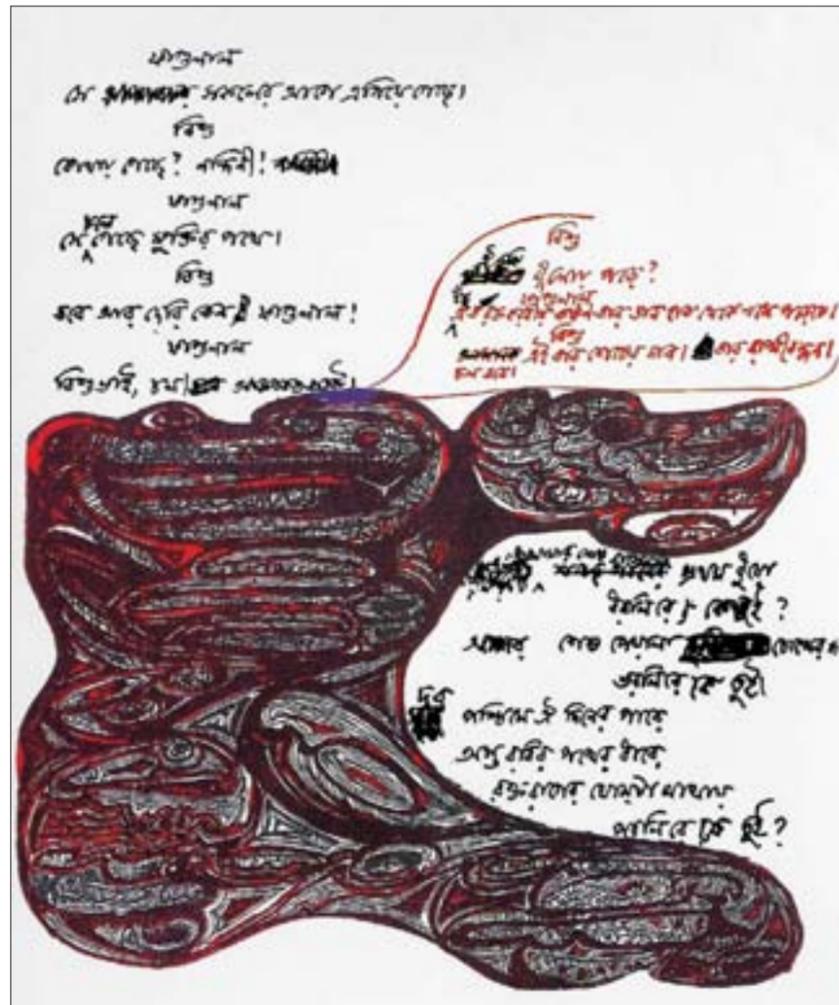
distinguished Rabindranath's creative process, and his approach to the notion of tradition was thereby liberated. Coupled with this, his European tours had probably contributed considerably to make the art of those lands a directly felt experience. But even when one identifies, for instance, echoes of the expressionistic in the paintings of Rabindranath, the images in their ultimate



totality of visual language are so utterly individual that they defy categorization into strait-jackets of stylistic periodization or movements in world art.

It is, therefore, necessary to comprehend Rabindranath's choice of themes in conjunction with, and as a logical corollary of, his choice in the realm of pictorial language. Not only did he opt not to hark back to past pictorial traditions, he also rejected associations of

the literary. Even when his pictorial compositions deal with dramatic ensembles of multiple human figures, the narrative is entirely contained within the perimeter of the painted page, without drawing direct reference to literary allusions, whether belonging to a shared tradition or to those of his own creation. What unfolds in front of the viewer of these paintings is a narrative told exclusively through the visual language – and meant to be read so as



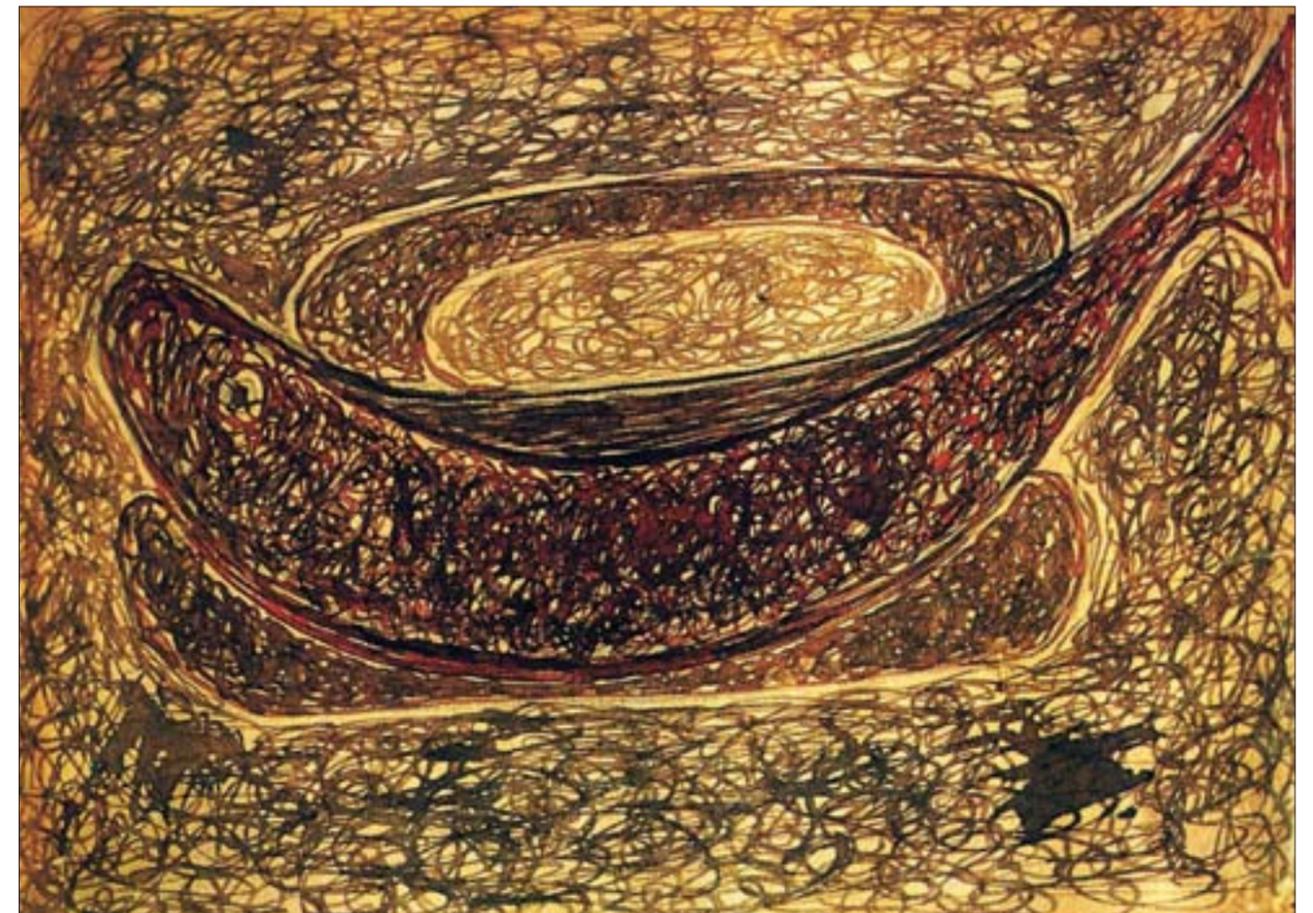
well. The pictures that he drew for his own books *Shrey* and *Khapchara* are in the true spirit of illuminations, independent expressions in their own right – complementary, rather than supplementary, to the text.

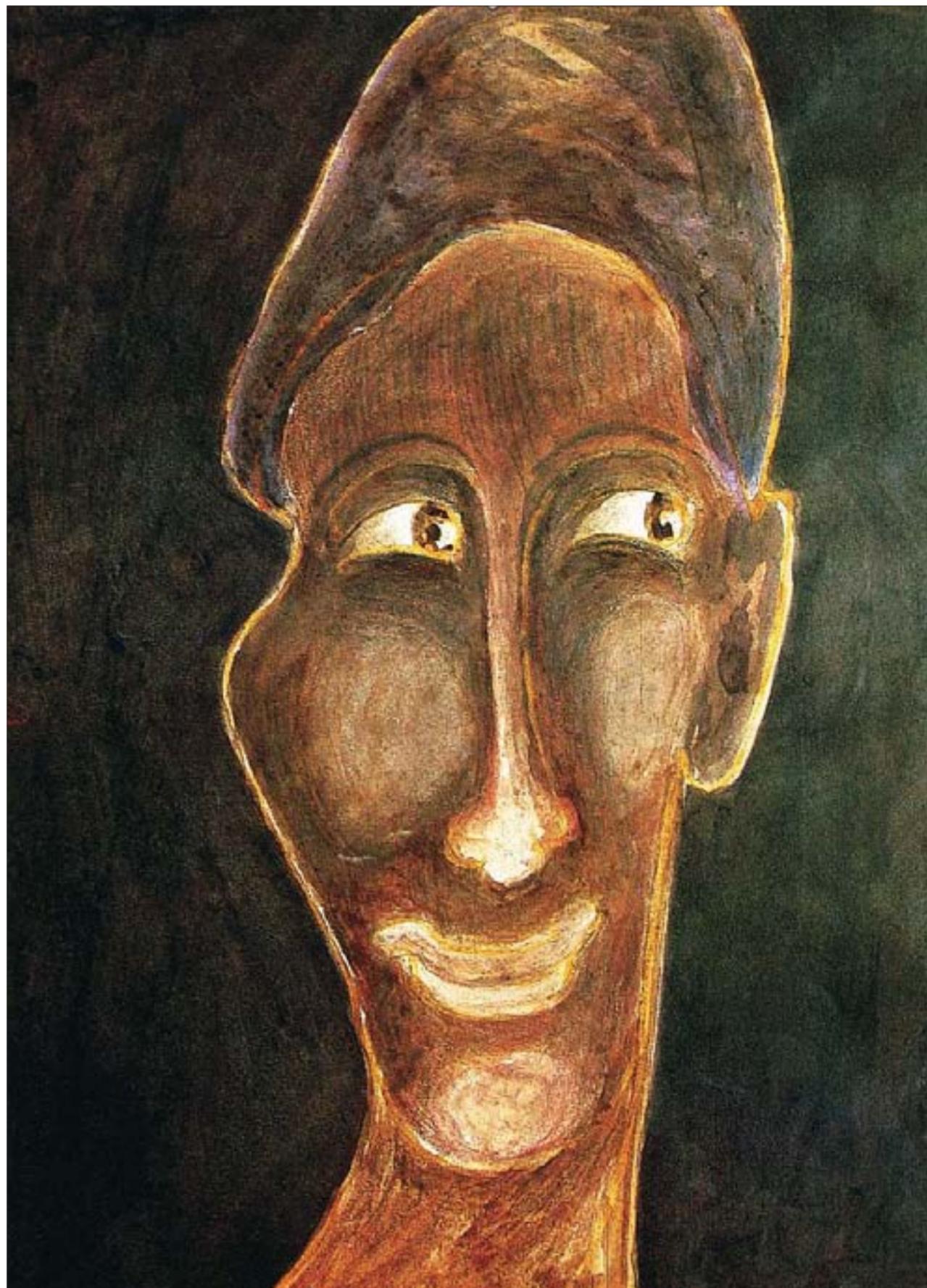
Then there are faces – both male and female – and these are not illusive portraits standing in for an individual. They may have taken off from a particular individual, but in the final rendering become rather character studies than visual impressions. It is thus that they do not lack in

personality but instead have distinctly personal presences, with expressions ranging from the sullen and sombre to the calm and contained, and rare instances of the joyful or the merry. However, whichever be the particular expression, the painted faces invariably exude a feeling of untold mystery, as if the whole of a personality is beyond complete comprehension.

Very similarly, Rabindranath's landscapes are hardly descriptive passages such that it may be nearly impossible to

determine the inspiring source in actual locations. Nonetheless, some of the glowing yellow skies behind the silhouette of trees in the foreground must invariably be the result of nature's manifestation at Santiniketan. Once again, the fact, that despite a broadly general identification the landscapes remain largely non-specific. These paintings rendered with a dominant tone of chromatic emotions, where nature's mysteries unfurl before us through the liquid tones of colour.





But above all, what draws our attention from amongst his entire collection is a series of reworked photographs. The May 1934 issue of the *Visva-Bharati News* carried a photo-portrait of Rabin Dranath on the cover. A number of these covers were painted over by him in ink, pastel and water colour, transforming each of the faces into distinctly differing identities. In many of these, the ink scribbles and colour tones spare the eyes which continue to glow piercingly out from

beneath the cloak of pictorial transformation, but in a few he had even painted over them. Not only does this exercise address the issue of the 'real' as an illusory appearance that substitutes an object, it also introduces within the same debate the issue of identity, especially when one realizes that a couple of these reworked faces tend to look distinctly feminine.

Addressing questions of considerably wider implications

than those that were of immediate concern to his contemporaries in the field of visual arts, Rabin Dranath personified a vision of much larger dimension. Approaching pictorial language from the vantage point of a wider horizon, he indexed a direction and a possibility in pictorial practice that was exemplary within the modern in Indian art.

◆  
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# IN SEARCH OF A NEW LANGUAGE FOR THEATRE

ABHIJIT SEN

*Though Rabindranath maintained his search for an alternative language for the theatre, yet it must be remembered that when it came to matters of actual performance he was never rigid or inflexible. He combined in himself the roles of author-actor-producer, therefore, he was ever alert to the requirements of production and reception, kept adapting his staging principles accordingly, thereby giving his theatre a broader perspective.*

*There is no need for the painted scene; I require only the scene of the mind. There the images will be painted by brush-strokes of the melodious tune.*

In a prelude that he later added to his play *Phalguni*, Rabindranath Tagore makes Kabisekhar (the poet) speak these words, and when he went on to play this role during performances of *Phalguni* (1915), he created and the creator seemed to speak in the same voice. Rabindranath himself is known to have made similar declarations regarding the theatre and the language that it needs to adopt, more so in our socio-cultural context.

The Bengali theatre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which emerged as a product of the Bengal Renaissance, was first, a colonial

importation, and second, an urban phenomenon. The English theatres in Calcutta, constructed chiefly for the entertainment of local British residents, provided the models for the theatres of the Bengali *baboos* (the elite *nouveau riche*); so the theatres of Prasannakumar Tagore (1801-1886) or Nabinchandra Basu (with his home production of *Vidyasundar* in 1835) or the kings of Paikpara, all emulated that Western model. The other important characteristic of this Bengali theatre was its urban nature. It evolved principally in the city, patronized by the rich elite classes, and increasingly pushed to the margins the earlier forms of popular performance, which included not only the *jatra* (a form of indigenous musical theatre with

spectators sitting all around the stage) but also the non-dramatic forms like *kathakata* (Didactic story-telling tradition), *kabigan* (literally, poets' songs), *panchali* (Poetic texts singing the glory of a deity), or *kirtan* (religious singing in chorus). These forms were looked down upon as being fit only for the riffraff – as vulgarisation of the Hindu pantheon merely to entertain the lower sections of the society.

Rabindranath and his brothers had a close association with

the theatre; one of them in particular, Jyotirindranath (1849-1925), had written several plays for the professional theatres, and had experimented extensively with Western melodies, which, in turn, are said to have inspired Rabindranath's own experimentations in the early operatic pieces like *Valmiki Pratibha* (1881), *Kalmrigaya* (1882) and *Mayar Khela* (1888). Though some of his works were staged in the public theatre, Rabindranath himself

A scene from a dance drama by Tagore, also seen in the picture





did not seem to care much for the contemporary professional theatre. He was envisaging a 'parallel theatre', distinct from the contemporary professional theatre.

This search for a 'parallel theatre' kept Rabindranath preoccupied throughout his entire dramatic career, though he began with early dalliances with the Western model – first, the operatic experimentations in *Valmiki-Pratibha* (1881), *Kalmrigaya* (1882) and *Mayar Khela* (1888); next, his use of the Shakespearean five-act

tragic structure in blank verse, in *Raja O Rani* (1889) and *Visarjan* (1890). Most of these early performances were marked by their use of overt realistic stage-conventions, whether it was the illusion of a forest created with actual trees for the staging of *Valmiki-Pratibha* (1890), or the stage strewn with realistic stage properties for the mounting of *Visarjan* (also 1890).

Between *Visarjan* of 1890 and *Sarodatsav* of 1908, despite some sporadic attempts at playwriting, there was virtually

Tagore (left) and with Indira Devi (below) in *Valmiki Pratibha*.



a gap of almost eighteen years. The return to serious drama with *Sarodatsav* in 1908 marks a major shift, not merely dramaturgical or theatrical but even ideological. On the one hand, Rabindranath still had a sense of regard for the “great English” (whom he associated with all that was good in the English culture) and distinguished them from the “little English” (whom he located in the colonial masters who had taken control of this country). On the other hand, he was influenced by the upsurge of the nationalist/anti-colonial ideology that was increasingly gaining momentum.

Oscillating between the two, Rabindranath had started to ‘imagine’ a modern Indian nation that would recover much of its lost ancient glory. This urge was articulated in several poems, songs and essays composed during this period (among which were essays like “Prachya O Paschatya Sabhyata”: 1901, “Nation ki”: 1901, “Bharatvarsher Samaj”: 1901, “Bharatvarsher Itihas”: 1902, “Swadeshi Samaj”: 1904). He was making a conscious departure from the British system of education by founding a school in Santiniketan, approximating the Indian concept of a *tapovan* (1901). He was even actively involved in the political protests against the British-policy of

partitioning Bengal; he stepped into the streets singing songs and celebrating *Rakshabandhan* between members of the Hindu and Muslim communities (1905).

Alongside, he was also ‘imagining’ a new kind of theatre, which would be significantly different from the colonial mimicry then practised on the public stage. This new theory of theatre is formulated in the essay “Rangamancha” (1903), in which he voices his disapproval of Western theatrical models, particularly of the realistic kind, and suggests a return to our indigenous cultural traditions. Rabindranath’s espousal of the cause of *jatra* is particularly significant because this indicates his disapproval of both the colonial and the urban nature of the contemporary Bengali theatre. In the preface to *Tapati* (1929) he is critical of overt realism in theatre, particularly the use of painted scenery. In imagining a “parallel theatre”, he was trying to rid it of the unnecessary colonial trappings and urban inflections. He was seeking to ensure that the imagination of the audience was not limited.

When he moved to Santiniketan and the open-air environs of the *asbrama*-school, Rabindranath was able to put into practice his notions of a ‘new’/‘parallel’ theatre – both in the dramatic and theatrical languages – particularly in the productions



Tagore as Raghupati in *Visarjan*

of seasonal plays like *Sarodotsav* and *Phalguni*. For the 1911-*Sarodatsav* production (in which Rabindranath played the *Sannyasi*, or the ascetic), the students are reported to have “decorated the stage with lotus flowers, *kash*, leaves and foliage”. Rabindranath allowed only a blue backcloth to stand in for the sky, and made Abanindranath remove the mica-sprinkled umbrella: “Rabikaka did not like it, and asked, ‘Why the royal umbrella? The stage should remain clear and fresh’; so saying, he had the umbrella removed.” The bare stage was the appropriate

setting for the two scenes of this play: the first located on the road; the second, on the banks of the River Betashini.

Again, for the first performance of *Phalguni* at Santiniketan (25 April 1915), the stage décor was in tune with this poetic structure of the play. As Sita Devi reminisces, “the stage was strewn with leaves and flowers. On the two sides were two swings on which two small boys swung gleefully to the accompaniment of the song...” Indira Devi, referring to a 1916-Jorasanko performance (a charity show for the Bankura famine), comments: “In place of

the previous incongruous Western imitation, a blue backdrop had been used; it is still used now. Against it, was a single branch of a tree, with a single red flower at its tip, under a pale ray of the moonshine.” The reviewer of *The Statesman* (1 February 1916) noted: “‘Phalguni’ is a feast of colour and sound and joy.”<sup>1</sup>

Around this time, Rabindranath also wrote what were arguably his maturer plays – *Raja* (1910), *Dakghar* (1917), *Muktadbara* (1922), *Raktakarabi* (1924) and *Tasher Desh* (1933). In

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Rudraprasad Chakrabarty, *Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratrikiya*, pp. 125-126.



Scene from a Tagore dance-drama

each of these he experimented considerably with the dramaturgical structure, but the performance of the two seasonal plays in the open-air ambience of Santiniketan encapsulated his notions of a new theatre scenography in a manner that would not/could not be available in any other ludic space. Though *Raja*, *Dakghar* and *Tasher Desh* were

produced by Rabindranath, he could stage neither *Muktadbara* nor *Raktakarabi*, though he read them out before several people on different occasions.

In 1926, Rabindranath took yet another bold step as he introduced dance as a medium of theatrical expression in his play *Natir Puja*. When it was decided to take the production to Calcutta, there was a sense

of unease because this was effectively the first time that a girl from a respectable family – Gouri, the daughter of the artist, Nandalal Bose – would be seen dancing in a theatrical performance. To tide over the problem, Rabindranath created the only male character of Upali and played the role himself. For the later dance dramas, he made it a point to be seen on the stage in a bid to give legitimation to the performances. *The Statesman* noted with approval Rabindranath's on-stage presence during a performance of *Parishodh* (the original version of *Shyama*) in October 1936: "He makes the stage human. Everyone else on the stage may be acting but he is not. He is reality. Moreover he gives a dignity to the performance – nautch is transformed into dance."<sup>2</sup>

Rabindranath by this time had paid several visits to the Far East: he went to Japan thrice, twice in 1916, and again in 1924; to Java and Bali in 1927. To him, the Japanese dance "seemed like melody expressed through physical postures... The European dance is ... half-acrobatics, half-dance... The Japanese dance is dance complete."<sup>3</sup> Of the dance of Java

2 The Statesman, 14 October 1936; cited in Rudraprasad Chakrabarty, Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratrikiya, p.298; emphasis added.  
3 Japan yatri, Rabindra Rachanabali (Complete Works) Visva-Bharati Edition, vol. 10 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1990) p.428.

he observed: "In their dramatic performances [he uses the term *yatra*], there is dance from the beginning to the end – in their movements, their combats, their amorous dalliances, even their clowning – everything is dance."<sup>4</sup> This exposure to the dance-languages of the Far East inspired Rabindranath to evolve his own theory of 'theatre as dance', which resulted in the crop of the dance dramas of the final phase that commenced with *Shapmochan* (1931). With the following trio – *Chitrangada* (1936), *Chandalika* (1939), and *Shyama* (1939) – Rabindranath went even further with his experimentations of the dance-drama form. Rabindranath adopted the style of *kathakata*, so that the lines of the prose play (of 1933) were easily set to tune. *The Statesman* remarked: "The technique of the dance-drama in 'Chandalika' is in many ways a revival of the ancient Indian form in which the dialogue is converted into songs as background music, and is symbolically interpreted by the characters through the dances."<sup>5</sup>

Though Rabindranath maintained his search for an alternative language for the theatre, yet it must be

4 Java-yatrir patra, Rabindra Rachanabali, (Complete Works) Visva-Bharati Edition, vol. 10, 1990, p.525.  
5 The Statesman, 10 February 1939, after the performance at Sree Theatre in Calcutta (9 & 10 Feb); cited in Rudraprasad Chakrabarty, Rangamancha O Rabindranath: Samakalin Pratrikiya, pp. 271-272.

remembered that when it came to matters of actual performance he was never rigid or inflexible. Because he combined in himself the roles of author-actor-producer, he was ever alert to the requirements of production and reception, kept adapting his staging principles accordingly, and thereby gave his theatre a broader perspective.

If Tagore was imagining a liberally comprehensive concept of a nation, he was also imagining a more inclusive kind of theatre, as is evident from his later experiments (as actor and producer). He retained his fondness for the indigenous resources but never believed in a blind replication of the *jatra* or *yatra*-model. At the same time, though largely critical of the Western stage importations, he did not reject them outright if they served the purposes of theatrical exigencies. As a producer, he often conceded to the actual staging conditions at hand to uphold the model of an eclectic theatre where components realistic and non-realistic, urban and rural, borrowed and indigenous, Western and Eastern, could all co-exist.

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# The Scientist in Tagore

PARTHA GHOSE

*Tagore was a perfect antithesis of the cultural divide between the sciences and the humanities so poignantly exposed by C.P. Snow in his "The Two Cultures". All truly creative geniuses have straddled this divide.*

Rabindranath Tagore was a quintessential poet-philosopher. Yet, he had a deeply rational and scientific mind. He was a perfect antithesis of the cultural divide between the sciences and the humanities so poignantly exposed by C.P. Snow (1905-1980) in his "The Two Cultures" (1959). All truly creative geniuses have straddled this divide. Darwin (1809-1882) wrote in *The Origin of Species* (1859):

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

Einstein admitted:

A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitutes true religiosity; in this sense, and this alone, I am a deeply religious man. (From "The World as I see it" 1931).

Rabindranath's song *akash bhara soorjo tara* expresses the same sense of 'wonder' in the universe:

*The sky studded with the sun and stars, the universe throbbing with life,*

*In the midst of all these have I found my place –*

*In wonder whereof gushes forth my song.*

*The blood that courses through my veins can feel the tug Of the sway of time and the ebb and flow that rocks the world –*

*In wonder whereof gushes forth my song.*

*Stepped have I gently on the grass along the forest path,*

*My mind beside itself with the startling fragrance of flowers.*

*The bounty of joy lies spread all around –*

*In wonder whereof gushes forth my song.*

*I have strained my ears, opened my eyes, poured my heart out on the earth,*

*I have searched for the unknown within the known –*

*In wonder whereof gushes forth my song.*

*How wonderfully the poet delineates the essence of science*

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in the line, 'I have searched for the unknown within the known'. It is this aspect of science rather than its utilitarian value that makes it a deeply spiritual quest and that fascinated Rabindranath.

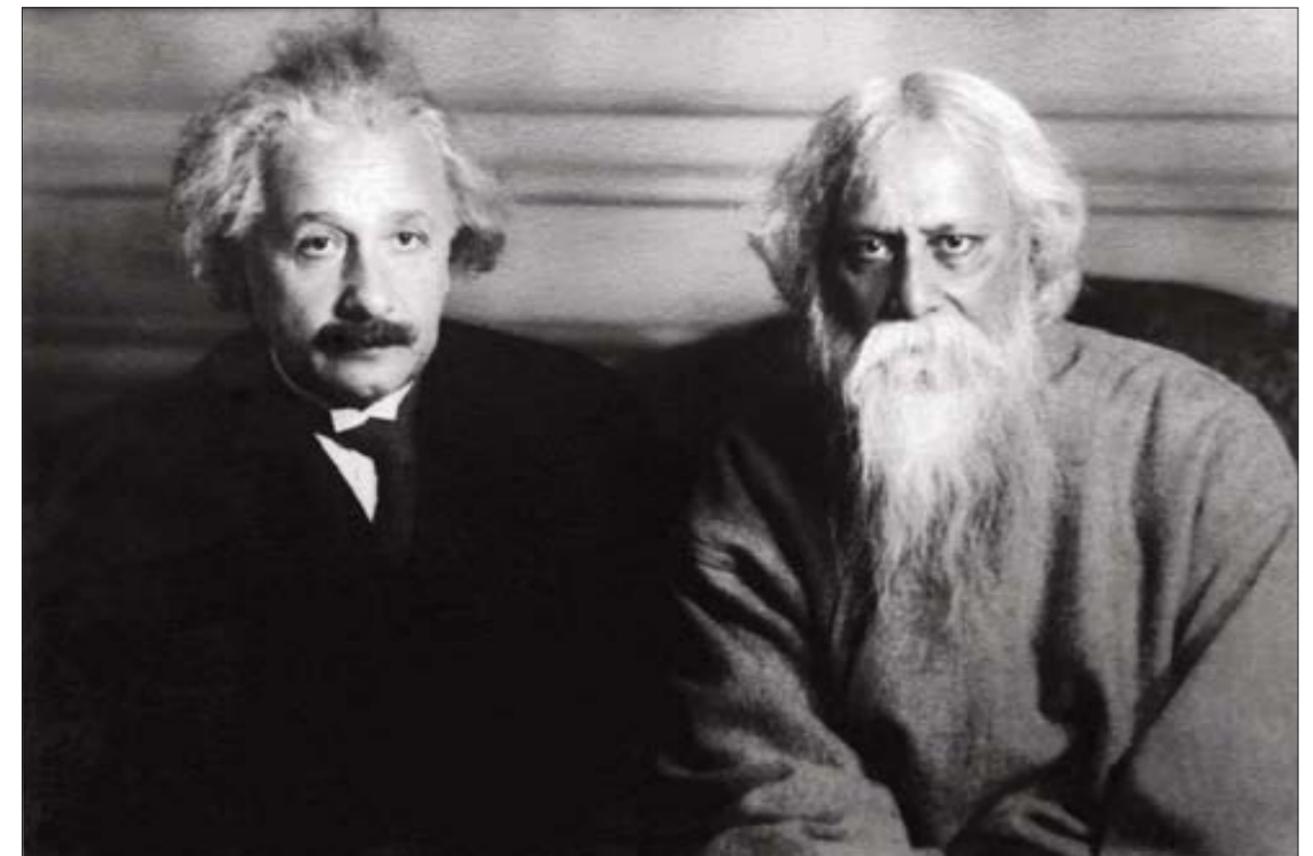
In the Preface to his only book on science, *Visva Parichay* (1937), dedicated to the scientist Satyendranath Bose (1894-1974), he wrote about this fascination for science from his childhood – how his teacher Sitanath Datta used to thrill him with simple demonstrations like making the convection currents in a glass of water visible with the help of sawdust. The differences between

layers of a continuous mass of water made obvious by the movements of the sawdust filled him with a sense of wonder that never left him. According to him, this was the first time he realized that things that we thoughtlessly take for granted as natural and simple are, in fact, not so – this set him wondering.

The next wonder came when he went with his father, Maharshi Debendranath, to the hills of Dalhousie in the Himalayas. As the sky became dark in the evenings and the stars came out in their splendour and appeared to hang low,

Maharshi would point out to him the constellations and the planets, and tell him about their distances from the sun, their periods of revolution round the sun and many other properties. Rabindranath found this so fascinating he began to write down what he heard from his father. This was his first long essay in serial form, and it was on science. When he grew older and could read English, he started reading every book on astronomy that he could lay his hands on. Sometimes the mathematics made it difficult for him to understand what he was

Tagore and Albert Einstein



reading, but he laboured through them and tried to absorb their gist. He liked Sir Robert Boyle's (1627-1691) book the most. Then he started reading Huxley's (1894-1963) essays on biology. He writes in the Preface to *Visva Parichay*:

The universe has hidden its micro-self, reduced its macro-self or shelved it out of sight behind the curtain. It has dressed itself up and revealed itself to us in a form that man can perceive within the structure of his simple power. But man is anything but simple. *Man is the only creature that has suspected its own simple perception, opposed it and has been delighted to defeat it.* To transcend the limits of simple perception man has brought near what was distant, made the invisible visible, and has given expression to what is hard to understand. He is ever trying to probe into the unmanifest world that lies behind the manifest world in order to unravel the fundamental mysteries of the universe. The majority of people in this world do not have the opportunity or power to participate in the endeavour that has made this possible. Yet, those who have been deprived of the power and gift of this endeavour have remained secluded and ignored in the outskirts of the modern world...

It is needless to say that I am not a scientist, but from childhood my strong desire to enjoy the *rasa* of science knew no bounds. ...My mind was exercised only with astronomy and life science. That cannot be called proper knowledge, in other words, it does not have the sound foundation of scholarship. But constant reading created a natural scientific temper in my mind. My lack of respect for the stupidity of blind faith has, I hope, saved me from the extravagance of cleverness to a

large extent. Nevertheless, I have never felt that it hurt my poetry or imagination in any way.

Today, at the end of my life, my mind is overwhelmed with the new theory of nature – scientific *mayavada*. What I read earlier I did not understand fully, but I kept on reading. Today also it is impossible for me to understand everything of what I read, as it is for many specialist pundits too. (translation mine; italics added)

Tagore's life long and intimate friendship with Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937) must have also helped him no end to develop a reverence for science. The Acharya's life was devoted to the search for reason in the workings of nature, for a unity in the diversity of nature, a synergism between spiritualism and reason. This search did not remain confined to philosophical speculations alone but led him to invent instruments of unprecedented precision and sensitivity for collecting direct evidence from nature. This must have greatly influenced Rabindranath who, like Raja Rammohun (1774-1833), Bankimchandra (1838-1894) and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), forebears of the Bengal Renaissance, searched for a synergism between spiritualism and reason in the Indian tradition. Not only did Rabindranath help his friend with money to carry on his path breaking experiments in England, he also wrote extensively about them and made them known to the public at large in Bengal.



Landscape – a painting by Tagore

He also had extensive conversations with other leading scientists of his time like Albert Einstein on the nature of reality and causality in Germany in 1930 and with Heisenberg (1901-1976) on the philosophical implications of quantum theory in Calcutta in 1928. This involvement with and understanding of science helped him develop his own interpretation of the Upanishadic philosophy of Nature to which he was introduced at an early age by his father. It engrossed his mind when he delivered the Hibbert lectures in Oxford in 1930. These lectures were later published as the *Religion of Man*. (Tagore, 1931).

Although he was critical of technology dominating over man in some of his plays

(*Muktadbara, Raktakarabi*), he readily embraced its beneficial effects. In Sriniketan where the emphasis was on rural reconstruction he introduced many technologies like weaving, carpentry, leather work, etc. In *Personality* (1917) he wrote:

Science is at the beginning of the invasion of the material world and there goes on a furious scramble for plunder. Often things look hideously materialistic, and shamelessly belie man's own nature. But the day will come when some of the great powers of nature will be at the beck and call of every individual, and at least the prime necessities of life will be supplied to all with very little care and cost. To live will be as easy to man as to breathe, and his spirit will be free to create his own world.

To Rabindranath scientific truths were not mere abstractions and

formulas but concrete, living truths that inspired him to write great poems and compose wonderful songs. He assimilated and internalized his scientific knowledge and weaved it into the very fabric of his philosophy and his artistic creations. So complete was the fusion that the songs and poems appear to stand by themselves as great artistic creations far removed from the world of science.

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## TAGORE: THE SEER AND INTERPRETER

ERNEST RHYS

*A sharper force drove Tagore to look at the ailment of his times, and he became, instead of its ascetic, or its hermit in the wilderness, its Healer, its Discerner, and its Interpreter. He did it by the simplest magic of heart and mind, such as poets and children know.*

When Zarathushtra (in one of the older books of the East) asked Ahura what his name was, he gave two in reply, both of which are remarkable – the Seer or ‘Discerner’ and the ‘Healer’. They would serve well, it has been said, to mark the functions which Rabindranath Tagore made his own in that later phase of his career, when the trouble of his days had made him more keenly

alive to the needs of men and women in India and all over the world. His temperament, his love of Nature, and the life of meditation that the Indian sun favours, might have led him to retire from the struggle for the new order. A sharper force drove him to look to the ills of his time, and he became, instead of its ascetic, or its hermit in the wilderness, its Healer, its Discerner, and its Interpreter.

He did it by the simplest magic of heart and mind, such as poets and children know. When you talk to him, and walk in the sun with him, you learn the secret. You see how by the divination of the heart he learnt to join together two spirits, two faiths, two regions. India and Indian faith and divine philosophy have often seemed immensely far away from ours

not touched by the affectionate piety and the feelings as those of a mother for her children, or the intimate faith of a St. Francis. But in Tagore you feel the humanity that was in the son of man, comforting the children of light in their awe of the Eternal. In him the spirits of the Upanishads reach the same threshold. It was natural that out of a living belief in the beauty

of the earth, in the sun and the stars, and in the waters below, there should grow a living faith such as Rabindranath Tagore has expounded in *Sadhana*. The test of its truth for him is that, living by it, and dowered by Nature to enjoy life to the full, he has found the medicine to heal the troubles of his own day. He is able to speak so naturally to us in this country, because he became an early pilgrim to our shores. In youth he went like some of the old Buddhist pilgrims on a long and arduous journey into our outer world, saw for himself the spectacle of our Western civilization, and what it was doing for good and evil; and he felt those forces of today which are affecting his own country, too, at times, and seeming to threaten the secret faith in which his songs were sung and his books sent into the world.

Thus, he has been not only a seer, but the herald of the new Dawn that we hope means the New Day for our two allied regions and our two troubled civilizations.

◆ (Ernest Rhys (1859-1946) was an English writer, best known for his role as founding editor of the *Everyman's Library* series of affordable classics. He wrote essays, stories, poetry, novels and plays)

Mother and child – a painting by Tagore



# The Wayfaring Poet

AMRIT SEN

*The sheer range of Tagore's travels fascinates us, considering the enormous difficulties and hardship he had to encounter. He was always eager to familiarize himself with other cultures, integrating the best aspects within his self and his institution.*

Among the many aspects of Rabindranath's multifaceted personality was his fascination for travel. "I am a wayfarer of the endless road", he wrote. He travelled widely across Europe, America and Asia at different points in his life and left behind a copious record of his travels in his letters, diaries and reflections.

For Tagore, travel not only broadened his selfhood, it also contributed to his philosophy of internationalism and the development of his institution Visva-Bharati.

Tagore's earliest experience of travel was his trip to the Himalayas in 1873 with his father Debendranath Tagore. Apart from inculcating a

Tagore with Helen Keller



bonding with nature, this trip also provided a sense of freedom and exploration that Tagore was to cherish throughout his life.

Accompanied by his brother Satyendranath, the young Rabindranath travelled to Europe in 1878 to study law. He reached London via Alexandria and Paris and visited Brighton and Torquay. He enrolled himself in the faculty of Arts and Laws in the University College London, but his trip was cut short and he returned to India in 1880. One of the interesting aspects of this trip was Tagore's recognition of the freedom of women in European society, already discussed in another essay in this volume. The young

Tagore in Argentina (right) and in Persia (below).

Rabindranath also visited the British Parliament and noted the bustle of English life. Tagore undertook his second trip to Europe in 1890 with his brother Satyendranath and his friend Loken Palit visiting London, Paris and Aden. On both these trips Tagore familiarized himself



with western music and was drawn to European art, visiting the National Gallery and the French exhibition.

Tagore's third trip to Europe in 1912 was a landmark in his career. Recuperating in England, the ailing Rabindranath came in contact with the leading literary personalities of England including William Rothenstein W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, C.F. Andrews, Ernest Rhys and Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). His translation of *Gitanjali* was received with great enthusiasm as Tagore left for the USA. He visited Illinois, Chicago, Boston and New York and delivered several lectures at Harvard. On his return to England, his play *The Post Office* was staged by the Abbey Theatre Company. Tagore's growing



popularity as a poet can be gauged from Rothenstein's letter to him, "When you last came, it was as a stranger, with only our unworthy selves to offer our friendship; now you come widely recognized poet and seer, with friends known and unknown in a hundred homes". Tagore left for India in September, 1913.

The award of the Nobel Prize transformed the reputation of Tagore and he was invited all across the globe. His ideas of internationalism also spurred his desire to travel and interact

with cultures. In 1916 he visited Rangoon and Japan, stopping at Kobe, Osaka, Tokyo and Yokohama. Tagore was keen to locate in Japan a "manifestation of modern life in the spirit of its traditional past", and he was moved by the aesthetic consciousness of the people. Tagore was, however, disappointed by the emergence of nationalism and imperialism in the country.

In September 1916 Tagore was invited to the USA to deliver a series of lectures. He travelled to Seattle, Chicago

and Philadelphia delivering his critique against the cult of nationalism. Although he was warmly received, his views generated a lot of hostility.

Tagore returned to Europe in 1920. In England, he was disappointed to find that his strident stand against nationalism and war had cooled the ardour of his friends. He travelled to France and was deeply moved on his trip to the battle ground near Rheims. At Strasbourg, he delivered his lecture titled "The Message of the Forest". His subsequent

visit to USA to generate funds for Visva-Bharati proved to be unsuccessful. Not only did he fail to raise significant funds, he also encountered a distinctly hostile audience for his criticism of materialism and nationalism. In 1921, Tagore travelled to Paris to meet Romain Rolland, immediately warming to the vision of internationalism that both shared. Tagore also visited Holland and Belgium, Denmark and Sweden delivering an address at the Swedish academy. He travelled to Germany looking with

Tagore with dignitaries on a visit to Japan, 1929



Tagore addressing people during his visit to Singapore, 1927



interest at the Universities there and proceeded to Vienna and Prague. Tagore's poetry was now being translated and discussed all across Europe and offered a significant acceptance among a population that had been ravaged by war. He received a rapturous welcome everywhere as he spoke about peace and world unity.

In 1924, Tagore travelled to China. He visited Shanghai, Beijing, Nanking and Chufu. Tagore

interacted with a number of poets, educationists once again reviving the notion of an Asian solidarity. He visited the tomb of Confucious and addressed the Chinese youth on several occasions reminding them of the tradition of cultural exchange between China and India.

Tagore's visit to South America took him to Buenos Aires, Chapadmalal and San Isidro. An ailing Rabindranath recuperated at the residence of Victoria

Ocampo (1890-1979). The voyage to South America was significant for Rabindranath's preparation of the manuscript of *Purabi* with its copious doodlings. It was from this point onwards that Tagore's career as an artist would find expression. In 1926, Tagore visited Italy at the invitation of Mussolini (1883-1945). He received a rapturous reception, but once he realized the fascist leanings of Italy he severely denounced the Italian government. Tagore

proceeded to Oslo, Belgrade, Bucharest, Athens and Cairo. At Germany he interacted with Albert Einstein (1879-1955). The translations of his poetry ensured that he received recognition and appreciation wherever he went.

In 1927, Tagore undertook a trip to South East Asia, visiting Malaya, Java, Bali, Siam and Burma. The overarching motif of this voyage was to study the relics of an Indian civilization

and to forge closer cultural ties with these regions. Tagore's travelogue on this trip shows his keen interest in the music and dance of this region.

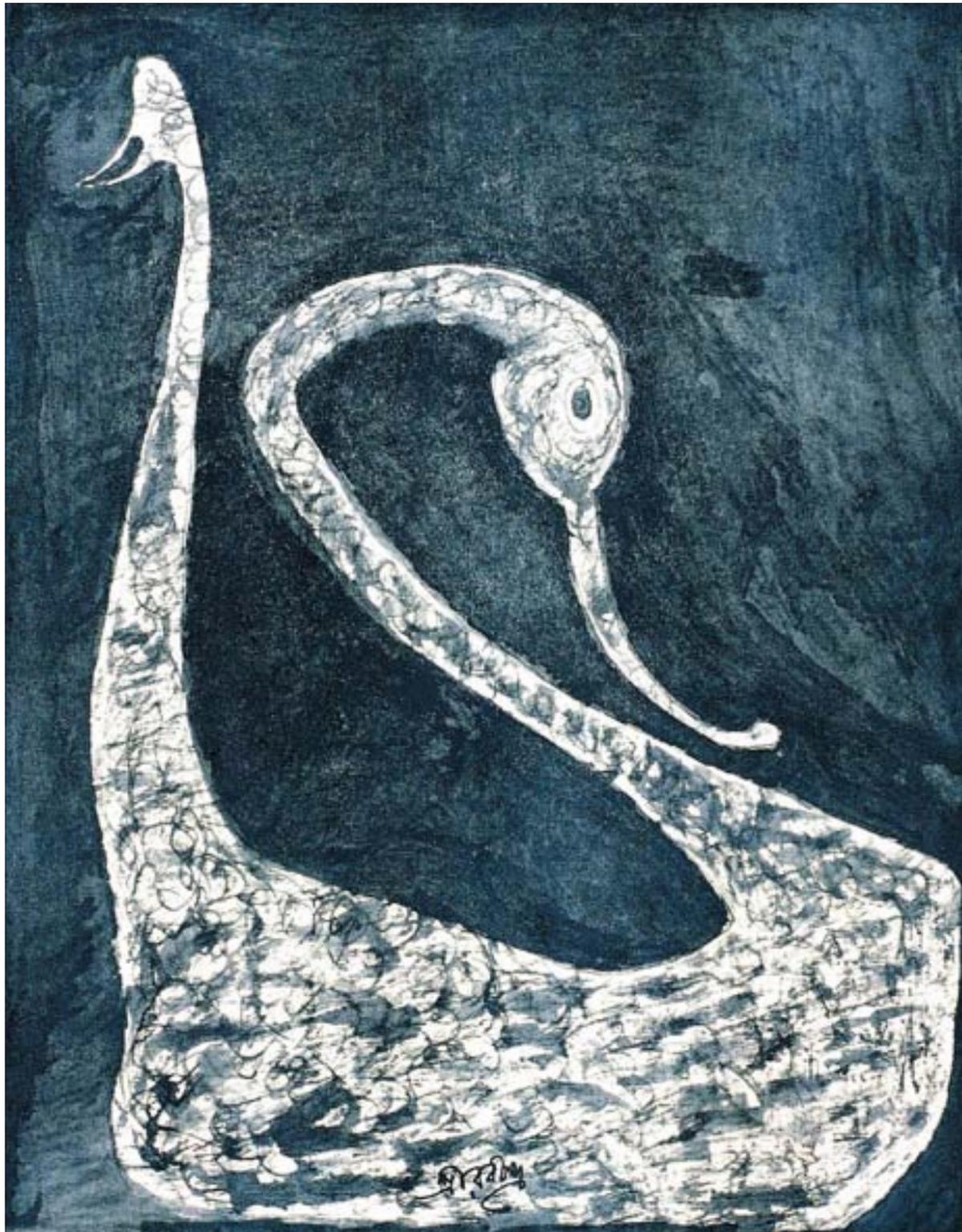
In 1930, Tagore travelled for the last time to Europe. On this trip he exhibited his paintings at several cities including Paris and they were warmly applauded. He travelled to the University of Oxford to deliver the Hibbert lectures, later published as *The Religion of Man*. He travelled

A photograph from Tagore's USA visit, 1916



Tagore with students in Russia, 1930





Painting by Tagore on board S.S. Tosa Maru, 1929



Tagore on arrival in Berlin, 1926

across Munich and reached Russia. He was warmly greeted by the Russian government and intellectuals. Tagore was deeply impressed by the rural development and co-operative movements here and later attempted to replicate them in Santiniketan.

In 1932 Tagore travelled overseas for the last time to Persia on the invitation of the King of Iran. He visited Baghdad, Shiraz, Tehran, Bushehr and he appreciated the modern measures to improve the state under Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919-1980). Once again Tagore reminded this audience of the deep cultural bonds shared by the nations. He visited the tomb of the famous poet Saadi and interacted with the King, emphasizing communal harmony as a

necessary condition for progress. The younger Rabindranath had admired the free spirit of the Bedouins in an earlier poem. Having travelled for a lifetime, he had finally met the subject of his fantasy.

Tagore's travels within the country are too numerous to catalogue. He travelled to all parts of the country for various causes. The last journey to Kolkata from Santiniketan in 1941 came immediately after his stirring address titled *Crisis in Civilization* where Tagore observed the darkening clouds of war and destruction gather over the world. His only hope was for the saviour who could redeem mankind.

The sheer range of Tagore's travels fascinates us, considering the enormous difficulties and

hardship he had to encounter. He was always eager to familiarize himself with other cultures, integrating the best aspects within his self and his institution. The young Rabindranath had travelled for pleasure and education. Once he was recognized as a world poet, he travelled as a voice of humanity to a society recovering from war, warning against the dangers of nationalism, fascism and imperialism. He retained an unflinching stance despite the hostility that he faced. As Tagore devoted himself to the growth of Visva-Bharati, his travels were directed to enriching the institution by creating a space where different cultures could coexist harmoniously in one nest. Everywhere he went, he interacted with the brightest intellects and creative personalities debating issues of philosophy, politics and aesthetics.

Writing to his daughter, Tagore once commented, "I feel a restlessness swaying me... The world has welcomed me and I too shall welcome the world... I go towards the wide road of the wayfarer". As he travelled across unknown ways dreaming about a globe without borders, he searched for the self that would be at home in the world.

◆  
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# Tagore's Religion

SABUJKOLI SEN

*Rabindranath's mission is – the divinization of man and the humanizing of God. Tagore's journey to "Religion of Man" started with the shlokas of Upanisad in his childhood. It was enriched by the philosophy of the Gita, the teaching of the Buddha, the Mahavira and also by the Christian tradition besides the indigenous Baul and Sufi traditions.*

"Everyone has something special called 'my religion'... which is his religion? The one that lies hidden in his heart and keeps on creating him."

– Rabindranath Tagore (*Of Myself*, Tr of Tagore's *Atmaparichaya* by Devadatta Joardan & Joe Winter, Visva-Bharati, 23)

Rabindranath Tagore was born in the family house of the Tagore's of Jorasanko, a centre of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal renaissance. When he was born, the Hindu revivalist movement already was in progress. Raja Rammohan Roy had founded the Brahmo Samaj, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar started his social reforms from within Hinduism and Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansa (1836-1886) was preaching his inter-religious understanding. Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore was an ardent follower of Raja Rammohan Roy, the maker of modern India. Debendranath abjured idolatry, accepted initiation into Brahmo Dharma,

gave it a shape, and became the leader of a re-oriented faith founded on the pure monotheism of the ancient *Upanisads*. Every morning his sons had to recite, with correct pronunciation and accent the verses culled from the *Vedas* and *Upanisads*. The daily recital of these beautiful as well as morally uplifting verses and the simple prayer introduced by the Maharshi influenced young Rabindranath and made a lasting impression on his mental make up.

As a member of Tagore's family in 1884 at the age of twenty three Tagore had to take charge as the Secretary of *Adi Brahmo Samaj*. During this time Brahmo Samaj was the target of adverse Hindu criticism. As a reaction to Brahmo Dharma a group of Hindu educated men was formed. They called themselves positivists or atheists. Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1886)

was one of them. The Hindu revivalist Pt. Sasadhar Tarkachuramani (1851-1928) invented a new religion called Scientific Hindu Religion. Its two organs, *Navajivan* and *Prachar* systemically published articles against Brahmo Religion. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay the famous Bengali novelist used to write articles in these papers supporting Hinduism. The young Secretary of Brahmo Samaj, Rabindranath, took up the challenge of the Hindus and replied to the articles of Bankim Chandra. Bankim Chandra replied back and the wordy duel of these two famous litterateurs continued for some time. In the long run both of them forgave each other and friendship was established between them. It will be interesting to mention here that the date Feb.26, 1891 was fixed for the census in India. Some Brahmo sects used to think themselves different from the

Hindus. But the *Adi Brahmo Samaj* sect of Brahmo Dharma to which Tagore belonged considered themselves as a special branch of Hinduism. In a letter to C. J. O'Donnell (1850-1934), in charge of census, Tagore requested him to refer the *Adi Brahmo Samaj* as 'Theistic Hindu'. He published a circular in *Tattvabodhini* requesting *Adi Brahmo* families to classify themselves as "Hindu – Brahmo" (*Rabi Jivani*, Prasanta Kumar Pal, Ananda Publisher, Kolkata, Vol.III,165).

As a Brahmo, Rabindranath was against the practice of idolatry in Hinduism. He was against the 'Incarnation-theory' or *avatarvada* of Hinduism. The taboos and prohibitions of Hinduism were repugnant to the poet. In *Dharmar Adbikar* (Vide *Sanchaya*, Rabindra Rachanavali, Vol. XII). He says :

"There are two sides of man's power. One is his 'can' and the other is his 'should'. The man can do certain actions, this is the easy side of his power. But he should do certain actions, this constitutes the utmost exercise of his power. Religion stands on the high precipice of the 'should' and as such, always draws the 'can' towards it. When our 'can' is completely assimilated by our 'should', we attain the most desired object of our life, we attain Truth. But these impotent people who can not act up to this ideal of religion, try to pull it down to their own level. Thus taboos and prohibitions arise".

Rabindranath did not spare any opportunity to protest vehemently against orthodox



Raja Rammohan Roy

Hinduism be that through his literary works or through his letters to Hemanta Bala Devi (1894-1976) or Kadambini Devi (1878-1943). But Rabindranath had an unprejudiced mind and did not subscribe to the views of any particular conventional religion. We have an idea of his religious view from the following statement "I have been asked to let you know something about my own view of religion. One of the reasons why I always feel reluctant to speak about this is that I have not come to my own religion through the portals of passive acceptance of a particular creed owing to some accident of birth. I was born in a family who were pioneers in the revival in our country of a great religion, based upon the utterance of Indian sages in the *Upanisads*. But owing to my idiosyncrasy of temperament, it was impossible

for me to accept any religious teaching on the only ground that people in my surroundings believed it to be true... Thus my mind was brought up in an atmosphere of freedom, freedom from the dominance of any creed that had its sanction in the definite authority of some scripture or in the teaching of some organized worshippers (*Lectures And Addresses*, R.N. Tagore, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 11).

Throughout his life Rabindranath Tagore never clung to one belief, however, his thoughts went through changes and developed further. From the fiftieth year of his life we find a change in his ideas about religion. He was no longer against Hinduism. He was eager to incorporate the best of Hinduism into Brahmoism. At that time there was a debate in the country: Are the Brahmos Hindus? The Brahmo leaders were divided on this issue. According to some, Brahmos are separate from the Hindus like Christians and Muslims. But as we have already mentioned earlier according to Tagore Brahmos were Hindus and in support of this view, he read a paper in the *Sadbaran Brahmo Samaj Mandir* under the caption *Atmaparichaya*. He said: "Brahmoism has received its spiritual inspiration from Hindus, it stands on the

broad basis of Hindu culture. Brahmoism has a universal outlook but it is always the religion of the Hindus. We have thought and assimilated it by the help of the Hindu mind. Today Hinduism must open the sacred, secret truth of its own heart. It must preach the gospel of universalism to the entire universe. Today through the salvation of Brahmoism, Hinduism has been fulfilling its own mission (from *Atmaparichaya*, in *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, 1919).

Tagore's unique ideas about religion began to take shape from this time. What he believed was neither Hinduism nor Brahmoism but a synthesis between the two. He did not discard the old orthodox religion totally, and yet at the same time he did not accept Brahmo religion with the same enthusiasm as before. Brahmoism could not satisfy him any more. He had seen that Brahmoism also had become conventional and rigid like Hinduism. Brahmoism of Rammohan Roy, the aim of which was to unite people failed to serve its purpose. Brahmos also used to think of non-Brahmos specially Hindus as opposed to themselves. From this time we see Tagore was not confined to any particular religion and sect. His novel '*Gora*' published in 1910 depicts the condition of the society.



Tagore in Nara, Japan, 1916

There is staunch Brahmo *Haranbabu*, ritualistic Hindu *Harimobini* and characters like *Paresbbabu* and *Anandamayee* who believed in the "religion of man". The central character

of the novel '*Gora*' initially was a staunch Hindu. He was very particular to observe Hindu rituals. However, when he came to know of his Irish birth and Christian origin, his previous



Young Tagore with father Maharshi Debendranath – a painting by Gaganendranath Tagore

notions were shattered. When he saw *Anandamayee*, who being a Brahmin Hindu lady took the orphan infant Gora in her lap – unthinkable at that time, Gora declared that

he was free then. He has no religion, no caste, no creed, no bondage of doctrines. He wakes up to a new awareness of his identity. He is a human being, neither Hindu nor Christian.

Then he was able to realize his universality. From '*Gora*' we find a seed of 'The religion of man' in Tagore. Professor Asin Dasgupta rightly observed that there is no doubt Rabindranath spoke through *Paresbbabu's* mouth and *Anandamayee's* work (Vide *Rabi Thakurs Party*, Asin Dasgupta, *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. IV, Nos. I & II).

The years 1910 & 1911 are very important to understand Tagore's views on religion. In 1910 "Christotsava" (celebration of Jesus' Birthday) was first observed in Santiniketan's prayer hall. On Tagore's request Hemlata Devi, wife of Tagore's nephew Dwipendranath Tagore translated a book on Sufism, the first issue of this was published in *Tattvabodhini Patrika* in 1911. In *Tattvabodhini* in the same year Tagore published "*Bouddhadharme Bhaktivada*" (Devotion in Buddhism). Rabindranath Tagore was very much interested in the translation of the great Sufi poet, Kabir (1440-1518). He was the inspiration behind Pandit Ksitimohan Sen Sastri's (1880-1960) translation of Kabir's *Doba*. It is evident that Rabindranath wanted to cull the best of all religions and formed his own view in the manner in which honey is formed in a flower.

Tagore's journey to "Religion of Man" started with the *slokas* of



Tagore at the Santiniketan Temple

*Upanisad* in his childhood. It was enriched by the philosophy of the *Gita* (though he did not like the context of the *Gita*, i.e., the warfield and also he was against the idea of arguments in favour of war), different schools of Vedanta and the philosophy of medieval saints. Vedanta was his natural inheritance but like his father Debendranath, Rabindranath did not accept entirely the Advaitic interpretation. “*Brahma satya jagat mithya*” was never acceptable to him. Like Debendranath he also had a reverence for the world. He said salvation through the practice of renunciation was not for him. He wanted to taste the freedom of joy in the midst of

innumerable ties. What attracted him was Vaisnavism, specially the *Visistadvaita* of Ramanuja (1017-1137). Vaisnavism, the cult of the deity and the devotee, the love between the two attracted him. Rabindranath received the inner significance of creation and love from the medieval Bengali *Vaisnava Padavali* (lyrics). The Vaisnava concept of beauty is imbibed by the poet, as beauty and love form the keynote of Tagore’s writings.

Rabindranath’s mission is – the divinization of man and the humanizing of God. Tagore was influenced by Buddhism also. Buddhist philosophy of *Pratityasamutpada* or

*Ksanikatvavada* did not attract him, neither he was attracted by the Buddhist concept of *Nirvana* where there is no pain or pleasure. He was attracted to Buddhist concept of *Abimsa*. He was fascinated by the Buddhist’s teachings of *Maitri* (brotherhood), *Mudita* (happiness in everything), *Upeksa* (indifference) and *Karuna* (compassion). Rabindranath was attracted to whatever was humane. The person Buddha was near to Tagore’s heart. Rabindranath’s view on Buddha will be transparent from his saying “This wisdom came, neither in texts of scripture, nor in symbols of deities, nor in religious practices sanctified by ages, but through the voice of a living man and the love that

flowed from a human heart” (*Creative Unity*, Rabindranath Tagore, Macmillan India Ltd., 1922, 69).

Tagore was also influenced by the Baul tradition. Baul is a non-orthodox faith that flourished in Bengal. The Baul philosophy is very similar to Sufi philosophy. The simple life style of Baul singers wandering around singing and dancing – always absorbed in the joy of life touched Tagore. The Bauls believed that there is God in every man’s heart and He may be realized only by sincere love and devotion. There is no room for distinction of caste and sex. At Silaidaha (Tagore’s family estate) Tagore came into contact with Baul *Gagan Harkara*, *Fakir Fikirchand* (1833-1896) and *Suna-ullah*. In

Santiniketan he came to know *Nabani Das Baul*. Tagore was also acquainted with *Lalan Fakir*’s songs though there is no evidence of their meeting. The songs of Bauls had such impact upon Rabindranath that his novel *Gora* starts with a Baul song. In his book ‘The Religion of Man’ (Hibbert Lecture, Oxford, 1930) he quoted a number of Baul songs and he composed many songs in the Baul tune, in keeping with the Baul spirit, such as:

*O my mind,  
You did not wake up when the  
man of your heart  
Came to your door.  
You woke up in the dark  
At the sound of his departing  
footsteps  
My lonely night passes on a mat  
on the floor.  
His flute sounds in darkness,  
Alas, I can not see Him.*

[Tr. cited from “*The Spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore*”, by Sitanshu Sekhar Chakravarty, in *The Spirituality of Modern Hinduism*, 274]

Here the relation between the singer and the God – “the man of the heart” – is very intimate. Sometimes Tagore calls this “man of the heart” the “Eternal Friend”, sometimes he calls him ‘lover’. This ‘lover’ is Tagore’s *Jivan Devata*, the ‘Lord of Life’, the guiding principle of his life. This *Jivan Devata* sometimes appears to him as male, sometimes as female. Like the Bauls, he was also looking out for this “man of heart”.

◆  
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Tagore with people at Silaidaha (his family estate)





Tagore and Gandhi – a painting by Jamini Roy

## Gandhi and Tagore

AMARTYA SEN

*Rabindranath knew that he could not have given India the political leadership that Gandhi provided, and he was never stingy in his praise for what Gandhi did for the nation. And yet each remained deeply critical of many things that the other stood for.*

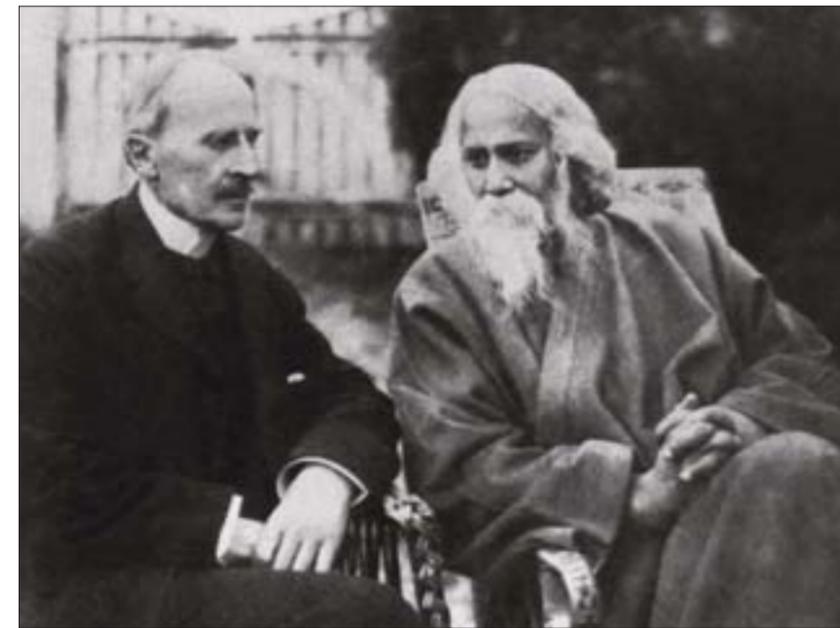
Since Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi were two leading Indian thinkers in the twentieth century, many commentators have tried to compare their ideas. On learning of Rabindranath's death, Jawaharlal Nehru, then incarcerated in a British jail in India, wrote in his prison diary for August 7, 1941:

"Gandhi and Tagore. Two types entirely different from each other, and yet both of them typical of India, both in the long line of India's great men ... It is not so much because of any single virtue but because of the *tout ensemble*, that I felt that among the world's great men today Gandhi and Tagore were supreme as human beings. What good fortune for me to have come into close contact with them."

Romain Rolland (1866-1944) was fascinated by the contrast between them, and when he completed his book on Gandhi, he wrote to an Indian academic, in March 1923: "I have finished my *Gandhi*, in which I pay tribute to your two great river-like souls, overflowing with divine spirit, Tagore and Gandhi." The following

month, he recorded in his diary an account of some of the differences between Gandhi and Tagore written by Reverend C.F. Andrews (1871-1940), the English clergyman and public activist who was a close friend of both men (and whose important role in Gandhi's life in South Africa as well as India is well portrayed in Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* [1982]). Andrews described to Rolland a discussion between Tagore and Gandhi, at which he was present, on subjects that divided them:

"The first subject of discussion was idols; Gandhi defended them, believing the masses incapable of raising themselves immediately to abstract ideas. Tagore cannot bear to see the people eternally treated as a child. Gandhi quoted the great things achieved in Europe by the flag as an idol; Tagore found it easy to object, but Gandhi held his ground, contrasting European flags bearing eagles, etc., with his own, on which he has put a spinning wheel. The second point of discussion was nationalism, which Gandhi defended. He said that one must go through nationalism to reach internationalism, in the same way that one must go through war to reach peace."



Tagore with Gandhi and Kasturba at Shyamali, Santiniketan, 1940 (left) and with Romain Rolland (above).

Tagore greatly admired Gandhi but he had many disagreements with him on a variety of subjects, including nationalism, patriotism, the importance of cultural exchange, the role of rationality and of science, and the nature of economic and social development. These differences, I shall argue, have a clear and consistent pattern, with Tagore pressing for more room for reasoning, and for a less traditionalist view, a greater interest in the rest of the world, and more respect for science and for objectivity generally.

Rabindranath knew that he could not have given India the political leadership that Gandhi provided, and he was never stingy in his praise for what Gandhi did for the nation (it was, in fact, Tagore

who popularized the term “Mahatma” – great soul – as a description of Gandhi). And yet each remained deeply critical of many things that the other stood for. That Mahatma Gandhi has received comparably more attention outside India and also within much of India itself makes it important to understand “Tagore’s side” of the Gandhi-Tagore debates.

In his prison diary, Nehru wrote: “Perhaps it is as well that [Tagore] died now and did not see the many horrors that are likely to descend in increasing measure on the world and on India. He had seen enough and he was infinitely sad and unhappy.” Towards the end of his life, Tagore was indeed becoming discouraged about the state of India, especially as

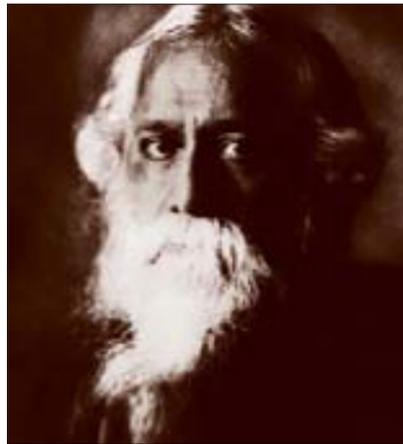
its normal burden of problems, such as hunger and poverty, was being supplemented by politically organized incitement to “communal” violence between Hindus and Muslims. This conflict would lead in 1947, six years after Tagore’s death, to the widespread killing that took place during partition; but there was much more already during his declining days. In December 1939, he wrote to his friend Leonard Elmhirst (1893-1974), the English philanthropist and social reformer who had worked closely with him on rural reconstruction in India (and who had gone on to found the Dartington Hall Trust in England and a progressive school at Dartington that explicitly invoked Rabindranath’s educational ideals):

“It does not need a defeatist to feel deeply anxious about the future of millions who, with all their innate culture and their peaceful traditions are being simultaneously subjected to hunger, disease, exploitation foreign and indigenous, and the seething discontent of communalism.”

How would Tagore have viewed the India of today? Would he see progress there, or wasted opportunity, perhaps even a betrayal of its promise and conviction? And, on a wider subject, how would he react to the spread of cultural separatism in the contemporary world?

(Excerpted from *Tagore and His India*).

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## Touched by Tagore

MARTIN KÄMPCHEN

*Creative writers like Tagore do not merely produce works of art, but they also create a new art of living which translates, as closely as possible, the essence of their creative impulses into a social context.*

There are two scenes from the early days of my sojourn in India which have left a deep impression on me. The first is when I was on a visit to a village in District 24-Parganas in South Bengal. A young farmer whom we met on his field, which was green with young paddy, wanted to greet us with warmth. He spontaneously burst into a Tagore song while he was standing on his field. His voice was untrained but soft and full of emotions, which was in stark contrast to his rough workman's hands and bruised bare feet.

The second scene took place at the Ramakrishna Mission

Ashram of Narendrapur, south of Kolkata. One evening I entered the hostel room of two college students whom I had befriended. I found them in the middle of a recitation of a long poem by Tagore. There they sat, side by side, and in one voice they declaimed loudly in the sing-song melody that is so well-known and adopted for recitation in Bengal. Their eyes were moist with tears, so deeply were they involved in the emotions of the poem.

I realised that for this unlettered farmer, as also for these two students, singing Tagore's songs and reciting his words was more than a pastime, more than a

thing of pleasure, even more than an educational effort. The Poet to them became the *Great Consoler*. "Behold the horrible fears that seize us when we behold the empty spaces of the night sky, when we imagine the vast expanse of time which is already spent and that which is in front of us, full with unknown challenges and tribulations." They can only be subdued by the inspired words of a poet like Rabindranath Tagore. Religious texts sanctified by tradition may have a deeply consoling effect as we sense the experience of centuries solidified in them. Yet, the words of an inspired man of our *own* time radiates so much more of human warmth and is so much more relevant to us, because they echo those old traditions in the language and in the experience that we are born in and that we intimately share.

Creative writers like Tagore do not merely produce works of art, but they also create a new *art of living* which translates, as closely as possible, the essence of their creative impulses into a social context. Rabindranath Tagore's urge to move out of the big city of Kolkata to start a *brahmacharya ashrama*, his vision of an authentic education which unfolds the child's potentialities, his service to village people, and his life of aesthetic simplicity combine into such a new art of living. It interprets old traditions of living, yet it does so in an individualized and personal manner.

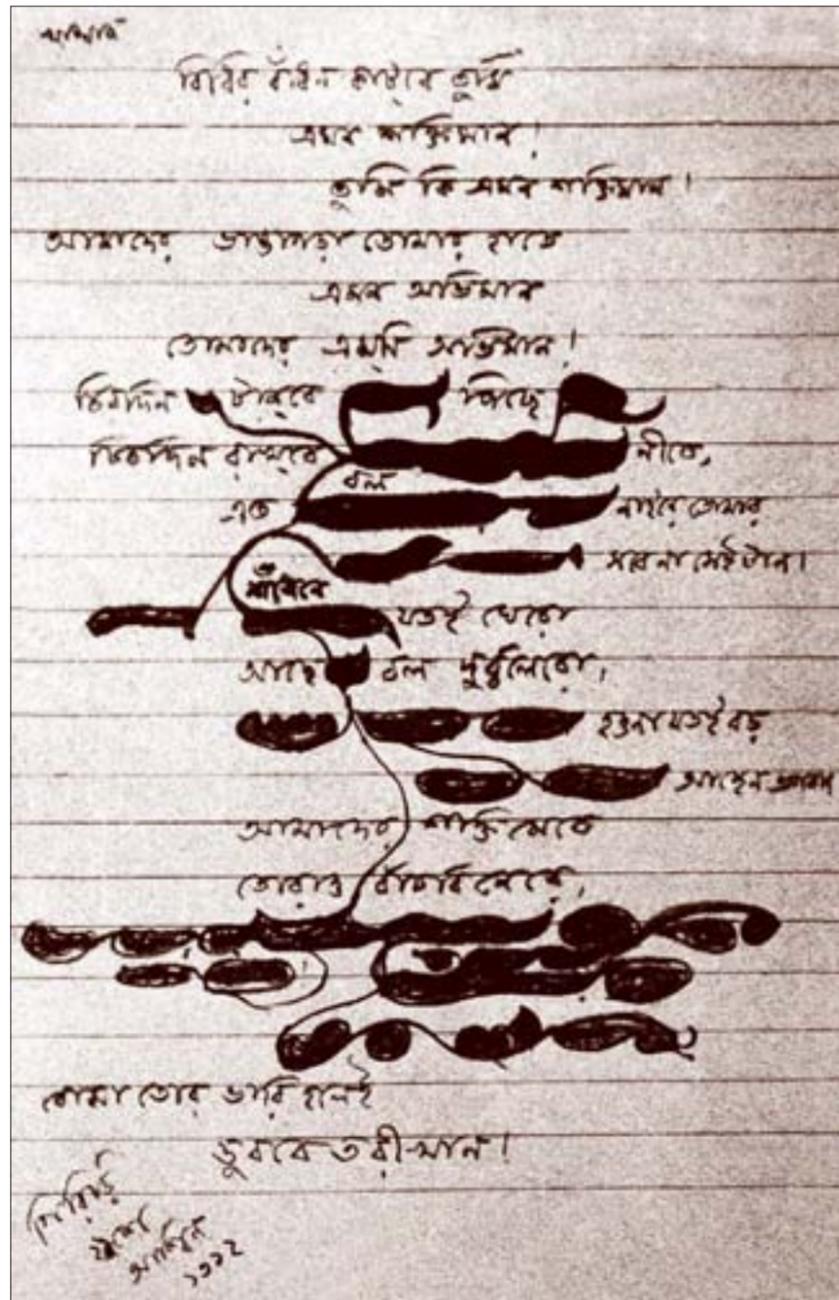


Thus, as I read Rabindranath, I was infused with a feeling of moving within a tradition, of being one element of a *Larger Whole*. And yet, in spite of such abstractions, Tagore radiates the warmth of a poet and story-teller who, within such a larger whole, is bound to be specific and personal. A story or a poem cannot simply spell out ideas or a philosophy. They must strive to evoke the Whole by describing the *detail*. It is like the sun being mirrored in a drop of rain. Writers who are capable of giving their readers a sense of the Whole through their stories and poems, they alone can be *Great Consolers*. Such writers recreate the Whole in the context of their language, their historical time and their specific geography, their cultural and social system. Thus, the

Bengali readers of today who are born into the same context as Rabindranath, have the extraordinary privilege of realizing the *Larger Whole* within the concepts and the vocabulary known to them.

This is a privilege which is rare, probably unique, in the modern world. Where in America or Europe do we have another writer who has opened the sky to the *Larger Whole* within his or her cultural context? Have the French existentialist writers done so? Or the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd? Has Marquez or Ezra Pound (1885-1972) or Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) or James Joyce (1882-1941)? I do not think so. When I survey the European writers who have meant something to me since my time as a student, I can only think of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) who within his melancholy Prague Jewish culture, has created a universe and drawn all his readers into it magically. Yet, his stories and novels lack the capacity to console. They tear us away from the complacency of a bourgeois life, away from a life which has become commonplace, conventional, uncreative. But Kafka stops there. We are awed, as I mentioned, by the horrible spaces of time and geography suddenly thrown open. Now we stare into these spaces – unconsolated. desolate. Tagore goes beyond Kafka.

Recently, I met a Muslim Bihari student in Darjeeling, a bright



and fervently dedicated lad. He had joined a Jesuit school at Darjeeling in Class Two and was now completing his College graduation in the same Jesuit institution. Meritorious as he was, he had become a Student

Perfect while still in College. He supervised younger students and was allowed to eat with his teachers, which he clearly considered a great honour. His clear-cut, natural speech, his simple pride bereft of arrogance,

his fine features which were neither harsh nor soft, impressed me. Here was a young man of, say, twenty-five years of age who had been chiselled by the morally upright, intellectual Jesuit knife. I asked him, what he wanted to do in the future, and his reply was no surprise to me. He said: "I will be a teacher, Sir! I want to serve this institution. I love it very much." With as much envy as dismay, I realized that this young man had probably never been seized by doubt on the merits of his education and character formation; he had never gone through the agonies of self-doubt.

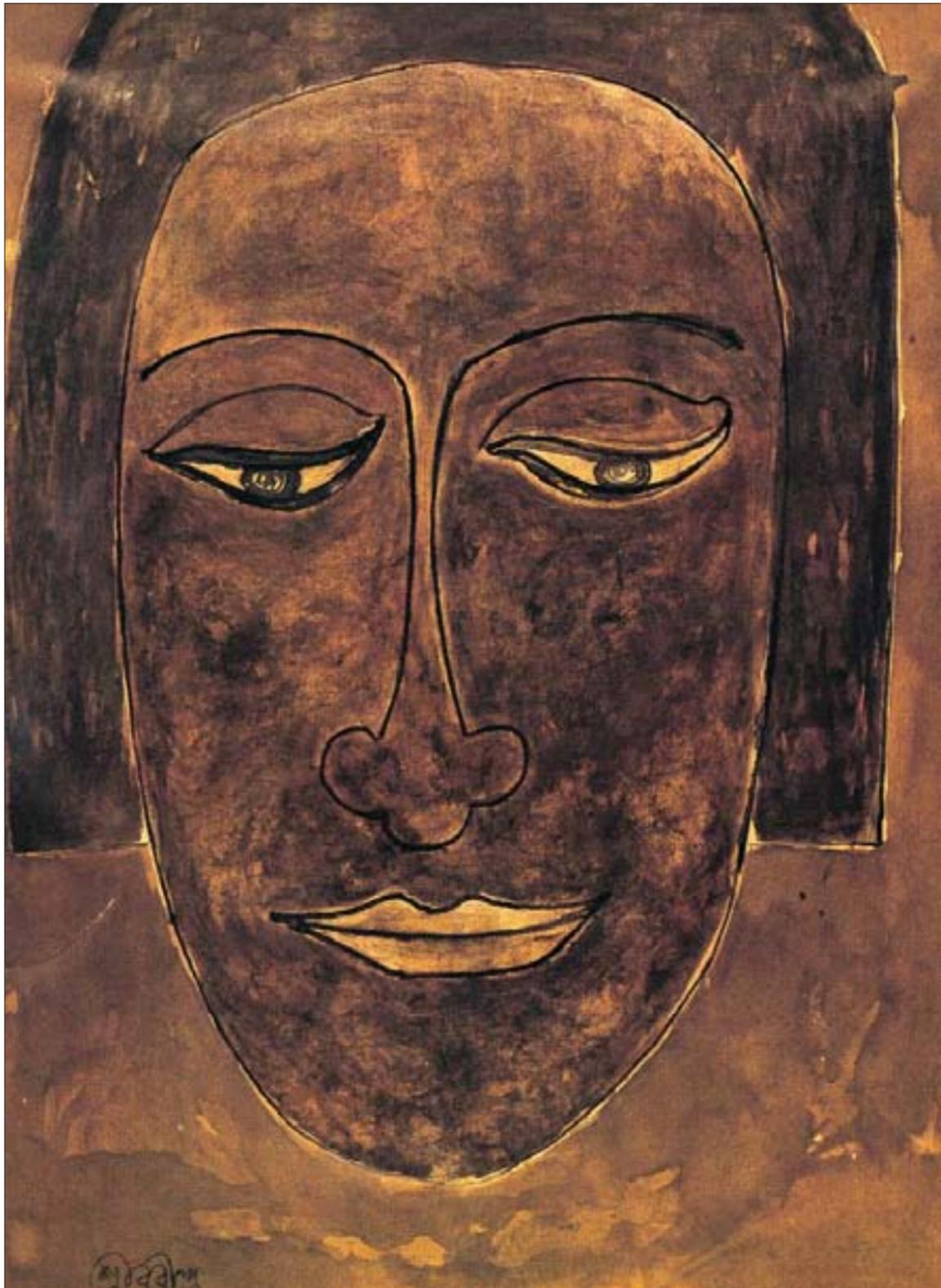
My *envy* was caused by the realization that my own life has not been as straight and simple. In fact, forever under various, often conflicting, influences, I have to struggle continuously to find my direction, agonizing and praying over the question what the wisest and most practical decision would be. At the best of times, I felt elated realising that my decision, executed with courage, took me further in my development as a human being and a writer. At bad times, I could hardly contain my despair at the mistakes and ill judgments I committed. My *dismay* looking at this young mission school product, was caused by the realization how much he really missed out on the fullness of life. Elation *and* despair, doubt *and* crisis belong to a fully lived life, and even being loved can never be worthily enjoyed without a self-purifying struggle.



What do I mean by these remarks in the context of Rabindranath Tagore's universality? The Bengal Poet has not written his poems and songs without the experiences of alienation and anxiety, without the fear and trembling he too felt when faced by the mysteries of life. Though he lived among his people with whom he shared a common language and culture, he was not confined to them, not like this young man in Darjeeling who was restricted to one single mindset. Rather, Rabindranath struggled through existential ups and downs, through *ananda* (joy) and *dubkha* (sorrow), and even his light-hearted, full-throated, melodiously happy verses are impregnated by them. Here I see his universality. Earlier, I spoke of his mirroring the Whole in the detail of a song or a poem, through which the Poet achieved

spiritual transcendence. I now try to describe Tagore's *cultural* universality which goes beyond the vocabulary and the concepts of one culture and thus opens his work to the understanding by other cultures. Alienation and hurt, strangely, speak more directly to humans than the products of a culturally secure and harmonious life.

Reading Rabindranath Tagore in Germany brings us to yet another dimension of the poet's work. First, we face language as an obstacle. Bengali is not considered a world language – but Rabindranath is a World Poet. This statement encapsulates all problems in their entirety. Outside Bengal, Rabindranath's language is no longer simply a vehicle which carries cultural content and is capable of evoking a cultural universality beyond language. Goethe (1749-1832), Germany's classical and most universal poet and thinker, has been intelligibly translated into other European languages and been able to influence the people speaking them. Shakespeare (1564-1616) and Dante, Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and Ezra Pound have become beacon-lights of their respective countries, radiating beyond their culture into all corners of the occident. Their influence depends on good translations into other European languages. We have a "culture of translation" in Europe and America; so we can demand that writers of national importance should get noticed internationally



Mit freundl. Genehmigung: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

through translations. There is a 'family feeling' at work when a Frenchman appreciates a Spanish poet, or a German picks up an Italian novelist's book.

Such a family feeling is still absent in India. She still lacks the culture of translation. Despite the efforts of several literary agencies, the literatures of the various regional languages do not yet travel widely beyond their language boundaries, at least not as much as they should. One, there is no money for translating from one Indian language into another, and two, India so far has too few professionals who are sufficiently skilled to execute such a difficult task. Hence, each regional literature plods on with rather scant influence from the rest of the country.

Translating from Bengali to, say, German involves a still greater effort. Rabindranath must cross over, not merely from one language to another within the Indo-Germanic language group, but the poet's thoughts and feelings must move from one culture to another, from one religion to another, from one emotional and social organisation to an entirely different one. When I translate a Tagore poem into German, I need to break up the Bengali sentence structure, and the thought process moulded by that sentence structure, into its elements and then "reassemble" them by integrating them into

Left: "Study in Face" by Tagore

the German sentence structure and thought process. Needless to say, this is a daunting task when it comes to such a volatile, fluid, evanescent, ethereal "creature" as a poem. Is it not bound to fail? Is it at all worth trying?

Before me, many others have tried their hand at translation with the same questions in mind. Let us not forget that Rabindranath Tagore shot into international prominence with a slim book of English prose poems, *Gitanjali*, which are the Poet's own translations from the Bengali original. Today we, including myself, prefer to run down the English *Gitanjali* as sentimental. Clearly, it cannot stand up to the spiritual and lyrical lucidity of the original. All the same, the English *Gitanjali* has introduced into the European consciousness a hitherto unknown experience, namely the direct, unabashed expression of religious sentiments. We in Europe find it increasingly difficult to speak about religious feelings normally, without camouflage. We feel uneasy and vulnerable, as if baring our soul is like stripping our clothes. This is a trend which has become even stronger since the time of *Gitanjali*. The words "God" and "Lord" cannot be uttered without an undertone of fashionable doubt. So Europeans increasingly turn to Oriental religions to express their simple spiritual emotions. In this context, Tagore has been a powerful vehicle of liberating religious sentiments in Germany. For that, the

translations which were done from the English renderings are quite sufficient. After all, in this context these *Gitanjali* poems were less seen as literature than as vehicles of religious emotions.

Tagore poems serve this purpose even today in Germany. It is astonishing how often a few lines from a Tagore poem crop up in a lecture or essay or any passage of devotional literature. Along with figures like Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), Mahatma Gandhi, the Buddha, Rabindranath Tagore supplies the storehouse of memorable, sententious thought-lines which are meant to prove to European readers that oriental wisdom teachers have a message which can be understood by all peoples.

Yet, there is more to Rabindranath Tagore than the pure religious emotions enshrined in the *Gitanjali* poems. Isn't Tagore a figure of world literature and should he not be seen against such a canvas. I have tried to project him as a figure who stands side by side with the national literary personages of other countries. I see him as one of the last universalists among them. Let there be more and more translations from the Bengali into European languages which prove this point. These translations will console and enrapture many readers as deeply as the original consoles and enraptures Bengali readers.

◆ The author is a noted German writer and translator of Tagore's works.



## Tagore's Swadeshi Samaj Debates on Nationalism

BIKASH CHAKRAVARTY

*The author of India's national anthem was outspoken in his views on nationalism. Nationalism and nation-states seemed to him a great menace, a 'geographical monster'.*

It is now well known that after his initial involvement in the Swadeshi movement centering round the partition of Bengal in 1905, Rabindranath gradually moved away from the mainstream of nationalist politics around 1907. However, the fallacious notion that disillusionment with the contemporary political situation led the poet to seek escape and retreat at Santiniketan from 1907 onwards falls in the face of facts. Never before had the

poet written so much on public issues – issues concerning the violent passion of patriotism, the illegitimacy of nationalism, disengagement of the political from the social and the moral, and the celebration of truth and *atmashakti* (literally meaning, 'the power within oneself') – as he did in this period.

This period includes the incisive lectures the poet delivered in Japan and America in 1916-17 on the cult of nationalism, later collected in a book called

*Nationalism* (1917:97), in which he questioned all forms of western nationalism; for nationalism and nation-states seemed to him a great menace, a 'geographical monster'. The author of India's national anthem was now outspoken in his views. He did not want his country to be caught in a situation where the idea of nation-state would supersede that of Indian society and civilization. He said: "Our real problem in India is not political. It is social. This is a condition not only prevailing in India, but among all nations. I do not believe in an exclusive political interest" (*Nationalism in India*, 1916).

The genesis of these ideas go back to 1901 when Tagore wrote two consecutive articles (both published in *Bangadarsban*) on the idea of nation: "*Nation ki*"

(*Rabindra-Rachanabali* 3:515-19), or 'What is nationalism?', drawing largely on the French thinker, Ernest Renan (1823-1892), and the second on the Indian Society, "*Bharatbarshiya Samaj*". Tagore concludes in the former that language, material interests, religious unity or geographical boundary – none of these have been an essential condition for the making of the western nation. For Tagore, nation is a mental construct. In the other, he differentiates between the idea of nation in the West and the idea of society in Indian history. To quote him: "What we have to understand is that society or community reigns supreme in India. In other countries, nations have protected themselves from various revolutions for survival. In our country society has survived countless convulsions from time

immemorial" (Tr; *Rabindra-Rachanabali* 3:522)

Three years later Tagore developed these ideas more fully in a seminal paper called "*Swadeshi Samaj*" (1904), or the 'Self-sufficient Society'. Here, we begin to recognize that Tagore raises very important issues – at once social, political and moral. Tagore says that in the history of the western civilization, life of the people has always been controlled by the state power, as in ancient Greece and Rome and also in the modern European societies. But in the Orient, in China and India, for example, society and not state, has been the determining agency.

Secondly, Tagore emphatically asserts that the locus of Indian civilization must be sought in her villages. The village in ancient India was not merely a place where people lived. It was also the centre of the basic values of Indian culture. It achieved almost a total self-reliance in all its basic needs – health, food, education, recreation and creativity. The village in India could thus function independently, without any help from the state. This is the village we have lost.

Thirdly, Tagore argues that the genius of the Indian civilization embedded in the community life of the village lies in 'its ability to harmonize the disparate'. He explained it in great detail in '*Bharatbarshe Itibaser Dhara*',

Tagore and Priyanath Sen



or 'The Course of History in India' (*Prabasi*, 1319 B.S., Baishakh: 423-451), and in other essays, where he insisted that Indian history, had achieved an ideal synthesis of diverse elements at all levels of human experience ('it is a perpetual process of reconciliation of contradictions', he said). Thus, his idea of nation-building must be understood in terms of *inclusion*, and not in terms of exclusion.

Implicit in these issues is Tagore's firm belief that the village is the centre of Indian culture – which we have lost in the course of time, and which needs to be retrieved and resurrected. And that alone could bring us independence. Following the idea of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), he says this should be done through an absolute commitment to the cultivation of love and neighbourliness, restraint and sacrifice, self-help and hard labour – that is through the full organization of *atmashakti*. However, even though Tagore does not endorse the role of modern technology in reconstructing the village, he does accept the logic of liberal-democratic organization as is evident from a detailed constitution he drafted for 'Swadeshi Samaj' and from his appeal to the people to *elect* a leader for the proposed organization.

It is worth noting at this point that Tagore's "*Swadeshi*

*Samaj*" (1904), in some of its basic postulates, anticipates Gandhi's 'Swaraj' conceived in *Hind Swaraj* written in 1909. In his emphasis on the values of poverty, suffering, restraint and sacrifice and his idealization of the rural life, Tagore at this period comes quite close to Mahatma's idea of nation-building. For both of them, 'Swaraj' in the final analysis ceases to be a political programme. It was an alternative way of living. But we should also note a difference. Tagore did not believe in 'enlightened anarchy' as Gandhi did (*The Penguin Gandhi Reader*, New Delhi, 1993:79). That is why Tagore does not reject the concept of that state in "Swadeshi Samaj"; he only refuses to recognize it as the determining agency in the life of community. To put it differently, for Tagore, the state and the community are not competing categories; they are, in the best of times, complementary.

The divergence between the views of the Poet and the Mahatma widens in the decades after the First World War. Tagore's first clear note of dissent from Gandhi's concept of 'Swaraj' was struck in a long rejoinder from the Poet to the Mahatma. At one stage, Tagore says: "Building of Swaraj involves an elaborate theoretical frame work, its process is intricate and lengthy. It needs emotion and aspiration but it also needs empirical



Tagore with Rashbehari Bose in Japan, 1929

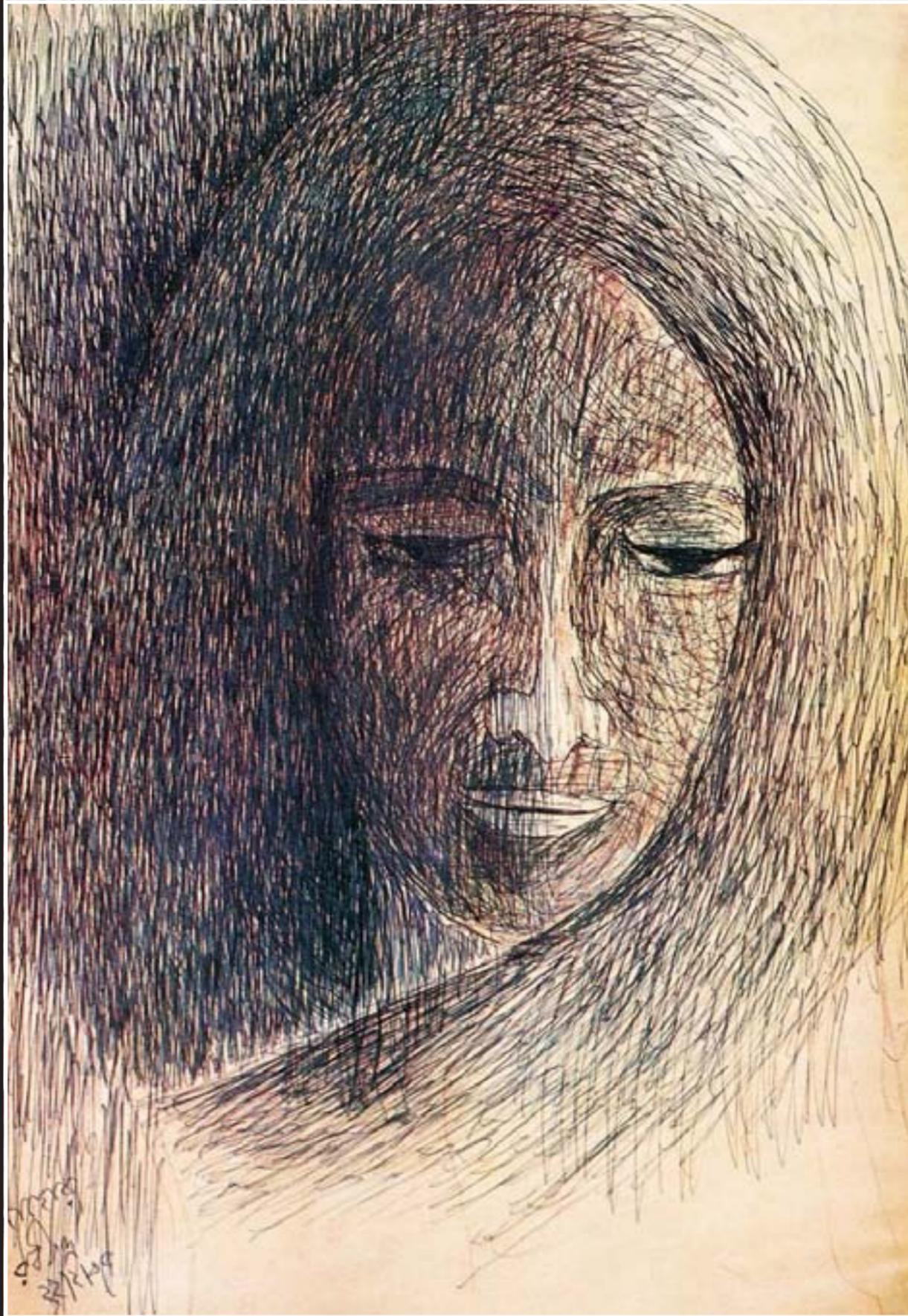
research and rational thinking in equal measure. In building the nation, we require the economists to apply their minds, engineers to use their skill and the educationists and political scientists to play their respective roles" (Translated). The argument is frankly statist, its logic issuing straight from the epistemology of the European Enlightenment because Tagore never denied the importance of the state, nor did he discard the legacy of the European Enlightenment. During the *Gitanjali* phase (1904 onwards), Tagore seems to have come quite close to erasing the gap between the natural order and the moral order – a postulate Gandhi believed in all his life. However, in the 20s and the 30s, Tagore seems to have revised his earlier Spinozistic position in favour of Kantian critique of practical reason, separate the moral order from the natural order.

What, finally, then is Tagore's idea of Swaraj? In the post-war decades, the poet was increasingly moving towards a concept of internationalism as the basis of a true nation. He said in a letter to C.F. Andrews (1871-1940) in May, 1921: "I feel that the true India is an idea and not a mere geographical fact... the idea of India is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of ones's own people from others, and which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts. Therefore my one prayer is: let India stand for the *co-operation* of all peoples of the world. The spirit of rejection finds its support in the consciousness of separateness, the spirit of acceptance in the consciousness of unity".

I submit that Tagore's idea of Swaraj finally rests in a vision of a liberal-democratic-representational organization

having a minimal contact with the state power – which will not resist the tenets of scientific rationality and the use of *admissible* technology. This organization, however, must devote itself to the strenuous task of reconstructing the village as the centre of Indian culture. As he has been repeatedly saying, we must win our Swaraj 'not from some foreigner, but from our own inertia, our own indifference'. This Swaraj (or 'self-governance') – call it Swadeshi Samaj ('Self-governed society') – will function by inclusion in the sense that it must be open to the world. Did not Gandhi talk about more or less the same kind of vision (except of course the question of the state and the intrusion of technology) in a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) in 1945? The letter read: "You will not be able to understand me if you think that I am talking about the villages of today. My ideal village still exists only in my imagination ... In this village of my dreams the villager will not be dull – he will be all awareness ... Men and women will live in freedom, prepared to face the whole world" (Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, 1986: vol. I: 286).

◆ The author is a renowned Tagore scholar having edited and published several works on the poet. He has also taught English literature at Visva Bharati.



## Rabindranath's Role in Women's Emancipation

KATHLEEN M. O'CONNELL

*Rabindranath's role in the liberation of Bengali women was a seminal one. Initially, he exposed the plight of women and argued for their autonomy through his letters, short stories, and essays. Through his novels, he was able to construct new and vital female role models to inspire a new generation of Bengali women. Later, by his act of admitting females into his Santiniketan school, he became an innovative pioneer in coeducation.*

The Jorasanko Tagore family played a seminal role in almost all the innovative socio-cultural changes that occurred in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, and female emancipation was no exception. Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), the grandfather of Rabindranath, was advocating women's education and social reform regarding women as early as 1842, following his trip to Europe. Rabindranath's father, Debendranath (1817-1905), though conservative by nature, supported the Bethune school for women's education, and permitted the participation of his daughters and other female members of the family in various forms of education and social work.

This essay displays Tagore's paintings

Most notable was the liberating role of Rabindranath's brother, Satyendranath (1842-1923), whose wife Gnanadanandini (1851-1941) became a role model for modern female behavior. Not only did Gnanadanandini redesign Bengali female dress to make it more appropriate for travelling beyond the *antahpur* (inner courtyard) she contributed articles on female educational and social reform to several journals and travelled to England with her three children without the accompaniment of her husband. Rabindranath thus grew up in a household where the norms concerning women were changing rather rapidly.

Rabindranath made his first trip to England in 1878, at the age of 17, and some of his

earliest statements regarding the need for Bengali women's independence come in a series of letters written to his family. After attending a party where British men and women mixed freely, Tagore wrote a letter contrasting the free mixing that occurred between men and women in England and the isolation of Bengali women, who were confined to *purdah* and separated from the outside world. Wrote Rabindranath:

It is only natural that men and women should seek amusement together. Women are a part of the human race and God has created them as part of society. To consider the enjoyment of free mixing between people to be a cardinal sin, to be unsociable and to turn it into a sensational matter is not only abnormal, it is unsocial, and therefore in a sense uncivilized. Men are engrossed in all manner of amusement in the outside world, while women are like their privately owned tamed animals, chained docilely to the walls of the innermost chambers of the houses. (Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from a Sojourner in Europe*, ed. Supriya Roy, Visva-Bharati, 2008: 88).

In response to criticism of this letter, which had been published in *Bharati*, then edited by his older brother Dwijendranath (1840-1926), he wrote:

The Editor has said that keeping women in purdah is not an outcome of the selfishness of men, it is but a natural outcome of the demands that the duties of householding place on one. This is a very old excuse provided by those against liberation of women; but I feel that it need not

be pointed out that to consider the practice normal to enter into purdah, surrounded by walls for the rest of one's lifetime, severing all contacts with the rest of the world, is in itself very abnormal (ibid, p.100).

Following his return to India, Tagore was put in charge of the family estates in East Bengal. There, for the first time, Rabindranath had an extended exposure to rural society and to the sufferings of rural people in general and rural women in particular. This was the period when many of his short stories were written and we find him portraying the plight of orphans and widows such as Ratan in the *'Postmaster'* and Kusum in the *'Ghater Katha'* ('The Tale of the Ghat') or the abuses of the dowry system and child-wives as illustrated by the abuse of Nirupama in *'Dena Paona'* ('Profit and Loss'), as well as the repression of female learning portrayed through the character of Uma in *Khata* ('Exercise Book'). Rabindranath's most radical short story *'Strirpatra'* ('A Wife's Letter') came later. Here the transformation of its main female character Mrinal – an upper caste woman – is portrayed, from submissive wife to autonomous individual. Mrinal chooses to live apart from the joint family as a result of the oppressiveness to a female relative that she witnessed within the family. It should be noted that Rabindranath also encouraged

female writers, and as a result of his encouragement, the feminist writings of Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani (1861-1920) were published in such journals as *Sadhana* and *Bharati*.

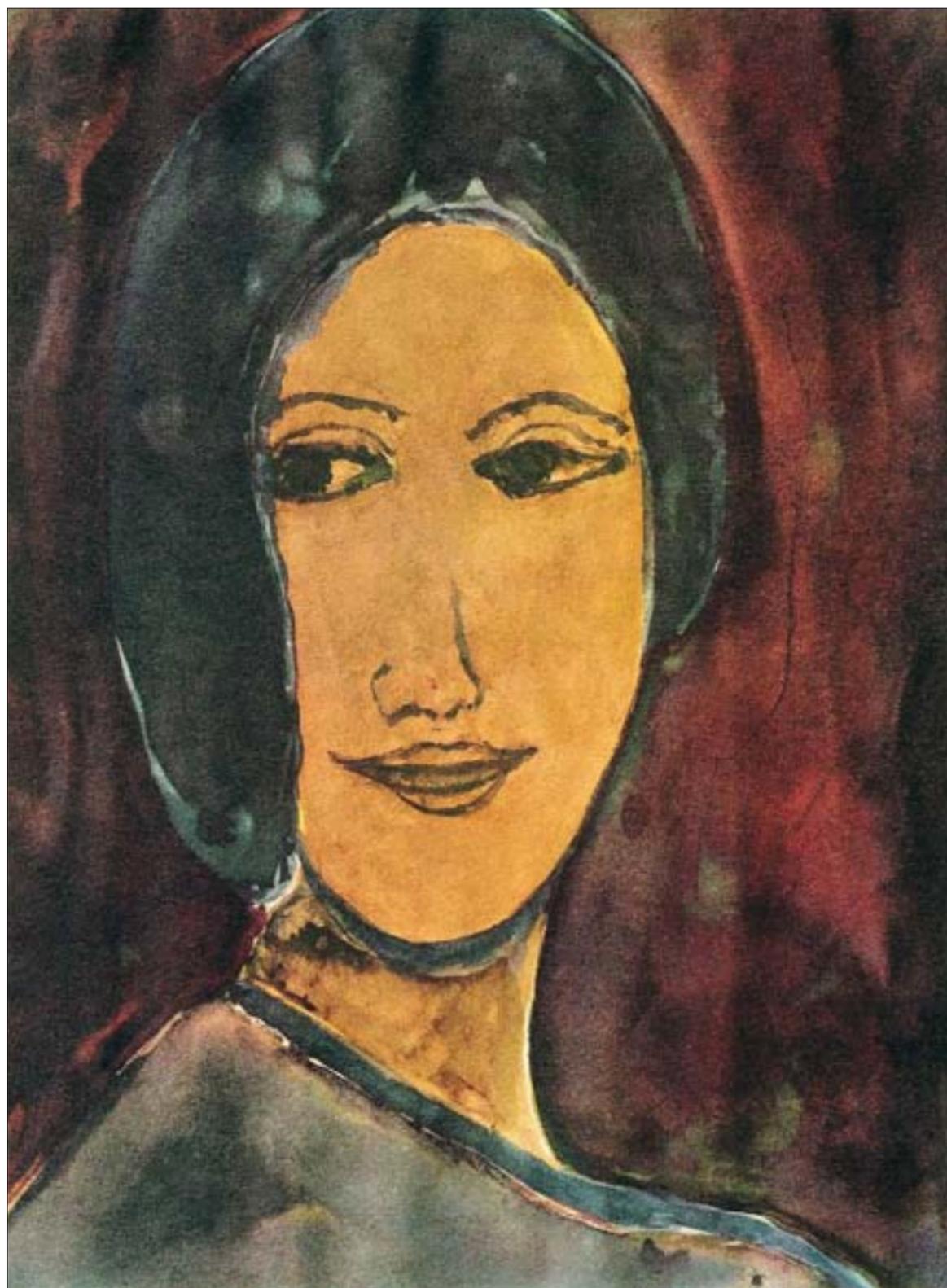
When Rabindranath started his school in Santinketan in 1901, he had wanted to include girls as well, but it did not prove practical until 1909, when a further blow to the traditional image of the Brahmacharyashram occurred with the admission of women.<sup>1</sup> The first six girls – who

<sup>1</sup> Both P.K. Mukhopadhyay and Himangshu Mukherjee put the opening of the girl's school in 1908, but Amita Sen, who lived in the ashram during this period, gives it as 1909.

had close associations with the ashram – were boarded in one of the cottages, where they were looked after by Ajit Chakravarti's mother and Mohit Chandra Sen's wife Susheela. What made the experiment so radical was that the girls were not put in separate classes but rather joined the boys in classes, sports and *mandir* services. Further impetus for the women's program came when Rathindranath was married to the talented Pratima Devi (1863-1969) in 1910, and she began taking a prominent role in the ashram activities, particularly in drama and the arts.

Rabindranath continued his exploration of the female psyche in his writings. The publication of his novel *Gora* was significant for its delineation of young female characters and the manner in which they interacted with the society around them. Such characters as Lolita, Sucharita and Anandamayee are shown in the process of shaping new identities and personal autonomy as they developed alternate ways of interaction with men and society. The development of such vital characters signalled the





potential for a new identity that Rabindranath upheld for the female students at Santiniketan. The novel's characters transcended the stereotypes of their sex, caste and race to participate in a broader social vision, becoming role models for a new generation of Bengali women.

In his educational essays also, Rabindranath began addressing the issue of women's education. His essay *Strishiksha* ('Female Education'), which was initially published in the journal *Sabuj Patra* and later translated as 'The Education of Women' in August 1915, states in no uncertain terms that there should be equality in education:

Whatever is worth knowing, is knowledge. It should be known equally by men and women – not for the sake of practical utility, but for the sake of knowing...the desire to know is the law of human nature. (Shiksha, 1351, B.S. ed, vol I, 181).

This was not to say, however, that there should be no distinction in education:

Knowledge has two departments: one, pure knowledge; the other, utilitarian knowledge. In the field of pure knowledge, there is no distinction between men and women; distinction exists in the sphere of practical utility. Women should acquire pure knowledge for becoming a mature being, and utilitarian knowledge for becoming true women (ibid, p.183).

As Santiniketan expanded to include women as students and village welfare as an objective,

curriculum innovations were required. These often took place through extra-curricular activities such as the 1910 drama *Lakshmir Puja*, which was staged and performed by female students. Tagore brought in dance teachers from Benares to train the girls and when they left, he personally taught them.

With the foundation of Visva-Bharati, a residence known as 'Nari-Bhavan' began attracting female students from India and abroad. The girls participated in all the academic departments with virtually the same courses as the male students. In addition, they also received special classes in cooking and kitchen work from an American nurse, Gretchen Green, who was attached to Sriniketan. Along with the general social and cultural activities of the institution, the girls organized their own clubs, societies and organizations. Rabindranath believed in a holistic education, and the girls were encouraged to participate in physical education as well. They engaged in games, sports, hikes and excursion, and even the athletics of self-defense such as lathi play and ju-jitsu. In Sriniketan, Dhirananda Roy (1902-1971), a former student, organized the Brati-Balakas/Brati-Balikas (literally boys and girls who have taken a vow), a group patterned after the boy scouts/girl guides and the American 4-H

movement. Their co-educational work helped the village children develop various practical skills and overcome caste prejudices through group participation.

We can, therefore, conclude that Rabindranath's role in the liberation of Bengali women was a seminal one. Initially, he exposed the plight of women and argued for their autonomy through his letters, short stories, and essays. Through his novels, he was able to construct new and vital female role models to inspire a new generation of Bengali women. Later, by his act of admitting females into his Santiniketan school, he became an innovative pioneer in coeducation. Not satisfied with imitating existing educational models, Tagore set out to create an alternative model of learning that was based on the education of the whole personality, whether male or female. It is hard to overestimate the social change that resulted through Rabindranath's writings and his encouragement of women's participation in academic events, sports, dance and creative expression.

◆  
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# Tagore and Rural Reconstruction

UMA DASGUPTA

*“If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established... Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way, and I shall say they are my India.”*

– Tagore

Not many would imagine or know that the poet Rabindranath Tagore worked for rural reconstruction in the surrounding villages of his Santiniketan school and Visva-Bharati university in rural southern Bengal. He founded the Santiniketan school in 1901 and Visva-Bharati in 1921. Along with Visva-Bharati, an institute of rural reconstruction was established in 1922 and named Sriniketan. The work of rural reconstruction was a pioneering endeavour to redeem the neglected village. The urge

Tagore with Leonard Elmhirst



Old Sriniketan farm

came to Tagore when he first went to live in his family’s agricultural estates in East Bengal, as estate manager in the 1890s. This was his first exposure to the rural world. He was then thirty, already a poet of fame, and had till then lived only in Calcutta. As estate manager he stayed in Silaidah in Nadia district, on the banks of the mighty river Padma, and his work as zamindar is on record in the District Gazetteers of the period. This rural experience was seminal to turning the poet into a humanist and a man of action. He wrote:

I endeavoured all the time I was in the country to get to know it down to the smallest detail. The needs of my work took me on long distances from village to village, from Silaidah

to Patisar, by rivers, large and small, and across *beels* (meaning ‘bayou’, or ‘marshy water-ways’) and in this way I saw all sides of village life. I was filled with eagerness to understand the villagers daily routine and the varied pageant of their lives... Gradually the sorrow and poverty of the villagers became clear to me, and I began to grow restless to do something about it. It seemed to me a very shameful thing that I should spend my days as a landlord, concerned only with money-making and engrossed with my own profit and loss (Tagore, ‘The History and Ideals of Sriniketan’, *The Modern Review*, Calcutta, November 1941:433).

As a pragmatist he knew there was not a lot he could do with his meagre resources as an individual considering the enormity of the need. But he was determined to at least make a beginning with the work.

He had two stated objectives, to educate the villager in self-reliance and to bring back to the villages ‘life in its completeness’ with ‘music and readings from the epics as in the ‘past’. He declared he would be content if that could be done realistically only in ‘one or two villages’. He wrote:

If we could free even one village from the shackles of helplessness and ignorance, an ideal for the whole of India would be established...Let a few villages be rebuilt in this way, and I shall say they are my India. That is the way to discover the true India.  
– (Tagore, ‘City and Village’, in *Towards Universal Man*, Reprint, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1967, p.322).

Community life in the Indian villages was seen to break

for the first time with the emergence of the professional classes among the English-educated Indian elite. The city began to attract Indians away from the villages. Letting the government take over guardianship of the people, this professional class relinquished their own traditional duties to society. The result was a widening gap between city and village. Tagore sought to bridge the gap through the Sriniketan experiment of combining science and tradition. He knew that a civilization that comprises of only village life could not be sustained. 'Rustic' was a synonym for the 'mind's narrowness', he wrote. In modern times the city had become the repository of new knowledge. It was essential, therefore, for the village to cooperate with the city in accessing this new knowledge.

One such vital area of expertise was in agriculture. His study of 'other agricultural countries' had shown Tagore that land in those countries was made to yield twice or thrice the harvest by the use of science. In Sriniketan, as in his family's agricultural estates earlier, he endeavoured to introduce the latest techniques of Western science to improve cultivation and agricultural production. In 1906 he sent his son Rathindranath and son-in-law Nagendranath Ganguli (1889-1954) and a

friend's son, Santosh Chandra Majumdar (1886-1926), to the University of Illinois at Urbana, USA, to study agriculture and dairy farming so that they could bring back scientific methods of agriculture to the Indian village. They returned with their degrees in 1909-10 and dedicated themselves to the Sriniketan scheme of rural reconstruction. Tagore wrote:

If we can possess the science that gives power to this age, we may yet win, we may yet live.

The Sriniketan scheme was to organise the villages so that they could supply all their needs on a cooperative basis. Tagore believed that the villagers, when trained in self-reliance, could establish and maintain their own schools and granaries, banks and cooperative stores. He hoped that those ties of cooperation would bring unity to the people and free them from dependence on the city and the government. He insisted that Indians must unite themselves to provide nation-building services. This was one of the pillars on which his dissent with the Nationalist Movement over swadeshi and swaraj was founded. He chose the path of 'constructive swadeshi' as something more urgent than swaraj.

That was the change he sought to bring to the Indian village. By change he meant, first of all, a change of attitude.



An open air class at Sriniketan

In reconstructing society urban Indians had to give the village its due respect by recognising the skills that they could contribute. This thinking was reflected in the new and alternative education of Visva-Bharati University by combining the knowledge given in the class-room with hands-on activity and experience from outside the class-room. Tagore hoped this would serve at least as an ideal for the whole country.

If we take the goal of self-reliance as a basic premise in Tagore's scheme of rural reconstruction, it would be easier to distinguish the Sriniketan endeavour from the nationalist and economic thinking of its day. Tagore's response was to work directly with the peasants even if that meant working on a limited scale with only one or

two villages. He was critical of the fact that the Indian National Congress had no such 'constructive' programme even with being concerned over the peasant question. Tagore argued that the national congress only clamours for political grievances and for jobs for Indians in the government. As early as 1910 he wrote of his disillusionment with the nationalists to his son Rathindranath who was then being groomed for the village work:

A deep despair now pervades rural life all over our country, so much so that high-sounding phrases like home rule, autonomy etc appear to me almost ridiculous and I feel ashamed even to utter them.

– (Tagore to Rathindranath, 7 April 1910, Bengali Letters, File: Tagore Rathindranath, Rabindra Bhavana Archives, Visva-Bharati University. Trs. Uma Das Gupta).

By 1910, when he wrote that letter, he came to the conclusion that working for a 'national'

programme was useless so long as the Indian elite were divided, so long as there was a conflict of vested interests among them. His remedy was to personally identify young educated volunteers who would willingly dedicate themselves to living and working in the villages without publicity or loud announcements. Their job would be to enlist the cooperation of the villagers to start the work of constructing roads, schools, water reservoirs, sanitation, to improve agricultural production, also to create new folk music, all this to bring about a 'new objective' to village life. He had enlisted his son and son-in-law as volunteers for the future.

In 1912 he bought twenty *bighas* of land along with a house which stood on that plot of land just two miles west of Santiniketan in the village called Surul. This place was named Sriniketan and its work was carried out through the Institute of Rural Reconstruction from 1922. In the course of the next two decades the Institute's work was extended to twenty-two villages, starting from just 'one or two' that we have mentioned above.

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# TAGORE AND HIS TIMES: THE IDEA OF ASIA

SUGATA BOSE

*The idea of Asia and the spirit of Asian universalism were in important ways products of cosmopolitan thought zones created by passages across the Indian Ocean. Rabindranath Tagore's direct encounter with the power and scale of art in Japan, Burma and China led him to urge Indian artists to look east in order to pioneer a fresh departure.*

A historical transformation is under way in the early twenty-first century as Asia recovers the global position it had lost in the late eighteenth century. Yet the idea of Asia and a spirit of Asian universalism were alive and articulated during the period of European imperial domination. One of the most creative exponents of an Asia-sense was Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Tagore traveled to Japan, China, Southeast Asia, Iran and Iraq in the early twentieth century forging powerful connections across Asia.

In my book *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (2006; Cambridge) I had claimed that 'Tagore was an eloquent proponent of a universalist aspiration, albeit a universalism with a difference'. This specific claim was part of a larger

contention that modern history could be interpreted – not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially – as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms. The colonized did not simply erect defensive walls around their notions of cultural difference. They were keen to be players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute to the shaping of a global future. Their cosmopolitanism flowed not from the stratosphere of abstract reason, but from the fertile ground of local knowledge and learning in the vernacular.

The *Swadeshi* cultural milieu of early twentieth-century India ('Swadeshi' standing for a political movement to attain 'Self-sufficiency'), despite its interest in rejuvenating indigenous traditions, was not wholly inward-looking; its protagonists were curious about



Tagore traveled to Japan (above), Persia (right above) and China (right) in the early twentieth century.

innovations in different parts of the globe and felt comfortable within ever-widening concentric circles of Bengali patriotism, Indian nationalism, and Asian universalism. Aspiring to reconcile a sense of nationality with a common humanity, they were not prepared to let colonial borders constrict their imaginations. The spirit of Asian universalism was brought to India by two turn-of-the-century ideologues – Okakura Kakuzo (1862-1913) and Sister Nivedita (1867-1911).

Okakura had been deeply influenced in his early years by the Harvard scholar of Japanese art, Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1908) – the Catalan American professor of philosophy and political economy at Tokyo Imperial University, whose collection of Japanese and Chinese paintings he later cataloged



for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Okakura's blend of Japanese nationalism and Asian universalism was appealing as a potential model for Indian intellectuals and artists of the *Swadeshi* era. Okakura first came to India in 1902 on the eve of the publication of his book, *The Ideals of the East*, for which Sister Nivedita, the Irish-born disciple

of the Hindu sage Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), wrote an introduction. Once Sister Nivedita introduced Okakura to the Tagore clan, a formidable cultural bridge was established between East and South Asia, and Japanese artists Taikan Yokoyama (1868-1958) and Shunso Hishida (1874-1911) soon followed Okakura's trail to Calcutta. By observing Taikan, Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) – the principal artist of the Bengal school – learned the Japanese wash technique, of which his famous painting *Bharatmata* (*Mother India*, 1905) is a prominent example. Another of his paintings – Sage riding through mountains on a white horse is in the same technique.

The Japanese brush-and-ink style was more deeply imbibed by Abanindranath's brother, and nephew of Rabindranath – Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938). In Nandalal Bose's



*Bharatmata* (Mother India), 1905 by Abanindranath Tagore.

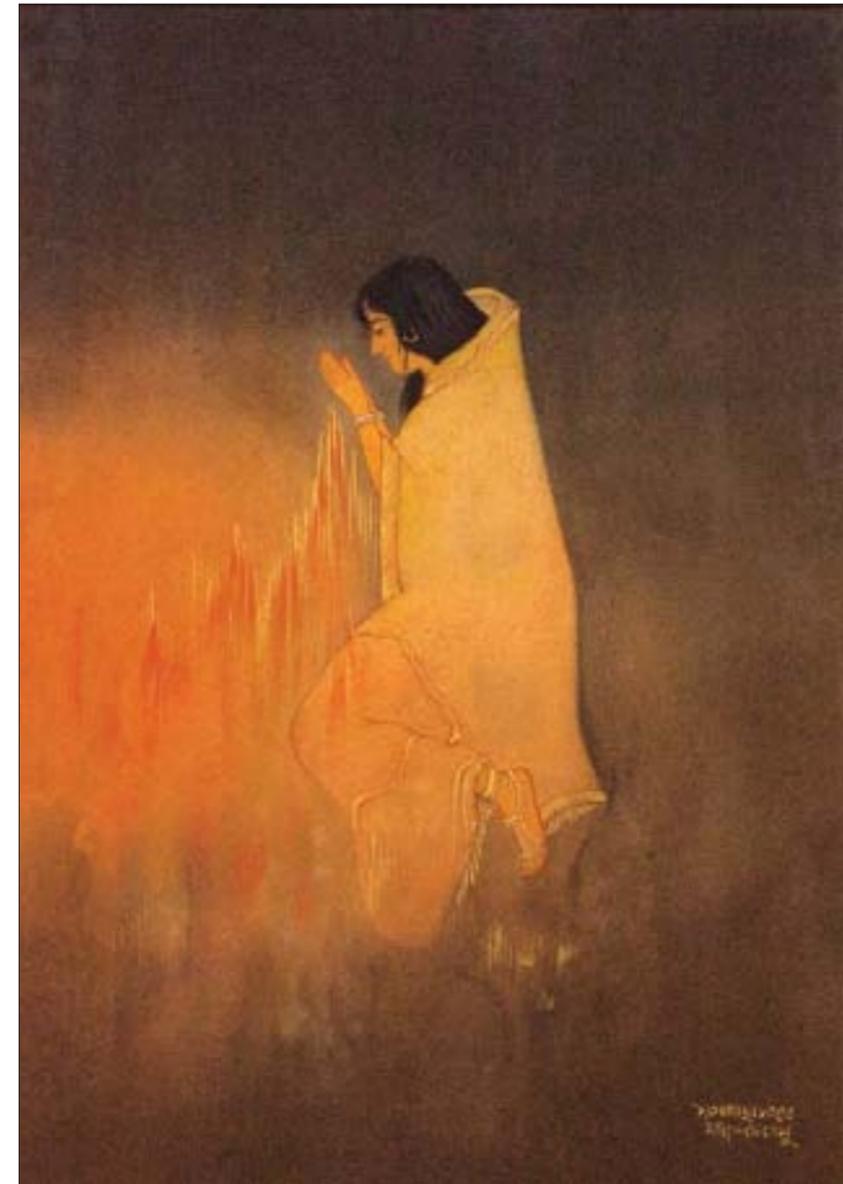
(1883-1966) early masterpiece *Sati* (1907), a quintessentially Indian theme of selfless womanhood emerged in the colors and contours of the Japanese wash.

Rabindranath Tagore's direct encounter with the power and scale of art in Japan during his 1916 visit to that country led him to urge Indian artists to *look east* in order to pioneer a fresh departure from the Swadeshi corpus of ideals. He crossed the Pacific to the United States of America and delivered his critical lectures on nationalism. The poet's entourage on his travels typically included a small but formidable team of intellectuals and artists. Mukul Dey (1895-1989) was the artist who had accompanied

Rabindranath to Japan in 1916; it would be the linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay (1890-1977) and painter Surendranath Kar's (1892-1970) turn on a voyage to Southeast Asia in 1927.

On the 1924 journey to Burma, China and Japan, Tagore's two companions from Santiniketan were Nandalal Bose, the painter, and Kshitimohan Sen (1880-1960), an erudite scholar of Sanskrit and comparative religion. On this trip Tagore preached the virtues of close interaction among Asian cultures. Stung by the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (sometimes referred to as the Orientals Exclusion Act) in the United States, some of Tagore's admirers even established an Asiatic Association in Shanghai to foster solidarity among all Asians. In Japan, Nandalal Bose had the privilege of being hosted by Tagore's friend, the artist who had visited India, Taikan, and he was introduced to masterpieces of Japanese art.

Developments in East Asia during the late 1930s had by this time brought a measure of disillusionment with the idea of Asia. Japan's invasion of China in 1937 had shown Asia to be as prone to nationalist wars as Europe. In its October 1937 issue the *Modern Review* carried a long essay by Subhas Chandra Bose titled 'Japan's



*Sati*, 1907 by Nandalal Bose. (Courtesy: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi)

Role in the Far East'. In some ways it offered a remarkably dispassionate, realist analysis of power relations in East Asia. Towards the end of the article, however, Bose did not hesitate to reveal where his sympathies lay. Japan, he conceded had "done great things for herself

and for Asia". He recalled how Japan had been a beacon of inspiration for all of Asia at the dawn of the twentieth century. He welcomed Japan's stance against the Western imperial powers. But, he asked, could not Japan's aims be achieved "without Imperialism, without

dismembering the Chinese Republic, without humiliating another proud, cultured and ancient race?" "No," he replied, "with all our admiration for Japan, where such admiration is due, our whole heart goes out to China in her hour of trial." He then went on to draw some ethical lessons for India from the conflict in East Asia. "Standing at the threshold of a new era," he wrote, "let India resolve to aspire after national self-fulfillment in every direction – but not at the expense of other nations and not through the bloody path of self-aggrandisement and imperialism."

In the end Japanese art enabled the spirit of an Asian universalism to survive the era of Japanese nationalistic imperialism. After Indian independence was achieved in 1947, Nandalal Bose began to quietly and confidently celebrate the Indian countryside in his art creatively drawing on the Japanese *sumie* style.

The idea of Asia and the spirit of Asian universalism were in important ways products of cosmopolitan thought zones created by passages across the Indian Ocean. In this sense, the continent and the ocean were not necessarily in an adversarial relationship but provided different contours of inter-regional arenas animated by flows of ideas and culture.



Benoy Kumar Sarkar, writing in the *Modern Review* in the 1910s, stressed both sea-lanes and land-routes in creating what he called an 'Asia-sense'. By the 1920s most contributors to the same journal were more enamored of the oceanic connections that spread Indian cultural influences to Southeast Asia. I have sought to make a distinction between two strands of cultural imperialism and a more generous universalism that shaped early twentieth-century discourses on this subject. During the modern age it has been a constant struggle not to allow universalist aspirations of the colonized degenerate into universalist boasts and cosmopolitanism be replaced by bigotry. The tussle goes on in new post-colonial settings. The outcome is yet uncertain, but the ethical choice before us seems clear enough.

◆  
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Tagore with the students at Karuizawa, Japan



## Tagore: The Golden Bridge between Great Civilizations of India and China

TAN CHUNG

*Tagore acted as the golden bridge between two ancient civilizations. He was in favour of a seamless world where all barriers, including the political and the geographic, must be obliterated to create a united mankind. He showed how following in the footsteps of Buddhism, barriers could become pathways leading to long-lasting friendship and mutual appreciation.*

“Geographical boundaries have lost their significance in the modern world. People of the world have come closer. We must realize this and understand that this closeness must be founded on love... the East and West must join hands in the pursuit of truth.” The man, Rabindranath Tagore, who made this observation, had his intellectual realm encompassing Sanskrit civilization, English culture, and Bengali folklore in addition to family affinities with Islamic traditions and Persian literature. He had also a China dimension in his universal outlook as he said in Beijing in 1924: “I have been reading

translations from some of your books of poetry and I have been fascinated by something in the quality of your literature... I have not seen anything like it in any other literature that I know of.”

Inspired by the Vedic mantra “*yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam*” (where the whole world meets in one nest), Tagore named the institution he founded at Santiniketan in 1921 “*Visva-Bharati*”. This ideal, Tagore shared, in a letter, with the Chinese writer, Xu Dishan (Su Ti-shan), who visited Santiniketan in December 1920: “Let the illusion of geographical barriers disappear from at least one place in India – let our Santiniketan be that place.”

Left: Tagore with Tan Yun Shan and family

Chinese bird-chirping was heard from Tagore's "world-in-one-nest" ashram in 1921 when Professor Sylvain Levi arrived from Paris and started teaching Chinese to Prabodh Chandra Bagchi who rose to become modern India's first Sinologist. That was the time when Tagore wrote in *Sikshar Milan* or *Union of Cultures*: "When the Lord Buddha realized humanity in a grand synthesis of unity, his message went forth to China as a draught from the fountain of immortality."

Tagore traced the footsteps of Buddha's messengers to China in 1924 and proclaimed there: "Let what seems to be a barrier become a path and let us unite, not in spite of our differences, but through them... Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living."

Tagore longed for the creation of a department of Chinese studies at Santiniketan, and extracted in his China visit (1924) promises of help that did not materialize. In 1928, a young Chinese scholar, Tan Yun-shan (my father), arrived in Visva-Bharati to start Chinese language courses and have lengthy discussions with Kshitimohan Sen, one of the dons of Santiniketan who was in Tagore's China trip. Tan Yun-shan began to shuttle

between China and Santiniketan in subsequent years, formed the Sino-Indian Cultural Society in Nanjing in 1933, enlisted support from influential Chinese leaders, like Dai Jitao (Tai Chi-t'ao), and eventually helped Tagore build Cheena-Bhavana in 1937. Attracting important Chinese academia to interact with Indian scholars, Cheena-Bhavana became the first foreign bird-nest at Visva-Bharati, and has remained, to this day, the symbol of Sino-Indian friendship and understanding.

Tagore converted the Chinese initiator, host, manager, guide and interpreter of his China trip, poet Xu Zhimo (Tsemou-Hsu), into the Bengalee "Susima". Xu Zhimo, in turn, intimately called Tagore "Rubidadda". These Sino-Indian pals bade goodbye not on the Chinese shore that Tagore left behind, but only after Tagore sailed back from his tour to Japan. When "Susima" asked "Rubidadda" at parting whether anything had been left behind, Tagore replied with a touch of sadness: "Yes, my heart." Eventually, Tagore went back to China in 1929 incognito to be the private guest of "Susima" and his wife at Shanghai for a couple of days each way when he set out for Japan and the U.S.A. in mid-March as well as in his homeward journey in mid-June.

Tagore also spent one of his most enjoyable birthdays in Beijing in 1924, getting from the renowned Chinese political thinker and scholar, Liang Qichao (Liang Chi Chao), the Chinese name "Chu Chen-Tan/Zhu Zhendan" which cleverly wrought the image of "thunder of Oriental dawn" by synthesizing "*Tianzhu*/Heavenly India" (ancient Chinese praise for India) and "*Cinastan*" (ancient Indian praise for China). Liang wrote the "Introduction" to Tagore's *Talks in China*. That memory was so indelible in Tagore that made him dictate, when his

hand was too weak to hold the pen, his "Once I went to the land of China" poem on his last birthday:

"A Chinese name I took,  
dressed in Chinese  
Clothes.  
This I knew in my mind  
Wherever I find my friend there  
I am born  
Anew."

When Tagore asked for the Chinese name on Chinese soil, he told Liang: "I don't know why, as soon as I arrived in China, I felt as though I was returning to my native place. Maybe I was an Indian monk in a previous

life, who stayed on a particular mountain, in a particular cave enjoying freedom."

Tagore inaugurated Cheena-Bhavana on the Bengali New Year Day (14 April) in 1937, in these words: "This is, indeed, a great day for me, a day long looked for, when I should be able to redeem, on behalf of our people, an ancient pledge implicit in our past, the pledge to maintain the intercourse of culture and friendship between our people and the people of China..."

For many years Tagore was voted by Chinese public

*Cheena-Bhavana* at Santiniketan



opinion as among 60 “most influential foreigners” in shaping the life of modern China, along with Marx, Engels, Nehru, etc. The Chinese remember Tagore fondly because his being an Asian winning the Nobel Prize of Western monopoly woke up the self-pride of Asian peoples, because his advocacy of embracing Western modernization while consciously developing Eastern traditions of millennial sedimentation of sagacity and enlightenment, and also because of his firm objection to Japan’s aping the West. The Chinese have always liked Tagore’s writings and songs for the richness of love, hope, harmony, and humanness. A “Tagore fever” was created in China in the 1920s, especially in the wake of his 1924 visit. We see another rage of “Tagore fever” surging in China with the universal celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Tagore.

Tagore’s commentary in *Sikshar Milan* likening modern Western civilizations to “a locomotive... rushing on with its train, the driver left behind wringing his hands in despair” is highly relevant today after eight decades. In the name of “development”, countries of the entire world are vying with one another in converting the flesh and soul of Mother Earth into the so-called “wealth”, creating



Buddha – a sculpture by Ramkinkar Baej at Santiniketan

an increasingly sick, immoral and uncouth humanity living in an increasingly rebellious and hostile environment. We see Tagore-like prophets running behind this mad train *wringing their hands in despair*. We must stop this mad train and put the driver of mankind to his seat. The best way of celebrating Tagore’s 150<sup>th</sup> birth

anniversary is to call upon the great civilizations like India and China to lead the world out of this impasse.

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## Tagore’s Visit and its Impact on China’s Literary World

YIN XINAN

*“If all the land were turned to paper and all the seas turned to ink, and all the forests into pens to write with, they would still not suffice to describe the greatness of the guru.”*

– Kabir

Rabindranath Tagore, who ‘brought out the essence of Eastern spirituality in his poetry like no other poet’ is revered as the greatest *guru* of modern India. *Gurudev*, as he is fondly referred to by his countrymen, had a thorough knowledge and deep appreciation of the Chinese culture. On the one hand, he loved the Chinese culture so much so that he always took advantage of his profound knowledge of the Tang poetry and *Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing)*, compiled by Lao Tze (Lao Zi, 6th century B.C.) one of the most famous sages of ancient China, and quoted from them profusely during his talks and speeches. Tagore often showed his regard for the glorious history and cultural traditions of China, and was deeply sympathetic towards the country which was being trampled upon by the colonialists at the time. On the other hand, he greatly influenced the contemporary literature of China through

his powerful writings. Both his literary works and social activities had a strong impact on the Chinese literati and social activists of the time. Tagore was viewed in those days as a bridge of friendship between the two countries.

When Tagore won the Nobel Prize in 1913, as the first Nobel laureate in Literature from Asia, his reputation spread across the Himalayas in a very short span of time. Because of the long cultural relationship that existed between the two countries, the literati in China were extremely happy to witness the great achievements made by him. As more and more of his articles began to appear in Chinese publications, Tagore became very popular as a literary icon even among the ordinary Chinese readers which, in turn, led to an upsurge in the demand for his works. Thus, the conducive atmosphere that existed in China in the early 1920’s paved the way for Tagore’s visit to the country.

In 1923, cultural celebrities, Mr. Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Mr. Xu Zhimo (1897-1931), had jointly founded a community called “Xin Yue She” or the “Crescent Society”, named after Tagore’s famous work, *The Crescent Moon*. Most of the members of the “Xin Yue” community had travelled to Europe and America for higher studies, and as a result, had a longing for democracy and freedom which matched with Tagore’s views on these subjects.

Though Tagore had visited several countries in Asia and Europe, and also the United

States, he had never been to China and was keen on visiting the country. In 1923, two cultural celebrities of the time, Mr. Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Mr. Hu Shi, invited Tagore to deliver a speech at the Peking University.

On March 21, 1924, Tagore began his journey from Kolkata (then, Calcutta) by sea. On April 24, Tagore and his entourage arrived in Shanghai to a warm welcome from the Institute of Literary Research and other organisations and individuals. The celebrities who were present to receive him included

famous writers, like Mr. Zheng Zhenduo (1898-1958) and Mr. Xu Zhimo. Tagore stayed in China for almost 50 days and visited several important places, like Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Jinan, Taiyuan and Wuhan. Besides enjoying the scenic beauty of China, Tagore also gave some important speeches and had several meaningful literary exchanges in many cities. The friendship between the poet and his Chinese counterparts, and also his followers and fans, strengthened in a matter of few days, and it had a profound influence on the cultural

Tagore sailing for China, 1924



Tagore with friends in a boat

relationship between the two countries in the early twentieth century. An important cultural landmark was thus established in the mutual relationship between the two countries.

The speeches Tagore had delivered in different parts of China were compiled and published in a book titled, *Talks in China* (1924). His speeches were full of wisdom, zeal and enthusiasm. One of the key thrusts of his speeches was an appeal to commemorate the traditional friendship between the two countries and to rebuild and strengthen the good cultural bond that existed in the past.

In his speeches, Tagore also urged the people of the two countries to undertake the duty of developing the oriental civilisation and to fight the materialistic influences of the Western world. He believed

that if only China and India cooperated with each other, the oriental civilisation could be developed further, which would then be beneficial to the whole world.

Many historians believe that he was successful in achieving the goal of his visit, i.e., to ensure that the people of China and India would rebuild and strengthen their traditional friendship. He was very optimistic of the future cooperation between the two countries.

A vast majority of the Chinese intellectuals welcomed Tagore’s visit to China and appreciated his speeches made during the visit. Cultural celebrities, Mr. Liang Qichao, Mr. Liang Suming (1893-1988), Mr. Gu Hongming (1857-1928) and Mr. Hu Shi, among others, appreciated Tagore’s visit and

his speeches as they shared his views. Some others, however, welcomed Tagore’s ideas only from the literary perspective. It is also a fact that Tagore’s speeches had elicited a different kind of reaction in some quarters in China at the time. Some intellectuals, like Mr. Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Mr. Qu Qiubai (1899-1935), Mr. Yan Bing (1896-1981), Mr. Yun Daiying (1895-1931) and Mr. Shen Zemin, who were deeply influenced by Marxism, held a critical view of him which was later proved to be a kind of misunderstanding. However, the style of his poems undoubtedly became immensely popular and cast a great impact on the Chinese youth of the time. No wonder, he was often referred to as the “Guiding Light of the East” by many of them.

The year 1924 is history now. Both the countries have witnessed the dawn of a new century. The seed sown by Tagore in China has now grown into a giant tree. As we celebrate his one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary, let’s hope that the friendship between the peoples of these two great ancient civilizations will grow from strength to strength.

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A painting by Rabindranath Tagore



## Man at the Centre of Universe Tagore's Ideas on Complete Education

UDAYA NARAYANA SINGH

*A set of four words here – aspiration, power, freedom and moral communion, define how Tagore would like to place man at the centre of his universe as he spelt out his ideas on education.*

**W**hile talking about his childhood and education Rabindranath Tagore (1929) had once written: *"I was brought up in an atmosphere of aspiration, **aspiration** for the expansion of the human spirit. We in our home sought freedom of **power** in our language, freedom of imagination in our literature, **freedom** of soul in our religious creeds and that of mind in our social environment. Such an opportunity has given me confidence in the power of education which is one with life and only which can give us real freedom, the highest that is*



Tagore with the students of the Santiniketan school

*claimed for man, his freedom of moral communion in the human world...*" (From 'Ideals of Education', Visva-Bharati Quarterly, April-July 73-74). The four highlighted words here – namely, *aspiration, power, freedom and moral communion*, define how Tagore would like to place man at the centre of his universe as he spelt out his ideas on education.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, by when western education had permeated into our lives in India, nobody seemed to have thought about Complete Education which would provide a learning opportunity where there is a communion between man and nature, between teacher and the taught, between liberal arts and the performing and fine arts, and where Man is at the centre of universe. That knowledge or skill alone

will not lead us anywhere as human beings, and that we need something more than these came out beautifully in a statement of Einstein when he said: *"Knowledge and skills alone cannot lead humanity to a happy and dignified life. Humanity has every reason to place the proclaimers of high moral standards and values above the discoverers of objective truth. What humanity owes to personalities like Buddha, Moses, and Jesus ranks for me higher than all the achievements of the inquiring and constructive mind."*

To this list of 'Great Minds' that Einstein (1879-1955) had mentioned, I would like to add Tagore – not just for his poems, plays, stories, novels, songs, and paintings, but also for his philosophy and ideas on nation-building – and his



Open air ambience of Santiniketan school

thoughts on 'What makes man complete?', and 'How Creative Joy' as in Music, Painting, Sculpting or Writing go hand in hand with Applied Sciences?' While commenting on Tagore's ideas on education, O'Connell, K.M. (2003; 'Rabindranath Tagore on Education') argued: *"Rather than studying national cultures for the wars won and cultural dominance imposed, he advocated a teaching system that analysed history and culture for the progress that had been made in breaking down social and religious barriers. Such an approach emphasized the innovations that had been made in integrating individuals of diverse backgrounds into a larger framework, and in devising the economic policies which emphasized social justice and narrowed the gap between rich and poor."*

While looking back at his experiment at Santiniketan when he was 80, Tagore told us how he found a place for 'science' in the scheme of things here (in *'Atmacarita'*): 'Once I had taken a vow to impart education, the creative field of which was the poetic universe of the Supreme Creator, and so I had invoked the cooperation of the land, the water and the sky of this place. I wished to place the penance for Knowledge on the pedestal of Joy. I tried to inspire the young students in the festive garden of nature by singing the welcome songs for each season... Here, right at the beginning we created a space for the mystery of the origin of universe. I wanted to create a space for the intellectual in the total and vibrant scheme of mine, which was why Science had a special position of privilege in



our work-place. The Vedas tell us – *'yasmadrite na siddhati yajno, vipashcitashcana sa dhiinam yogaminvati'* – 'One without whom even the most knowledgeable ones cannot attain the fruit of the *yajnas* – One that is attainable only with intellect and not by chants nor by magical rituals!' That was why I have tried to use both joy and intellect in the creative construction of this place.' (Translation by this author).

Notice that contrary to our belief, there is no talk of 'divinity' or 'supernatural' here, which is very interesting. Tagore here talks about bringing in a communion between the forces of 'intellect' – the sciences, and the power of 'joy' – the arts. All through, his argument is that both need to be 'located' within the space in which they need

to be reared and cultivated, and must address the issues that are the concern of man and the nature around him. That is why they must have the cooperation of the land, the water and the sky of the space around, and be linked to the change of seasons.

That education did not mean 'rote' learning, memorization and reproduction is clear from his opening paragraphs of the book titled *Visva-Bharati*: 'The education that encourages repetition is not the education

of the mind, because that can be taken care of even mechanically!' (Translation by this author). Truly, mechanical reproduction cannot be the aim of an educated aggregate as the ideal education requires us to discover or uncover the truth, and express that according to one's own abilities. He talks about constraints here as a particular nation may have various constraints within which one would be able to express a scientific truth or an observation. Tagore is confident that India has always been



Students of Patha-Bhavana with a visiting scholar

at the forefront of cracking difficult knowledge puzzles, and thinking about solutions to the crisis of the world.

But then, Tagore also laments that when India had cracked difficult problems of knowledge, it had a mental unity, but that now it's 'mind' has got divided in terms of caste, class, language and religion. He warns that disruption of one's intellectual organ or snapping off one's sense-organs vis-à-vis the rest of the body can render one useless or motionless, whereas it is a known fact that only when we join all ten fingers that our hands can form a cup – either to offer 'anjali' or to accept anything that is offered as a gift. It is not surprising that he would invite the best of European and Asian scholars in his university while gathering some towering personalities in his time as faculty members under each

discipline. This facilitation of making them interact, he thought, would automatically lead to new ideas and new knowledge.

He, therefore, says that we need to develop a system that draws from civilizational histories of 'Vaidika' ('Vedic'), 'Pauranika', 'Bauddha' ('Buddhist'), 'Jaina', 'Muslim' ('Islamic') traditions of education, and discover our own pathways to prepare the new generations and help emerge men and women with appropriate leadership qualities. He says – if you do not know yourself in detail and in an involved manner, you cannot build an 'India' by aping and copying others. You can do so only by learning to converge various traditions, or else – we could at best build a second-rate system that depends on 'transfer' of knowledge and technology.

Tagore had argued that in the West, each country and its culture as well as society had found its own goals and objectives based on which they had decided what kind of education system was needed. But in our country, rather than the *life* or '*jiivana*', it is the *livelihood* or '*jiivikaa*' that assumed the prime place in education planning. While livelihood or employment related to what we lacked and what we needed ('*abhaava*' and '*prayojana*'), the aim of life is much higher – it seeks to achieve a fullness, a completion – a kind of semantic that is much higher than mundane aspects of employability, which would be achieved any way as we go along the true path of education. To that extent, we must differentiate between the "higher" aim, i.e. liberty, freedom, civility – and "lower", or "incidental" aim – employability, skill and technical capability (*Visva-Bharati*, 1919). In Tagore's scheme of things, therefore, it was always the case that man and emancipation of the human being occupied his central concern.

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A ceremonial procession at Santiniketan. Indira Gandhi is seen (fourth from right) as a student of Visva-Bharati during 1934-35



Mit freundl. Genehmigung: Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust, New Delhi

# Tagore and Technical Education

B.N. PATNAIK

*There is no place for competition in education. Education must lead to an understanding of the underlying harmony in the universe; thus it would discourage a perspective that sees things in conflict – for example, humans in conflict with nature, or in conflict with another species.*

Tagore did not see education as merely a means to a career and a comfortable livelihood; he saw it as a means to the full unfolding of the potential – intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, and physical – of an individual. There is, then, no place for competition in education. Education must lead to an understanding of the underlying harmony in the universe; thus it would discourage a perspective that sees things in conflict – for example, humans in conflict with nature, or in conflict with another species. The great poet and thinker was intensely aware of the destructive potential of knowledge, not grounded on such an integrative perspective. Education must not only sharpen the aesthetic sensibility of a person, and sensitize him to the expressed and the hidden beauty of things, it

must also develop in him a strong sense of relatedness to others, and of empathy for the deprived, the disadvantaged, and the voiceless. It must not lead to dissociation between the learner and the tradition of knowledge and value system to which he belongs. At the same time it must equip him with a critical intelligence to evaluate that tradition. Tagore believed that learning is possible under conditions of joy; therefore the classroom must not be a prison cell, and a foreign language could hardly be the medium of education. He believed that a good educational system must benefit all sections of the society; the farmer and the potter must gain from it (in, for instance, the form of useful technology), as those aspiring to be bureaucrats and doctors. As for exploration of knowledge, education must not ignore the local and the indigenous.

One might suggest that these are too idealistic to be successfully translated into reality. One might argue, for example, that it is neither possible nor desirable to reject competition and conflict, because these contribute to the growth of knowledge. This of course is more evident in certain knowledge domains, for instance, the sciences, than in others, like the arts. But this argument loses force in the personal context of an individual practitioner of science. In any case, there can hardly be a justification for not trying to implement ideals.

Looking at this from a different perspective, Tagore's thoughts can be viewed as constituting a benchmark for education, and at the same time, a kind of measure for evaluating education.

What would be a Tagorean view of technical education at the higher level, with specific reference to our country? His ideas on education need to be translated into a set of goals for being directly relevant to this domain. First, technical education should significantly increase the students' awareness of the social, economic,

historical, and the larger cultural context in which technology development takes place, and scientific pursuits are carried out – no pursuit of knowledge, whether purely aesthetic or scientific, takes place in a vacuum. Secondly, a student of science and technology should be broadly aware that there exist other ways of cognizing the world than the scientific; for instance, the imaginative, as manifest in works of art, and further that these modes of cognition are not inferior to the scientific one. Thirdly, he must know that there are domains of knowledge, such

Photographs in this essay show students' acquiring skills in the early years of Sriniketan





as ethics, which lie outside the scope of science, but for that reason are not dispensable. Ethical sense is invaluable not just for living a good life, but for survival too. Fourthly, a student of technology must be enabled to appreciate that the most valuable technology is that which brings relief to the labourer, and the farmer, and which helps the physically challenged in different ways to negotiate with the world with relative ease. Development of text-to-speech and speech-to-text systems in the local languages is a case in point.

A conservative objection to such broad based technical education has been that it would reduce the quantum of technical knowledge to be imparted to the students, and would thereby dilute the quality of technical education. This view is based on the wrong premise that technical education serves a society best when it delivers competent technical manpower. On the contrary, from its educational system, that does not exclude technical education, a society expects knowledgeable, competent, balanced, sensitive and empathetic persons who can provide it creative, constructive leadership. Yet another conservative view is that there is no need for humanities and human sciences

in the curriculum because one can acquire sufficient knowledge about society and culture from life itself. But the fact is that one does not acquire such knowledge directly from experience; one needs constructed knowledge to interpret experience and render it intelligible and learnable. Then again some maintain that one does not learn values in a university classroom. Whereas there is some truth in it, it must be recognized that university (and university-like institutions), whether general or technical, is the best place to critically interrogate knowledge, beliefs and values, whether traditional or modern, and develop a proper perspective on the same.

However, some technical education planners today are inclined to support broad based technical education. But at the same time there is a negative attitude to arts and human sciences. So “broad-based” in most cases has come to mean inclusion in the curriculum of courses such as English language and communication skills, industrial economics, organizational behaviour, and business management. These are supposed to enable the student to negotiate with the market effectively. Such a curriculum is broad based only in name; it actually defeats the purpose of broad based education – it is oriented

towards career and success, not the development of a well-rounded personality. In fact, the ultimate goal of broad-based education is to inculcate in the student, recognition of the existence of and a healthy concern for the other, respect for him, and his beliefs and views, which may be diametrically opposite to his own.

It is extremely important that proper structures, at the formal and non-formal levels both, are created for the implementation of the Tagorean ideas. In the present system of higher education, the undergraduate level is where broad-based education can be most meaningful. About ten to twelve percent of the courses an undergraduate has to do must be in humanities and social sciences, and these must be spread over the entire duration of the undergraduate programme, not concentrated in the first two or three semesters. Courses on literature, linguistics, communication (knowledge and skill oriented both) history, philosophy, art and psychology, sociology, economics, among other human sciences, and traditional Indian knowledge systems, must be available for the student to make his choice. He must be discouraged from choosing courses from just two or three disciplines.

At the level of technology development, application of



Gavandes Kollektion im Rabindra-Bhavana

Tagore’s ideas would mean developing, in our context, people-oriented technologies for maximal utilization of water resource, harnessing natural energy resources to meet power requirements, road building, communication, disposal of garbage including electronic waste, among others, and also developing innovative methods and techniques of teaching-learning, including language learning, etc.

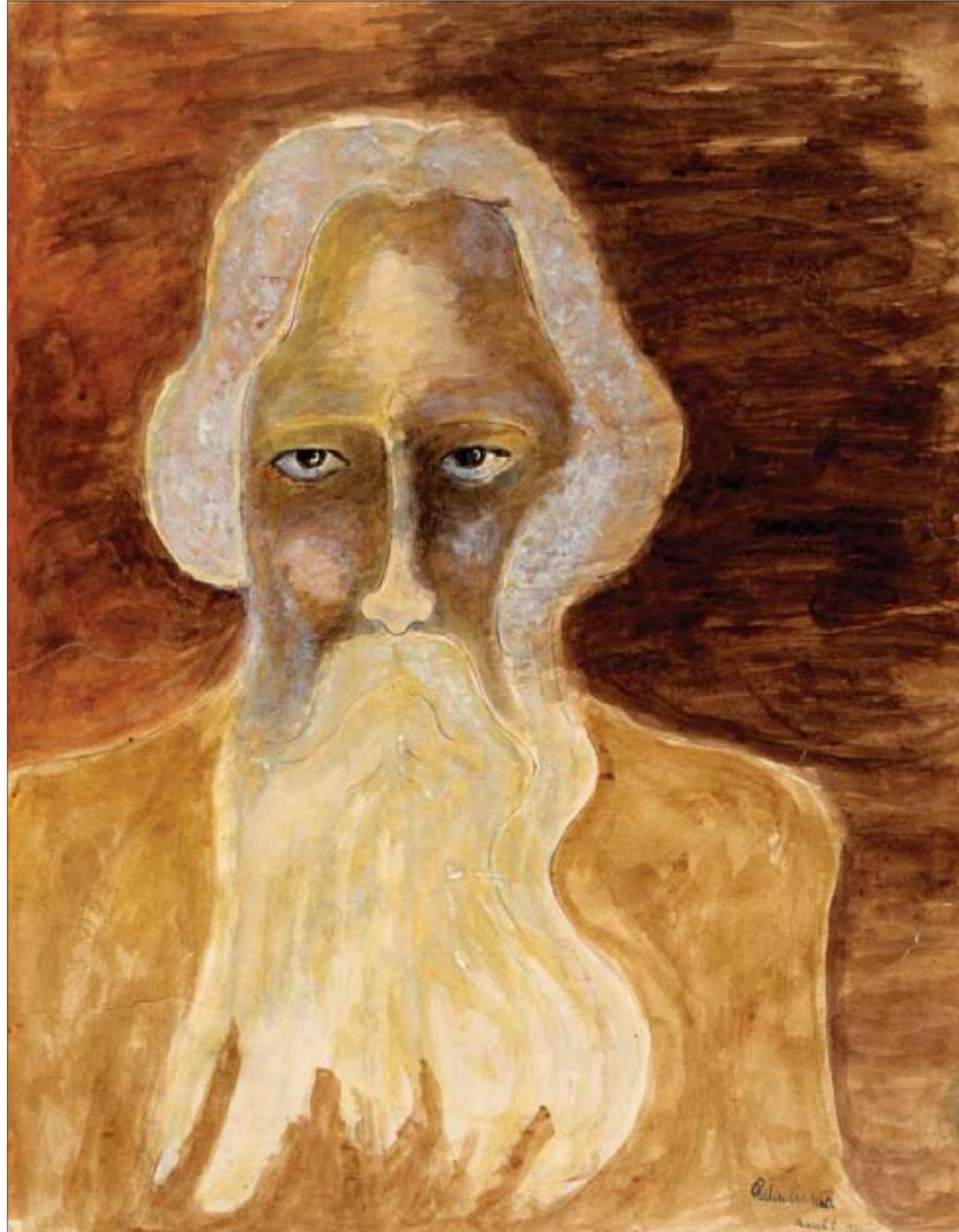
But curriculum alone cannot serve the goals of broad based education. Non-formal structures need to be created

so that free and responsible discussion and debate are possible on questions of significance concerning various societal issues, not excluding those of technological knowledge creation and dissemination.

The main difficulty for the implementation of such a Tagorean model of technical education is a certain societal mindset, formed by the enormous success of technology, its ever increasing marketability, and to a certain degree at least to the specialized nature of its discourse,

which gives its practitioners “knowledge-power”. Such a mindset tends to view other kinds of knowledge as mere intellectual self-indulgence and luxury, therefore, dispensable. This needs to be corrected and technology pedagogists have an important role here. One hopes that they will not fail the society in this respect.

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Self-portrait by Tagore

## Equal Music: Influence of Tagore on other Painters

INA PURI

*In the words of the Poet, 'What is rhythm? It is the movement generated and regulated by harmonious restriction. This is the creative force in the hand of the artist. So long as words remain in uncadenced prose form, they do not give any lasting feeling of reality.'*

Distanced by time, geographical locale, personal histories, it came as a surprise when the painter in Manjit Bawa (1941-2008) spoke ever so often, of the deep spiritual kinship he shared with Rabindranath Tagore, a man he regarded as one of the most influential forces in modern years. We were working in Dalhousie on Manjit's memoirs and as he painted, he spoke of his first acquaintance with Tagore and his art. For an artist it was but natural that the young man should get to learn about the great poet, musician, playwright, litterateur, philosopher, savant through his art. Manjit was a mere adolescent then, growing up in an era brimming over with optimism, when he discovered quite by chance, the paintings of Tagore, at his teacher, Abani Sen's (1905-1972) class. The surreal landscapes and intensely sensitive portraits of women were to leave a

lasting impression on his mind that time would only strengthen. He found himself deeply drawn to the brooding faces of women especially, their eyes darkened with inner turmoil and pain. As he read his poems and plays, and listened to his songs, his reverence for Tagore deepened. As always, his life followed its usual routine in Delhi, school, art classes, working on studies for his assignments, yet, in his secret life, he could hear the song of the bard encouraging him to break away from the mundane and follow his heart's chosen path. *'Eklaa cholo rey... jodee tor daak shuney keyu naa aashey'* ('Move ahead alone... even if no one comes listening to your call!') became Manjit's anthem, words he replayed in his mind when he was faced with hardship and strife.

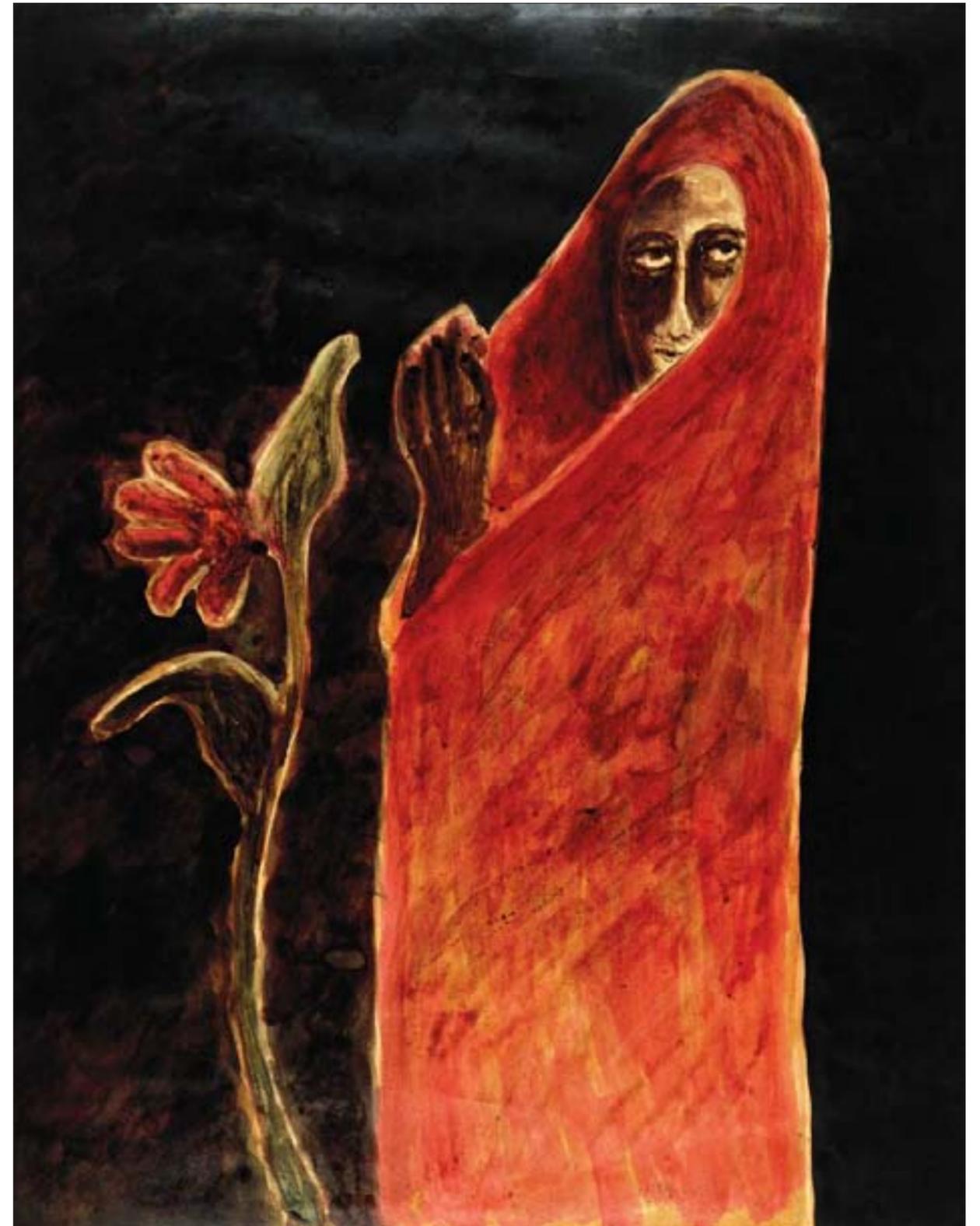
As one of midnight's children, growing in the immediate decade post-Swaraj (with the trauma of partition), Manjit's



Paintings by Tagore (above & right)

childhood years were a collage of different experiences that shaped his adult character. Their's was a large family but one that shared a warm and close bonding despite the occasional financial upheaval. His older brother was instrumental in getting him started on art and to make sure he remained interested set him interesting assignments that included travel to places of historic and archaeological significance. As Manjit cycled to destinations through the hinterland of the country, he often read Tagore's writings, during breaks. The cadmium yellow mustard fields and fiery orange blossoms of *'polash'* would make their way to his canvas but so would be the beat and rhythm of tribals he would encounter en route. Long after

his passing, I discovered his companion of those journeys, in a torn and tattered volume written by Rabindranath Tagore called 'What is Art?' (Kessinger Publications, 2005 edn). Revisiting the pages, I thought this must have been a favourite read, for the leaves of the pages were now frayed and brittle. Holding it in my hand, I heard Manjit's voice again as he drew parallels between the two lives and journeys. While in distant Birbhum, in another age, Tagore paid his tribute to the wandering minstrels, the 'baul' through his work, so did Manjit celebrate the Sufi saints and poets. For both, it was the metaphysical aspect of the faith that mattered, not any religious connotation. Interestingly, Sikhism was Manjit's family's religion, Bramhoism, Tagore's



and both eschewed ritualism and religious excesses.

Iconographically, too, despite the fact that Manjit was a trained artist and serigrapher, with years spent learning the technique in Delhi and London, there was a connectedness in the trajectories that is hard to dismiss. Like Tagore, Manjit's painterly domain encompassed the abstract and stylised figurative oeuvre that took little from Western practises, choosing to espouse all that was Indian, in terms of colour palette, imagery, and thought-processes. The celebration of pan-Indic mythology, ethos,

music, poetry, spiritual thinking is common to both and we find in their paintings, some similar compositions that are similar only in their spiritual kinship. Some lives are lived and enriched by internalising pain and here again was another sphere where the two journeys coalesced. In both lives were moments of immense pain and emotional turmoil, yet, both dealt with their dark despair creatively, there was seldom recrimination, on the contrary, there was a looking forward that was a statement of their intensely positive attitude towards life, no matter how hard the blow life had

dealt them, be it the death of a beloved child or separation from a loved one. Calm and fortitude marked their approach towards life, showing a restraint that was remarkable given the tragedies they had to encounter on more occasions than one. Deliberately opting to live in isolated places, Santiniketan in the case of Tagore and Dalhousie in the instance of Manjit, their art reflected their inner mindscapes that seldom used imagery from the world around, no matter how beautiful that outer world was. While their techniques differed in so many senses, stylistically and technically as did their colour

palettes, both were bonded spiritually, no matter how asymmetrical one was and symmetrical the other.

About Bawa's art, J Swaminathan (1928-1994) wrote, "There is a certain bonelessness, a pneumatic

quality to Manjit's figure which echoes the tantric frescoes of Himalayan Buddhism. Only the shadow of time intervenes: we are transported into a seemingly pastoral landscape, where the sublime and the risqué, the lyrical and the grotesque set

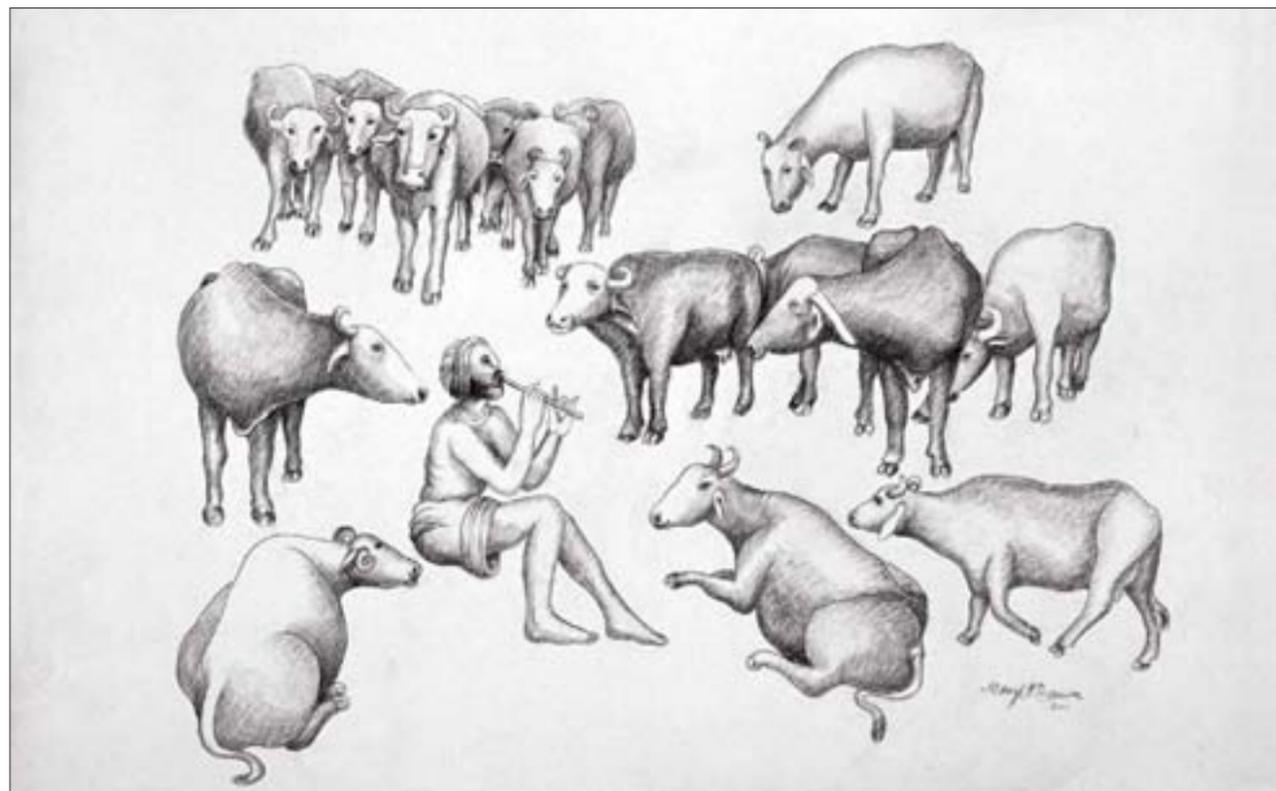
up a strange tableau... What is representational in Picasso becomes enigmatic, what is demonstrative in Souza becomes epileptic and what is petrified in Tyeb becomes liquid and sparkling in Manjit."

In the words of the Poet, 'What is rhythm? It is the movement generated and regulated by harmonious restriction. This is the creative force in the hand of the artist. So long as words remain in uncadenced prose form, they do not give any lasting feeling of reality. The moment they are taken and put into rhythm they vibrate with radiance. It is the same with the rose. In the pulp of its petals you may find everything that went to make the rose, but the rose which is *maya* (or illusion), an image, is lost; its finality which has the touch of the infinite is gone. The rose appears to me to be still, but because of its metre of composition it has a lyric of movement within that stillness, which is the same as the dynamic quality of a picture that has a perfect harmony. It produces a music in our consciousness by giving it a swing of motion synchronous with its own.'

(From Rabindranath Tagore, What is Art?).

◆ The author is a well-known art critic and curator of many major international and national exhibitions.

Works of Manjit Bawa (below & right)





## Tagore: From the 21st Century Perspective

ILKE ANGELA MARÉCHAL

*Inhabitant of his time, advocating Unity and Universality, underlining the part of the Unconscious as well as the Subconscious, Tagore did not need to follow the phases and vagaries of the construction of the new science in order to herald great truth by which the basic values of his own tradition had nourished him all along.*

At the turning point of the year two thousand, we entered into a new century. But essentially, as we turned a page toward a new millennium that, in many respects, imposed on us radical changes in our ways of living; and more so: a revolution, in an unconscious manner, of perceiving the world, of feeling life and of how to envision our

futures. And this prompted us to proceed, without noticing it, to change our mentalities, if not our consciousness. Seen in retrospect, Rabindranath Tagore, with the immense stature of his poetry, literature and creativity, proved to be deeply rooted – even if it was in an unconscious manner, in his “*Zeitgeist*”, the acting principal of a time, which gave birth to real upheaval, the

concrete effects of which till today alter more than ever our daily lives.

Rabindranath Tagore almost was a voice in the desert, despite his travels and his encounters with many a great man in the Occident and the whole world, where he was seen, often wrongly, as a typical representative of the Orient; just as back home in India, where he called for the necessity of change and evolution in his own cultural, religious and political context.

After his meteoric rise following the Nobel Prize in 1913, he

nearly sank into oblivion. A similar misfortune occurred with Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), to name only one among many, and he needed to be rediscovered. This seems quite incomprehensible but at the same time – is perfectly possible, because this is what often happens to those who are very original and innovative and whose ideas are so fundamental that the mentalities of a given time cannot receive them without a deep questioning of its own values. As a reformer he was hitting hard on our chains and urging for changes inconceivable at that time.

*Punascha: Tagore's house in Santiniketan*





Tagore with Sigmund Freud

What were these main upheavals of the time of Tagore that made our world views start to move? And where is the concurrence with the contribution of Tagore, the validity of which still surfaces more and more? We can neither be exhaustive nor definitive here but would like to provide a glimpse of what could be a possible answer to these questions, attempted mainly in the spirit of the joy of discovery.

If the war of 1914-1918 is called “First World War”, it is because never before was there a war which had such a dimension. The ruptures and changes it provoked on a sociological and anthropological level were unprecedented. On the negative side, it certainly was among the forerunners of what today, a hundred years later,

we call globalization, which is a different kind of ‘onslaught’. Like a volcano it has also led to destruction on the surface of some deeply underlying upheavals and ruptures. At the same time, irreparable disruption took place in the profoundness of all sections of science, soft or hard science, with philosophy being a vitally affected part. Let us name some actors who brought in great changes earlier by way of explanation: Darwin (1809-1882), Einstein (1879-1955), Marx (1818-1883), Freud (1856-1939), and the revolution they brought about in each of their fields turned everything upside down about a century ago. Then, the big voice of thunder came through the advent of Quantum Physics. What began then was a series of questioning against what was believed to be

known. One could even see it as erasure of our normal day to day logic, the logic of Aristotle, which is “the logic of Identity”! By then we already knew that when the sun is rising in the east and setting in the west, it does not mean it turns around us. From then on, everything, in fact all matters were no more taken as what they appeared to be but it was believed that things had a double “identity”, ‘particle’ as well as ‘wave’. The ‘singular’ disappeared, and ‘plural’ became the master.

Here we could see a revolution in our human knowledge. Our perception of reality made a quantum jump. It obliged us to rethink our manner of thinking and acting, in short, to review our ‘Ethics’, and even more so – to finally invent an Ethic that was valid for all of us.

It is here that Rabindranath Tagore plays his part. His part was that of a forerunner, a role too rarely recognized. Amidst his exchanges with the grand spirits of his time, certainly, there was that with Einstein, so we can see Tagore being someone, like Dante (1265-1321) in his time, who was perfectly informed about the advance of science in his days.

However, Einstein fought all his life against Quantum Physics because he could not admit the dictate of the philosophical implications – thus the concrete deriving from there – of its findings. Tagore, on the contrary, does not seem to mention anywhere about the shock of an encounter with the philosophy of Quantum Physics. Nevertheless, if we go back to the small list above, imagining it to have been conceived by our “grand homme”, we will have no problem whatsoever to recognise him in each postulate’s new concept (e.g. the organic vision).

Inhabitant of his time, advocating Unity and Universality, underlining the part of the Unconscious as well as the Subconscious, Tagore did not need to follow the phases and vagaries of the construction of the new science in order to herald great truth by which the basic values of his own tradition had nourished him all along:

“We have in front of us the problem of one country; the Earth, where different races, like individuals, would have the faculty to freely bloom and at the same time show solidarity to the federation. What matters is to create a unity more powerful, with broader views and deeper feelings. ...The science of meteorology knows the truth when it acknowledges that the



atmosphere of the earth is one and the same, although it influences the different parties of the universe in different manners. Likewise we must know that man's soul is One, coming to life through differences necessary for the fertility of its fundamental unity. This truth, as soon as we understand it disinterestedly, will help us to respect all the real differences between men, while staying conscious of our personality, while being aware of the fact that *perfection of unity does not consist in conformity but in harmony*". – (italics by the author). (*Tagore Educateur: Appel en faveur d'une Université Internationale*, mai 1921, p143/4; éditions Delachaux & Niestle S.A., Neuchâtel et Paris, 1922).

There would be so many subjects, battles and keywords associated with Tagore for which to find in Our "Zeitgeist" parallels, evolutions, resonances – just as if times finally have come where our mentalities have acquired the necessary enlargement in order to, in the future, taking care seriously of the problematics and possibilities of which Tagore, his ideas and acts, already had made us see the importance as well as the inescapable solutions.

May these few notions which follow as examples open slightly a door which others will then open widely. In *Towards Universal Man* (Gallimard, Paris, 1964 ; Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, 1961) many times we find elaborated this "Unity in diversity, the One in the number" of which Tagore

thinks it could be what India, as an example, has to offer to the world. Nowadays Europe gets down to it and maybe tomorrow the whole world will. Our master, in the worst case, could be the "climate change", if our wisdoms will not have bent our egoisms beforehand.

Let's listen again to Tagore:

"... We must know: every nation is part of humanity and everybody has to answer this question: what do you have to offer to man, which new ways of happiness have you discovered? As soon as a nation loses the vital force necessary for this discovery – it becomes a dead weight – a paralysed member of the body of Universal Man. Simply to exist is not a glory.

"It's a law of life to destroy that which is dead ...it does not allow immobility ... This makes me say that the main truth of our time are these currents of a new life which drive us to act. ...But at the bottom of the soul there is a tendency to want to embellish humanity with one's own individuality as ornament.

"When man ceases to act out of his own will and is driven only by habit, he becomes a sort of parasite, for he loses his means to accomplish the task assigned to him, which is to say 'make possible that which seems impossible' and follow the road of progress, man's true destiny.

"Those who could not reach interior independence in themselves are bound to lose it also in the exterior world. They are not aware of man's true function, namely to transform the impossible into possible through one's own capacity to work miracles and not to limit oneself to that which was, but to progress towards that which has to be."

These few citations simply are meant to say: Let us go and look for that what the visionary in Tagore has to say to us today. His book "*Sâdhanâ*" (1913) is certainly to be kept among our Bibles, just as the notions that follow are to be used as stepping stones:

The *Individual* (and with it the *individuation* dear to Carl Gustav Jung, 1875-1961), *Spontaneity*, *Creativity*, *Independence*, *Cooperation*, *Power of Invention*, *Faculty of the Spirit of Universality*, *Evolution* (even in religion), – all these living and current concepts of our era of "Yes we can" have been marvellously highlighted already by Tagore.

Stephane Hessel (1917-), who participated in writing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, would like to see the "Declaration of Independence" of Nations be complemented by a "Declaration of Interdependence". Tagore, at his time, already was its advocate. It is for us still to make it come true.

On the road which is ours, we fortunately are with companions and are helped by the light of forerunners.

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## 'Blessed am I that I am born to this land': A Biographical Sketch of Tagore

PURBA BANERJEE

*Rabindranath Tagore's life spanned over eight decades. Tagore started his career as a poet and turned out to be a powerful literati, educator, painter, social reformer and a philosopher of his times.*

Rabindranath Tagore once expressed, "I am a shy individual brought up in retirement from my young days. And yet my fate takes every opportunity to drag me into a crowded publicity. I often wish that I had belonged to that noiseless age when artists took their delight in their work and forgot to publish their names. I feel painfully stupid when I am handled by the multitude who by celebrating some particular period of my life indulge in their avidness of some sort of a crowd ritual which is mostly made of unreality."

Rabindranath Tagore's eventful life was as diverse and fascinating as his rich creative variety. Not only was he a poet, novelist, playwright, song writer and painter, Tagore himself a famous school drop-out, went on to become an outstanding educator of his time. As part of his anti-colonial educational experiments Rabindranath set up two unique schools, Patha Bhavana and Siksha Satra and also an international university, Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan. This write-up seeks to offer a brief chronology of Tagore's life.



Sarada Devi

**1861:** Rabindranath Tagore the fourteenth child of his parents Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi born at Jorasanko, Calcutta on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May.

**1863:** Tagore's father bought seven acres of barren land from the *zamindars* of Raipur, Birbhum, West Bengal which later came to be known as Santiniketan.

**1873:** Traveled to the Western Himalayas with his father. On their way to the Dalhousie Hills, Rabindranath stayed at Santiniketan for the first time with the *Maharshi*. This is where he wrote his first drama *Prithvirajer Parajay* (The Defeat of Prithviraj). Unfortunately no copy of this work exists.

**1874:** First publication of his poem *Abhilasha* in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*.

**1875:** Death of his mother. Recited his own patriotic poem



Maharshi Debendranath Tagore

'Hindumelar Upohar' (The gift of the *Hindumela*) at the *Hindu Mela*, which is considered to be his first public appearance.

**1878:** Stayed with his elder brother Satyendranath Tagore in Ahmedabad just before his departure for his studies at the University College of London as a student of Law.

**1879:** First visit to London.

**1880:** Returned to India without completing his formal course of study. His first book *Sandhya Sangit* (Evening Songs) was published.

**1881:** Wrote his first musical drama *Valmiki Pratibha*.

**1883:** Married to Mrinalini Devi.

**1884:** Sister-in-law Kadambari Devi committed suicide.

**1886:** Birth of first child, Madhurilata.

**1888:** Birth of elder son Rathindranath.

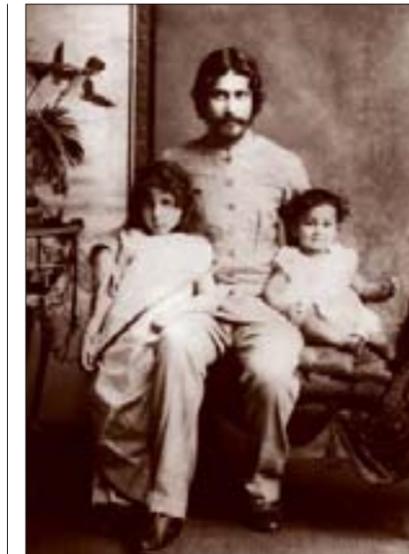
**1890:** Assigned the job of managing the Tagore Estate at Silaidah (now in Bangladesh).

**1891:** Birth of second daughter Renuka.

**1892:** Advocated education in mother tongue, rather than in English. He criticized the prevalent system of English education in India in his essay *Sikhsbar Herfer* (Vagaries of Education).

**1894:** Birth of youngest daughter Mira. Elected Vice-President of Academy of Bengali Letters and became the editor of *Sadbana*, the new family journal of the Tagore family.

**1895:** He started a *Swadeshi* store in Calcutta for the promotion of indigenous goods and business among the youth of Bengal, and a jute-pressing factory in Kushtia, the district



Tagore with daughter Madhurilata and son Rathindranath

town adjacent to their estate in East Bengal.

**1896:** Birth of youngest son Samindranath.

**1898:** Sedition Bill passed; arrest of Bal Gangadhar Tilak; Tagore read his paper

*Kantbarodb* (The Throttled) at a public meeting in Calcutta.

**1899:** Moved to Santiniketan with his wife and children.

**1901:** Revived Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's monthly journal, *Bangadarshan*. Established a school for children called the *brahmacharyashrama* on the model of ancient Indian forest school at Santiniketan with approval of his father. Wrote the poems of *Naivedya*.

**1902:** Mrinalini Devi, his wife, died.

**1903:** His second daughter, Renuka, expired.

**1903-1904:** He started taking serious interest in the political problems of the country and wrote his seminal essay '*Swadeshi Samaj*' (Our State and Society, 1904).

Tagore with Mrinalini Devi



Padma boat at Silaidah (now in Bangladesh)





Mira: Tagore's youngest daughter

**1905:** His father, Debendranath Tagore, died at the age of 88. Launch of the *Swadeshi Andolan* (Independence movement) protest against Lord Curzon's proposal to partition Bengal. Tagore advocated the policy of constructive non-cooperation against the British Raj.

**1907:** Youngest son, Samindranath, died. Tagore, disillusioned over the political exploitation of the Hindu-Muslim conflict, withdrew himself from the *swadeshi andolan*.

**1908:** Presided over the Bengal Provincial Congress session in Pabna, East Bengal and delivered his speech in Bengali, breaking away from the tradition of delivering speeches in English at these sessions.

**1910:** Bengali *Gitanjali* published.

**1912:** Met British painter William Rothenstein in England. Rothenstein was instrumental in arranging for the publication of the English *Gitanjali*, with an introduction by W.B. Yeats, by the India Society of London. Visited USA for the first time.

Tagore at his house Punascha



Youngest son Samindranath

**1913:** *Gitanjali*, *Crescent Moon*, *The Gardener* and *Chitra* published by Macmillan, London. Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature as the first Asian recipient of the award.

**1915:** Received Knighthood. He met Gandhi for the first time at Santiniketan. Stayed in the Surul village near Santiniketan, and wrote his novel *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World).

The Nobel Medallion



**1916:** Traveled to the USA via China and Japan giving lectures on *Nationalism*.

**1918:** Foundation stone of Visva-Bharati, an international university was laid.

**1919:** Renounced his Knighthood in protest of the Jalianwalla Bagh Massacre, where an unarmed gathering was brutally shot by the British Brigadier-General, Reginald Dyer, killing nearly 1000 people and injuring more than 1500.

**1920:** Left for England on a lecture tour to raise funds for Visva-Bharati. During this trip he traveled to France, Holland and America.

**1921:** Visited England, France, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Austria and Czechoslovakia.

**1922:** On February 6, the Institute of Rural Reconstruction was established in Sriniketan with the participation from Rathindranath Tagore, Leonard Elmhirst and William Pearson.

**1924:** Visited China and Japan. Almost immediately after returning from this trip he sailed for South America, particularly for Peru. However he fell ill and was confined to Buenos Aires as the guest of Victoria Ocampo where he engaged himself in the art of doodling connecting the accidental erasures in his writings which finally gave birth to his paintings.

**1924-1925:** Began a political debate with Gandhiji on the *Charkha* campaign which invited tremendous criticism

Gandhi – a sculpture by Ramkinkar Baej at Santiniketan.



from people like Prafulla Chandra Ray and others for his non-participation in it. He replied with an essay titled 'Swaraj Sadhan' (Attaining Swaraj) where he argued the futility of the practice of *Charkha* as a means to attain *Swaraj*.

**1925:** Mahatma Gandhi visited Santiniketan. Tagore turned down his request to join his political campaign.

**1926:** Traveled to Italy as the guest of Mussolini, though his choice was misguided by others. Mussolini told him, "I am an Italian admirer of yours, who has read every one of your books translated into the Italian language". He also traveled to Switzerland (where

he met Romain Rolland), Austria, England, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany (where he met Albert Einstein), Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Greece and Egypt.

**1927:** Staged *Natir Puja* in Calcutta where he acted the role of the Buddhist monk. Went for a trip to South East Asia, including, Myanmar, Singapore, Java, Bali, Malaya, and Siam.

**1928:** Took up painting.

**1930:** Made his eleventh foreign tour. Delivered the Hibbert Lectures in Oxford (published as the book *Religion of Man*). His solo exhibition of painting was held in France followed by other exhibitions in England, Germany, Switzerland, and USA.

**1931:** *Letters from Russia* published.

**1932:** He led the massive protest meeting against the Hijli Detention Camp shooting incident and condemned "the concerted homicidal attack, under cover of darkness, on defenseless prisoners undergoing the system of barbaric incarceration and a nerve-racking strain of an indefinitely suspended fear". Tagore had his last overseas visits to Persia and Iraq.

**1937:** Hall of Chinese Studies, or the *Cheena Bhavana*, was inaugurated in Santiniketan. Tagore fell seriously ill.

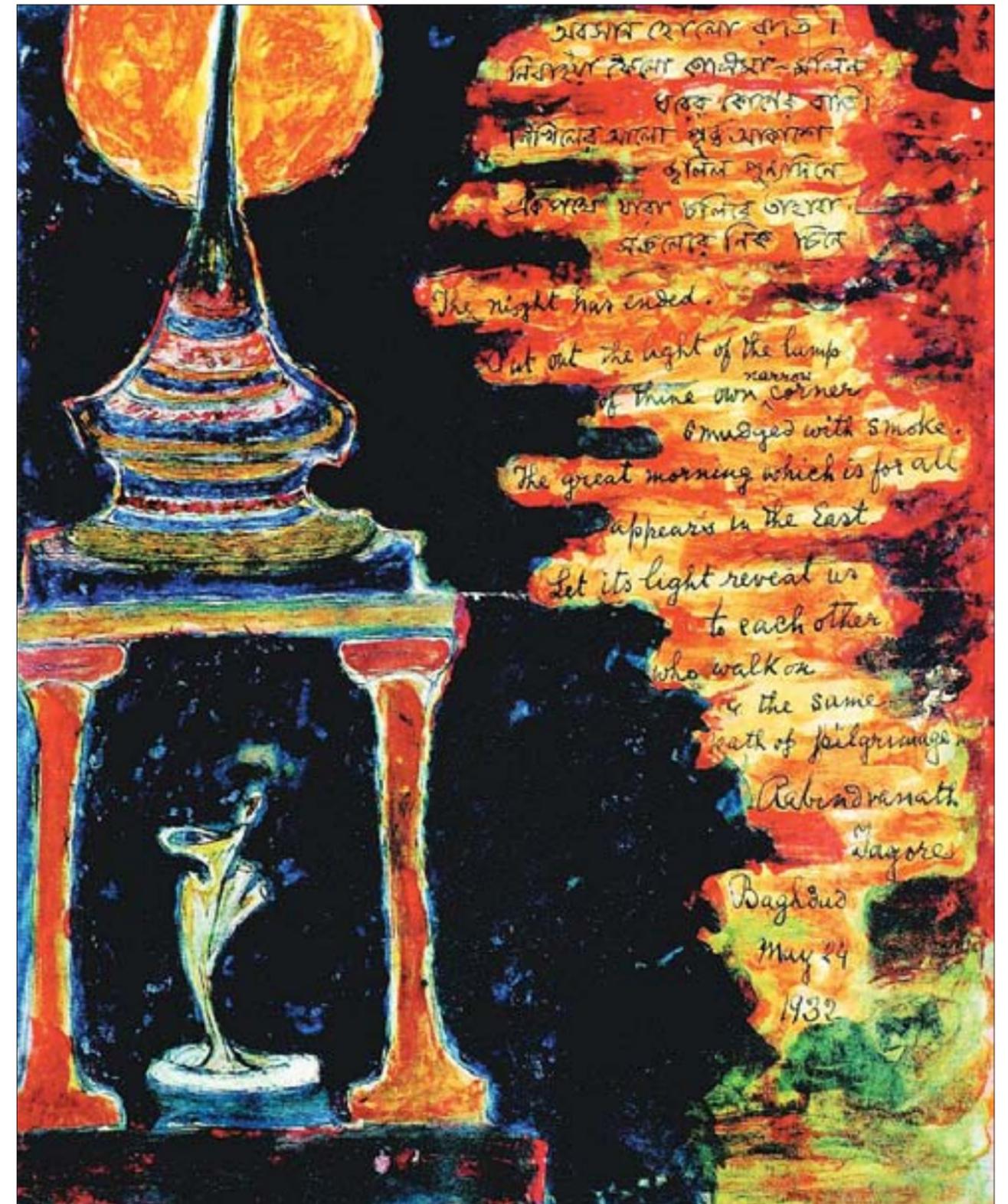
**1938:** Exhibition of his paintings held in London.

**1940:** Oxford University conferred Doctorate on Tagore through a special convocation at Santiniketan. Tagore wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi requesting him to take charge of *Visva Bharati*.

**1941:** His final lecture, *Crisis in Civilisation*, written during the heydays of the Second World War, was read on his eightieth birthday at Santiniketan. He was taken to Calcutta being seriously ill on the 25th July from Santiniketan. Tagore breathed his last on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August at the age of eighty.

◆ The author has assisted in the setting up of the Maharshi Debendranath Tagore Memorial Museum at Santiniketan and is presently engaged in research at Rabindra Bhawan.

Tagore on his last birthday. Kshitimohan Sen reading Tagore's essay: Crisis in Civilization



'The Night has ended': Illustrated poem with translation, Baghdad, 1932