

UDK: 930.85(5+6)

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## The Phenomenal Legacy of Rabindranath Tagore

Ketaki KUSHARI DYSON\*

### Abstract

Belonging to a generation of Bengalis who received Tagore as an acknowledged classic of their tradition, I grew up reading his books, listening to his music, watching his dance-dramas, and writing poetry under the inspiration of his words. This youthful appreciation of Tagore eventually led to a deeper understanding of his stature as an artist and thinker, but it was only when I entered Tagore studies in a more formal manner that I realized how truly spectacular his achievements were from an international perspective. Tagore was fortunate in that his time, place, and circumstances allowed him to give a good run to the natural versatility and fecundity of his genius. He has thereby secured a rich and diverse legacy for us, which tends to mean different things to different groups of people.

**Keywords:** Tagore, Bengali, literature, poetry, music, drama, legacy, influence

I happen to belong to a generation of Bengalis who received Tagore as an acknowledged classic of their tradition. I grew up absorbing his influence and trying my hand at writing poetry under the inspiration of his words. In my family, myself and the sister immediately after me had been named by our parents after two of Tagore's favourite flowers, sealing a kind of bonding with his memory. The fact that my first year on this earth and Tagore's last year had coincided was like a sign telling me that the great man had secretly given his blessings to my scribblings.

The first Tagore book I ever read was *Shishu*, the poems for children he wrote after his wife's death. This was followed by the narrative poems of *Katha o Kahini*. I then moved on to *Sanchayita*, the fat anthology of his poems selected by himself; *Galpa-guchchha*, the short stories in three volumes; the Bengali *Gitanjali*, which I got as a school prize at the age of ten; the collection *Mahua*, specializing in love poems, which my parents had received as a wedding present; and the remarkable dramatic poem *Chitrangada*. Later still I discovered novels like *Gora* and *Shesher Kabita*. The

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\* Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Independent scholar, Kidlington, Oxon, UK. E-mail: [ketaki.dyson@virgiliolibro.com](mailto:ketaki.dyson@virgiliolibro.com)

thrill of those discoveries is still with me; I even remember the position in which I used to sit in a favourite cane sofa as I read the two novels at weekends or during school holidays, the mid-morning kitchen smells and street cries mingling with my consciousness. The first two Tagore songs I ever heard were in my mother's voice, sung during moonlit nights, sitting on the veranda, one of which I later translated, so deep was my attachment to this childhood memory. Tagore's dance-dramas came to me thanks to Lady Brabourne College, where I spent two years at the pre-university stage and where I saw them performed. At the age of fourteen I went with a group of Lady Brabourne girls to the Poush Mela festival in Santiniketan, where I had the thrilling experience of hearing the noted singer Debabrata Biswas singing Tagore songs. He was sitting just a few feet away from me, and as is the custom in Santiniketan, at the end of each song the audience exclaimed '*sadhu sadhu*' instead of clapping. I am including these personal details to remind my audience in Ljubljana that Tagore's works came to some of us from childhood onwards like a natural heritage, like personal gifts left to us by the man himself, or as the poet Keats might have put it, as naturally as leaves come to a tree.

Of course this youthful response to Tagore did mature into a deeper appreciation of his genius as I grew older, but it was only after I entered the field of Tagore studies in a more formal way that I realized how truly spectacular his achievements were. Tagore was the most brilliant product of the Bengal Renaissance, and his long life straddled the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth: times which witnessed earth-shaking events and the explosion of new ideas in every sphere of human activity – from the arts and sciences and technology to major social and political movements. His entire life was lived under the aegis of the British Indian Empire. *Pax Britannica* provided a certain stability of background to his social class, giving his genius the space and time and material means to flower. The unlocking of India's past by the researches of the great Orientalist scholars nurtured in him a feeling of pride in his own cultural heritage. At the same time, membership of the native elite class of an international empire internationalized him, enabling him to see the British as the harbingers of important new ideas, who opened India's doors to the West. It enabled him to travel, exposing him to the ideas of the eminent thinkers of his time in other countries, and especially after the event of the Nobel Prize, allowing him to meet and interact with them. He could therefore attempt a synthesis of the best elements of his own heritage with what he could learn from other countries. The experience of the First World War caused him to turn away decisively from the political model of competitive, mutually antagonistic nationalisms and move towards a philosophy of universal humanism. He witnessed the surge of the Indian independence movement, and while he regarded non-violence as the better political strategy for attaining it, he

disagreed with the Gandhian tactics of non-cooperation, preferring cooperation between different human groups as the best strategy for all times. He founded his university with the noble dream of making it an international meeting-place of minds. The artist in him joined hands with a far-sighted social thinker. He believed in self-help, self-sufficiency, development from the grassroots level, and much of the thinking of this lover of nature foreshadows the thinking of the Green movement of our times.

Tagore was fortunate in that his time, place, and circumstances permitted him to become an East-West person and to give a good run to the natural versatility and fecundity of his genius. He has thereby secured a rich and diverse legacy for posterity, which is there for the whole world to claim and tends, quite naturally, to mean different things to different groups of people. Certainly, we should be proud of it and celebrate it, but it is also our serious responsibility to look after this heritage. How best can we do it? What are the different ways in which we can relate to it?

When I try to explain Tagore's greatness to Westerners, I find myself referring to an oft-quoted statement of Goethe's in a different context. Goethe said that one could not appreciate what a human being was capable of achieving until one stood in the Sistine Chapel and looked up at Michelangelo's work on the ceiling. Adapting Goethe's words, I say that one cannot appreciate what a human being is capable of achieving until one knows Tagore's formidable *oeuvre*. But of course in every such achievement it is not just one person delivering the goods on his own. A segment of the achiever's society has always played a crucial role in the story, helping to make it possible. The same is true in Tagore's case, but his legacy is phenomenal because he did so many different things so well and with so much passion, not only writing in every genre, but also composing, directing his own plays, bringing modernism to Indian painting, and founding a school, a university, and an institute for rural development. And he has profoundly influenced and inspired numerous distinguished contemporaries from Spain's Juan Ramón Jiménez and Argentina's Victoria Ocampo to Germany's Helene Meyer-Franck, England's Leonard Elmhirst, and Slovenia's Srečko Kosovel.

Tagore's formidable legacy begins with his actual works: his books, music, plays, dance dramas, drawings and paintings, and the institutions he built, charging them with so much of his love and faith, hopes and dreams – Santiniketan, Sriniketan, Visvabharati. To that we must add his archives: his manuscripts, unpublished correspondence, and similar items. Sadly, due to poor security at Visvabharati, we have recently lost, in one daring nocturnal burglary, a number of these small museum items, including the original Nobel medallion. To those burglars, Tagore's legacy only meant the value of the little bit of bullion they stole. Tagore's drawings and paintings,

because they are mostly done on fragile paper, are both his works of art and a part of his archives, a part of his papers in the comprehensive sense. To preserve his papers we need care, far-sightedness, and the intelligent application of relevant technology. It is not enough to preserve items as in a tomb: scholars must be given access to the storehouse. Books must be kept in print; music must be available for people to buy; his haunting drawings and paintings, which brought the influence of Primitivism and Expressionism to Indian visual art, deserve to be disseminated in digital format and to be listed in a comprehensive *catalogue raisonné*. Why not a gallery of his art on the Internet?

We have a heavy responsibility towards the institutions he founded. The danger they face is that of stagnation, a turning away from the founder's enlightened humanistic ideals, a suicidal immersion in internal politics and in the easy business of dispensing formal qualifications and jobs for ex-students. No institution can survive in a healthy condition unless it grows and evolves, engaging in a creative dialogue with the changing times, innovating and experimenting, attempting what seems difficult *now*, in order to achieve a better result in the future. Tagore's ideas and experiments pertaining to education, rural reconstruction, and international cultural and intellectual exchanges, as enshrined in the institutions he founded, are, by any standard, a heritage worthy to be cherished and shared with all the world, but a more dynamic approach is needed in these campuses to carry on the work he so bravely initiated.

Researchers will necessarily want the freedom to conduct research on him. The nature of research projects will change with the times; lines of inquiry in consonance with our times are to be encouraged, not stifled. And we must always remember that the right to work on him does not belong to insiders alone. As his works receive more international dissemination in the coming years, scholars from all over the world are likely to want to work on different aspects of him, or on issues relating to his reception in different countries. We must welcome all research which gives us a better insight into his life, time, works, and interactions, and allow such researchers access to necessary material. From the campuses housing his archives international scholars will expect an enlightened administration and an openness to modern methods of communication. There must be rights and responsibilities on both sides. In the mid-nineties I had a tough time in securing permissions for the book *Ronger Rabindranath*, which embodies some major research on Tagore's colour vision and its effect on his works, which I did with other scholars. To facilitate the publication of an academic book on Tagore in Bengali, with an art component, the estates of Western artists generously waived reproduction fees for their copyrighted material, and gave their permissions in a matter of days, while for the very same publication Tagore's own estate charged full fees and took one whole year to grant the formal permission in two

separate steps. It was quite an ordeal. But now that the copyright has expired, the situation may be better. People embarking on a serious project on Tagore which is a little off the beat may find that there is initially some opposition, or a negative reaction, from some quarter or other, but they should never give up because of that. If one is patient and persistent, it is usually possible to complete a project, for everywhere there are some wonderful people who are cooperative.

In the presentation of his work through the performance arts, performers have to be granted some freedom of interpretation. In that way his works will flow through our times as a living tradition that continues to fire and inspire us, instead of becoming a collection of precious items locked up in a box. Tagore valued creativity, and likewise we should value creativity in those who perform his works in front of the public. Life would be dull if only boys were allowed to take on the roles of women in Shakespeare's plays. It was so in Shakespeare's own time, but it is not a custom that has to go on for ever. From time to time Western composers are likely to want to set some of Tagore's work to music, in their own styles, as they did in the past, and they should be free to do so. William Radice helped to develop a libretto in English from a poem he had translated, which was set to music by the composer Param Vir, to become the fascinating opera *Snatched by the Gods*.

We are in an age of mass culture, dominated by the mass media. People pay lip service to the classics, but read them less and less. Tagore's texts are certainly not being read as much as they deserve to be read, even by Bengalis, though films have brought a few of them to a larger public. To disseminate his books amongst those who do not read Bengali, we need to encourage the work of able literary translators. It is through the art of literary translation that the classics of one language become the heritage of all the world. Ideally, such texts should be translated directly from the original language, but in many cases in the real world, unless an intermediate version is used, nothing will get translated at all, so the intermediate version has to be reliable. Tagore needs to be translated into several languages to reach his potential audience even within India. One hopes that he will be translated into the other languages of India directly from the original, for that way he can reach his widest possible audience in India. Through the medium of English, he can only reach the English-reading elite. I am uneasy about the way English now dominates the translation scene in India. It discourages direct cross-fertilization between the Indian languages. To encourage the other language groups to translate him, Bengalis need to set an example themselves by learning other Indian languages and translating into Bengali the literary treasures available in those languages. At present, they are not doing enough in this respect. Multilingual India with its rich storehouse of literatures has the potential for becoming

an exemplary workshop for literary translation. India should celebrate her linguistic diversity, not crush it.

Among diasporic Bengali communities living abroad, English translations can be of value in reaching out something of Tagore to the second generation, who usually cannot read serious literary texts in Bengali. The same holds true for other diasporic communities from the subcontinent. In some programmes in Britain, I have read out my translations of Tagore songs first, then a singer has sung them. Non-Bengali members of the audiences have expressed great delight in being able to follow the meaning of a song at last, which has enhanced their appreciation of the music as a whole. Song-lyrics, being relatively simple in structure, can, when translated, help to bring the music over to an audience who do not follow the original language. Nowadays when an opera in a foreign language is presented in Britain on television, it is common to provide subtitles. In a live performance, lines may be presented on an electronic screen above the stage. This is called 'surtitling'. These visual aids have increased the appreciation of opera from other European languages. Translations of song-lyrics do increase the appreciation of vocal music from a language not known to us. They also whet our curiosity about the whole cultural tradition behind it. I myself became attracted to Spanish as a language by following the translations provided on record sleeves when listening to Spanish songs. In different parts of India, Tagore's songs could be recited in the language of the region first, followed by the songs sung in the original Bengali.

The potential is also great for bringing more complex poems to a new public through the combination of a dance-sequence and a recitation of the text in translation. Two British-based dancers did this with two of my own Tagore translations. Piali Ray of Birmingham presented a beautiful dance-sequence in the New Jersey Rabindra Mela of 1993, based on my translation of the poem *Parishodh (The Repayment)*. In London in 2000 Bithika Raha did the same with my translation of the dramatic poem *Karna-Kunti-Sangbad*; in fact I translated this poem at her special request.

But the definition of what constitutes Tagore's heritage has to be broadened further. The modern Bengali literary language is itself, in some important respects, a legacy from Tagore. By taking off from where he had led it, the post-Tagore writers enriched Bengali prose and poetry further from the thirties onwards. They built on the foundations he had laid, and Tagore lived long enough to see this new generation emerge, welcoming them. In a profound historical sense, therefore, our wider Tagorean heritage includes the achievements of the post-Tagore writers. This is something that the Old Guard of Tagore devotees often failed to grasp, even in the recent past, setting up a false opposition between Tagore and his literary successors. But by nature's law the Old Guard generation are now disappearing. In song-making

the snobbery has sometimes been even worse, with the Old Guard failing to realize that the spirit of Tagore, himself an innovator, lives on in the creative experiments of the moderns. Just as Tagore himself was profoundly influenced by the Bauls in his song-making, so also without Tagore Kabir Suman, Nachiketa, Anjan Dutta, or Mousumi Bhowmik of our times would not have emerged. These singer-songwriters of today are his successors. From poetry and drama to music and painting, we would not be doing things the way we now do, if Tagore had not given these activities tilts in certain directions. Had he lived a little longer, he would have undoubtedly tried his hand at making films also. He was a Renaissance man, and that urge to have a go at everything is also his legacy. Many of us have been inspired by his example, telling ourselves that if he could do it, we could too.

To discharge our debt to Tagore's legacy in the new century we have to support the writers, artists, thinkers, and activists who are carrying his torch forward. I myself feel very deeply that by writing in Bengali I repay Tagore the debt I owe him. He was one of the early shapers of my sensibility. By writing in Bengali I remain affiliated to the effort to carry Bengali writing forward. Writing in one's mother tongue may seem no big deal – until we ponder the realities of our times, when so many Indian writers are vying with one another to write in English and capture the global market. I have been in diaspora for many decades, but continue to write in Bengali and take great pleasure in it. I try to bring my diasporic life-experiences to this language and to make creative experiments with forms and genres. The language *does* matter, because packed in it are those values and those ways of looking at the world which identify us as Bengalis.

I had fondly hoped that with the new era of Tagore translations ushered in towards the end of the last century, the stature of his language abroad would improve, that there would be more curiosity about what else is written in it. Sadly, that has not really happened. Only those Indians who write in English get known abroad. I have been a British citizen since 1965, but though I am now regarded as a meaningful Bengali writer of my generation by both mainstream and diaspora Bengalis, I can expect no support from either the academic or the arts establishment of Britain for any book I write in Bengali.

Within India language politics has become a problem. Obviously the subcontinent needs link languages, but the term 'regional language' is beginning to signify an inferior status. Squeezed between the hegemony of English in the elitist circles and the dominance of Hindi in film and television, writers in the other mother tongues are often feeling marginalized. The English-language media of India do not, as a general rule, review books written in the native Indian languages. If today I write a book on Tagore in Bengali, no matter how path-breaking it may be, it will not be reviewed in

an English-language paper, not even in Calcutta, though if I am lucky, I may be interviewed about it. To be reviewed in such a paper the book has to be in English. What can one say about this kind of neo-colonialism?

In 1997 after the book *Ronger Rabindranath* (to which I have referred before) was launched in Calcutta, a television journalist had the bright idea of interviewing me and my husband, who had also been part of the research team as a scientific consultant. We gave an entire evening to her project and were assured that the English-language interview would be part of cultural news coverage from Delhi. Alas, Hanif Kureishi arrived from London and stole the limelight, and our carefully recorded interview was never broadcast! We could not compete with an author who wrote only in English! Viewers were not given a chance to hear one line about a major research project on Tagore spanning half a decade. How are we going to make Tagore a genuine part of the pan-Indian heritage if India's media have this kind of neo-colonial attitude?

Tagore's name has become a sacred national symbol, but becoming a symbolic figure is a curse for a creative artist or thinker, for he is then treated with idolatry. People pay him homage as to a figurehead, but pay little heed to the actual details of what he had said and believed. This is happening right now and is the last point I shall make. Tagore was a far-sighted social and political thinker who knew that India's weakest point was in the high degree of stratification and hierarchization of her society. The dance-drama *Chandalika* delivers a powerful humanistic message in this context. In a prophetic poem written a century ago and included in the Bengali *Gitanjali* Tagore said emphatically that those whom we keep backward will drag us back. In text after text he said that the humiliation and marginalization of the underprivileged had to end if India wanted to move forward in the modern age. India has not yet taken this project fully on board, thus generating tragic insurgencies and futile, retaliatory counter-insurgency tactics from the state. In West Bengal, this cycle of violence is traumatizing a young generation of intellectuals and activists who see the present political set-up as having sold out to global capitalism and consumerism, sacrificing the interests of the most vulnerable: the dalits, adivasis, and small farmers. They know that Tagore's cherished ideals are being abandoned. He had always believed in development from the grassroots up, and had preferred consensus, cooperation, and reconciliation to violent confrontation. No matter how much lip service is paid to Tagore as an iconic figure, they see this as a betrayal of his legacy.