



Rabindranath Tagore: A Great Indian Poet and Writer

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Abstract: My main recollection of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) lies not in his poetry, music, dramas, novels, or paintings, but rather with his “Jana Gana Mana” (Thou Art the Ruler of the Minds of All People), India’s national anthem. When I was a free-spirited little girl, probably in third grade, I remember school started every day with everyone singing this song. I also remember singing it in chorus on other occasions like Indian Republic Day, which honors the adoption of the country’s constitution on January 26, 1950. Sixty-eight years later, Tagore’s national anthem has not lost its charm and popularity. It still warms the hearts of millions and millions of Indians both in India and abroad.

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Introduction:

In 1938, Tagore wrote “Chandalika,” a story that touches on the sensitive subject of the caste system in Hindu society. This work’s message is that all human beings are equal regardless of their social status, and it comes through the tale of a young girl, Prakriti, who is born to an “untouchable” caste, the Chandalis. Because of her caste, Prakriti suffers terrible discrimination and injustice. Even the vendors in her village shun her. One day, she happens to meet a Buddhist monk named Ananda, who approaches her and asks for water. At first, she refuses because she believes that water from a low-caste person’s hands is polluted, and that by offering it she would be committing a religious offense. But Ananda teaches her that all human beings are equal and that the difference between upper and lower castes is the product of an unjust society. Convinced by the monk’s kind words, Prakriti ultimately serves him water, an action that gives her joy and self-confidence.

Rabindra Nath Tagore is known in the West chiefly as a writer of lyric poetry, but he is very much more than a poet. How many-sided are his activities will be realized when one remembers that besides being a poet, he is also a dramatist of real distinction, a novelist, a literary critic, a renowned educationist, a religious teacher, a social reformer, and a writer of political and historical tracts, ethical treatises, children's books and poems and miscellaneous - essays. But one thing is common to every field of his literary effort, which is that it is always unmistakably affected by his own personal aesthetic outlook and

philosophical ideas. The form may differ endlessly, but the essence remains always the same, namely, the expression of his own self. Primarily he is a critic of life-not merely life as we see it, clothed in its physical trappings and social and moral conventions, but life that is much larger and deeper than the human mind can comprehend.

Rabindranath Tagore was the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, one of the founders of the 19th-century Hindu religious reform movement, the Brahma Samaj. Although he had the opportunity for formal schooling in England, the young Rabindranath had little interest in formal education and returned to India before finishing his education abroad. At home, his father arranged for private tutoring, the flexible pace of which appealed much more to him than the school’s rigid curriculum. During this time, his intellectual horizon expanded and he developed a wide range of interests, especially in the arts.

In addition, Rabindranath grew up in a very musical environment. His elder brother Jyotirindranath used to experiment with different musical traditions, which exposed Rabindranath to classical, folk, devotional, and other genres of music. In his more than 2,000 compositions, he expresses all manner and category of human emotion. It is this range that makes his music appealing to everyone – old and young, rich and poor.

Another important dimension of Rabindranath Tagore’s legacy is his involvement with Shantiniketan, a town in Birbhum District in what is today the state of West Bengal in eastern India. After

his father purchased the land in 1862, it was used for an *ashram*, a spiritual center for meditation, but Tagore eventually developed it into Vishva Bharati University, which – as its name indicates – integrated knowledge from all over the world (*vishva*) with the unique wisdom and spirit of India (*bharati*). The university also embodied its founder's philosophy of education and social harmony. With his burgeoning interest in social reform in his later years, Tagore reached out to the poor and preached the principles of freedom and cooperation among all people regardless of caste and creed. In this respect, he was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. Both had great respect for one another, and Gandhi visited Shantiniketan on four separate occasions – twice with his wife Kasturba and twice alone.

Tagore's life also included its share of grief. In 1902, his wife Mrinalini Devi passed away. Then, in succession, he lost his younger daughter, son and loving father. He was disconsolate for a long time. In his works, one can see the combination of personal sorrow and commentary on social and political upheavals in colonial Bengal in the early twentieth century:

*I saw the suicidal madness of the modern age
And saw in its body
The ironical distortion of ugliness
("Rabindranath Tagore: a 125th birth anniversary volume," Calcutta : Govt. of West Bengal, Dept. of Information & Cultural Affairs, 1988.)*

Tagore, the Poet

Tagore wrote his first verse when he was only eight years old. Like a poet born to compose, verses subsequently poured naturally from his pen. With the publications of "Sandhya Sangit" (Evening Songs) in 1882 and "Prabhat Sangit" (Morning Songs) in 1883 Rabindranath secured his place among the most distinguished poets of his era. His interest in the observation of ordinary people's lives in ordinary situations found expression in poems published under the title "Chhabi O Gan" (Pictures and Songs).

*Sweet is this world, I wish ne'er to depart,
I yearn for a dwelling-place in humanity's heart.
("Rabindranath Tagore, the singer and his song," Reba Som, New Delhi: Penguin, Viking, c2009.)*

In 1881 at the age of twenty, Tagore wrote his first dramatic piece "Valmiki Pratibha" (The Genius of Valmiki), which was shown at Tagore's mansion in Calcutta. His dramas are so popular today that they are still staged in theaters in India and Bangladesh..

In 1913, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature for his great English composition "Geetanjali" (Song Offerings). He was the first Indian

and first Asian to receive this award. The Nobel Prize enhanced his reputation not only in India but worldwide. In 1971, newly independent Bangladesh chose one of Tagore's songs "Amar Sonar Bangla" (My Golden Bengal) as its national anthem. Perhaps Tagore is the only poet whose songs have been adopted as national anthems by two different countries, Bangladesh and India.

Every Journey Is a Pilgrimage

Tagore enjoyed traveling and made many friends abroad. He traveled all over Europe and Asia, including England, France, Italy, Russia, China, and Japan. He celebrated his sixtieth birthday in Germany. In Stockholm, the Swedish Academy paid him rich tribute. At the personal invitation of the king Reza Shah Pahlavi, Tagore visited Persia, in April and May of 1932, and paid homage in the city of Shiraz to two great masters of Persian poetry, Hafiz (1320-1389) and Saadi (1184-1283).

Tagore's last pilgrimage ended on August 7, 1941. He was 80 years old. His poem "A Farewell" speaks poignantly to the themes of death and departure:

*Look out once more with tired eyes, and see
How, where the sun has set, the sea and sky
Merge in the darkness, then will you see the trace
Of shining light left by my parting gaze.*

Even though Tagore embarked upon his last voyage, his music, poetry, and national anthem will keep his memory alive for generations to come. Indeed, Rabindranath is not only one of the preeminent literary geniuses of Bengal and India but also all of South Asia.

Tagore's Works in the Asian Division

The Asian Division's South Asian collection holds many works by Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali, as well as a number of contemporary scholarly publications on his life and legacy. Here are a few titles for further reading:

"RabindranatheraGalpaguccha" (1970, first published in 1900)

"GhareBaire" (The Home and the World, 1950, first published in 1916)

"Gora" (Fair-Skinned, 1951, first published in 1910)

Sudhakar Chattopadhyay's "Rabindranatha o bharatiya sahitya" (Rabindranath and Indian Literature, 1967)

Rabindranath Tagore's 'Nature's Revenge'

In Indian philosophy, under the law of karma there is always a scope to strive for the better, because as Dr. S. Radhakrishnan very ably says, —Life is like

the game of bridge. The cards in the game are given to us. We do not select them. They are traced to past karma but we are free to make any call we think fit and lead any suit. Only we are limited by the rules of the game. We are freer when we start the game than later on when the game has developed and our choices become restricted. But till the very end there is always a choice. [7] So the law of karma does not mar man's freedom of making choices. Notwithstanding the determinism that the law envisages, there is scope for making correct choices for the betterment of our future. And above all, the kind of determinism that the law of karma enforces is nothing other than our own past karmas. Therefore, in the Indian moral thought it is perfectly meaningful to say that a person is himself responsible for the good or bad consequences that he has to undergo because of his good or bad actions. Rabindranath Tagore is the right representative of Indian philosophy: Rabindranath's religion is identical with the ancient wisdom of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita and the theistic systems of a later day. [8] There is an amazing and intimate parallelism between Rabindranath's mind and the mind that manifested itself in the Upanishads. This parallelism is amazing because it transcends the gap of at least three thousand years and yet remains very close and evident. [8] Here we take the Indian drama „Nature's Revenge“ by Tagore to understand Indian philosophy to a greater depth particularly with reference to Tennessee William's views on God. The drama depicts only one main character — a proud and defiant hermit (sanyasi) who would no doubt have looked with contempt at the shy lonely young man who had been turning his adolescent sighs into still more adolescent poems. The poet and the hermit (sanyasi) were both absorbed in their painstakingly secluded selves, but there the similarity ends. The poet was sad and self-pitying in his loneliness; the hermit (sanyasi) is exultant and boastful in his complete self-sufficiency. The short drama begins with the expansive hermit (sanyasi) soliloquizing about his hard-won success in transcending the world — the world in so far it existed for him. Its sights and sounds do not reach him, its temptations do not touch him, its joys and sorrows do not affect him. Once, like everybody else, he too was a slave to nature, enchanted by desires, hopes and fears, running after earthly pleasures which if they were reached, vanished before they could be tasted and left only lasting bitterness, when the hermit (sanyasi) comes out of his dark cave, he finds Nature utterly insipid and dull, and sees, as if from a great height, insignificant men and women engage in the most trivial and silly pursuits. He expanded the verse of Buddha's declaration:

*Subdued have I all, all-knowing am I now
Unattached to all things, and abandoning all Finally*

freed on the destruction of all craving Knowing it myself, whom else should I credit There is no teacher of mine, nor is one like me Truly entitled to honor am I, a teacher unexcelled Alone am I Supreme Buddha, placid and tranquil.

In the hermit (sanyasi) as he is introduced to us in the opening scene of the drama, „subdued have I all“ is sounded with equal zest, but disgust with the normal course of life and hatred of „the world enveloped by darkness“ is even more pronounced. The next scene shows village folk engaged in all manner of tomfoolery and triviality. As the scene is preceded by two lines in which our hero says: —By now these people have become petty in my eyes,/ Let me cast a glance at the game of life they play, we get the impression that these scenes represent not an objective cross-section of village life but an aspect of that life as seen by the hermit (sanyasi) exulting in his self-accomplished alienation. The drama is a play of changing attitudes, of how through various phases and reversals his initial contempt for everything is transformed into love which knows no bounds, and finally into something like the Shakespearean realization — „Ripeness is all.“ The instrument of change is a little orphaned, outcast girl, seeking shelter from door to door and passerby to passerby. But everyone turns her out or turns away from her. In this helpless condition she encounters the hermit (sanyasi) and runs to him for succor. The hermit (sanyasi) takes kindly to her. The girl responds by calling him father and snuggling close to him. A chord is struck and there is an affectionate response. But the hermit (sanyasi) is annoyed with himself: had he not conquered and risen above such frailties? He turns away, but the girl follows him. Thus begins that inner struggle, the oscillation between affectionate warmth and cold detachment, which gives the drama the aesthetic value it possesses. What is remarkable is that in learning to love the girl, the hermit (sanyasi) is beginning to find interest and joy in the world. While struggling to recover his detachment, he says that Nature is mocking at him through the little girl's enchanting laughter. But soon he begins to regard her as an epitome of the whole world; from Nature's mockery she becomes Nature's emissary.

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