

# A Study of Literatures and Ideas of Rabindranath Tagore: A Great Indian Writer

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**Abstract – Rabindranath Tagore had early success as a writer in his native Bengal. With his translations of some of his poems he became rapidly known in the West. He was also a cultural reformer who modified Bengali art by rebuffing the strictures that confined it within the sphere of classical Indian forms. Though he was a polymath, his literary works alone are enough to place him in the elite list of all-time greats. Even today, Rabindranath Tagore is often remembered for his poetic songs, which are both spiritual and mercurial. Being a natural poet, his poetic outpourings in Bengali began to rejuvenate and recreate Bengali literature. In his late twenties he was entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the family estates in North Bengal. There he came into contact with the daily life of the village folk. He started his village re-construction program there. Tagore was a great humanist, painter, patriot, poet, playwright, novelist, story-teller, philosopher, and educationist. As a cultural ambassador of India he gave voice to the country and became an instrument in spreading the knowledge of Indian culture around the world.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7 May 1861. At some time towards the end of the seventeenth century, his forefathers had migrated from their native lands to Govindpur, one of the three villages which later came to constitute Calcutta. In the course of time, the family came to acquire property and considerable business interests through the pursuit of commercial and banking activities. They had particularly benefited from the growing power of the British East India Company. Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, lived lavishly and broke the Hindu religious ban of those times by travelling to Europe, just like his contemporary, Rammohan Roy, the nineteenth century social and religious reformer.

Roy started a religious reform movement in 1828 that came to be known as the Brahma Samaj Movement. Rabindranath's grandfather supported Roy in his attempts at reforming Hindu society. Dwarkanath's son, Devendranath Tagore, also became a staunch supporter of the Brahma Samaj Movement. In order to encourage its spread, in 1863 he established a meditation centre and guest house on some land about 100 miles from Calcutta at a place called 'Santiniketan', the Abode of Peace.

Although deeply steeped in Hindu and Islamic traditions, Tagore's family contributed large sums of money for the introduction of Western education, including colleges for the study of science and

medicine. This peculiar situation explains the combination of tradition and experiment that came to characterize Rabindranath Tagore's attitude to life.

Rabindranath's father was one of the leading figures of the newly awakened phase of Bengali society. He had been educated at one stage in Rammohan Roy's Anglo-Hindu school and had been greatly influenced by Roy's character, ideals and religious devotion. Devendranath Tagore was well versed in European philosophy and, though deeply religious, did not accept all aspects of Hinduism. He was to have a profound influence on his son's mental and practical attitudes.

Rabindranath was the fourteenth child of his parents. His brothers and sisters were poets, musicians, playwrights and novelists and the Tagore home was thus filled with musical, literary and dramatic pursuits. The family was also involved with diverse activities at the national level. Important changes were taking place in Bengal at the time Rabindranath was born. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar had been attempting to reform the position of women in society. Schools using English as the language of teaching were being established, alongside the traditional Sanskrit schools. Vidyasagar had established Bengali-medium schools at different places in Bengal with little or limited government support. He had also established a centre to train teachers for these schools. Rabindranath attended this school and, as he says himself, owed his love of Bengali language and literature to it. He was

also sent to a number of English-speaking schools, but he did not like their teaching style and had no wish to be taught in a foreign language. He gradually withdrew from formal schooling when he was around 14 years old. The remainder of his education was carried out at home through his own personal efforts and with the help of tutors in various subjects. He also had lessons from professionals in wrestling, music and drawing. The manner of his early schooling was to leave a deep impression on him.

Tagore married when he was 23. At this stage, beyond his literary pursuits, he had begun sharing his father's religious responsibilities. In 1890 he made a second trip to the United Kingdom, but came back after a month to look after the family estates. This responsibility opened up new vistas of inspiration for him. Whereas his previous literary work had been primarily based on imagination, he now came to acquire a direct and intimate experience of the wretched life led by the poor Bengali peasants. This new experience led to the composition of *Galpaguccha* [A bunch of stories] (1900), and the many letters he wrote to his niece, subsequently published as *Chhinnapatra* [Torn letters] and *Chhinnapatravali* [A collection of torn letters], considered to be landmarks in the writing of Bengali prose and in describing the countryside of Bengal.

Tagore was overwhelmed by the economic, social and political misery in which the peasants lived. Tagore, one of the founders of the 19th-century Hindu religious reform movement, the Brahmo 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.

Tagore's life was marked by several paradoxes; inconsistency was the hallmark of his personality. A poet, he was also very much a practical man,<sup>5</sup> and managed the family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and Orissa, where he would spend many days on a boathouse, interacting with ordinary people whilst writing in his spare time.<sup>6</sup> His time there brought him in, close touch with common humanity – “the patient, submissive, family-loving, Bengali ryots” (Das Gupta 440) – and increased his interest in social

reforms. Many of his letters written to Indira Devi, from his estate in Shelidah, often interspersed with humour, show the affection and sympathy Tagore bore for the poor villagers who made their living by working on his land. In a letter to a Bengali woman friend in 1931, who was the daughter of an orthodox zamindari family from Natore in East Bengal, he declared in simple but pointed language, “I love [my tenants] from my heart, because they deserve it” (Dutta and Robinson, *Selected Letters* 405). Critics who accuse Tagore of being a “bourgeois reactionary” (Lukács’ famous attack on Tagore in his review of *The Home and the World* is a typical example<sup>7</sup>), have perhaps misunderstood the writer, or failed to take into account stories such as “The Postmaster” (Postmaster), “Assets and Debts” (Denapaona) “Kabuliwala” (Kabuliwala), “Subha” (Subha), “Punishment” (Shasti) and “Purification” (Shangskar) or his play *The Post Office* (Dak Ghar), which are all written with empathy for the poor and the downtrodden.

Tagore's empathy also extended towards women. He was opposed to gender hierarchy created by the age-old patriarchy in Indian society. Indian women have been oppressed since their legal rights were curbed in the ancient Sanskrit Manu's Laws (Manavadhrmasastra or Manusmriti), and women were compared to “dogs” and “crows” as physical embodiments of “untruth, sin and darkness” (Reese 57). To dismantle such false notions about women and restore to them the dignity that prevailed in Vedic Indian society, when women were seen as conduits for the primal energy of the universe, primordial to the male force, Tagore created several strong and assertive women in his works.

Charu in *The Ruined Nest* (Nasta Nirh), Bimala in *The Home and the World* (Ghare Baire), Mrinmayi in “The Conclusion” (Samapti), Chandara in “Punishment” (Shasti) and Kalika in “Purification” (Shangskar), are examples of such women; imbued with Shakti, they are naturally independent, vibrant and self-confident, and provide counterexamples to the traditional depiction of the timid, suffering Indian women, automatically portrayed as social victims.

As a poet, Tagore preferred a secluded life, or one of “sweet obscurity” on “sea-shores of worlds,” to keep in touch with the muse of poetry. Yet throughout his life he remained very much a public figure, both at home and abroad. He frequently travelled overseas, out of duty, friendship and social obligation – sometimes acting as a literary luminary turned unofficial ambassador of India, “pushing the wheelbarrows of propaganda from continent to continent”. Like a perpetual wayfarer, a chirapathik, he went from capital to capital in a regal manner, while world leaders and prominent intellectuals vied for his attention, and men and women jostled with one another to catch a sight of this poet and “prophet” from India. Several times, he visited Europe, America and many Asian countries, and the diaries he maintained, or letters he wrote, during these trips,

have come down to us in several volumes, as Tagore's travel writings.

Tagore is often seen as a mystical writer, or a voice of India's spiritual heritage, because of the formative influences of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita on him. He inherited the Upanishadic idea of the living presence of God in all created objects, or the presence of "selfluminous Brahman" in the "hearts of all". This resulted in a pantheistic and anthropocentric worldview, that since God is present in nature and human hearts, we ought to love nature and humanity to fulfil/realise ourselves and to attain God.

Tagore's patriotism, or his love for India and Bengal, is unquestionable. The many poems and songs he wrote commemorating the beauty of Bengal still stir the blood of many in his homeland. Bengalis across the border, or across religions, love to hum/sing Tagore songs on emotional and spiritual longing or the seasonal cycle of Bengal, at private moments or at cultural occasions. Two of his patriotic poems were later made into national anthems, respectively of India and Bangladesh, making him the only poet in history to have the honour of authorship of two national anthems.

Tagore's contribution to Bengali literature cannot be overrated. The Bengal Renaissance had produced such great writers as Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-73), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-94), Taru Dutta [also known as "Toru Dutt"] (1856-77) and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), but Tagore was the pre-eminent writer of the entire movement. Referring to the Bengal literary Renaissance, Charles Andrews commented, "If Ram Mohan Roy may be likened to the root of this tree of literature, planted deep in the soil, Debendranath Tagore may be compared to its strong and vigorous stem, and Rabindranath, his son, to its flower and fruit". It wouldn't be an exaggeration to describe Tagore as the lifebreath of modern Bengali literature and language. Subsequent writers, especially those of the Kallol group, had to strive hard to break the Gordian knot and come out of Tagore's shadow. Even more than half a century after his death, he remains the towering figure in Bengali/Indian literature. His contributions to the awakening of Indian consciousness were such that he came to be regarded by future generations as a culture hero, and the supreme symbol of the Indian spirit.

## NOTABLE WORK

Rabindranath Tagore wrote eight novels and a number of poems and most of his creations are in the Bangla language. His most acclaimed works in novel genre are Ghare Baire, Shesher Kobita, Char Odhay, Gora, Jogajog, and Dak Ghar. Aside from fictions and autobiographical works, he also wrote essays, lectures and short stories on various topics ranging from history to science and arts. As a prolific musician, Tagore influenced the style of such musician such as Amjad

Ali Khan and Vilayat Khan. He composed the words and music of the Indian national anthem Jana Gana Mana, which was accepted as the national anthem in 1950.

His song has been accepted as the national anthem of Bangladesh as well, thus making him the first ever person to have written the national anthems of two countries. Tagore discovered his talent as a painter in his early sixties, when his first exhibition was held in Paris. Tagore was credited with the culmination of writing short stories as an art, especially in Bengali. "The fruit seller from Kabul" is considered one of the best creations among at least eighty four stories written by him. Based upon his early experience with villagers, he wrote stories which give a glimpse of the life most Bengali live. Though Tagore wrote vividly in every genre of literature, he was a poet first of all. His poems are an inseparable part of every Bengali family where his poems are recited on all important occasions. His best collection of poems is Gitanjali, which gained him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913.

## MODERNISM AND MODERNITY IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Modernism as an aesthetic movement is embedded into socio-political contexts of reactions to modernity. From these particular contexts emerged different concepts of modernity, leading to various expressions of modernisms<sup>1</sup>, the study of which still leave a minor place for Indian artists. The awareness of this plurality pointed at possible shifts in the meanings attributed to these concepts and their relationship. It seems therefore nowadays indispensable to re-investigate the latter by focusing on the variations against the standardization of modernity and modernism as defined by European and American expressions, and also against the standardization of the relation of these two concepts. The interweaving of modernism and modernity differs since the mutual reactions are singular to the context, but also since the context implies various artistic and political influences on the modernists. In particular, the cultural shifting of the debate on modernity implies variations in the colonial and postcolonial state of India, which engages the question of its 'identity' in a modern world<sup>2</sup>.

The specificity of this modernism is also shaped by the particular situation of the former capital of Bengal, Kolkata. It represents the locus of intersection of the local and the global, the traditional and the modernist, the colonial and the indigenous, the Bengali speakers and the English speakers, the international and the national. The conflicts and tensions of these different forces occurring suddenly in this single place transformed it into an important modernist city. However, Partha Mitter draws our attention towards the singular cosmopolitanism of Kolkata, presented as a 'virtual' one. Indeed, in the particular Indian context, cosmopolitan modernity was mainly virtual, in the sense of a mediated exchange, via literature and Western values imported through colonialism. Their



impact on the Bengali elite was effective and they shaped the modernist movement, but it was mainly a fictive relation maintained in printings. It should be noted that Tagore constitutes a remarkable counter-example, whose international character partly explains his singular position within modernism in India.

This socio-political context led to a shift in aesthetic expressions, as noticed in particular by Partha Mitter and Supriya Chaudhuri<sup>6</sup>, regarding above all the movement of 'primitivism', as an aesthetic expression based on a positive evaluation of the concept of nature. If this artistic movement was a reaction against the sudden burst of the urban character and the new industrial state of cities in Europe, its adoption by Indian artists pointed rather to a denunciation of a colonial style of living against Indian values. It served as a political denunciation by using urbanity as a symbol for denouncing colonial influences. Tagore's concept of harmony with nature concerned the universal man and its socio-political application in India while the exotic quest of Paul Gauguin looked for new horizons to escape their own modernity.

Considering modernism as a global phenomenon requires taking into consideration alternative expressions that are not to be considered as reinterpretations and inventions of European modernisms. Although modernism, as defined in its European manifestations, found expressions due to global influence and exchanges<sup>8</sup> within Indian Art, the impact of its emergence in colonial Kolkata cannot be underestimated. It would therefore be misleading, as Partha Mitter remarks, to read Tagore as a 'cubiste manqué', or as some derivative painter from the West<sup>9</sup>. The stakes of an investigation on modernism in non-Western spaces should not be to establish a classification of what matches or differs from modernism as defined in its Western perspective, but to investigate its proper meaning and expression in different contexts. One should therefore not study what Tagore had 'similar to', 'less' or 'more' than Western modernists, but what this very concept signifies in his literature. In this sense, modernism can be defined in my study as a creative movement that reacted to colonial modernity.

Modernism in India consists mainly in a reinterpretation of and a response to the European reception by attempting to construct India's identity. It marks the beginning of a transition and a reflection on 'alternative modernities'<sup>10</sup>, or a reflection on what should or will India be. It became intrinsically related to the stakes of colonialism, and connected with 'modernity' from which it is inseparable. Modernity in this sense is a double reflection on Indian values compared to Europe's exportation of its own values.

## RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE WESTERN RESPONSE

Tagore once rightly said, "It is with literature and art that countries come to know one another"<sup>1</sup>. The West recognised the literature and art of India through the works of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a poet, a musician, a dramatist, novelist, a painter, an educationist, a social activist, a historian and above all one whose religion was his nation. He awakened the West to the knowledge of the East in an era when England was steeped in imperialistic designs. The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 came as a surprise to Tagore as much as it did to the world. In this paper I shall discuss the factors that influenced the flowering of the creative genius of Tagore and the fickleness of fortune that brought a serious blow to his reputation. I shall first throw light on the factors that influenced his literary works and then proceed to his journey to the West, the impact and response of the West, the possible reasons of the rise and fall of his reputation and in the end briefly discuss his place in the literary world today. Tagore was born at the dawn of the Renaissance in India and the era of enlightenment in Bengal. He grew up in a Bengal where social reformers Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar (1820-1981), Ram Krishna Paramhans, (1836-1886), Raja Ran Mohan Roy (1772-1883) and many others had raised their voices against prevalent superstitions and evils like child marriage, bigotry, sati, and promoted widow remarriage and women education. Art and literature in Bengal, through the efforts of Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-73) Din Bandhu Mitra (1829-74) and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) were already blossoming when he was young. His family was free from the bonds of orthodoxy and steeped deep in the pursuance of knowledge. In his autobiography he writes, "The greatest man in Modern India, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was born in Bengal and was the best friend of my grand father ... My father was fortunate in coming under the influence of Ram Mohan Roy from his early years which helped him to free himself from the sectarian barriers, from traditions of worldly and social ideas that were very rigid, in many aspects very narrow and not altogether beneficial."<sup>2</sup> Tagore's father Debendranath (1817-1905) was a Sanskrit scholar also well versed in Persian, Indian and Western Philosophy. He, later in life became a Maharshi, a great sage who turned to the Himalayas and compiled excerpts from the Indian scriptures Brahmo Dharma. Tagore turned to these scriptures often. Tagore's family was highly gifted with a rich literary and cultural ambience. All members of the family were exponents of art and culture involved in literary, dramatic, musical activities. Dwijendra Nath, his elder brother composed Svapna-Prayan (Dream Journey) which Tagore as a boy had memorised. He read a collection of Vaishnav lyrics, the early lyrics of Bengal and the Geet Govind of Jaidev at the age of twelve. These have immensely influenced Tagore's works. Jyotindranath, Tagore's brother and his wife Kadambari Devi, ran a literary club and his other brother Satyendranath Tagore was the first member of Indian Civil Service while his wife started the magazine Balak. Though creative inspiration was

drawn from his family yet it were his own experiences in life and his genius that made his works so special. European literature attracted him and in his young age he was fond of Romantic and Victorian English poets. Shakespeare was as close to him as was Kalidas. Tagore's image in the West initially rested on Gitanjali (the English version). He wrote the poems of the original Gitanjali between 1907 and 1910. It is one of the best known works of Tagore and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Most of the compositions were hymns written in Shantiniketan at a time when his life was facing a crisis. Between the years 1902-1907 he lost his wife, daughter, father and son. Through the creation of Gitanjali he was also trying to overcome his personal grief and sought shelter in the Divine.

Tagore was the first Indian to bring Oriental culture through Literature to the mainstream of intellectual life in the West. He himself had travelled widely. His works were translated into English, Spanish, French, German and many Asian Languages. After 1912, he started writing in English as well. But Tagore's rise to fame also matched with his sudden decline. There are several reasons of the sudden apathy of the West towards Tagore. A major reason could be inefficient translations of his original works. He understood well the shortcomings of translation. In 1930, he remarked "My poetry is for my country men my paintings are my gift to the West". Tagore's novels and other prose works did not arouse much interest in the West.

Tagore's criticism of the British administration of India was extremely sharp. In 1941, in a lecture he gave on his last birthday, he distinguishes between opposing Western imperialism and rejecting Western civilization. While he saw India as having been "smothered under the dead weight of British administration" Tagore recalls what India has gained from "discussions centred upon Shakespeare's drama and Byron's poetry and above all...the large-hearted liberalism of nineteenth-century English politics." The tragedy, was that the West had all that was needed for a civilized nation but in the sway of imperialism they overlooked their ideals. They were "truly best in their own civilization, the upholding of dignity of human relationships, has no place in the British administration of this country."

## LETTER CORRESPONDENCES OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Rabindranath Tagore is essentially known to the world as a poet. But he was a great short-story writer, dramatist and novelist, a powerful author of essays and lectures, philosopher, composer and singer, innovator in education and rural development, actor, director, painter and cultural ambassador. Rabindranath wrote as many as 40981 letters from October 1878 to July 1941 which forms a substantial part of Tagoreana (all the intellectual output of Rabindranath). Besides family members, estate workers and Santiniketan associates, Rabindranath

wrote to literary personalities, poets like W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, artists, editors, thinkers like Romain Rolland, Bertrand Russell, scientists, educationists, scholars of Indian religion and philosophy, religious leaders, agricultural economist (Leonard Elmhurst), politicians and statesmen like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose.

Rabindranath wrote huge number of letters during his lifetime not only to communicate messages to persons for specific purpose but also to express his ideas on nationalism, civilization, nature, society, education, Swadeshi movement and so on. So, the letters of Rabindranath helps to understand Tagore as a family man and also as a universal man with his many faceted vision and activities. Tagore's letters written to his niece Indira Devi Chaudhurani published in Chhinapatravali<sup>1</sup> written during 1885-1895 are not just letters but finer prose from where the true picture of poet Rabindranath as well as imaginative Rabindranath can be drawn.

Rabindranath wrote to W.B. Yeats "...I feel sure these letters, when published, will present to you pictures and ideas concerning me and my surroundings more vividly and truly than anything I have yet written". Most of the letters were first published in different journals and were in the personal collection of different people to whom the poet wrote. Only after the establishment of Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati took initiatives to collect them and later on publish them in the book entitled Chithipatra<sup>3</sup>. It is a rare example in Indian literature, particularly in Bengali literature where manuscript of such a good number of letters are preserved and published. Letters written to Mahatma Gandhi<sup>4</sup>, letters of English poets to Rabindranath<sup>5</sup>, selected letters of Rabindranath<sup>6</sup> etc. have been published separately.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the study that Rabindra patrabali as a literary form constitutes a substantial part of Tagoreana. Tagore used his mighty pen to write large number of letters not only as a medium of personal communication but to express his ideas on different aspects of life/society or even travel account. His concerns about Santiniketan ('abode of peace') amply are reflected in his letters. An in-depth study of letters reveals that many times Tagore used letters to draft his ideas of short stories or even poems. This paper is a short attempt at examining Tagore's concept of modernity, by trying to understand what modernism and its relation to modernity means in this poet's work. Considering the large range of his writings, essays and novels were selected according to what I considered to be the most relevant to the present investigation, favoring the more systematic writings among Tagore's novels and essays. Gora, however, another complex criticism of Nationalism, has not been included here, since its analysis would deserve a complete paper<sup>36</sup>. It also did not focus on the introduction of European modernisms and European modernist expressions in

India from a historical or aesthetic perspective. Rather, it underlined a conceptual understanding through Tagore's work of his own ideas, and the experience of modernism in India through his Indian writings.

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