

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

In 1912, Tagore's own English translation of his Bengali work, *Gitanjali* was published in Great Britain (Bose 140). It immediately attracted the attention of poets like Yeats and Pound and within a year the Swedish Academy awarded Tagore the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first non-European to claim this honour (Atkinson 25). Almost immediately he gained world-wide fame, which ironically drew attention to him across the Indian sub-continent. Prior to his winning of the Nobel Prize he had been a distinguished figure in his native Bengal, but nowhere else, since none of his writings had been translated into either English or any Indian languages (Narvane 8).

Now, at the age of 52 he became an international figure and for the next twenty years he travelled extensively reading his poems and lecturing on a wide variety of topics which reflected his polymath nature. By the mid-1930s however, his star power had faded in the West, much like that of the Theosophical Society whose promotion of Hinduism had helped, albeit indirectly, to fuel Tagore's rise to celebrity status (Roy-Chowdhury 22). This loss of prominence, however, never happened in India or Bangladesh where to this day he is held in high regard and viewed as a progressive mind whose insights are still relevant with regard to many contemporary issues (Sen 90).

The sheer magnitude of Tagore's contribution to humanity is staggering. He wrote voluminously penning thousands of poems, over twelve hundred songs, most of which featured

music that he composed, thirty-eight plays, a dozen novels and nearly two hundred short stories. He also wrote many essays and commentaries on social, cultural and political issues. In the last twelve years of his life he took up painting and produced more than twenty-seven hundred pictures (Narvane 6). He also created a school, Santiniketan, which he oversaw and taught at for decades. Nearby he also created an experimental farm and agricultural college, Sriniketan, where he carried out his ideas concerning rural education and reconstruction (Jana 3). If nothing else he was prolific, a characteristic which seemed to tie in with his joy of life.

To understand his energy and creative genius it is necessary to examine his family roots and his childhood milieu. The Tagores were a Bengali Brahmin family that capitalized on the arrival of the British on the Hughli River in the eighteenth century. Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) invested in the manufacturing of sugar, tea, and indigo. He also owned a coal mine, a shipping company and he founded a bank (Tinker 33). Dwarkanath grew fabulously wealthy and was known for the extravagant parties that he threw. He had a philanthropic side which included funding the activities of his best friend, Ram Mohan Roy, the catalyst of the Bengali renaissance. When Dwarkanath died suddenly on his second trip to Britain, the family fortune was left to his oldest son Devendrath (1818-1905) who in temperament, was the exact opposite of his father (Tinker 34). Devendrath gradually disentangled himself from the family businesses in order to live less in Calcutta and more on the large estates the family owned in Bengal. Here he could follow his major passion which was pursuit of the spiritual life. He revived Ram Mohan Roy's *Brahmo Samaj* and generally became

known for his saintliness and the fifteen children he fathered (Tinker 34). The youngest of these children, was Rabindranath, born in 1861. All of the children were gifted, none more so than Rabindranath, who quickly became a favourite of his father and his older siblings. Rabi's earliest memories of his father were of him chanting the Upanishads every morning. Many evenings the young boy would sing devotional hymns for his father's enjoyment and to aid his meditations (Roy-Chowdhury 32). During the day, his education consisted of tutored home studies in Bengali, Sanskrit, and English, as well as various sciences (Roy-Chowdhury 32). Rabindranath was the only child to travel with his father in the summer of 1873 on a trip that took several months and covered much of north India. Father and son ended their travels with a prolonged stay in Dalhousie, a hill town in the western Himalayas (Narvane 14). This trip seemed to open young Rabi's eyes to the wider world and its possibilities, a feeling that would remain with him for the rest of his life. He began composing poems at the age of eight and by thirteen he had translated MacBeth into Bengali. After spending eighteen months in England, ostensibly to prepare for a career in law, Tagore returned home in 1880, with no degree but, with a respect and admiration for English literature (Narvane 17).

At the age of twenty-two Tagore experienced a mystical vision which proved to be a pivotal point in his life. His vision-like experience revolved around the beauty of nature and lasted for four intense days. It left him with a feeling of joy and freedom that was expressed in much of his subsequent writings, which also seemed to increase in frequency after this seminal event (Bose 116 and Narvane 18). In his early fifties Tagore described this event as one of the most important in his life and in a conversation with his friend, the Indiaphile Charlie Andrews,

the latter observed that this experience marked the emergence of Tagore as a real poet (Bose 118).

Another development that greatly impacted Tagore was his father's request, in 1891, that he manage the family estates in North Bengal and Orissa (Bose 125). This tenure served many purposes not the least of which was providing many uninterrupted hours to write. In this rural setting he explored the Padma River and its environs, which drew him even closer to nature. This increasing respect and love of nature was subsequently reflected in his poetry. He also spent much time in peasant villages learning about lower caste social and economic issues and in devising methods to improve the lives of farmers (Narvane 20). He would later build on these community development initiatives at Sriniketan.

Though primarily known for his mystical literature Tagore created a multi-faceted life, each aspect of which displayed his spiritual nature (Dutta and Robinson 1). This spiritual outlook on life is however hard to define because it has several strands. It is in fact as complex as the man himself. Tagore is hard to categorize, and according to Sen the fact that his literature would not fit neatly into the boxes that poets like Yeats and others wanted to place him, was the cause of some of the negative reaction that befell him in Europe in the 1930's (Sen 95.)

Growing up, Tagore heard passages from the Upanishads recited in his home on almost a daily basis reflecting the importance that his father attached to them (Narvane 30). Early on Tagore identified with the Upanisads and many scholars of his literature view his entire spiritual outlook as being guided by them (Bose 110). In particular, his mystic philosophy echoes the

transcendentalism of the Upanisads (Bose 139). Others see Tagore's emphasis on joy in his poems as an expression of the significance of Vaisnava thought in the theistic tradition of Bengal. Some scholars have contended that in Tagore's poetry the opposing pulls of Upanisadic and Vaisnava theology are displayed, but this belief seems to have declined over the years (Narvane 31).

Rather than opposing forces within Hinduism, what seems to characterize Tagore's philosophy and spiritual outlook was his tendency to pick what he liked best in each religious tradition and to unify those beliefs into his own world view (Atkinson 33). Always looking for harmony in humanity, Tagore combined Buddhist ethics with Upanisadic universalism (Bose 112). In fact, Tagore is given credit for reviving interest in Buddhism in India, through many of his early essays and poems (Narvane 32). From his father, Tagore acquired the monotheism of Ram Mohan Roy (Atkinson 125). In his studies of Christianity Tagore came to admire the self worth and dignity of the individual that was championed by Jesus. He also liked the idea of "social progress in time" that characterizes Christianity, as opposed to the indifference to history and time which he saw in Indian religions (Narvane 33). Clearly Tagore was non-sectarian (Sen 90) and he in fact describes his family as being impacted by three cultures, those of Hinduism, Islam and that of the British (Tagore 168).

What emerges from all of this mixing of religious values and concepts is a unified philosophy that Tagore expounded upon in the Hibbert Lectures which he delivered at Oxford in May of 1930. These addresses were published in a book entitled *The Religion of Man*, which more than

any other work, explains the world view he had developed as he was about to enter the eighth decade of his life. In essence, he uses the non-poetical language of a lecture to reflect the philosophical and spiritual views that he had developed over a lifetime and deployed in his poems and literature.

To Tagore the development of human consciousness has, over time, increased the reality of humankind's immortal being. This has in turn inspired humanity to create aspects of themselves which illuminate the "divinity within" (Tagore 14). This would help to explain Tagore's comment that his personal religion, was a "poet's religion" (Tagore 91).

He was an ardent admirer of Zarathustra and devoted one of his Hibbert Lectures to "The Prophet." What he saw in the sage was the first attempt by humanity to free up religion from the constraints of tribal gods by offering spirituality to "the universal Man" (Tagore 78). This universalism seems to permeate all of Tagore's thoughts and actions. More than that, the ultimate Being, "who is the infinite in Man" is only "realized through serving all mankind" (Tagore 70). This philosophy of service to humanity appears in many aspects of Tagore's life and actions. What Tagore hoped for was that Western humanity, as represented in Christ's teachings could be combined with the Eastern concept of the "universal soul" (Tagore 175). He explained his concept of the "religion of Man" as that situation where "the infinite becomes defined in humanity" (Tagore 95).

Another key spiritual concept for Tagore was *mukti*, which can be defined as freedom or the liberation of the soul. Tagore found this freedom for himself in nature and in spiritual love (Tagore 177). This concept of freedom which he experienced in his vision was a recurring

theme in his literature and in the school that he founded. In an illuminating conversation that Tagore had with Albert Einstein, which is tucked away in the appendix of his book, Tagore summed up *The Religion of Man*, his religion, as “the reconciliation of the Human Spirit in my own individual being” (Tagore 225).

Tagore was not a politician in any way, but because of his public profile and his penchant for speaking out on contemporary issues that impacted him, his intermittent forays into the political sphere are worth exploring, if only because they mirror his spiritual and philosophical views. His first notable sortie occurred in 1905 when the British Government partitioned Bengal into a largely Hindu western zone and a largely Muslim eastern territory. Tagore gave anti-partition speeches at several public meetings, as well as penning many patriotic Bengali songs (Narvane 21). He followed this up by opening a *swadeshi* store, featuring products from around India (Atkinson 42). The same freedom and spiritual unity that he sought for mankind, he called for in his native Bengal (Atkinson 42).

In 1913, the now internationally prominent Tagore, reached out to an unknown Indian in South Africa with an encouraging letter of introduction that wished him well in his non-violent struggle against racism (Narvane 23). Thus began his friendship with the man he popularized as the Mahatma or “Great Soul,” Mohandas Gandhi.

The First World War caused Tagore to become greatly disillusioned. He wrote poignantly against the evils of nationalism, which he saw as the root cause of the conflict (Atkinson 43). He also saw the potential dangers of nationalism for India being reflected in the politics of the

independence movement and he was greatly disturbed by the growing tensions between Hindus and Muslims over the future of the sub-continent (Atkinson 44).

Tagore and Gandhi developed a close and respectful relationship and although they were to meet often and agree on much, they also had profound philosophical differences that included nationalism, the role of rationality and science, and how to develop rural India.

Tagore, was much less bound by tradition than Gandhi, which was shown in his championing of science and his interest in ideas emanating from the rest of the world (Sen 92). Tagore was particularly opposed to Gandhi's promotion of the *charka* and the concept of spinning cotton at home. He saw this tie with the past as totally unrealistic for the needs of the emerging country and for him it also lacked any relevant symbolic value (Sen 100).

Tagore felt this way about Gandhi's traditionalism and lack of interest in science because of his lengthy involvement in the education of children and his efforts to lift the lot of the peasants of Bengal. In 1901, Tagore began a school on one of the family estates at Santiniketan, about 100 miles north of Calcutta (Jana 51). He wanted this school to reflect the Upanisadic tradition that he had learned from his father and he wanted it to be expansive enough to contain "all the elements of an East-West cultural synthesis" (Sarkar 147). His inspiration for the school was the Montessori-like education that he received at home, under the guidance of his father who also utilized the scholarly traditions of India. These included the *tapovana* or "forest schools" as found in the *Ramayana*, as well as the Buddhist centres of learning such as Nalanda (O'Connell 983). Central to the philosophy of the school

would be a spiritual relationship between the teacher and the student (Sarkar 147) and the concept of *mutki* or freedom as applied to learning (O'Connell 987).

Tagore not only founded the school but he taught there as well and it was during this phase of his life that his students and friends began to call him Gurudeva, the “revered teacher” (Narvane 159). Within his school, Tagore wanted to create a specific culture, the *sadhana* of self discovery (Sarkar 159). Like many private schools it had issues around funding, (Sen 114), but by 1921 it had grown to the point where the farsighted Tagore wanted Santiniketan to expand. A part of the campus was cordoned off to become a university which attracted teachers and scholars from around the world (Jana 61). This university was later taken over by the Indian government with the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, becoming the first chancellor (Jana 62).

As much as he was known for his poetry and literature, Tagore saw Santinektan as “the boat which carries the best cargo of my life” (Narvane 151). He once called Santinektan, “my tangible poem” (Narvane 151). Clearly he was proud of his school and its success led him to extend the school in another direction to encompass another life-long concern. In 1922, on an adjacent property to Santinektan, he established Sriniketan, a centre for rural development that would sometime after Tagore’s death, in 1941, become an agricultural college (Jana 65). The goal of this initiative was to improve rural life by making villagers self-reliant. Cooperative principles were employed and scientific agriculture was stressed. In addition, crafts and trades were taught so that villagers could make extra money when the volume of work was low on their farms. Starting with three villages the scheme eventually encompassed seventy-six villages

(Jana 65). The concept of Sriniketan was decades ahead of its time as was much of Tagore's thought concerning education. An early environmentalist, Tagore deplored deforestation and in 1928 he inaugurated an annual festival of tree planting in and around Santinektan and Srineketan (Sen 118).

It is challenging to adequately measure Tagore's legacy given his voluminous writings and plethora of interests. Tagore was a visionary whose belief and writings about spiritual joy, the infinite and universalism sets him apart as not just a singular figure of his time, but as one whose message will endure for centuries. He was however, much more than a mystic and Nobel Prize winning poet. The citizens of India and Bangladesh have Tagore to thank for both the lyrics and the melodies of their respective national anthems (Narvane 21 and Sen 90). Many would see him as a great philosopher of education and mentor of students. As the Gurudeva of Santinektan, he shaped students the likes of filmmaker Satyajit Ray, economist Amartya Sen and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Sen 115 and 117). It is ironic that the Bengal of Tagore's birth has produced two other Nobel Prize winners in recent years, both who claim to have been inspired by Tagore. The life work of these recipients is not poetry or education; in fact they are closer to Tagore, the rural reconstructionist. Amartya Sen won for economics, in 1998, in the main for his scholarship on the causes of rural poverty around the world. In 2006, micro-credit founder Muhammad Yunus earned the Nobel Peace Prize for his groundbreaking work in empowering the women of rural Bangladesh and subsequently poor women throughout the developing world [For Sen's views on Tagore see his chapter entitled "Tagore and His India" in The

Argumentative Indian (see reference section for publishing details). For the views of Yunus on Sen see the article "High Five With Muhammed Yunus" from Forbes Magazine, Oct. 28, 2008.]

Tagore classified himself in the broadest sense of the word as a "singer" (Tagore 86). He certainly sang, he sang often and he sang for all of his life. His "songs" still resonate throughout India, Bangladesh and wherever people are attracted to the idea of "the Religion of Man" (Tagore 7).

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