

The English Tagore versus the Bengali Rabindranath

KHADEMUL ISLAM

I have never known the Bengali Rabindranath, only the English Tagore, and that too haphazardly. It was partly because I spent a large part of my childhood and teenage years outside East Pakistan, outside its small and intimate circle of language and literature, and partly because my parents, never having been steeped in Rabindranath themselves as children, remained distant from the Rabindranath culture, his books and his songs.

Distance, linguistic, cultural and geographical, from Rabindranath produced distaste for Tagore. Bad translations did not help, of course, but neither did the actual books. I remember reading *Chokher Bali* (touted as the first 'modern' Bengali novel) in America. It was a suffocating experience. The four characters, and especially the principal male character Mahendra, spent an interminable amount of time indoors simply talking or dissecting their relationships with each other. Nobody seemed to go outdoors; nobody seemed to need fresh air. There was no physical detail, missing was the whole wide world: Mahendra had passed his medical exams, practised in a hospital, yet there was no description of his place of work, what patients he saw or what kind of medicine he prescribed, no descriptions of furniture, houses, carpets, food. Nobody drank tea outside, went to a circus, discussed a play, or watched a football game. What manner of men were these I

remember thinking, sitting on their haunches all day and yakking about the same thing? The damn book gave me a headache.

His poetry, especially *Gitanjali*, was not much better. The poems had those quaint titles like Journey Home, or Purity, or Song Unsung, and read embarrassingly New Age-y, like the stuff that came out of cut-rate artist colonies in New Mexico, or from people in downtown New York whose parents had been Hare Krishnas. It seems suspiciously the product of someone who would go on to be India's first professional guru to the West, the man who laid the ground for the later, and far lesser, Maharishi Yogis, all beard, 'mysticism' and white robes! And how could anyone, I had thought, accept as 'spiritual' somebody who had been a lifelong zamindar, who had exacted taxes (his son Rathindranath called it "managing the family estate" in his article Father As I Knew Him, yet all of us know what the zamindari system was founded on) from the poorer peasants, someone who could write scathingly against the British, but who never seemed to have critiqued the zamindari system in his own writings, a system brought into being by the British to serve as the economic basis of the Empire. How does one, I thought, relate to a guy who floated up and down the Padma in a houseboat being waited on hand and foot?

To me, raised on modern English (by which I mean American too!) fiction, Tagore's writing style was insufferable: the stacking of ornate, flowery similes



upon similes and the argument proceeding by indirectly excessive courtesies. It was like being stuck forever in Tennyson- and Swinburne-land, conceivably a fate worse than death. And as we Bengalis get increasingly further from Nature, as rural Bengal disappears and we become truly urban creatures, live and die in our urban jungles, Tagore's very lushness of prose (reflecting as it does rural Bengal) turns against itself, his metaphors and turns of thoughts, especially in bad translations, ludicrously overdone. Despite the immense variety of topics, the style in English sounds the same: Tennyson and Swinburne, that's all you get, hour after bloody hour. Why didn't you read Lear, I wanted to say, or Hardy. Or Campion. To all this was added surprise

at how reverentially Tagore is treated by the more 'modern' Bengali academics and critics, in comparison to say, Shakespeare in the West. It is a surprise engendered in those acquainted with the academic assaults launched on Shakespeare and company, on what is now only sneeringly termed over there as the "Western canon." Shakespeare is under attack from all sides: the feminists have been unpeeling the 'construction' of women in his plays and find him wanting, the postmodernists deny the 'centrality' of author and text, the Marxists have been long assailing him for his 'royalist propaganda', post-poststructuralists are waiting in the wings sharpening their knives, the postcolonialists lashing him with Caliban. But Tagore, amid all this furore, was very much

unscathed; among our academics Tagore is still a god, a divine being, whose 'constructions' have escaped the deconstructionists' scalpels. Bengali academics willing to dismantle 'colonial' authors seemed to be very touchy about touching one of their own. It seemed unfair, and only served to increase my antagonism.

But my deepest antipathy towards Tagore was because of his curious lack of angst, of existential despair, of that very modern feeling of the futility of the whole cosmic enterprise; what seemed to me to be his heedlessness about the presence of real Evil, of the enormous capacity within us for Evil, and which is the basis of much of modern sensibility, and by extension, literature. Instead what we seemed to be getting was the same tiresome sun and moon and stars and *jarul* flower, with its latent nagging undertone that the rest of us ordinary mortals are not as assuredly sublime as the great master!

Today I realize that I was largely wrong. Not totally, but largely. One has to read not the English Tagore, but the Bengali Rabindranath. Not only is the latter is a vastly more complex creature than the former, but only the native cadence brings home fully the debt we owe him, our 'Chaucer and Shakespeare' rolled into one, as Buddhadev Bose wrote. Rabindranath gave us our speech; the very prose with which the deconstructionists will get to work on him was shaped by him. The patterns of our very thought started in his head. I realize today a writer's

actual lived life has nothing to do with his work. And when one starts to read the Bengali Rabindranath, as I have begun to do, as I start to look at him steadily, I find him looking back at me. And the more one looks at him the more one begins to see oneself, and there will come that point (as happens with every great artist) when I'll find that I am no longer reading the text, rather the text is actually reading me.

The change came because after a long stay abroad I began living in Bangladesh, because of a sharper awareness of my surroundings, the green of the coconut *daab*, the *krishnachura*, the lilt in the Bengali spoken by Bengalis from Burdman, the seawave drift of the saris on a clothesline, the vivid colors of a Bengali *shongshar*, the rippling glint of *ilish* scales jerked from ice into sunlight. So, I began to feel, the old man saw all this, not just with his eyes, but in his very bones. And the second thing were his letters, part of the excellent English translations of Rabindranath now gradually available, led by the Oxford series edited by Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri. In his letters I find Rabindranath at his most natural (not that his prose or fiction does not feel 'natural' but they are after all formal artistic compositions, artifices, pages within a book), at his most affable and vulnerable, all portals open, accessible, the guy next door -- as much as he can be the guy next door.

So now it is now time to turn to the Bengali Rabindranath.

now I am taking my fill of it. Here I am sole monarch of these rooms and have thrown open all the doors and windows. I feel the mood and the will to write here as nowhere else. The living essence of the outside world floats in freely in verdurous waves of light and air and sound and scent that mingle with my bewitched mind and mould it into story after story after story.

The intoxication is especially strong in the afternoons. Heat, hush, solitude, birdsong--especially the cawing of crows--and languid, limitless leisure together remove me from reality.

I believe, though I have no proof, that the Arabian Nights came into being upon such sun-baked afternoons, in Damascus, Samarkand and Bokhara. I can see the bunches of grapes and the wild gardens of roses, hear the melody of bulbuls, taste the wines of Shiraz. In the desert there is only a file of camels, an itinerant horseman or a crystal spring beneath a date palm to be seen. But in the city, below bright canopies overhanging narrow alleys in the bazaar, there sit turbaned, loosely-attired merchants selling melons and pomegranates, while not far away in a great palace perfumed with incense, on bolsters and kinocob-covered divans within balconies, reclines Zobedia or Amina or Sufia, dressed in a gaily decorated jacket, flowing pyjamas and gold-embroidered slippers, her hubble-bubble pipe coiled at her feet, and her person guarded by gorgeously liveried Abyssinians. Such a prodigiously grand and mysterious setting in such a faraway country was bound to lead to a thousand tales--credible and incredible--of the deepest hopes and fears of mankind.

Noontime in Shahzadpur is high noon for story writing. It was at this time, at this very table, I recall, that my story 'The Postmaster' took over my thoughts. The light, the breeze and the movement of leaves on all sides combined and entered my writing.

Three letters of Rabindranath Tagore

TRANSLATED from Bengali by K. DUTT and A. ROBINSON

Shahzadpur, 9 February 1891 (28 Magh 1297)

Some evenings the postmaster comes upstairs to have a chat with me. His office is on the ground floor of our building--very convenient, for we get our letters as soon as they arrive. I enjoy our talks. He tells of the most improbable things in the gravest possible fashion.

Yesterday he informed me of the reverence towards the Ganges shown by the people of the locality. If someone dies, he said, and the relatives do not have the means to take his ashes to the Ganges, they powder a piece of bone from the funeral pyre and keep it until they come across a person who at some time of other has drunk the water of the sacred river. To him they administer some of this powder, hidden in a courteous offering of *paan*, and are so content to think that their deceased relative has finally made his pilgrimage to the blessed waters at least a portion of him has.

Smiled as I remarked: 'This must be a yarn.'

He pondered for quite a while and then admitted: 'Yes, it probably is.'

Shahzadpur, 5 September 1894 (20 Bhadra 1301)

All of a sudden I realized how hungry for space I had become and so

To Rabindranath

SHAMSUR RAHMAN

(translated by Fakrul Alam)

People say poetry has fallen on hard times in Bangladesh.

In particular, since you died the figure of poetry has lost

All loveliness and grace. Only ruggedness and obscurity

Surround it now. All around it one sees wastelands.

Why the hungry mouse is started by moonlight on the skull

The flower of the cactus can in no way comprehend!

Sudhindra and Jibanananda are dead; Buddhadev seeks solace

In translations. Shamar and Shuvash are mere echoes

In memory's corridors now. Some others have survived

Storms and floods and have ascended to secure thrones,

Although those who have recently taken up helm and scull

On flowing rivers have been unseasonably stranded

On sandbanks all of a sudden. And those who love flowers

Have settled on putrid ones to celebrate spring.

Like newly planted seedlings needing sun and rain

We too needed celestial succor all life long.

Your brilliance illuminated our sun-seeking consciousness,

Irradiated our talk of politics, our loving.

As if in princely eminence when on midday

Birds ceased to sing you never heaved a sigh.

As if Bolpur's blazing summer didn't tire you out

Or in a parched voice you never cried out for water

As if the death of your beloved son Shomeer

Didn't dim the fire in your bosom the bewitching

Always elusive mythical deer didn't delude you ever

It was an imposing figure that you cast on countless souls!

Although the rose's thorns pierced the azure of Rilke's being;

He had his bath at midday and lunch; his hair had felt

The touch of a comb; his heart too was devoted to a woman.

You've given my days the glow of poetry

My nights you've filled with the sparkle of songs.

All my lifelong you've given me the magic spell

I needed to burst through the formidable phalanx

Of the fabled seven charioteers. You've given me

The assurance to shatter the barbarian's outburst

With the drill of my intense indignation.

You've emboldened me to walk the open road of symbols

And to enter the fields of joy and the wide world.

You've swept past the avowed atheist's secure defenses

With such pure lyrics of devotion and god's love.

I'd rather not wade in waters where toads croak;

I want to be part of the immense ocean. In trying

To soar like you I may keep falling into the mud;

Nonetheless, I console myself: being the cuckoo

Of the mudflat will give my life some meaning!

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Literature EXTRACTS

Rabindranath Tagore and Bengali Prose

BUDDHADEV BOSE

Another thing that Tagore did to Bengali prose was to impart movement. In saying this I am not counting the distinction between *sadhur* and *chhalitbhasha*, for in his case both have the same kind of movement, though not to the same degree. I am rather trying to define the difference, in terms somewhat more precise, between his prose and let us say Bankimchandra's. Not that Bankimchandra did not have movement--it is impossible to write either prose or verse without movement of some sort--but Tagore made the language flow, giving it a flexibility we do not find in his elders. The quality of charm was there in Bankimchandra and he was the first to possess that quality but the charm of his prose was of the sort we find in rhymed and regular verse to which it seems to me it owed great deal. He uses repetitions as poets do refrains; at times he misses being metrical only narrowly, and his use of the caesura balancing a remark and repartee, is clearly reminiscent of the verse of Bharatchandra or Alexander Pope. His sentences are like trained soldiers marching across a plain; their movement is ordered and slow, their progress linear, and the link between them is the logical one of a common purpose. These, too, on the whole, are the characteristics of Pramatha Chaudhuri, as we have lately come to realize, the strife between *sadhu* and *chhalitbhasha* being ended. The fact is that Pramatha Chaudhuri's profession of the new style was result of his intellectual conviction; temperamen-

tally he had more in common with Bankimchandra than with Tagore. So it happens that Tagore's prose has a quality we do not find in the two great writers before and after him, nor in all later writers who should have gained by his example. And this quality is neither order, nor charm, nor brilliance--these the others have; it is fluency, the feeling of high-powered motion, of amplitude and overflow.

It seems to me that Bankimchandra built up his prose in a succession of single sentences, but in Tagore the unit is the paragraph, and the link between the paragraphs and the sentences of which they are composed, is provided not merely by grammar or logical coherence, but by another element, less easy to define, which remains offstage as it were and yet animates the whole. It is something like the pulse-beat in the body of a living animal, and this we can finally recognize as the very rhythm of the language. This rhythm of which Mallarme speaks what was lacking in Bengali prose before Tagore and which he brought to it. Tagore's sentences do not merely follow a logical sequence, but remain sensuously in touch with one another; they are like a troupe of ballet dancers who have plastic limbs and sinuous movement and who can produce the most overwhelming effects by doing not what is expected but what is barely felt to be possible. Perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that the satisfy our immortal longing for harmony, and by harmony I mean an organization which can combine a very great variety of movement, including dissonance and violation of symmetry. In Tagore's prose long

and short sentences jostle one another; meandering complexities lead to an abrupt decision couched in a statement of two words; no two consecutive sentences begin or end in the same way, and closed and open sounds caressingly alternate.

And Tagore does all this intuitively, with an apparent ease which baffles us all, and he does this in a language whose resources, when came to it, were certainly small compared to English or French. The syntax of the English language clearly influenced him, as it did both Bankim and Vidyasagar, and though certain unworthy moderns are sometimes blamed for writing Bengali 'in the English way', I must say it was Tagore who showed how much Bengali can gain in speed, strength and richness by adopting parentheses, inversion and several other devices which are common in English and all other languages which have developed a prose literature. Without these devices prose would be incapable of expressing any but simple and rudimentary thoughts; and I do not know in what sense they are 'English' except that we received them through the English tongue. But once Bengali adopted the various forms of modern punctuation, it was inevitable that its own native genius should lead it along the same course of development as that of modern European languages, whose various modes were similarly influenced by punctuation, and of which Bengali has now become a competitor. Perfected by Tagore, this new syntax is the style of modern Bengali; it is absurd to say that any such thing as a 'pure Bengali syntax' is any longer pos-

sible, or that our prose has corrupted itself by deviating from the norm of medieval verse-couplets, which trudged as best they could on the stilts of their single and double stops. The truth is that the style of Tagore makes full use of the natural rhythm of spoken Bengali; neither stuffily Sanskritic nor loosely colloquial, it rather an idealized form of the living speech of his countrymen. The very inflexions of our voice, ranging from assertion the whispered word, from dejection and doubt to passionate belief--this is hear in the prose of Tagore. In other words, it is rhythmic in the way of prose, and removed as far as possible from metrical beats; it moves in the same way as the *alap* or overture of Indian music, which follows tempo, but rejects melodic measure.

Bankimchandra, who tried his 'prentice hand on verse, made his prose distinctly reminiscent of that early encounter; but Tagore, the poet, writing prose as only a poet can, never admits in it the faintest echo of metrical effects, not even in the prose-poems of his later years. And this, I think, is his great achievement as a prose writer. He realized that rhythmic prose is not something which falls between prose and verse, but belongs to prose proper, its aim being the maximum intensity available to non-metrical language. 'Tagore's prose,' as Atulchandra Gupta has observed, is the prose of a great poet, and therefore nowhere like verse.' This 'therefore' seems to me meaningful.

Uncle Rabindranath

INDIRA DEVI CHAUDHURANI

My uncle was a very handsome man. I often think that he was handsomer in his old age than in his youth. He possessed a fine tall figure, regular features and a good physique. In his younger days he used to wear his hair in long ringlets. The gilded youth of those days used to try and follow this fashion, forgetting that ringlets alone do not proclaim the poet. His complexion may have been considered fair by the ordinary Indian standard, but he was not so fair as some of his brothers and sisters. It is a truism that our memory consists partly of hearsay, and I have heard that his eldest sister Saudamini Devi used to say: 'Rabi may be dark, but he will shed luster on the family name.' Physical culture was then in vogue in the Tagore family, and the Maharshi's (Rabindranath's father Devendranath) sons used to practice wrestling and other Indian modes of exercise.

When I say that my uncle seemed handsomer in his old age, I mean that his skin took on a ruddier tinge and his wavy white hair and bearded face gave him the look of a *rishi* or seer of old.

In those days the fashions in food and dress of our recent Mahomedan conquerors had not become altogether obsolete. As far as I remember, the outdoor costume for men consisted of the Muslim type of *achkan* and *jibba*, cut short to suit the exigencies of the time. The indoor dress was a combination of *kurta* and *pyjamas* even for little boys and girls. But Rabikaka used to wear the usual *dhoti* and *chadder* also when going out, with a shawl for ceremonial occasions. The *jibba* was usually discarded. His hair kept getting shorter and shorter with age, as his many photographs will testify. Some sort of headgear was considered necessary for full-dress occasions. We have seen portraits of Prince Dwarkanath (Rabindranath's grandfather) wearing a *shamla* like those usually worn by lawyers. From the Maharshi downwards a variation of the *pagri* or national headdress was used, a small and stiff edition of which was known as the *pirali pagri*. My mother was an adept in the art of folding and stitching this kind of *pagri* in a more homely fashion on the heads of members of the family. I don't remember seeing any Tagore wearing the English hat proper, though the fashions of other Asian countries were sometimes adopted, such as the Turkish *fez* or the Iranian *topi*. The feet were shod in ordinary English shoes with pants, and various kinds of slippers with *dhoti*. I particularly remember a kind of red-leather slippers worn by my uncle, with upturned toes and soft-padded soles, which we used to call Jagannath slippers...

