

A Birthday Tribute to Rabindranath

The Poet of Hope and Faith

A WEBINAR PRESENTATION BY FAKRUL ALAM FOR IGCC ON 9 MAY, 2020

Let me begin my speech in this birthday webinar organized by the High Commission of India in Dhaka to commemorate Rabindranath Tagore's 159th birthday by referring to his last public address, *Sabhyatar Sankat* or *Crisis in Civilization*. Read out on behalf of the unwell poet four months before his death on 14 April, 1941, it is an address made pessimistic initially, not

quote from the concluding section of the poet's speech, although all around him were "crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility," he would not "commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man" (*The Essential Tagore*, 215). Rabindranath goes on in his speech to envision "a dawn" emerging eventually, in all likelihood from the East, "where the sun rises," to allow humankind to reclaim their "lost heritage" (216).

Rabindranath Tagore thus offered to a world, even when fratricidal armies were clashing bloodily in one of the gloomiest phases of human history, a "ray of hope" through his vision of the future. This is why I believe that the theme chosen by the Indian High Commission of Bangladesh at this critical juncture of human existence is a particularly apt one—*tabiguru* offers us through this final address to the world, as he always did through his works and philosophical musings as well as his actions, a demonstration of his unwavering faith in humankind. Rabindranath, is ultimately the poet of hope, encouraging all of us to cope with public as well as personal crises, through his actions, as well as his words. Now that we are in a corona-infected world, confined to our homes, constricted in our movements, and leading cramped lives in shrinking, bordered spaces, more than ever, we need to remember on this birthday event what Rabindranath articulated at every turn of his eighty years in the planet—hope is what we can never abandon. For him, the sun will rise again and break through night, inevitably, naturally and invigoratingly. Surely, his father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore had been prophetic in naming him Rabindranath—for he is truly "Robi," a sun who can guide us in these, and all other times of crisis.

Personally, I am more addicted to Rabindranath's songs than any other

genres or creative outlets that streamed from him, and so let me focus in particular on one of his best-loved songs, "Anandodhara Bohiche Bhubane," (Happiness Streams Across the Universe), to see how he himself coped with personally difficult situations. The song was composed in 1908 at a time when Rabindranath had become overwhelmed by personal tragedies. His dear wife and unfailing helpmeet Mrinalini Devi became ill and died on 23 November, 1902; nine months later, his daughter Renuka died at the age of thirteen; Satis Roy, a young poet and teacher of his Shantiniketan school he was particularly fond of, died four months later of typhoid then raging in Bengal, and his youngest and dearest child, the thirteen-year old Samindra, died of cholera in November 1907. As Rabindranath's biographer Krishna Kripalani, puts it, it was as if God had "sent him, as He had done to His Servant Job of the Old Testament, a series of bereavements and afflictions" to try him (201). What he does in the song, however, is admonish himself for letting depression grip him when God seemed to be sending down every day reasons for living. As Rabindranath berates himself in the song, why was he sitting alone, submerged in the self, and "feeling forlorn," when day and night heavenly bliss was splashing across the universe, and the sun and moon beaming down forever? He should rather consider his sorrows "inconsequential," fill the void in his life with love for others, and act positively. This then is the kind of philosophical musing offering rays of hope to us that we can recall on his 159th birthday in this corona-infected year.

Let us remember at this time too that during these years of bereavement, Rabindranath was fully involved in all kinds of humanitarian and national causes and not only

writing poetry and staying depressed. After all, these were the years when he was running his fledgling school in Shantiniketan set up for altruistic purposes with his own money, taking an active part in the swadeshi movement till he got fed up with its excesses and increasingly communal bent, and working on schemes to help the peasants in his estates in east Bengal lead better lives.

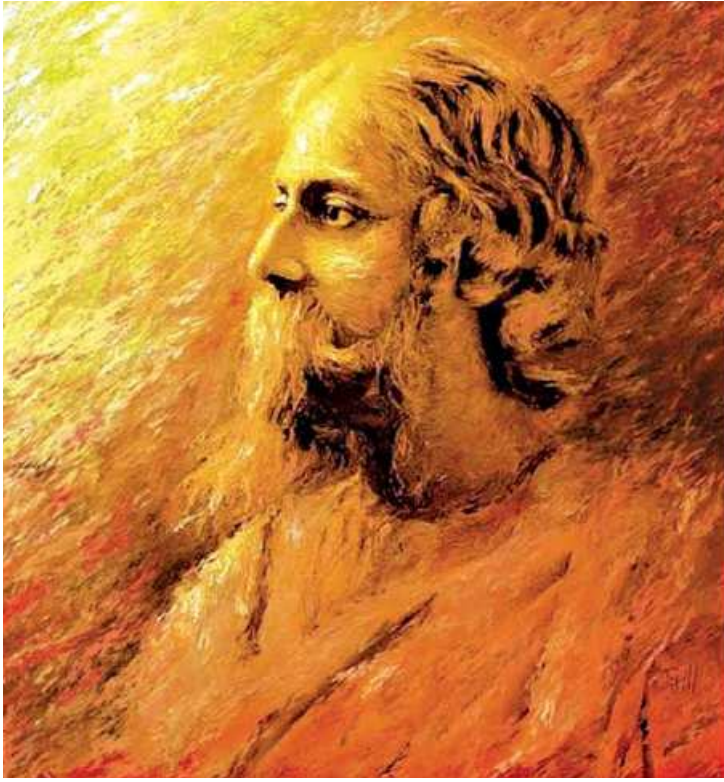
Always, Rabindranath was the activist coming up with ways of helping people cope with the consequences of the natural or man-made disasters periodically ravaging the subcontinent. An example that comes to my mind on this occasion is the way he decided to aid the victims of people suffering from the famine-like conditions created by floods in North Bengal in 1932. What he did on this occasion was adapt for performance the long poem he had first written in English titled "The Child" that he had subsequently recreated as the Bengali poem "Shisu Thirta" in 1932. This adapted version became a Kolkata fund-raising event organized to help distressed people. What we find then is Rabindranath typically contributing the way he could at a moment of crisis, yet again.

The Rabindranath I would like us to commemorate on this birthday webinar is therefore the activist, as well as the seer-poet, who offered again and again rays of hope for his people through his life and works. In a part of the book he translated as *Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore*, he urges us to "meet the morning light" and not sit with our face "turned away" from it; in his essay on "Hindus and Muslims," he exhorts them to "demolish the barriers that have been built" in their minds; in another essay titled "The Tenant Farmer" he points out that no matter how difficult the situation is, one must not give up "the will to live"; in his breakthrough poem "Nirharer

Swapna-Bhanga" or "The Fountain's Awakening" he is rhapsodic in the final line because "the sun has finally found its way!" In another poem "Sabhyatar Prati" or "To Civilization" he declares that we must "burst through all barriers that hem us in and feel/This boundless universe's pulsating heartbeat!" In his last, death-bed poem, "Tomar Srishtir Poth" or "On the Way to Creation", he tells us to embrace "truth" and cleanse "our innermost being by its light". And in a song-lyric he wrote on one of his birthdays, "Hey Notun" or "O Herald of the New," he urges himself to be "Like the rising sun/ Burst through the heart of the void and unveil yourself/ Let life be revealed as triumphant."

Rabindranath Tagore, then, is forever our "robi" shining steadfastly over our part of the world, sending his rays of hope across the subcontinent, and even to other parts of the world, warming our hearts and minds with his poems, songs, plays, dance-dramas, fiction, prose, the institutions he created like Visva-Bharati or Sriniketan, and, indeed, through his exemplary life. His musings on the world of the spirit, harmony between peoples, the limitations of nationalism and the need for an international outlook; his thoughts on rural reconstruction, cooperative development, preserving the environment and education amidst nature are as relevant as ever. For us in Bangladesh, in particular, he has been an unending source of inspiration and a sustaining force. For our two nations, of course, he is a bond that is permanent. On this birthday webinar, being organized at a time when our people are trying to cope with the crisis brought about by Covid-19, we know that he is a ray of hope we can turn to and be inspired by as we move on to better days and a brighter future.

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only by the shadow cast on the whole world by the seemingly all-engulfing Second World War, but also by the colonial arrogance on display then. But for Rabindranath, though the situation was grim, and though misery, misunderstanding and violence seemed to cloud the horizon, hope was not something to be forsaken, even in an apparently apocalyptic situation. To

Rabindranath Tagore and Jatragan

TAPAN BAGCHI

Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) childhood and adolescent memories of stage performance involve both *Jatra* and theatre. His elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1825) had composed a play called *Sarojini* (1875) in the fashion of a *jatra* alongside burlesques like *Kinchit Jogajog* (1872) and *Hathat Nabab* (1884) and plays like *Purushbikram Natak* (1874) and *Alik Babu* (1900). Jyotirindranath's *Sarojini* was performed by professional *jatra* artists and the show took place inside the Jorasanko Thakurbari. *Jatra* shows were popular during Tagore's time and Rabindranath as a child had first-hand experience of watching them. Though generally children were not allowed to be audience to those, there was one exceptional occasion when they were allowed to watch a *jatra* named *Nal Damayanti* based on the Mahabharata. In his memoir titled *Chelebela* Tagore recalls his immaturity and his experience of watching an incomplete *jatra* performance.

Tagore himself never composed any *Jatrapala* per se, neither was any of his plays except *Bisarjan* ever performed by any *jatra*-group. But the influence of indigenous drama or *jatra* can be easily traced in many of his plays. By adding various elements of *jatra* he had endowed his plays with a novel significance. It is often very difficult to differentiate between a *jatra* and a stage play by looking at their scripts alone. But there are huge differences between the stage conventions used by the two. A stage-play is invariably influenced by Western traditions. On the other hand, *jatra* employs Bengal's unique indigenous dramatic traditions. A close analysis reveals that the styles of writing used by the two are also distinct. In his plays Tagore nurtured both *jatra* and Bengal's own consciousness towards theatrical tradition. From the memoir of Pramathanath Bishi (1901-1985) one comes to know that Tagore himself considered writing *jatras*:

The success of our *jatra* performances prompted Rabindranath to write *jatra* too. One day he told me, "see, I am thinking of penning *jatra*." I said, "all avenues of literature have your footprints; won't you leave a few by-lanes for apprentices like us?" I don't know what he had thought after I finished my words. But after some thinking he replied, "alright, go." As if to say "I am sparing that for you." (Pramathanath Bishi, *Rabindranath O Shantiniketan*, Visva-Bharati Publishing Dept., Shantiniketan, 1372, p.181)

The character of Bibek (conscience) which

is an integral part of *jatra* conventions, can be found in Tagore's plays too. In plays like *Chirakumar Sabha* (1907), *Sharadotsav* (1908), *Raja* (1910), *Achalayatan* (1912), *Dakghar* (1912), *Falguni* (1916), *Muktadhara* (1923), *Raktakarabi* (1926), *Rather Rashi* (1926), *Tapati* (1930) he used parables and *uktigeet* (songs sung in *jatra* that begin by quoting from others) akin to the songs sung by Bibek and Niyati (fate) in *jatra*. Characters in Tagore's plays who may be said to parallel Bibek are Akshay in *Chirakumar Sabha*, Thakurdada in *Sharadotsav*, Baul and Pagol in *Raja*, Dadathakur in *Dakghar*, Andhabaul in *Falguni*, Dhananjoy Bairagi in *Muktadhara*, Bishu Pagal in *Raktakarabi*, Bipasha in *Tapati*, Aparna in *Bisarjan*, the poet and the hermit in *Rather Rashi* etc.

He never felt the need to borrow a character representing conscience from the Western



traditions. Little doubt that Tagore created the characters akin to Bibek in his plays treading on the path of a thousand-year old Bengali dramatic tradition. Not just the character of Bibek, but researcher Naren Biswas believes that even Aparna's character in *Bisarjan* is a "centenary edition of Bibek in *jatra*" (Naren Biswas, *Prasanga: Sahitya - Sanskriti*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1989, p. 152.) Tagore's commitment to tradition endows a unique richness to his plays. Tagore could never accept the westernized concept of a stage for his plays. He explained his views as:

"The stage inside the mind of a thinker has no death of space. Magicians weave scenes there. Such a stage, such scene is the destination of a playwright; no imitated stage, no spurious scene

can fit the imagination of a poet" (Rabindranath Tagore, 'Rangamancha', *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 5, Visva-Bharati, Kolkata, Reprint, 1974 (Bhadra, 1381), pp. 451-52).

Lyrical-tendency in Tagore's plays is an integral part of his style. But in the original performances we notice an abundance of music and songs. Especially in *Krishnajatra* music is used as a major element.

Though Tagore got his idea from the character of Bibek in *jatra*, he made his characters different from the conventional figure. Thus, we find Thakurda in *Sharadotsav* as a playmate of the boys too. In the play *Raja* the characters of Baul and Pagal were added. Moreover, in the character of Panchak in *Achalayatan*, one can trace the effects of *jatra*. In the play *Tapati*, Tagore moved closer to Bengal's indigenous theatrical style i.e. *jatra* by

opting out the use of backdrop.

Tagore not only recognized the importance of *jatra*, but he also accepted it alongside his own theatrical ideas. We can consider Kabi (poet) and Sannyasi (ascetic) in *Rather Rashi* as characters created out of the influence of *jatra*. The character of Andha Baul (the blind minstrel) in *Falguni* also reminds us of Bibek of *jatra*. In fact, he is a more intense form of Bibek. We can then very well understand that even Andha Baul can be a guide to life, kindling the rays of hope by rectifying errors of life.

It is not difficult to discover similarities between Tagore's dance-drama and the narrative opera style of *jatra*. Presence of dance in *jatra* is a natural tendency. But even after coming across the era of narrative opera, we find that in the modern era Tagore retains that dance tradition.

If we consider the aspect of theatrical sensibility, we can find remote similarities between Tagore's plays and *jatra*. Issues prominent in *jatra* like the conflict between good and evil, triumphs of morality, religion and humanity also find apt modern expressions in Tagore's plays.

There is no denying the fact that as a playwright Tagore is original and modern. But he had also proudly acknowledged that he had been influenced by the thousand-year old tradition of *jatra* in Bengal. And the conventional Bibek of *jatra* has been converted to indispensable characters in his plays. The portrayal of stoicism in *jatra*'s Bibek and his invocation to pronounce the revelation while being outside the plot—all have been rejected by Tagore to reconstruct his own version of Bibek considering the need of time. In this way by simultaneous acceptances and rejections Tagore has enriched his creative treasure.

"Atithi" is a famous short story by Tagore. Its success as a motion picture is also reputed. The hero of this story becomes a companion to a boat-riding troubadour circus group. In the story the reader gets to know about various folk performances like *jatra*, *panchali*, poets' assemblies and dance shows that were important components of contemporary village fairs.

Tagore included the context of *jatra* in his novels as well. We get more references of *jatragan* in the novel *Noukadubi*. A conversation between Kamala, Shailo, and Umesh portrays an incident prior to the beginning of a *jatra* show.

Tagore firmly believed that *jatra* can be used effectively as a medium of public education. Hence, he had introduced various features of *jatra* in his plays. He even thought of propagating national history and tradition through such native performances. He believed that a *jatra* can have more impact on the mass than books.

Tagore realized the value of *jatra* and considered it as Bengal's cultural heritage. He considered this public medium of education as a chief implement for cultural development. Therefore, he had developed plans to patronize *jatra*. Tagore understood how *jatra* is connected to our roots, and hence he showed strong inclination towards this dramatic form of folk literature.

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