

Rabindra Jayanti Special

German Writers on Rabindranath Tagore

by Martin Kampchen

The author of this article is a German scholar who has long remained actively involved in research into the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore. Dr Kampchen came to Bangladesh on a short visit in 1993 and delivered a lecture on Tagore at the Bangla Academy, dwelling on the impact of Tagore on contemporary German poetry. Following is the article which he also read at one of the literary gatherings organised in Dhaka. This article shows, among other things, how Tagore was initially received in Germany.

lectuals of his time — which could not stand up to reality. It was not a country, but an "idea", and "ideal India" they nourished in their fantasies. Hence the disappointment when Hesse came into touch with reality.

Rather reluctantly Hesse published his diary, misleadingly entitled *Aus Indien* (From India). But as time went on, memory began to paint a rosy picture of India, until finally he convinced himself that it had been a fruitful visit and an unforgettable experience. In short, he had reverted to the "ideal India".

When Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany in 1921, Hesse was writing his novel *Siddhartha*, a fictional biography of Gautama Buddha. In other words, he was steeped in Indian mythology and spirituality. Hesse claims that his Asian visit helped him to write the book. One should have thought that there was no person better equipped to have a meaningful dialogue with Rabindranath than Hesse. Yet, there was no direct contact between them, reflecting definitely on Hesse's part a lack of sustained interest to meet the Indian poet. Hesse lived in his mountain resort of Montagnola in the Alps which he did not like to leave often. When, however, one of Rabindranath's students and associates in Santiniketan, Kalidas Nag, came to visit Hesse, their contact flowered into friendship.

Yet, Hesse did read Rabindranath's books, as is evident from the three book-reviews he wrote and from a lecture he delivered. Apart from them, Hesse has mentioned Rabindranath half a dozen times in letters and articles. In 1914, when Rabindranath arrived in the German book-market with a bang, Hesse published two brief book-reviews, one on *Gitanjali*, and the second on *The Gardener*. Let us first hear them both in full. First on *Gitanjali*: The Indian poet Tagore, who was completely unknown until he received the Nobel Prize, has now been translated. His *Gitanjali* has appeared in translation by Marie Luise Gothein... These songs consist of prayers, conversations with God, invocations and fairy-tales of the soul, full of India's ancient pantheistic spirit; yet the strong, somewhat modern identification of the highest being with personhood is worthy of note. This small book contains much that is sacred and exquisite, but there is nothing really new in it. These are not the songs of a religious thinker, but of a quiet, noble dreamer who spends his days, remote from the world, in poetic worship, and whose Indian-ness is tinged with the influence of European literature.

And the second book-review which is on the German edition of *The Gardener*: Just recently another book of poetry by the Indian Rabindranath Tagore appeared....

Hermann Hesse was deeply disappointed in India when he visited the country in 1911. He had left Europe mainly to escape personal problems. He voyaged by ship to Ceylon, Singapore and Indonesia and had to cut his trip short after three months because of falling health. He did not visit the Indian mainland at all. Hesse had been in touch with things Indian since his youth. His maternal grandfather, Hermann Gundert, who had lived in South India for many years as a missionary, knew Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages. Hesse's mother was born and brought up in India. His father, too, went to India as a missionary for three years. Hermann Hesse studied the Indian scriptures early, and carefully read new books on India and Indian religions, as many book-reviews testify. A romanticised notion of India had formed in his mind — as in the minds of many other intel-

entitled *The Gardener*... It confirms the impression of the first volume, *Gitanjali*. One contemplates the artistry of this eclectic aesthete with quite pleasure, and is somewhat surprised that he is an Indian and not an English pre-Raphaelite. Despite one's sympathy for this poet, who has been undeservedly adorned with the Nobel Prize, one has little inclination to read more of him.

These comments are rather harsh, especially since they come from Hesse. Note his tendency to compare Tagore's work with European literature. Naturally, Hesse had no other point of reference, since he — like other European intellectuals and critics — was not conversant with many forms of Indian literature. For Hesse, Rabindranath is too European, and that implies: too compromising with his Indian heritage. We shall hear later that for other German intellectuals, Rabindranath was just the reverse, namely too nebulously and mysteriously "Indian" for them to understand and accept.

Hermann Hesse harps on the same theme of "European-ness" in his third short review, written a few years later (1920), on Rabindranath's novel *The Home and The World*. He writes, this time praising the book: The marked degree to which Tagore has now assimilated European literary forms is revealed in his decision to write a novel. Presumably this will rapidly become the most widely read of his books in this country, although it lacks the unalloyed beauty of his earlier works. It moves along to an alien rhythm, in a way which is reminiscent of English popular novels. But in its purity and grandeur, this work is essentially Indian too. [The few weaknesses of this work will not diminish its strong appeal. On the contrary, they will enhance it where the ordinary reader is concerned, and this is quite acceptable, for the more people read this book the better.]

When Rabindranath visited Germany in 1921, Hesse seems to have kept himself aloof of the barrage of publicity and media attention surrounding the Indian poet. But we know of a lecture Hesse delivered a year later, in 1922, at St Gallen in Switzerland, on "Indian Art and Literature". Interestingly, this lecture was given before the performance of Rabindranath's play *The Post-Office*. In it Hesse termed Rabindranath an "imitator of the Indian mind" (*Epigone des*

indischen Geistes) who "lacks in original strength". This again shows his critical stance. But can Hesse be blamed? The German prose versions of Rabindranath's Bengali poetry are but a shadow of the original. So Hesse could probably not help but feel that Rabindranath's creativity was weak and imitative.

Towards the end of his life, in 1957, Hermann Hesse was asked by a Bengali, Nimai Chatterjee, to write on Rabindranath. And he responded in a letter which was later translated and used as the Preface by Aurobindo Bose for his translation of *Later Poems of Tagore*. Here Hesse's views are more benign, kindly-disposed, and balanced. He writes: Tagore's partial eclipse in the west at the present time is a phenomenon based on a universal historical truth. Today's man of fame falls into oblivion after his death, and only after a lapse of time — sometimes prolonged — does the world take the trouble to re-examine and reappraise both his former fame, and his present neglect. Indeed, the greater the fame the more obdurate the oblivion that follows. This is the state of Tagore's reputation in the West today. In Europe, in the years following the First World War, Tagore was not only famous, he was also very much in fashion. But such is the world that it likes to make its former favourites pay the price for gifts once bestowed....

Although I had no close relationship with Tagore, I contemplate his memory — that of a noble and venerable presence in the intellectual world of his time — with affection and delight. And I would be happy if I lived to see his triumphant re-emergence after the testing period of temporary oblivion.



Tagore on stage: His own play *Nair Puj*



Stefan Zweig, the Austrian writer, was very much in the centre of the East-West dialogue of his time. For over thirty years, he kept up a busy correspondence with Romain Rolland, whose pivotal role in bringing India closer to the European cultural context is well-known. Stefan Zweig's thirst for life impelled him to travel to many parts of the world. From November 1908 until March 1909, Zweig visited Ceylon, India, and Burma. Unfortunately he — who was thoroughly European — failed to establish an emotional rapport with India. In his autobiography, he admitted: India itself had a more sinister and depressing effect upon me than I would have thought possible. I was shocked by the misery of the emaciated figures, the joyless seriousness in their sombre glances, the often cruel monotony of the landscape and, more than all else, the rigid division of classes and races.

Yet, Zweig kept up contact with Indian culture throughout his life. He began to discuss Rabindranath Tagore in his letters to Romain Rolland from 1921, the year of Rabindranath's first visit to Germany. On 22nd April 1921, Zweig commented: "Recently I read Rab Tagore's last poems. Such serenity, such beauty!... I am happy that such a man lives among us, furthering the spread of wisdom..."

Zweig praised Rabindranath's collection of essays, *Sadhana*, to Rolland, but he criticised the noise and tug-of-war around Rabindranath's public lectures. Zweig related to Rolland in June 1921: "People came to blows with each other to get a glimpse of him [Rabindranath], and the people had to intervene. The same will happen in Darmstadt where Tagore wishes to stay for a week... and in the end Tagore will have seen nothing of Germany but journalists and arrivistes, and all because he was unwise enough to have his visit publicly announced."

One of the important figures in German intellectual life was Kurt Wolff. The young, ambitious publisher brought out many expressionist writers. He especially made a name for himself as the "discoverer" of Franz Kafka. Kurt Wolff had published Rabindranath's works starting with *Gitanjali* in 1914. When the Indian poet came to Germany for the first time, in 1921, Wolff — together with Count Hermann Keyserling — "stage-managed" Rabindranath's visit. While Keyserling organised the much talked-about "Tagore week" in his native Darmstadt, Wolff tried to rope in eminent men of letters to meet Rabindranath and enhance his fame. In 1914, Kurt Wolff tried to persuade Rainer Maria Rilke to translate into German the poems of the English *Gitanjali*; in 1921, he was instrumental in introducing Thomas Mann and Stefan Zweig to the Indian poet.

When Rabindranath planned to visit Vienna, Kurt

Wolff wrote to Stefan Zweig who lived in Salzburg, asking him to meet Rabindranath. The result was a half-hour get-together at Salzburg railway station. On the same day Stefan Zweig wrote in a letter to Kurt Wolff: "Thank you very much for the information regarding Tagore's travel programme. This enabled me to spend half an hour in his company today at Salzburg railway station while he changed trains. Thanks to you, I have encountered this great personality, of whom I formed a strong and profound impression. I understand that everything has been arranged in the best possible way in Vienna, and you can rest assured that the press there will behave more tactfully than in Munich, where its hollow jokes were really embarrassing for us all. Anyone who is in the least familiar with the ways of German literary circles knows that there are always a few gentlemen who would like to demonstrate their superior intelligence by speaking in condescending tones about people whose feet they are not fit to touch. What is certain is that, at the moment, the literary trend where Tagore is concerned will be one of cool and distant benevolence. For my part, I shall not comply and I hope you will soon be able to read what I think of this wonderful book 'Sadhana'... I consider it an unavoidable duty to keep a most resolute distance from the condescension of such people, even though one's enthusiasm may be sneered at."

Here again we get a hint of the reserve and suspicion with which Rabindranath was greeted in some literary circles. Some were envious of Rabindranath, as mentioned. But some more sensitive persons like Stefan Zweig felt genuinely embarrassed, even repelled, by the tumult and hero-worship around Tagore. In a letter to Romain Rolland, Zweig complained: "In Germany, the country which knows no proportion, people celebrated him [Tagore] a little too much and too loudly. Good will all too easily takes on exaggerated and aggressive forms with such people."

It honours Zweig that he nonetheless kept up his interest in the Indian poet and came out with his critical appreciation publicly. Stefan Zweig wrote a long essay on Rabindranath's collection of philosophical essays, *Sadhana*. His decision to write on *Sadhana*, rather than on other books, was wise. These essays were originally written in English for western audiences. So many of the difficulties a serious European critic feels in appreciating Rabindranath's works, did not exist in this case. Zweig wrote the essay as a dialogue between an "Older Writer" and a "Younger writer". The Older writer was clearly Zweig himself, who defends Rabindranath against the criticism regarding his inordinate popularity in Germany. In essence he said that a writer cannot be made responsible for the reception his work receives. Not any book which has become a bestseller must be superficial, although the masses normally prefer books of second-rate literary quality. Zweig went on to defend the

book-reading masses: "In one matter, we should never underestimate the masses, and that is where their instinct is concerned. The common people are acutely sensitive when it comes to discerning which writer writes for them and for their benefit; which writer wishes to serve them, and has humanity in mind with every line he writes. This wholly natural instinct leaves the masses indifferent to other artists who in fact create only for their own benefit, or for some highly imaginary idea of art and artistic perfection. Just as street dogs instinctively run towards a person who loves dogs, so people flock filled with faith to a writer who thinks not of himself but only of them, in every line he writes. The tremendous impact of Tolstoy and of Rolland... is only explicable in terms of the fact that the people sense in these writers, with a deep and powerful intuition, a desire to serve and to speak to them."

Zweig evaluated the book *Sadhana* thus: "... The ideas which Rabindranath Tagore develops in 'Sadhana' are of course old, even ancient. Forever ancient, they are the eternal ideas which are to be found everywhere, in every spiritually evolved person, in each religion and each writer. They include, for example, the idea that man should not strive for power and possessions, but for the development of his inner being, his true self, through which he is merged with the divine. When it comes to expressing such elemental ideas... all that matters is the form and the style they assume, and the degree to which they are clearly and poetically phrased. It seems to me that, by these criteria, this book is uniquely successful. In it, the concepts of God, the Universe and the Self have been fashioned, as it were, from a material different from that of either ancient or modern spirituality. Moreover the language is imbued with such soothing warmth, yet such passionate sensuousness, that even soul of the most simple-minded and unsophisticated person can penetrate it. This, you will agree, constitutes an enormous advantage over our own contemporary works of philosophy, which, trapped in their own jargon, attempt in priestly fashion to hide their literary impotence behind Greek and Latin terminology. The clarity of Tagore's poetic diction in itself represents an exemplary model for our entire generation of thinkers..."

But Zweig voiced a pointed criticism of Rabindranath's style of philosophical thinking as well. It is a kind of criticism with which the Poet has been confronted often in the West, a criticism of his "Indianness", or what has been conceived as such by non-Indians. Zweig wrote: "If there is one thing which disturbs me about Tagore's book, it is a certain effortlessness, that sleight of hand with which he disposes of the most problematic conceptions — those with which mankind has been grappling since the very hour of creation — in a pleasantly cheerful vein, without any agony of mental strain whatsoever. He brushes aside death, evil and the darker instincts with a mild gesture. ... This book does not unfold before us the most

Continued on page 10

Rabindranath's Encounter with Russia

by Nilratan Halder

WHEN Rabindranath visited the Soviet Union in 1930, he had only 10 more years to live. The poet himself confessed in his "Letters from Russia" that had he not gone to Russia, joining the life's holy congregation might remain unfulfilled. His advanced age was not particularly an advantage for a visit to that cold country. But Rabindranath went there with a learner's mind. The celebration of life that was taking place on a scale the world has never known before was on his mind when he established Shriniketon to complement Santiniketon's educational programmes with social and economic ones. In one of the letters he admitted that what he had tried to do in a limited way was being vigorously pursued by the Soviets on a grand scale.

In fact some of the plaudits for the Soviet system may seem to be arising out of the favourable disposition the poet held towards the 1917 revolution. During his itinerary, the poet visited a few institutions such as farm house and pioneers' commune. There is no doubt that Rabindranath was not shown everything he wanted to see. But at the same time even the pre-arranged meetings helped him to get enough insight into the system. He was fully aware of the Soviet people's hardship, the centuries-old social prejudice, lack of education and oppression they were subjected to upto the revolution. The poet was rather excited and impressed by the classless ill-clad Moscovites. He held the belief that the people were too absorbed in life's greatest challenges to mind their clothes. They were only willing to make the sacrifices.

Rabindranath did not see all, nor he needed to. He had that probing mind and the versatile genius to guide him.

And his is that prophetic utterance — where he unreservedly points out the danger of the application of physical power to level all and everyone on the same plane — which seems to have come true. He approved the tremendous effort that was being expended to reduce the mental and economic gap between people. The poet had no doubt that man's individuality must meet at some points with the society at large. When the individual greed overtakes collective interests and welfare, society loses its balance or equilibrium. Because on one side, it is shameless affluence and on the other intense jealousy and hatred. The individual has no meeting point with the collective well-being.

The poet then warned against putting in place theories before the people have been prepared for the appreciation and implementation of those. It appears the farmers and the young learners he met were some of the most dedicated of party workers who were ready to sacrifice everything for building a better common future for the Soviet people. Well, there were some of the poet met, who did not support many of the socialist programmes. But let us not forget that the people were still in the process of orientation with the world's first communist programmes. The important thing is that people were interested in the system and it was only their initial trepidation. It is this enthusiasm, excitement, the all-round activity, the unfolding of life in its most explosive vibrancy that impressed the poet.

In about 60 years since the poet's visit what really has gone wrong that the Russian people find themselves in almost the pre-revolution situa-

tion? If we believe the poet, there was no deceit and lack of urgency at the initial stage. Even the people's cultural craving — if not standard — was impressive and intense. It was a gala arrangement where people were deeply devoted to bring the best in their fellow beings through education that combines knowledge with practical experience and is enhanced by cultural cultivation of mind.

So a setting such as this cannot and should not have culminated in a whimper it has done. The poet warned of both outside and internal threats. It appears both had a fair share of undermining the world's most spectacular effort to bring parity and sanity in human society. That the Soviet Union had to commit itself to the mad race of armament and followed oppressive means in its haste to catch up with the West was counterproductive. The denial of individuality and diversity of human nature was bound to face opposition and therefore led to undesirable consequences. Rabindranath saw the danger of making types of human minds. They are not machines and treating them so would bring the whole edifice down, the poet inferred. The system has disintegrated not because it itself is to blame but because there was aberration and gradual shift from the austere and sacrificing spirit and principles that once was the strength of socialism.

Rabindranath advised the recipe for the eternal conflict between individual and collective interests in that a balance has to be struck. His worst fear has come true. Had he lived to this day, he would have suffered intense pain and disappointment but perhaps would not need to change his opinion and therefore reiterated his position on a society free of exploitation.

THE huge funeral procession of Satyajit Ray held after his death in 1993 could only be compared in scale with the historic procession for another Bengali artist: Rabindranath Tagore. After I had commented on this parallel, one of my friends reminded me of one more relevant detail: Satyajit Ray had begun his documentary on Rabindranath with just that historic scene.

Similarities between these two Bengali masters of different times and media, however, do not begin with this final procession. There are other areas of resemblances between them. For both, it was an irony that their greatness was first discovered and appreciated in the West rather than in their own homeland. It was only after Rabindranath had received the Nobel Prize that the Bengali literary community realized that they had such a great poet in their midst. Rabindranath's speech, given at a reception held in his honour by the Bengali literary elite after the Nobel award, emphatically refers on, to that embarrassing reality. Equally, with the current outburst of eulogy and appreciation of Satyajit Ray, we are conveniently forgetting a time when, in contrast to *Pather Panchali*'s great success at the Cannes Festival, the local authorities dismissed the film as "rather dull and slow-moving". Even a great Bengali writer like Kamol Kumar Majumdar did not find anything worth mentioning in the film with the exception of a single "nice shot". We should not also forget the fact that even before *Pather Panchali* was completed, the Museum of

Rabindranath and Ray

by Tareque Masud

Modern Art invited the film to a special exhibition in New York. Moreover, the Museum made a special request to the West Bengal Government to assist in the completion of the film. Bidhan C Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, finally supported the project, but only after mistakenly labelling the film as a documentary and advising the director to change the last scene by having the family join a "community development project" instead of simply leaving the village.

Rabindranath was in every respect a Renaissance mind, not only in literature, but in his powerful mastery of painting, music and drama as well. But it is commonly believed that the age of the Renaissance man is over now. The arts and the media have evolved into such complex and diverse forms that it is no longer possible for a single person to excel in every field. So it is all the more striking when artists such as Rabindranath and Ray actively and deftly exhibit their Renaissance temperament and talents.

Perhaps, one can readily identify two types of great minds in history. The first is the type to play a revolutionary role either by evolving ideas and ideals or by bringing a radical change in their respective art-form. But there is another kind of equally great artists who, without necessarily trying to radicalize society or revolutionize their own art-form,

achieve in their work an embodiment of the character and culmination of the entire society. In this case, the artist becomes the cultural symbol of their society. This society, with all its vices and virtues, its potentials and limitations, is manifested through the artist's work. Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray both belong to this latter category. "Rabindranath is an ocean, where water from all sources, fountains, rivers and clouds come together and lose their own separate entities in the greater whole." Rabindranath never hesitated to borrow from any cultural source, be it Baul or Vedanta. He synthesized these sources into a new and integrated cultural whole. Like Rabindranath, Ray also explored and exploited the potentials of Bengali literature and culture, from Rabindranath's world vision to Bibhut Bhusan's rural Bengal, and gave them a cinematic synthesis.

The history of the Tagore and Ray families is a microcosm of the history of the Calcutta-based Bengali middle class intelligentsia. In contrast to the rise of ultranationalism and Hindu revivalism in greater Bengal, a reformist movement called *Brahmo Samaj* was born in the ranks of the intelligentsia. A new energetic, liberal and creative spirit sprang from this community. Openness to all religions and cultures was the

crucial characteristic that enabled them to become leaders of the Bengal Renaissance. Unfortunately, this openness also led the leaders of the new intelligentsia to subscribe to a less admirable trait: the Victorian sensibility and its prudish aspects. So it was not a matter of mere coincidence that both Rabindranath and Ray came from the *Brahmo Samaj* families with all the virtues of the Enlightenment and the vices of Victorianism combined. Despite their individual genius, one cannot discount the decisive influence of this Brahmo background on their mental makeup.

To me, the most striking commonness between Ray and Rabindranath lies in their broader world vision. Neither of them suffered from the narrow binds of nationalism. Interestingly enough, when a fellow Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak died, Satyajit Ray, in his condolence message, said, "Ritwik was a greater Bengali than I." I don't think Ray was just trying to be modest here. Rather, this was a compliment he did not want to reserve for himself. This temperamental distance from Bengali nationalist tendencies was fundamental to Rabindranath's world view as well.

The irony of history is that although Rabindranath never fell prey to the temptations of nationalism, after his death he was made into its ultimate symbol in certain quarters.

Hopefully, Satyajit Ray will not fall prey to the same fate. In this regard, Ray may have one important advantage over Rabindranath. Ray did not make the mistake of leaving behind an institution after his death as did Rabindranath. It was the very institution that Rabindranath founded that, after his death, was instrumental in defining him in narrower terms and reducing his legacy to a hollow pillar of middle-class culture. It was quite likely that Ray learned a lesson from this. In fact, Ray studied at Santiniketon for several years as a result of his family pressure. But before he could complete his degree, he had left. As he recalled later on, he did not like the atmosphere there. He hated the "sign song" voice of the Santiniketan subculture. Many years later, Satyajit Ray stamped his protest against the orthodoxy of Santiniketan-led idolization of Rabindranath by making one of Rabindranath's Western melodies even more Western in one of his own film-songs.

Let me conclude with an interesting detail from Andrew Robinson's book on Satyajit Ray, "The Inner Eye". During a visit with Ray in Calcutta, Robinson realized that unlike other Bengali homes, Satyajit Ray's home had no portrait of Rabindranath Tagore hanging from its walls. When Robinson asked Ray about this absence, Ray simply said, "Such a cliché" in the near future, we should not be surprised to see that the portrait of Ray in every Bengali middle class household has become "Such a cliché".