



essay

# Rabindranath Tagore Through the Eyes of the Germans

By Kamaluddin Ahmed

TAGORE'S most sensational success was limited to Germany alone and it reached its climax as early as the year 1921. In France and in England it was the intellectual elite, or at least the most progressive part of it, that accepted and appreciated him wholeheartedly and unhesitatingly. Romain Rolland, Andre Gide, the Countess de Noailles, Paul Valery and many other outstanding writers and scholars in France celebrated him as one of the greatest poets of the age and spontaneously responded to his message. In England it was W B Yeats, George Russell, Ezra Pound, Sir William Rothenstein, Sturge Moore, Professor Gilbert Murray, who from the very beginning recognised his greatness and remained his friends until the very end. The average reader in France and especially in England was less spontaneous in his response, because of his eastern outlook and partly because of political rather colonial prejudices.

But in Germany Tagore's success was different. It was much on a larger scale. That is why he became a sensation for the many, but a prophet only for the few. The German middle class turned to him as a saviour, while the German intellectuals with a few exceptions were bewildered by his tremendous success. They also looked upon him with slight contempt. But it is to be kept in mind that Tagore's poetry and message found a ready response in the hearts of millions of German middle class people, the very same people who had come back from the battlefields determined never to fight again and who ten years later, after Tagore's name had been forgotten by most of them, started great preparations for a renewal of the same futile attempt at self-destruction.

Tagore's sensational fame in Germany was a part of an evolution. The evolution started in 1921 and reached its climax in the disaster of democratic failure in 1932. Already during his stay in Germany Tagore had become a myth. To the German middle classes he personified the principle of the irrational and their newly ac-

quired mysticism. From a purely intellectual point of view both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche had paved the way for Tagore's success. And for the time being Germans were somehow deceived by their finding in him a representative of Schopenhauer's oriental ambiguity and vague mystical appeal. In this regard *The Advertiser* published from Adelaide, Australia, wrote in 1921 "Rabindranath Tagore's gentle philosophy has superseded the fiery creed of Nietzsche, which nurtured the German mind before the war. Tagore's success is astounding—he is the best seller of the year. No German novelist, dramatist, or poet is in it with the Indian gentle dreamer. The cheapest edition I saw 15 marks the volume, but I saw many complete editions of Tagore at 250 marks to 300 marks the set."

When Tagore lectured for the first time in Berlin University in June 1921, the occasion was marked by "scenes of frenzied hero-worship....In the rush for seats many girl students fainted and were trampled on by the crowd". (Daily News London, 1921). During the summer of 1921 the German publishers of Rabindranath had placed in America an order for 1,000,000 kilograms—more than 2,000,000 pounds of paper for his books, which was enough for 3,000,000 copies. By October 1921 more than 8,000,000 copies of his works had been sold. These statistics are really surprising. German enthusiasm for poetry had been much more stronger than in France or in England. At a time when Tagore's name was on

everybody's lips in Germany, famous poet like Rainer Maria Rilke were known only to a small intellectual minority. The possible political implications of his success seemed to correspond to the many pseudo-oriental conceptions noticed in post-war Germany. In Germany at that time treatise on philosophy, art and religion was very popular. Spengler's *The Decline of the West* was also in great demand.

Intellectuals in England and France tried their best to understand this unique literary phenomenon. The comment in *Sunday Times* was very significant, "It is perhaps, politically typical in Germany today that one of the best read authors is the Indian Tagore whose mystic dullness appeals as a kind of anodyne." The French took a larger view on the matter. To some of them this turning towards the East was part of the spiritual crisis through which Germany was passing at that time. There was hardly any irrational at that time in French civilisation. Since the Renaissance the French had cultivated a rational outlook on its life and they were quite naturally opposed to any far-reaching Eastern influence. France is essentially a Mediterranean country and any message that comes from the Far East is liable to be subjected to the closest scrutiny before it is accepted by the French intelligentsia. Even Andrea Guide in the following lines in *Nouvelle Revue Franchise*, 1921 expresses his intense bewilderment at this sudden outburst of Germanic mysticism: "The youth of Germany looks towards the East and turns its back to

Europe. This indicates a decisive revival. At all times the German mind had to lose itself in order to find unity only after a fertilisation from abroad. But whenever this tendency is active, that is, where it is not repressed by an old fashioned and pedantic spiritual nationalism, their minds turn towards Russia, and beyond, towards India and China."

Feeling of shock at this mass-enthusiasm was expressed by Germans themselves who disliked the sensationalism associated with Tagore during his stay in Germany in 1921. They knew that his poetry appeal most to the individual struggling for certainty in utter isolation, and not to the mass with its fast changing standards of taste and fashion. And they refused to join those private meetings and dinner parties. One of them directly addressing Tagore, complains bitterly: "You did not see those who searched for you and who were near you through your books; instead you passed your days with ell-clad men and decorated women and you were honoured by them and you rejoiced at it." (Die Kunstmache, Munich, 1921).

From all over Germany voices were heard protesting against this kind of mass-response to a poet whose words are addressed to the creative and searching individual alone. Tagore, in his own immutable language, expressed the need of the hour better than any other writer did at that time. It was difficult to say whether the mass grasped the meaning of his message. But the intellectuals were grateful to Tagore because he was successful in saying the things that are in our

minds, but which we can not quite bring out.

The Europeans found a new consolation in Tagore's writings. Spengler's *Decline of the West* provided them only with a scholarly and somewhat pedantic picture of the shape of things to come. They were crazy for ideals and, even after having found them, they realised that they could not put them into practice. It was a time of general frustration and spiritual crisis combined with political and economic crisis. They wanted a reawakening of Europe's spiritual life. This desire for spirituality went side by side with the awareness of the spiritual crisis in the West. Therefore Tagore was hailed as prophet of the East coming to deliver his message of goodwill and brotherhood among mankind. People were so eager to receive inspiration from the East that innumerable pseudo-oriental societies were founded all over Europe, especially in Germany.

This intellectual movement occurred as a spontaneous reaction to the feeling of moral disintegration that pervaded Europe since before the First World War. Europe learnt to see herself through the eyes of the East. In Ezra Pound's famous review *Gitanjali* the sentiments are expressed in a forceful language. Europe has found her new Renaissance: "As the sense of balance came back upon Europe in the days before the Renaissance, so it seems to me does this sense of a saner stillness come now to us in the midst of our clangour of mechanisms...." The European civilisation was undergoing a process of revaluation at that time.

Progress and scientific advancement, compulsory education and free trade, all these are 'barbarous'. To the Europeans is the vision of India from which they are to get a fresher sense of nature and life. They remember the missionaries that had come from the East two thousand years ago, preaching to crude Western barbarians the art to love one another. Tagore seems to them one of those prophets from the East who had been watching at these centuries for his message. The Orient has always provided Europe with prophets and saints who had come to save the continent from self-destruction and utter disintegration. Being haunted by the memory of its battlefields and the futility of it all, Europe felt that salvation must come from the East. In Germany this feeling of frustration was felt more intensely than anywhere else. The reason was that the middle-classes in that country were subjected to process of decay more than any other western democracy. 'The decay of the West' meant 'decay of the middle classes'. Ideals were necessary to face that decline. Germany realised that "the traditional European mental equipment will not be able to stop the decay of the West". Tagore came as a *deus ex machina* when he was most needed. The Germans considered him to be a kind of glorified 'leader' of the German 'soul'.

The German reaction to Tagore can be summarised in the following statement made in a speech by one of the best known professors of literature Professor Eugen Kuchemann at that time: "It is Tagore's merit to have helped us to wake up the German soul, to make her conscious again of her own strength. The German soul must regain its former health through German strength. But that Tagore has pointed out the way in these evil times, for this we Germans owe him a debt of gratitude."

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## impression

# In the Cruelest Month of April

By Andalib Rashdie

ELIOT could be accused of being not impartial in his treatment of calendar months. Anyone thinking of April envisions cruelty first. This is how T S Eliot programmed modern mind.

Nicholas Albery, not a poet of high repute, not an editor extraordinary either, comes up with some poetic truth, substantiated historically to endorse that April is more cruel a month to the poets than kind. Nicholas edited a book of poems called "Poems of the Day". Wendy Cope puts a foreword in it. When a plane takes off, or dentist drills into her tooth, Wendy closes her eyes and silently recites something by Shakespeare, Housman or Emily Dickinson. Poetry does not banish her fear but helps prevent total panic. When readers leaf through the April poems, and come to know about the April poets they get panicky. Why on earth April should be infested with misfortunes?

Everyday has got a poem, a poetic history, and a few poetic anecdotes too. Roman poet Ovid died in banishment on January 2, 17 AD. Persian poet Omar Khayyam was born on May 18, 1084. Shelley married Mary Godwin on December 30 to be his second wife after Harriet, his first wife chose to commit suicide. Byron caught fever in a rainstorm, Ezra was handed over to American army to serve 13 years in custody and alcoholic Hart Crane jumped from a ship en route from Mexico to the States in April. This write up draws mostly from Nicholas' book, which I borrowed from my good friend Salahuddin Akbar, who is an occasional contributor to the Star Literature. The following is the navigated April saga:

April 1  
Isaac Rosenberg, an emigrant poet of Russian origin noted for his courage in wars and valorous war poems died on April 1, 1918 in the war-field near Arras. Wordsworth declined the offer to become Poet Laureate because of his old age and personal incapacity to

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bear the responsibilities of this position in 1831. One of the most reckless poets of the 17th century John Wilton, the Earl of Rochester was born in 1647. Leading a recklessly brave and dissolute and bisexual life John died at the age of 32 probably of syphilis and/or of kidney stones.

April 2  
Danish poet and the great master of fairy tales Hans Christian Anderson was born in a poor shoemaker family on April 2, 1805. Katherine Tynan, the poet died on this day in 1931. W B Yeats once wondered if he should propose to Katherine. Her sons fought during World War I. She wrote a few memorable war poems. Here is an excerpt:

There they go marching in step so gay

Smooth-cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns

Blithely they go as to a wedding day

The mother's sons.

April 3  
Anglo-Welsh poet George Herbert was born on April 3, 1593. On the same day in 1631 John Donne was laid to rest at St Paul's Cathedral.

April 4  
Oliver Goldsmith the poet (famous for *The Deserted Village*), novelist (*The Vicar of Wakefield*) and playwright (*She Stoops to Conquer*) died at the age 46 on April 4, 1774.

April 5  
Algernon Charles Swinburne, son of Admiral Swinburne was born on 5 April 1837. An outstanding poet of his time, Swinburne got beaten and bullied at Eaton School, and failed to get the first degree from Oxford's Balliol

College. He became alcoholic. *Poems and Ballads* of Swinburne published in 1886 with composition like 'And all her face was honey to my mouth/and all body pasture to my eyes' created sensation. A legendary bohemian and drunk Swinburne was directed the way to his house with the help of the address pinned by Rossetti to his coat collar. It proved to be the only reliable way to see the poet had returned home safely after several rounds of drinking in different taverns.

April 6  
Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-October 25, 1400) himself went on a pilgrimage to Canterbury on April 6, in 1387 or 1388.

April 7  
William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770 at Cockermouth in Cumberland. He grew up to be a major influence in English poetry.

April 8  
Rudyard Kipling wrote on this day in 1891 to Hallam Tennyson, son of the great poet Alfred Tennyson telling that his father's commendation for his works was more than achieving a decoration in the war field.

April 9  
Charles Baudelaire, the great French poet was born on April 9, 1821. Baudelaire exerted a strong influence in shaping the taste of modern Bangla poetry in the 1930s. Susan Coolidge, famous for her girls' stories died on the same day in 1905. A shell blast killed Edward Thomas in the battle of Arras in 1917.

April 10  
The great bohemian poet of his time

Algernon Charles Swinburne died on this day in 1909. One of the most quotes of all time 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever' was dated with twelve other lines as the Preface to *Endymion* by John Keats on April 10, 1818.

April 11  
Poet Christopher Smart who used to sleep in his class and drink heavily in old taverns was born in 1722. Deeply in debt, probably to pay for his drinks, he was always in fear of his creditors. Admitted to Bedlam Asylum for Lunatics, he was denied the use of pen, he scratched on his wainscot a poem called 'A Song to David' with a key. On reading the poem one of his visitors and also a good friend W Mason declared him as mad as ever. He died at the age of 49 at King's Bench Prison in debtor's prison.

April 12  
There is no special note on the day except for one E E Cummings' exuberant letter to John Dos Passos.

April 13  
Cervantes, the Spanish novelist famous for his classical work *Don Quixote* died in 1616. John Dryden was appointed Poet Laureate in 1668. Noble Prize winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney was born in 1939.

April 14  
Poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky, a staunch supporter of the Russian Revolution, but later on a disillusioned outsider committed suicide on April 14, 1930. Lord Byron told his lady on the same day in 1816 that they 'can ever meet again in the world nor the next'.

April 15  
Poet William Oldys died on April 15, days after being released from the Fleet prison in 1761. Mathew Arnold

coln was shot on April 14, 1865 and died next morning. Walt Whitman composed the great poem 'O Captain My Captain' on Lincoln.

April 16  
Poet William Oldys died on April 16, 1869 and received a nice corner at Westminster Abbey for her burial.

To be continued

## poem

### An All Seasoned Man

by Monzoor Wakil  
(Dedicated to Lalon Shah)

Roaming down the sleepy forest,  
He is a mysterious man.  
Do you know him?  
He bathed in the fairy sea of moonlight.  
He flew through the vicinity of blue and ash.

Do you know him?  
He is a bohemian man.  
Tuning his lonely violin, he voiced his eternal songs.  
Beating his selfless heart, he streamed for endless journey.

Do you know him?  
He is a divine man.  
He cultured his sorrow, mastered his solace.  
He cried for beauty, searched out for truth.

Do you know him?  
He is an all seasoned man.  
He swam like a fish in the river,  
Grew like woods in the green valley.

Do you know him?  
He is a man inside us.  
He cried, he loved, he fought.  
He breathed, he laughed.  
Forever for unknown.

American President Abraham Lin-

succumbed to heart failure in 1888. Mathew wrote that he had less poetical sentiment than Tennyson, less intellectual vigour than Browning and yet because he had perhaps more of fusion of the two than either of them, he was likely to have enough to turn.

April 16 Poet and writer Aphra Behn, the first professional female writer in Britain, who worked as a spy for Charles II was imprisoned for debt. She died on April 16, 1689 and received a nice corner at Westminster Abbey for her burial.