

ESSAY

Gitanjali in English Translation: The Latest Reincarnations

Bengalis, of course, have known all along that he is truly a world poet and have thus always called him bishwa kabi, but the world has forgotten this and needs to be reminded again of his poetic genius through more translations of his verse.

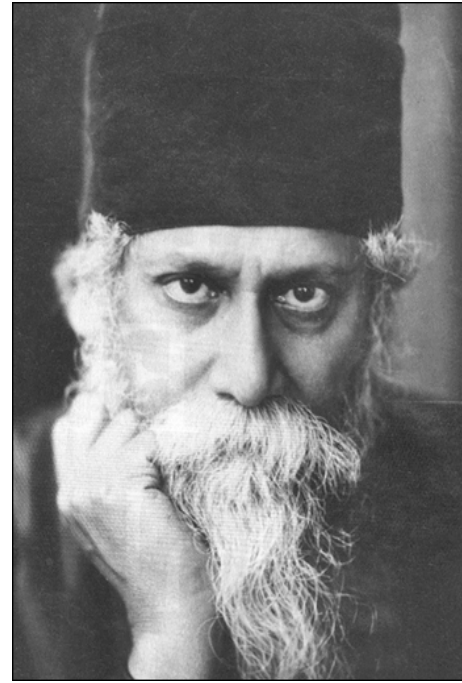
FAKRULALAM

EVERYTHING about Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (or song-offerings) appears to me to be miraculous. The poems are, of course, marvels of Bengali lyric poetry and as songs they are simply wonderful. In Tagore's English prose versions they retain the power to amaze readers encountering them, as they did the western world in the second decade of the twentieth century, because of their distinctiveness. The process through which the poems gained universal recognition and earned Tagore the Nobel Prize in 1913 is, even in retrospect, another miracle; how else can one explain how this slim volume got so much praise then? Is it any wonder that the *Gitanjali* poems continue to overwhelm its Bengali readers, that the songs still leave us spell-bound, and that every now and then a new translator comes along who renders them into English or another language competently, though Tagore is the most untranslatable of all poets?

The story of the composition of the *Gitanjali* poems is quite well known. Essentially religious songs that testify to Tagore's deep faith in God and love for Him, they came to the poet between 1909 and 1910 and were published in Bengali sometime in 1910. Many of them were written in Sheldah, Bangladesh, and Tagore's love of the riverscape of Bengal also adds to the beauty of the verse. But of course love of God and love of Nature amounted to the same thing to the poet and the indivisibility of the two is a basic theme of the collection.

The story of the publication of the English version of the *Gitanjali* is also quite well known. Tagore was about fifty years old in 1911 when he fell ill just as he was about to visit England. As a consequence, the trip was delayed. In convalescence, the poet did not feel strong enough to compose anything new, but though he had just about enough in him to translate some of the lyrics he had written recently. In a way, too, he was reacting to some translations done by his Bengali admirers in England recently. He probably considered them not good enough; in all likelihood, he felt rendering his poems into English was something he should himself take up.

When Tagore finally sailed for England the next year, he resumed the task of translating his verse on shipboard. By the time he landed in England he had produced a sizable number of prose versions of some of the poems he had published in the Bengali *Gitanjali* and a few more poems from other recent collections of verse. In London, the English painter Sir William Rothenstein became enthusiastic about the translations and decided to introduce Tagore to the English literati. On 30 June 1912, Rabindranath read the translations to a select group of people that included, among others, Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats. The response was overwhelming. The English *Gitanjali* was published soon after. The rest is history.



Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore.

Why did the *Gitanjali* translations meet with such approval? One answer to the question is that the English *Gitanjali* was conceived in leisure and thus were particularly well done. The evidence suggests also that it was a volume that had the benefit of poetic inspiration. As Tagore explains in a letter, "I simply felt an urge to recapture through the medium of another language the feelings and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy" while composing the Bengali *Gitanjali* poems. No wonder Buddhadeva Bose has called the English version of the book "a miracle of translation, the miracle being 'not that so much has survived', but that 'the poems are re-born in the process, [and] the flowers bloom anew on a foreign soil'". Bose even finds "moments when the translation surpasses the original", and notes the advantages to be derived over the target language sets about to translate his own verse, for he has the license to take liberties denied to other translators.

Nevertheless, Bose finds the English *Gitanjali* wanting in crucial respects. For one thing, the translated versions are not poems and lack the lyrical qualities of the original that come from arrangement of sounds, lines, and stanzas in an intricate pattern. That is to say, the English collection lacks the music of the original. Also, its images are occasionally too flowery and there are quite a few poeticisms. On the other hand, they have become, inevitably, more prosaic in the prose versions. Once can add also that Tagore uses for his prose versions a formal, artificial kind

of English that has its own soothing cadences, but that is at a remove from spoken English, unlike the original poems which are quite idiomatic and light in movement. Still, the English *Gitanjali* is an astonishing performance from a man who had written only a couple of years after the book had been translated: "That I cannot write in English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it!"

Why was the English *Gitanjali* such a huge hit in the West? One reason for its success could be that in war-torn, Edwardian England, Tagore's poem brought soothing intimations of eternity. In a manner that now appears astonishing, the poems of the volume, even in the less than perfect English prose versions, swept away readers in one western country after another. Yeats famously maintains: "I have carried the manuscripts of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me!"

However, Tagore's overseas reputation began to decline steadily afterwards. The reasons are many: in the disillusioned world of post-world war I Europe the mystical elements of the poems did not have the same kind of impact as they did earlier. Also, Tagore and his publishers rushed so many other translated volumes into print soon after the success of the English *Gitanjali* that readers soon became weary of what appeared to be the same kind of verse served in a careless manner. Many poems were truncated or summarized instead of translated accurately or rendered in prosaic versions. In short, the music of the original, miraculously preserved in the English *Gitanjali*, could no longer be heard in subsequent volumes. As a result, even though the volume continued to be reprinted over the years Tagore's reputation in the West plunged. Eventually, *Gitanjali* began to be read only by the specialist or European readers interested in the mystical east.

Both Buddhadeva Bose and Sisir Kumar Bose have noted with dismay that it was Tagore's misfortune to have translated his own poems into English and not to have them done by someone whose mother tongue was English. Writing in Bengali in 1980, Bose noted that till that time Tagore remained the greatest translator of his own verse. He looked forward to the day when someone would publish a proper selection of the great poet's verse whose mother tongue was English and who was a poet.

In the event, William Radice's 1985 book, *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, seemed to meet the longings of Tagore experts such as Bose and Das. And there can be little doubt that Radice's is one of the most sustained and successful attempts by someone who is not a Bengali to render the poet's verse into English. However, Radice admits to not translating Tagore's songs because of his belief that one cannot translate them. This surely must be seen as a

quirky decision. After all, can anyone who knows Tagore's verse think of his poetry without the *Gitanjali* poems in particular and the songs in general?

Bangladeshis, however, have been fortunate to have available for some time now the verse translations of *Gitanjali* by Brother James (UPL, 1983). Reverend Brother James Talarovic, born in Ohio, came to our part of the world in 1941, and eventually became headmaster of Dhaka's St. Gregory School. Like many other missionaries he fell in love with Tagore's verse because of their spiritual nature. Indeed, Brother James even called the Bengali poet's verse "his only love".

And indeed Brother James's translations have a purity that can only come from someone passionately devoted to the text he has set out to translate. The 157 poems he has rendered into English have a limpid and pleasing quality and his versions manage to capture the movement of thought of the original. I particularly like the simplicity of Father James's translations since they remind us that among the many reasons for the success of the original *Gitanjali* poems in Bengali and in English was their sincere expression of an intense spirituality. What could be simpler and more effective than the opening lines of the famous song, "Megher Pore Megh Jomeche": "Cloud has piled upon cloud; They darken my world./O why do You/leave me alone/ sitting at the side of the door?"

It is good, therefore, to find out that Father James's heartfelt effort has now got international recognition in that his translation of *Gitanjali* has been reprinted by an American Publisher with a Foreword written for the edition by Radice. As one would expect, the book is handsomely printed and aesthetically more pleasing to look at in its American version than the UPL edition. But why, I wonder, has the book been retitled as *Show Yourself to My Soul*? And why does the backcover blurb blather on about the mystical-spiritual quality of the poems and link them with the verse of Kahlil Gibran's works. The answer must be that the marketing department of Sonr Books has put Tagore's poems in the "oriental-mystical" category, ignoring the fact that Tagore's profound spirituality is far removed from Gibran's effusions. I also regret that the American publisher, like UPL, did not bother to provide any kind of textual information or key so that one could easily compare the Bengali original with Brother James's work. However, *Show Yourself to My Soul*, does come with a useful Introduction by Rev. David E. Schlaver, another American missionary who worked for a long time in Bangladesh, and who is able to bring his experience of our world to preface the book for western readers. It is to be hoped, then, that *Show Yourself to My Soul* will not only help win new readers for Tagore's *Gitanjali* but will also be a testament to the American missionary's devoted service to our land and to his love of Tagore (Brother James died in USA in 1987).

Another foreigner who has translated Tagore's *Gitanjali* is the Englishman Joe Winter. In his

Introduction to his *The Gitanjali of Rabindranath Tagore* (1998), Winter declares that his aim is to render the poems as they "appear on the Bengali page, each musically, intellectually and spiritually of a piece." (9). Winter quotes Edward Thompson's observation that "the poems were written to be sung; but they must sing themselves" (23). He indicates that he tried to make the poems as musical as he could. Crucial to his effort is the use of rhyme and meter. Here, then, are the opening lines of Winter's version of "Megher Pore Megh Jomeche": "Cloud on cloud has gathered./dark is coming near./Why am I in the doorway? Why do you keep me here?" It is easy to see that Winter's use of rhyme has made his translations more musical than, say, Father James's versions. But "dark is coming near" reads awkwardly. Also, Winter's very brave decision to compose all the *Gitanjali* poems in rhyme has meant that from time to time his lines suffer because they have been forced to fit a preexisting scheme, even though he has succeeded in enhancing the aural elements of his versions.

On a recent trip to Dhaka's New Market I was delighted to come across Syed Mujibul Huq's *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Songs: Beyond Melody* (Leicester: Bangladesh Youth and Cultural Shomiti, 2002). This is a slim, elegantly produced, attractively priced (only eighty takas!) volume containing translations of 51 songs, mostly from the *Gitanjali* poems. It is also a dual-language edition and the Bengali poem is conveniently placed next to the English version. The translations themselves, on the whole, are delicate, light in movement, and retain something of the music of the original. Here, for example, is Huq's version of the opening lines of "Megher Pore Megh Jomeche": "When clouds gather/Upon clouds/ And darkness descends/Why make me wait/Alone at the doorway?"

How do these translations compare to Tagore's own version? Here is the opening stanza of another *Gitanjali* poem (in Bangla "Dibashe Jodi"), first in Tagore's own translation, and then in the versions by Brother James, Winter, and Haq:

If the day is done, if birds sing no more, if the wind has flagged tired, then draw the veil of darkness thick upon me, even as thou has wrapt the earth with the coverlet of sleep and tenderly closed the petals of the drooping lotus at dusk. (Tagore.)

If the day is indeed ended,
even if the birds are not singing
even if the tired breeze is not stirring
then cover me deeply this time
with a veil
of very dense and profound
darkness--

just as you have covered the earth,
slowly, secretly, gradually
with sleep and dreams,

just as You have covered the lotuses of night.
(Brother James)

If the day goes, if birds will no more sing,
and if the wind is spent and no more blows,
then dear one, bring that deepest covering,
and in the all-dense darkness me enclose...
as when the Earth with dreams around
is secretly and slowly wound;
the lotus settles in night's offering;
and, as eyes entering sleep, you cover those.
(Winter)

If the day ends
And the birds
No longer sing,
If the tired wind
No longer blows
Then lay me down
Deep inside the obscure
Impervious darkness
With dreams,
Secretly and gently
As you cover the earth,
Or eyes in slumber
Or the lotus blossom
At night.
(Huq)

Readers must decide which version they like best, and everyone of course will agree that none comes close to the Bengali original. But none appear to me to be unsatisfactory and all manage to communicate some of the beauty of the original.

It is good, at any rate, to have so many options to choose from in trying to encounter Tagore's *Gitanjali* in English. I note that all three translations came out in the new century/millennium (although Brother James's book was reprinted). Also, Visva Bharati published a beautiful bilingual edition of *Gitanjali* in 1999. In the last couple of years I have come across translations such as Radice's *Particles, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2000) and *Rabindranath Tagore: Final Poems* by Wendy Barker and Saraindhanath Tagore (New York: George Braziller, 2001). The *Selected Poems* in the Oxford Translations series should be coming out any time now. Do all these volumes indicate that there is a Tagore revival internationally? In our part of the world we have been lucky to read the lovely *Gitanjali* poems in Bengali and can listen to the exquisite lyrics sung soulfully by singers such as Debabrata Biswas. But surely there is scope for many more translations of Tagore's verse. There is a need for more translations that will lift his international reputation out of the moribund state it had fallen into even in his lifetime. Bengalis, of course, have known all along that he is truly a world poet and have thus always called him *bishwa kabi*, but the world has forgotten this and needs to be reminded again of his poetic genius through more translations of his verse.

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PERSPECTIVE

Literature is the Defence of History

DZEVAD KARAHASAN

Continued from last week

Modern life offers a myriad of examples for the third logical premise of Ivek's action: the reduction of a relationship between two identities to a single, hostile form of mutual exclusion, to an "either/or" relationship. One of the best known and unfortunately most relevant is Samuel P. Huntington's widely commented book *The Clash of Civilizations*. The way in which the "either/or" logic of our joke is consequentially adopted in this book is striking: since various cultures exist in the world, and since these cultures differ among themselves, they must inevitably and necessarily clash. As with Ivek: Moshe is here, I am here; ergo, one of us must go.

Huntington bases his belief in the inevitable clash of different existing cultures on human nature. He says that it is human to hate, that people need enemies to define and motivate themselves... How is it possible that someone who studies culture can write a book which so simplifies the very being of culture, and does so with such caricatures? Like language, every culture is a blend of the universal and the specific; one side is turned to the universal, the general, the common, and the other is turned to the individual the specific, the concrete. The former opens it up to all people and links it up with other cultures, while the latter separates it from other cultures and makes it the spiritual environment of a particular group of people.

That is why a single nucleus of the universal, the general, is common to all cultures, and that is why the space for cultural overlapping is relatively broad. That, too, is why the clash of cultures is logically impossible, for in that event every culture would be fighting against a part of itself. If there seem to have been times in history when cultures have clashed with each other, for instance during the Crusades, that is only because of our nominalistic simplifications. For, the crusades were not a clash between Islam and Christianity as cultures, they were a clash of political programmes which attached themselves to these cultures. If these wars can be linked to cultures at all, if there is a



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desire to connect them to cultures at any price, then it can only be done with the "politically prepared" versions of these cultures, with simplifications patched together from individual elements of these cultures and connected into a whole which, of course, is not culture but rather an ideological system. Such ideological systems, patched together out of the elements of a culture that have been extracted from their actual context and reduced to a single, prominent political dimension, are called politically instrumentalized cultures. "Cultures" that are thus prepared and reduced to ideological caricatures, can clash. But then they are no longer cultures because both the one and the other have been deprived of that universal dimension through which they address every individual. And that is why I maintain that when he spoke about the inevitable looming clash of cultures, Mr. Huntington meant, must have meant, the caricature ideological distortion of individual cultures, and not the cultures themselves. In order to arrive at his conclusion, Mr. Huntington had to apply the same operation to cultures that the Ivek of our joke applied to himself and to Moshe: reduce them to political i.e. mechanical caricatures of themselves.

Mr. Huntington has the ahistorical in common with our Ivek as well. He claims that it is human to hate and sees in this ability to hate the fundamental, underlying characteristic of *homo sapiens*. Several centuries of anthropology from the Age of Antiquity, which Plato had already systematized and integrated into a broader philosophical system,

some fifteen centuries of Christian anthropology, which recognizes in the human capacity to love the proof of man's connection with God, innumerable anthropological projects in the modern age -- Huntington simply ignores all this and contents himself with his revelation that man is a being of hatred. It is human to hate, ergo conflict between cultures is inevitable. Perhaps Mr. Huntington would rather not ignore all those fine minds which contemplated man and all those many centuries during which they did so. But, perfectly in keeping with his logic: it is human to perspire, ergo the Deluge certainly happened.

I confess that even in happier times I would have thought poorly of Mr. Huntington's book, but in better times I would not have examined it at such length. This is necessary today, however, because caricature "adaptations" of cultures are emerging all around us, "versions" adapted to a single programme and reduced to a few elements of the original culture, "versions" that might even be able to conceal their caricature-like and vulgar mechanical quality if they managed to produce confrontation with some "enemy" or find a real enemy. Like in a play where a well-constructed conflict can conceal the fact that your characters are unconvincing and poorly motivated, so well-developed characters greatly impede the construction of conflict, indeed make it virtually impossible (think of Chekhov, for example). Conflicts are, of course, possible among these "versions" of culture (which, for reasons that will always remain unclear to me, we call fundamentalist) because they are not the cultures they depict themselves to

be but rather their ideologically processed products.

Obviously, every fundamentalism -- Islamic and Jewish, American and Catholic, neo-liberal and communist -- proclaims itself to be not only the equivalent of the culture it invokes, but also its only true face and guardian. Obviously, educated people will receive such statements with a questioning mind, because reading and questioning are the first thing one learns in a good school. What remains when we ignore what a political programme says about itself and what rival programmes say about it, when instead of its intentions and reasoning we look at its affect on the everyday life of society and the individual? Well, what remains is its impact on real life, what remains is the form of time it offers us, what remains, in other words, is its true cultural value. For, it is culture that gives shape to our presence in the world, that shapes our day and our year, that shapes our attitude to the past and to the future. How do those who today proclaim themselves to be the guardians of certain cultures shape our presence in the world?

This can best be seen from "true life" pictures, pictures, from details which can have a symbolic value because they reflect the whole. Or would it be more correct to say that I see and understand best from the details of real life because I am a writer, whereas someone with a different, say nominalistic view of the world would see and understand better from a notion, a law or something else? The images that reveal themselves to me, their symmetry, bizarre at one moment and too logical the next, convince me that

ing, not equating, and comparison points to similarities and underlines differences. It shows how much less violence against living beings there is in covering up a sculpture than in forcibly covering up women; it shows how grotesquely comic it is to dress poor Justice who could not even comprehend that she was indecent because she hails from ancient Greece. But it also warns of similarities: in both pictures we see the female body, we see the fabric that covers it and deprives it of its specific details, that reduces it to a figure, a model, a contour. In both pictures we see the breakthrough of nominalistic into the real world, the violence of arithmetic against the body, we see how the real body, the real form loses its unique individually and becomes general like a notion, a number, a symbol. All women in the chador look the same, just as the curtailed sculptures of Justice look the same as those of the provincial official. This draws attention to yet another important similarity: at the heart of both acts of covering up is the need to negate, and to stop time, a need characteristic of all eschatological projects and movements. There is no patina on the sculpture, no awareness of the tradition that lends meaning and form to the sculpture, no lines of the faces of the women because there are no faces to start with, no difference between old and young, nothing to indicate the passing of time. There is no time because there are no real forms which show duration because they remember; only we exist -- the creators of notions, figures, models -- and these notions, figures and models exist.

Goethe said that someone who at the end of his days can look back on his life and recognize in him time on earth a whole, a form a possible story, can consider himself happy. In other words, a person can consider himself happy if he has managed to reconcile and balance out the nominalistic and the realistic, structure and history, if he has lived as if writing good literature. Delivered to the theory of arithmetic like this, can we hope for the happiness Goethe speaks of? I cannot know the answer, it all depends on whether or not we want to save our cultures from their fundamentalist "guardians". And whether or not we will have enough good literature. For, if anything can save us from arithmetic's penetration into this world of real forms, then it is literature, truly good literature.

Let us be clear: I am compar-

POEM

Jesus of Kolkata

NIRENDRANATH CHAKROBARTY

There was no warning of red lights
Yet the moving-as-fast-as-a-storm city of Kolkata
Suddenly stopped.
Taxis, private cars, tempos, the tiger-like double-deckers
Swayed dangerously then stood still.
Those who came running from both sides of the street
Shouting, 'he's gone, he's gone'
Porters, hawkers, shopkeepers, customers
Now even they were intent as if in a still life
On an artist's easel.
Silently everyone watches
From one side of the road to the other walks
A child completely naked.
It rained just a while ago in Chowrongoe
Now and again, sunlight descends like over-long spears,
Piercing the hearts of the clouds;
The city of Kolkata floats in a tender light.
With my face in a State bus window
I watch the sky and then you
Child of beggar mother
Jesus of Kolkata
You have stopped the traffic by some magic spell
The shouting of people, the grinding teeth of impatient drivers
Heedless of all
Death threatening on both sides, you in the middle
Totter through.
As if humanity incarnate, in the joy of just learning to walk
You want the whole world in
The palm of your hand. As if that was why
On toddling feet you
Walk from one end of the earth to the other.

Translated by Shabnam Nadiya