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Coming to Terms with Tagore

SUKANTA CHAUDHURI

I am spending some time on academic business at Santiniketan. I sit most of the day in Rabindra Bhavan, where you take off your shoes to enter a spacious modern library, backed by the biggest computer facility I have seen at a humanities centre in this country. The balcony outside is brushed by the foliage of ancient trees where I can watch swarms of birds, eyeball to eyeball. There are more birds around the rooms where I stay. When they stop singing at night, their eerie tree-laden silence sends a stray shudder down my town-bred soul.

More deeply, town-bred souls are intrigued by what they see as a conjunction of opposites: modern academic activity, with all the good and bad that implies, amidst a natural semi-rural setting—as opposed to a landscaped campus—and the remnants of an ashram life. Many think it an impossible conjunction: they include diehard ashramites who knew Tagore in his lifetime, as well as city-bred academics catapulted here by accident of employment. Visva-Bharati bristles with people who will tell you that the place is moribund, neither an ashram nor a modern academic centre. I cannot tell: I do not belong here. But having visited regularly over the years, and having had opportunity to

compare many other universities across the country, I am convinced that, whatever common or mundane distractions Visva-Bharati might wallow in, it still has a markedly uncommon dimension to its being. There is something special about the place.

What is special is not the trees and birds—some academically derelict universities have magnificent campuses—but the abiding presence, at least in remnant, of a vision of genius. Amazingly, no attempt has ever been made to assess the full impact of Rabindranath Tagore on the Bengali psyche: we swing between bardolatry and shallow sniping. Yet it seems fair to say that no poet in any land has so radically modified the sensibility of his people for all time to come. It is not a matter of being widely read or quoted, or of influencing later literature or formal thought; it is a question of how a race thinks and feels in every sphere of its being.

Some of that influence is at least recognized if not fully formulated: a certain refinement of sentiment and utterance, the classicizing of certain features of the Bengali landscape, a certain vein of exalted romanticism, the arguably unique merger of word and music in an extraordinary body of song. Tagore virtually worked these elements into the stuff of Bengali language and thought:

so much so that when later writers have wished to revolt against these features, they have had to do so forcibly and self-consciously, acknowledging his authority even as they challenged it. If the Bengali language and psyche are now indeed being transformed, it is not owing to any literary movement but the impact of the Hindi cinema and, most recently, of the globalization of culture.

So compelling is this image of an elite, effete Tagore tradition that we tend to lose sight of the robust, gigantic, practical vision and achievement of the man. The world offers no other instance of a supremely great poet and thinker who also set up a major institution on the ground, developed it over 40 years, and left in it such seed for future growth that, another 57 years on, it continues to change not only the cultural but the economic and administrative map of the region. Of course it has itself changed radically in the process; of course some of the change might be undesirable; but the magnitude of the achievement is breathtaking. How many professed men of action, rulers or industrialists, have done as much?

And of course this practical vision and achievement existed in organic relation to his writings. The idiom of Tagore's writings, both prose and verse,

changed and re-changed profoundly throughout his life, but invariably within the limits of the formal and elite—a striking contrast to his paintings, which burst the bounds of his formal artistic consciousness. This elegance of idiom has obscured the profound pragmatic concern of his writing, giving point and value to his poetic-philosophic perception of a secular this-worldly human-faced human-minded god.

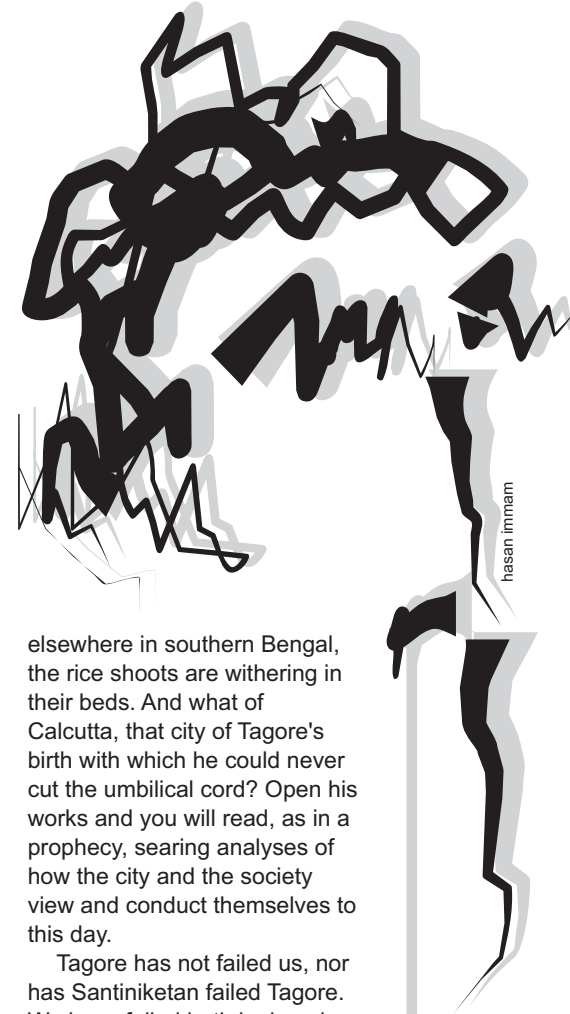
We read Tagore's poetry and his fiction, but not—unless we are specialized scholars, and then not often—the prose writings on politics and society that, beneath a superficial datedness, still reach out like a whiplash to touch the Bengali psyche and the Indian polity. Out of his poetry, every educated Bengali knows the lines about the silent lonely weeping of spurned justice, the pale dumb witless lips that must be made to speak, the people who toil in fields and towns. But these set lines are read through the romantic haze with which we choose to invest Tagore, like a dentist's ether that lets us defang him.

So also the radical programme of village uplift and scientific agriculture that he envisaged for Sriniketan has in the wider Bengali imagination reduced itself to a few rites and feasts of tree-planting, ploughing or whatever—a matter of song, dance and ritual. These

have become ominous preserves of politicians and public men. More generally, across Bengal and indeed India, innumerable speeches, hoardings and public announcements daily enshrine the letter of Tagore's work in order to mortally deny its spirit.

I am no longer talking of Visva-Bharati or Santiniketan, but of Bengal and India. Closed round with the aura of his own exalted language, Tagore is in danger of becoming a class weapon of the elite and the establishment. Where he penetrates to the masses—as to some extent in his songs—it is still often as a constricting rather than a liberating influence.

As I write, I see a group of little children, on their way back from school, enter the compound where I am staying to gather firewood, coddling and dropped fruit. They have regulation-issue satchels, the gift of some NGO; but their clothes are ragged, and only two are shod, on one foot each: they are sharing a pair of shoes. On the increasingly streamlined tourist trains to Santiniketan, far more deprived children are at this moment sweeping the carriage floors for a little loose change. It is late August: there has been no rain for a week ('How nice to have Puja weather so early,' said a Calcutta lady I met here yesterday), and on un-irrigated fields here and



elsewhere in southern Bengal, the rice shoots are withering in their beds. And what of Calcutta, that city of Tagore's birth with which he could never cut the umbilical cord? Open his works and you will read, as in a prophecy, searing analyses of how the city and the society view and conduct themselves to this day.

Tagore has not failed us, nor has Santiniketan failed Tagore. We have failed both by keeping them confined to a corner of Birbhum, a tourist spot and art centre of the mind. We dare not let his terrifying genius come too close to our lives and hearts.

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Lord Of A Dark Sun

KAISER HUQ

What's in a name?

There can be a lot in a name. Take one that means Lord of the Sun: can you dismiss it as easily as just plain Rose? And should its bearer conceal it behind a comic synonym as you did, Grandfather-Poet, the farcical comeuppance is well-deserved: a doctoral thesis of Teutonic solemnity on a fictive author! Of course you relished the joke as much as anyone--- your second nature's childlike play, much as your vassal in the sky plays hide-and-seek with clouds, charming mortal eyes with celestial chiaroscuro. For every sad and sweet nuance of feeling you have a song-and-dance routine. If that's snide let me be blunt: too often your prose reads like Madame Blavatsky. Let provincial culture-vultures and New Age pseudo-cosmopolitans keep you in those aspects. But when our blighted age catches up with... er... your perennial philosophy, turning your pen into tormented artist's tool, when you wield words like scimitars that slice through the herd's holy cows you remain an exemplar for our entropic millennium, Lord of the Sun,

The English Gitanjali*

AMIT CHAUDHURI

By the time Tagore came to translate the *Gitanjali* into English in 1912 (it was published by Macmillan in London in 1913), he had established himself, after a not inconsiderable spell of revilement from his detractors, as the foremost poet in Bengali: he had finally transcended the cliques and frissons of the Bengali literary world. Most of the major personal tragedies in his life had occurred. Kadambari Devi, his sister-in-law, once his playmate and later his intellectual companion, had committed suicide in 1884; later he lost the wife, Mrinalini, to whom he had been joined in an 'arranged' marriage in 1883; his second daughter, Renuka, had died in 1903 of tuberculosis; in 1907 his younger son Shamidranath died of cholera.

Bengal already had a distinguished lineage of stylists in the English language at the time he undertook the 'translations'--the novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya, the poet Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, and the historian R.C. Dutt among them. Interestingly, for many of these writers, their English writings had been a preliminary to the Bengali works through which they then made their reputations. There was, for instance, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt's return, after years of writing verse in English, to his native tongue with *Meghnadavadhya Kavya* (1861), and Bankimchandra's brief flirtation with English in his first novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), before he set about the task of establishing himself as the first major novelist in the Bengali language. Tagore's poems are 'translation' in only a very general sense; many of the poems in the English *Gitanjali* are not to be found in the Bengali one, but are taken from three other sources, *Naivedya*, *Kheya*, and *Gitimalya*. The translations turned out to be substantial reworkings, many of them different in almost every imaginable sense from the originals. Moreover, they launched Tagore's international career and contributed to the myth in the West, subscribed to by many readers at the time, and perhaps a handful even today, that Tagore was a poet who wrote in English.

Tagore had completed *Jiban Sriti*, in which he had made... cutting and jocular remarks

about English and the English lessons of his childhood, in 1911; the following year he translated the *Gitanjali* into the language he had once found tedious and ridiculous; in 1913, amazed by the success of the poems, he wrote a letter to his niece Indira Devi, in which we hear a new note of hesitancy regarding the language. Somewhat misleadingly, and with excessive modesty, he declared the tentativeness he had always felt in relation to the English language.

'You have alluded to the English translation of the *Gitanjali*. I cannot imagine to this day how people came to like it so much. That I cannot write English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it. If anybody wrote an English note asking me for tea, I did not feel equal to answering it. Perhaps you think that by now I have got over that delusion. By no means. That I have written in English seems to be the delusion.'

He goes on to say: 'But believe me, I did not undertake this task in a spirit of reckless bravado. 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 within me in the days gone by.'

That Tagore was attempting to 'recapture' in 'another language' rather than 'translate' is borne out by how little effort he expended on approximating the metre and content, and even the literary temperament--precise, controlled--that produced the original songs (for the Bengali *Gitanjali* is predominantly a book of songs). The language of the English *Gitanjali* is, to say the least, problematic. While the Indian poets who had earlier written in English--Derozio and members of the Dutt family among others--show the influence of both literary models from the English canon and British Orientalist poetry, a poetry often inflected with Persian motifs, and sometimes incorporating historical material, Tagore's prose-poems, ahistorical and more fluid in form and intent than any English literary model would allow, seem apparently little indebted to either.

The poems themselves were received, to a large extent, as Eastern wisdom, and Tagore is open to the speculation that he might have deliberately positioned himself, in these poems and in public life, as an Eastern mystic for the eyes of the West. However, there is ample evidence to show that



Tagore had arrived at most of his mystical accoutrements well before he would have had any inkling that he was to become, briefly, a magus in Europe. Moreover, a substantial part of Tagore's 'Eastern' mysticism was actually quite Western and Victorian in its thrust, involving a sharp Ruskin-like critique of utilitarian values, and a valorizing of the autonomy and sanctity of the world of art. The proper thrust of this critique can only be assessed if one recalls that it would have been formulated, at its onset, primarily as a reaction to a Bengali society obsessed with professional qualifications and scientific knowledge for the sake of career advancements, and which had no definition or space for writing as a full-time occupation.

Looking back on the English prose-poems themselves, it seems puzzling now that they were ever read or enjoyed for their message or philosophy, mystical or otherwise; so reticent and deliberately uncommunicative are they. Firstly, only a few years before the birth of Practical Criticism, with its emphasis on the autonomy of each poem, and in marked contrast to the finished and individual nature of the 'originals', these prose-poems,

confusingly, flow into each other, as if the boundaries and frames separating them were blurred; one might easily mistake one poem for another. The propagation of any 'message' is deflected by the creation, within the English *Gitanjali*, of a dreamscape of repeated words and symbols--'flute', 'instrument', 'lamp', 'song', 'garland', 'Lord', 'guest', 'leisure'; what remains with the reader afterwards is neither content, message, observation, nor conceit, but this unresolved network, this dreamscape. The biblical overtones of some of the passages are undermined by the repetition of certain words and phrases that point towards a culture that is both unbiblical and unWestern. For instance, exhortations such 'No work for the day!' and phrases like 'overflowing leisure' evoke heat, indolence, and the space reserved for rest; a celebration of idleness that is rare in English poetry, except when qualified by proper Protestant ambivalence as in 'The Lotus Eaters' and certain stanzas of the Faerie Queen. Similarly, the biblical 'Lord' present in many of these poems is also sometimes addressed, unsettlingly, by the quite unbiblical appellations of 'friend' and 'singer'; these are echoes of Vaishnavite and local

folk traditions that had entered and shaped Tagore's artistic world, acting in the English *Gitanjali* as counters representing another tradition, serving here not to illuminate, but to disrupt the continuity of any single (biblical or otherwise) tonality. One might conclude by saying that, for a sequence of poems that had gained such popularity, the English *Gitanjali* says alarmingly little and keeps drawing attention to its textuality and its unresolved linguistic tensions. Firstly, to the fact of its being composed in English, without the poet having observed the proprieties or niceties of the English literary tradition; secondly, by constantly referring, though a

series of repetitions, to the presence of another language and thereby, to the pressure of another culture and way of life (as a translation, whose aim is to recreate the original impenetrably in terms of the target language, would never do). On one level, thus, the English *Gitanjali* is a poor translation; on another, it is a genuine instance, albeit only a partially successful one, of an Indian bilingual sensibility expressing itself in the English language. The force of Tagore's bilingual (indeed, multilingual) sensibility made his Bengali poems polished, subtle, both preternaturally sensitive to the fleeting sensory stimulus and adept at making the generalized observation: it made his English poems loose, wordy, and reticent at once, a site where categories were mixed up and realigned.

Some of the poems themselves, moreover, provide their own commentary: language and its contingent problems are constantly referred to, indicating how Tagore had struggled to arrive at his idiom even in Bengali. In the English version, the narrative of this struggle has its own peculiar resonance. In Poem 3 (22 in the Bengali *Gitanjali*), we find, 'My heart

longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggles for a voice. I would speak, but speech breaks not into song, and I cry out baffled.' Poem 37 (55 in the Bengali collection) ends with 'And when old worlds die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders', which refers to many things, including Tagore's achievements in Bengali, the historical moment of that achievement, the attempt at 'recapturing... feelings and sentiments' in 'another language' that was Tagore's present undertaking; it is also prescient of the great leap that both Indian poetry and Tagore's reputation would take, purely in terms of Western attention, with the publication of the poems.

Some of the liberties that Tagore takes with his translations are telling as well. The very first poem, 'Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure' (which, as a matter of interest, is absent from the Bengali collection, and is taken from *Gitimalya*), has the sentence: 'At the immortal touch of thy hands my little heart loses its limits in joy and gives birth to utterance ineffable'. Here, 'ineffable' is Tagore's addition; there is no word corresponding to it in the Bengali version. It might have been added to compound the mystical tenor of the sentence; but it also signals to the reader, especially the reader of both versions, the limits of the new language, and the difficulties of the poet's undertaking in an idiom that leads him towards what cannot be spoken.

[...The issue, finally, is not so much whether Tagore wrote English well or badly; that particular debate risks ignoring the complexity of his engagement with the language. Paradoxically, it is his English, the language of his public and international persona, that is shaped by his cultural confusion, personal drives, inspirations, and limitations, more nakedly than his Bengali, where the formal accomplishments at first conceals... contradictions; and these contradictions at least partly hold the key to an understanding of Tagore's achievement, his (later) marginalization in the West, and his continuing interest to us today.]

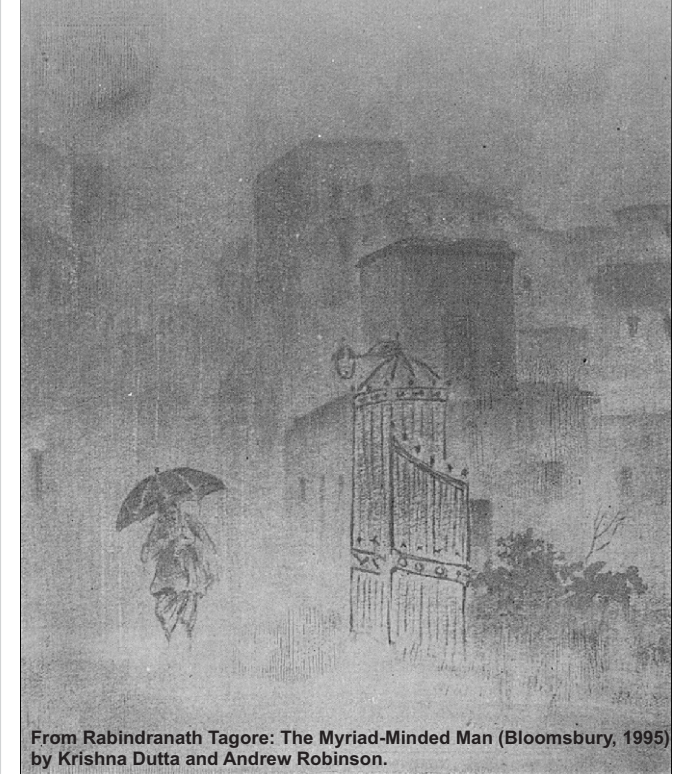
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The Familiar Black Umbrella

English was Tagore's least favourite subject, and he would never acquire complete confidence in it (especially the grammar). His interest developed only later, almost entirely through reading literature. Until the time he translated *Gitanjali*, he wrote in English very rarely. In general Tagore, like many people with a highly developed feeling for their own language, found other languages difficult to learn (Sanskrit excepted). The discovery of fire was one of man's greatest discoveries so we are told,¹ he wrote in *My Reminiscences*. I do not dispute it. But I cannot help feeling how fortunate the little birds are that their parents cannot light lamps in the evening. They have their language lessons early in the morning--how gleefully everyone must have noticed. Of course we must not forget that it is not English they are learning!

For the first publication of this memoir, Gaganendranath Tagore painted a charming black-and-white scene. Entitled *The Familiar Black Umbrella*, it shows Dwarkanath Tagore's Lane seen from the verandah of No. 6. Rain is lancing down, the lane is flooded (it still floods during a heavy shower), and a male figure clad in a dhoti (English tutor Aghore Babu) is picking his way towards the house beneath a large umbrella. Rabindranath explained:

It is evening...Our lane is under knee-deep water. The tank has overflowed into the garden, and the shaggy tops of the *bel* trees are standing guard over the waters. Our whole being is radiating rapture like the fragrant stamens of the *kadamba* flower. Our tutor's arrival is already overdue by several minutes. But nothing is yet certain. We sit on the verandah overlooking the lane, waiting and watching with an apathetic gaze. All of a sudden our hearts seem to tumble to the ground with a great thump. The familiar black umbrella has turned the corner, undefeated even by such weather. Could it not be somebody else's? No, it could not! In the wide world there might be found another person, his equal in pertinacity, but never in this particular little lane.



From Rabindranath Tagore: *The Myriad-Minded Man* (Bloomsbury, 1995) by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson.

* The above is an excerpt from Amit Chaudhuri's article titled 'The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore' 2003.