

Tagore and China

MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

RABINDRANATH Tagore's name in the Chinese language is Chu Chen-Tan. He was given this name in Beijing (then Peking) while on a tour of China in 1924. The naming coincided with Tagore's 63rd birth anniversary.

The Crescent Moon Society of the intellectuals of the Chinese capital organised a ceremony on the occasion at a cinema hall of the Beijing National University, where Tagore was given a pair of seals and a piece of stone, the latter containing three characters in Chinese wherein the name Chu Chen-Tan was written. It means "Thundering dawn of India."

In his youth, Tagore was much agitated reading an article by the German padre Dr. Theodor Christlieb, titled *The Anglo-British Opium Trade*. Based on the facts and details of the article, Tagore wrote a critique in the Bengali magazine *Bharati* (of Jaistha 1288 BS) captioned "*Chiney Moroner Babashaya*" (the death trade in China), where he commented: "A whole nation was given poison for the greed of money. None had ever heard of such thuggee before.

China tearfully said: 'I shall not take opium.'" The English trader retorted: "How that can be?" China's hands were tied and opium was shelled into her mouth with a cannon. Then he asked for the bill: "Pay for the opium." Its long since the English have been running this trade in China."

Fifty years later, Tagore wrote in *Kalantar* in its Shrawan 1340 BS issue: "Outside of Europe ... the European civilisation is not for enlightenment, but for putting on fire. Following this came the day when cannon shells and opium were fired at the very heart of China. None had seen such apocalypse ever in history."

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Boer War raged on in South Africa, and the European imperialists were united in their

attack on China. An aggrieved Tagore wrote in the Ashar 1308 BS issue of *Bangadarshan* in an article named "*Samajbhed*" (social discrimination): "Last January Doctor Dilan wrote an article under the title Tiger China and Lamb Europe in Contemporary Review. There is detailed mention in the article about the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by the Europeans against the Chinese people. Even the names of Genghis Khan and Tamer Lane bow down in front of the barbarity of civilised Europe."

In the Ashar 1309 BS issue of *Bangadarshan*, Tagore wrote a lengthy review of "*Letter of John Chinaman*," a book by Launce Dickinson, and published under the pseudonym John Chinaman, which was sent to him by Jagadish Chandra Bose from Britain.

Tagore wrote: "Vast China has not been tamed by the rule of weapons; her discipline comes from the rule of ethics. If that ethos is struck, China would taste death pangs."

Tagore spent two days at Dickinson's Cambridge home in 1912 as his guest. In his article "*Englander bhabuksmaj*" (Intellectuals of England), he wrote about Dickinson: "He is the writer of Letter of John Chinaman. When the book was published, it injected a massive dose of oriental chauvinism in our midst ... At that time I had written a long essay on the book and read it in a conference. I knew then that the writer must be a Chinese. Now after seeing him I am sure he is not a Chinese; but since he is an intellectual, he belongs to all countries of the world."

It appeared at the start of Tagore's visit to China in 1924 that a renewal of the historical relationship between the two countries, which had started with Buddhism's first incursion into China, was going to take place. According to Chinese tradition, Emperor Asoka (266-232 BC) had sent ten preachers to China.

But the Chinese emperor, known for his role in building the Great Wall,

ordered that they be killed. Thirty-seven Buddhist preachers from India undertook this perilous mission to China between 67 and 789 AD. The last of the expeditions took place in 1036, prior to the raising of the Mongol curtain.

When he was in Hong Kong, Tagore was invited to visit Canton by Sun Yat-Sen,

Kuomintang leader of the 1911 revolution. Sun wrote to him: "I find in you not only a writer who has enriched India's literature, but also an extraordinary activist in those areas of endeavour wherein the future welfare and spiritual emancipation of mankind lies."

Tagore could have accepted the invitation and his meeting with Sun Yat-Sen would have created a powerful impact. After his lectures in Shanghai and Hangchow, Tagore met the provincial governor and warlord commander of the locality, General Chi. He begged the general to stop fighting for the sake of Asia and humanity.

A civil administrator, who was also a scholar in Buddhism, said: "We were waiting for seven centuries for a message from India. Now here you are. It's a great anniversary, Dr. Tagore." He, however, alerted the poet that the young generation of China might not understand him fully.

Tagore read out his speech calmly. Tour-companion Elmhirst thought it was the best of Tagore's speeches he had ever heard. The speech, delivered in English, was possibly heard and understood by barely a hundred people.

The most remarkable episode of Tagore's China visit was his meeting with former emperor Pu-i. The meeting was initiated by Sir Reginald Johnstn, an admirer of Tagore and the emperor's English teacher.

Tagore was the first foreigner to have this honour. The poet and his party reached their destination, passing courtyard after courtyard of the Forbidden City, through the Shen

Wu-men (Gate of Divine Military Genius).

On the way, officials were changed, because none had the right to meet the emperor directly. Tagore and his two female companions were carried on a sedan chair to where the emperor was waiting with his two wives.

Elmhirst presented the emperor with a set of Tagore's works in English, while the poet gave the queen's conch-shell bangles, which were considered to be symbols of opulence. Tagore talked about renewing friendship between China and India. About his young Chinese interpreter Miss Lin, who was fluttering like a bird all through, the poet dedicated a couplet that later found a place in his collection "*Lekhan*" (vol XIV of Collected works.

The blue of the sky fell in love with the green of the earth,
The breeze between them sighs "Alas!"

The poet was very pleased when the Young Men's Buddhist Association invited him to the Temple of the Origin of the Law, calling him "the great Buddhist poet."

But once he started speaking, he met with stiff opposition. On the occasion of his second lecture, a leaflet was floated around. The hosts hesitated to translate it for him. He sought the help of his Japanese acquaintances for the translation, and once he understood its gist, he was really hurt. In it, the poet had been attacked with these comments:

- Much of our sufferings are due to the ancient oriental civilisation: its gender- disparity, emperor-worship, oppression of the people, feudalism, apartheid and a blind addiction to formalities have done a lot of damage. We cannot but oppose Dr. Tagore for his approval of these unnecessary and inert characteristics of our civilisation.
- When we come face to face with modern civilisation, we are put to shame. We need to develop our

age-old mode of agriculture, hand-driven industry, inept transportation and water vessels, low quality printing, and lack of roads and public health. We oppose Dr. Tagore because we want to enjoy the fruits of modern civilisation.

- The so-called spiritual civilisation of the east is nothing but civil war, unscrupulously self-seeking forcible occupation, pretense, hypocrisy, poisonous regality, sort of a devious respect for parents, and despicable caging of women's feet. All these are harming us, and we cannot but oppose them.
- The Chinese are now indifferent to foreign aggression, and to oppression of homegrown warlordism. They are faced with danger to their security and lives. Dr. Tagore wants to replace nationalism and politics with compassion of the spirit. These are not for us, but for the idle who find refuge and aesthetic pleasure therein. We cannot but oppose Dr. Tagore, who supports all the things that erode and diminish our nation's life.
- Dr. Tagore lends hearty support to Tung Shan Spiritual Society, a hated and poisonous organisation that reconciles Taoism and Buddhism. Dr. Tagore speaks of "Heavenly Kingdom," "Almighty God" and "Soul." If these cannot eradicate our adversity what benefit is there to man in reforming the world? We oppose Dr. Tagore, who wants to limit expansion of self-determination and the struggle of the oppressed classes and nations.

By the way, Tagorer's meeting Pu'i in the Forbidden City, acceptance of the invitation of the pro-Confucius governor of Shansi, staying at luxurious hotels, attending various programs at foreign clubs, intimacy with English-speaking and Chinese Christians -- all these led them to brand Tagore as an agent of imperial-

ism and a fossil of ancient India.

Cruel words were hurled at him for his collection of poems "*Gitanjali*." U Chi-Hu asked: "What type of Thakur (idol) is this who writes so well in the language of his enemies for only a prize donated by a rich man of Scandinavia." The new generation of China did not like Tagore's evasion of the political leader Sun Yat-Sen and poet Lu Sun.

In his book of essays "*Sahityer Pathey*" (path to literature), Tagore heaped passionate praise on the Chinese poets. About Li-Po he wrote: "Li-Po wrote more than a thousand years ago. He was modern and had the eye to see this universe with simplicity."

In his letter to Amiya Chakravarty on February 21, 1938, Tagore wrote: "The ease with which one notices the daily trotting of man on the road of human life in Chinese poetry can hardly be seen elsewhere. When the mirror of the mind has been distorted due to a huge disturbance, it can only give a skewed reflection of the world -- I do not get a simple picture of eternal man there, everything is mixed with sarcasm; maybe it gives a timely historical taste, but it does not belong to all times. You can doubt whether there is anything belonging to all times. I think the essence which man has over long time collected with eagerness from the worldly life and has wanted to give it a form of permanence can be termed complete and perfect ... The Chinese poetry I was mentioning may be down-to-earth, but not insignificant. Its authenticity has found expression in austere simplicity." (*Chithipatra* 11, page 211-213).

In 1921-22 Silva Levi started teaching of the Chinese Language and Buddhism at Shantiniketan. Madam Hardun of Canton donated a huge quantity of Chinese books to Shantiniketan for Vishwa Bharati. Tan Yan-Shan studied the English language and Indian religions in 1928.

Professor Tan Yun-Shan and other

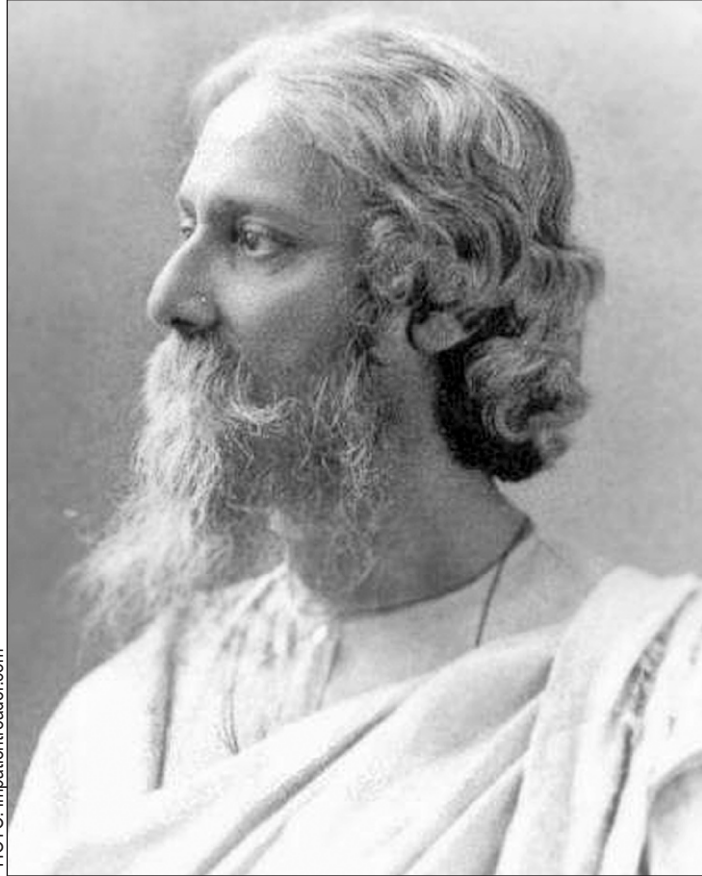


PHOTO: impalintreader.com

Chinese intellectuals came forward with monetary help to establish the *Chinabhaban* (China House) at Shantiniketan. Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru could not come to the opening ceremony of the China House, but they welcomed the endeavour.

The poet quoted a part of his speeches given in China to say: "One of its aims is that India will greet at heart the rest of the world. Come, let us join together ... despite our differences. For differences can never be erased; and life would become poorer without them. Let the whole of mankind retain its individuality and then unite, in a dedication that is not dead but in a harmony that is lively and vigorous." In 1957, China's prime minister was honoured with a degree by the Indian prime minister and Chancellor of the Vishwa Bharati at this very Shantiniketan.

In 1938, Tagore sent a letter to Chiang Kai-Shek through the hand of Tan Yun-Shan. He wrote therein: "Your neighbour Japan is indebted to your cultural heritage. For its own ultimate good, it should naturally maintain good neighbourliness with you, but the sudden import of western imperialistic malevolence and greed has infected it so much so that a wonderful chance to raise an edifice of great destiny has been thrown into sad disaster."

In 1940, Chiang Kai-Shek sent greetings on the occasion of the poet's birth anniversary in the first month of the Bengali New Year.

(Translated from Bengali by Akhtar Husain Khan, a former secretary to the government.)

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If this government fails

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

THANKS are due to law adviser Mainul Hosen who has at last candidly expressed an apprehension that the current CTG might fail and warned all concerned to think about the consequences should this happen.

However, instead of soul searching, the adviser, in his usual style, has relocated the blame onto others. The adviser went on to say: "It is the responsibility of the people in every sector to help the government ... But I find a lack of consciousness among the intellectuals and the media people. They are not playing the role we expect of them."

I am not sure how much time the adviser devotes to reading what is being ceaselessly written in the country's news media by the columnists and editors of most of the credible news dailies.

On January 11, this government took over the reins of the country not only with the backing of the armed forces but enjoying an overwhelming support of the masses who did not want the scheduled one-sided election of January 22 go through.

It enjoyed the wholehearted support of the columnists, news media and the members of the civil society who were fighting tooth and nail against holding of a farcical election as nefariously planned by the four-party alliance.

Never before since the first government right after the victory of our liberation war, any government enjoyed such good will of the masses and the media. Regrettably, only after 200 or so days it is no one but the self-assumed chief spokesperson of this government himself who has had to issue the warning of failure.

The realisation, no matter how-

ever late, is commendable but the responsibility is misplaced. Ironically, the handful of columnists who were blindly in favour of holding the January 22 election under the pretext of constitutional continuity have metamorphosed themselves, over the last few months, into sycophantic supporters of the current government, while the erstwhile proponents for creating a level playing field before holding an election have become sceptics. The reasons are multi-fold.

Firstly, this government's actions in many cases are mired in lack of transparency and accountability. These actions of the government have even impelled the US charge d' affairs to suggest ensuring that the corruption cases are prosecuted fairly, transparently, and without "selectivity or political motivation."

Following the arrest of Sheikh Hasina on July 16 on charge of so-

called extortion which the law adviser himself had earlier termed "peculiar," The Daily Star editor, Mahfuz Anam, in his splendid commentary noted sharply the apparent misguided agenda of the government with the clear warning that "the fundamental mistake committed by past proponents of 'command politics' was to underestimate the wisdom of our masses."

Notwithstanding such a bold warning from the country's most prestigious English daily, how the honourable adviser can blame the media and the intellectuals of their lack of consciousness? The adviser must have also come across with the grim concerns his friend Rashid Suhrawdy has expressed in his article in DS.

In any government where an iota of accountability and respect for the media exists, Mahfuz Anam's commentary (many of our compatriots

foresee it will be considered a milestone in our political history when the dust settles) would certainly generate a response from the government.

Just like any other government in the past, it did not happen. Yet, the law adviser asked the media and the intellectuals to point out their mistakes in order for them to avert any of their impending failures.

Secondly, the law adviser "wants to run the government honestly abiding by laws so that an example could be created." Would an example of "abiding by laws" be the deployment of more than a thousand members of the law enforcing agencies, some of them wearing bullet-proof vest, with dog squads, to arrest an unarmed near-60-year-old woman isolated in her home in the wee hours of night without any warrant of arrest from a court of law?

revealed clearly. The general secretary of that party was allowed to leave the country while a former PM was not allowed to go out of the country although cases of similar nature were lodged against both of them. This list could go on.

Fourthly, "selectivity and political motivation" of the government actions have been so much self-evident as it seems that Sheikh Hasina was the immediate past PM and her government was responsible for the most despicable governance this country has ever experienced, her party colleagues were the ones responsible for reckless looting and plundering national wealth in the last five years, and that her political alliance's "irresponsible acts" led to the declaration of emergency.

This sort of selectivity has created rooms for speculations that have led the political analysts to put forward hypotheses, regrettably, not very

much in conformity with the well meaning intention of the January 11 takeover.

It is an open fact that it is the credibility of the armed forces of the country that is at stake in the success and failure of this government. God forbid, if its mission plunges in disarray, as has been apprehended by the law adviser, it is the leaders of the armed forces who will have to bear the brunt.

The advisers neither have any election mandate nor any constituency to lean onto. They might share the credit, if any, but do not have to partake the burden of failures since they are virtually no one so far as the people of the country are concerned.

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Direct road-link between Bangladesh and Myanmar

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

BANGLADESH signed an agreement with Myanmar, on July 27, for establishing a road-link between the two countries. The adviser for communication and the Myanmar minister for construction signed the agreement, which came after a long wait of around two years.

The MoU was signed during a visit by Begum Khaleda Zia to Myanmar in 2004. This direct road-link will improve bilateral relations and also facilitate Bangladesh's access to the Asian Highway down to east Asia. In fact, the road may be used by Bangladesh to drive upto China. An initiative has been taken to develop the road-link system connecting Chittagong port with Kuming in southeast China.

A joint action plan will be made to process formalities and give approval to the various steps for implementing the project. The 25 km link-road includes two kilometers on the Teknaf side, and the remaining 23 km stretches from Gundum to Gualibazar inside Myanmar. Bangladesh will bear the cost of construction of the project.

It is expected that the groundwork will start by the end of the year.

The road is very significant for both Bangladesh and Myanmar. It will create the possibility of a greater road network between Bangladesh and south east Asian countries including Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, apart from Myanmar and China.

It may be pointed out in this regard that Bangladesh should have tried to develop closer relations with Myanmar during the early period of its independence, because Myanmar had shown a friendly attitude toward our struggle for independence. Instead of friendly ties, some unfortunate border clashes during Ziaur Rahman's regime resulted in a strained relationship.

Though the importance of this link-road was appreciated by the BNP-led government, progress was disappointing. The quick movement of the CTG appears to be timely.

Strategically, the road is important because of our growing relationship with China. Needless to say that for achieving growth rate of 7% to become a middle-income country by 2016, we shall have to concentrate on expanding our trade.

Bangla-China trade must grow



PHOTO: art@home.org

rapidly. In fact, some of our neighbours, including Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, have already been benefited immensely by bilateral trade with China.

Apart from trade, there may be more fruitful interaction among the peoples of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Leasing of 50,000 acres of farming land has been offered by Myanmar to Bangladesh commercial enterprises. Such an offer will no doubt promote better relations between the two countries.

It may be pointed out in this regard that Myanmar allows each enterprise up to 5000 acres of land for plantation, 3000 acres for orchard, 1000 acres for seasonal crops, and 2000 acres for aquaculture. In the case of livestock, it is 5000 acres for buffalo rearing, 1000 acres for sheep and goat, and 500 acres for poultry.

Among the importable items from Myanmar are mainly timber, fish, maize, livestock, pulses, and some handicraft items. We may concentrate on export of items like leather products, finished leather, readymade garments, and some cottage industry products such as clay, straw, cane and jute products.

Our exporters may be encouraged to visit Myanmar and develop closer cooperation with the traders of that country. It may be pointed out that Bangladesh-Myanmar trade-link is historical.

During the British regime a large number of traders used to import rice from Myanmar but, because of reduction of exportable surplus of rice in Myanmar, the country does not export the item in large quantities now.

Bangladesh needs rapid increase in production of electricity to meet the deficit, and sharp increase due to industrialization and urbanization. We are aware of the possible exhaustion of our existing gas reserve by 2015.

As such, we should start negotiation for import of gas from Myanmar at an acceptable price. With regard to the prospect for establishing joint venture for generating electricity, it is heartening to know that the CTG has already started exploratory talks with Myanmar.

Closer trade relations with our neighbours, particularly smaller neighbours, are necessary because of the following factors:

- As a relatively small, poor, and least developed country, we should prefer smaller neighbours to bigger and developed countries because of fewer possibilities of ultimate loss.
 - Strictly speaking, the Asean countries are not actually tough competitors of Bangladesh in the field of export. Thus, trade relations with these countries may be profitable for Bangladesh.
 - We may acquire newer (maybe better) technologies from these countries at cheaper cost.
 - With the development of a road network in the region (Sea) our trade will be more cost effective in future.
- This is an age of interdependence. We are living in a global village. Through greater cooperation, we may assist each other to grow and prosper. Because of our increasing cooperation with China the link-road may prove to be a milestone not only for Bangladesh and Myanmar but also for Bangladesh and China.
- A. B. M. S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.