

# Tagore's place in diplomacy

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

In early May this year, when the 152nd birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore was being celebrated across India and Bangladesh, he was remembered as a poet, educationist, economist, humanist, painter and novelist. And yet it was refreshing to find the Indian Council for World Affairs, a leading New Delhi-based think tank, focusing on a virtually unexplored area—diplomacy—where the poet has left an indelible mark.

A brainchild of ICWA Deputy Director General Sarvajit Chakravarty, the conference on the theme *Rabindranath Tagore—Envoy of India: His Vision of India and the World* saw scholars and distinguished serving and former diplomats from a number of countries, including Bangladesh, engage in a lively debate on Tagore's visits abroad, his knowledge of the countries he toured and his contributions to the evolution of Indian foreign policy in the early years of Indian independence.

The conference was not just another occasion for idolizing Tagore or finding nothing wrong in everything he did in every field. There were questions and criticism of his actions and utterances as an 'envoy' of India. Observe the nature of the questions asked. Was Tagore right in going to Italy, meeting dictator Benito Mussolini and seeking his help for Italian studies at Visva Bharati? Was the European media at that time right in criticising a highly liberal Tagore for unwittingly legitimizing the fascist Mussolini and for lacking knowledge of the prevailing political situation in Italy?

Tagore undertook his first foreign trip—to England—at the age of seventeen when he was sent to that country for studies by his father Debendranath Tagore, who wanted his son to be either part of the Indian Civil Service or be a barrister on his return. Rabindranath became neither. But that did not prevent him from leaving a distinct imprint on the foreign policy of the government of independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Tagore's ideals of internationalism, humanism and global peace through a meeting between the East and the West had inspired Nehru's foreign policy vision.

Tagore firmly believed that lasting global peace could not be secured without a meeting between East and West despite their differences. As Prof Radha Chakravarty, a Tagore scholar at Delhi University, told the conference, the poet consciously saw himself as a representative of the East in dealing with the West.

Nehru's pan-Asianism articulated four months before India's independence in August 1947, and the subsequent setting up of the Non-Aligned Movement through the Bandung Conference bear the imprint of Tagore. The poet's desire for Indo-Chinese cooperation, particularly the five principles of peaceful co-existence between the two countries, had greatly inspired Nehru. It was Tagore again who had used the soft power of India's mystic and spiritual values as a diplomatic tool to reach out to the world.

Amitava Tripathi said Tagore felt there was no alternative to the use of soft power in order to reach out to the world because India was at that time a colonised country, with low level of development and little scope for exercising hard power.

It was the visionary in Tagore that had predicted the emergence of a resurgent Asia, particularly China (the world's second largest economy at present after the United States), nearly a century ago and warned of the threat of Japan's nationalism turning into imperialism. Tagore firmly believed that such a vast mass of people, especially the young, in Asia could not be kept subjugated in poverty for long and it was a matter of time when the continent would develop and claim its rightful place in the comity of nations. A background noted issued by ICWA for the conference sums it up best: 'the principles of Indian foreign policy and the approach of Indian diplomats to world affairs bear the deep and lasting imprint of Tagore's vision of India and her role and stature in the world'.

At a session on 'Tagore's Influence on the Ethos of Indian Foreign Policy', Amitava Tripathi stressed the need for culling out lessons emanating from Tagore's message of peace, internationalism, brotherhood and humanism. At the same time, Tripathi candidly said, 'For conventional diplomats like us versed in Kautilla's works and Machiavelli, sometimes it is difficult to appreciate Tagore's supra-nationalism because we are confined to working within the nation-state framework in diplomacy whereas he is looking at the universe.' Essentially, it was a choice

between Tagore the foreign policy philosopher and the foreign policy practitioners, Tripathi said.

Former Indian Foreign Secretary M K Rasgotra provided a balanced assessment of Tagore's influence on India's foreign policy when he said that it had both positive and negative sides. Tagore's universalism and humanism and ideals of goodwill 'led to misjudgement' of other countries' policy, like China. The reference was clearly to China's declaration of war against India. However, the upside of Tagore's influence was the idea of soft power which much later became a tool of India's diplomacy.

According to Suryakanthi Tripathi, Tagore was 'more of an intuitive philosopher rather than an analytical and methodical thinker' and therefore 'one should not expect clear-cut foreign policy prescriptions from him'. She thinks it is 'took simplistic' to believe that 'the answer to more peaceful and productive international relations' lies in 'the perceptive wisdom and humanism of Tagore.'

In Tripathi's view, while Tagore was opposed to



'unbridled and militaristic nationalism and political aggressiveness', 'it is not always easy to choose between patriotism and humanism, between one's country and what is morally right.'

Making a perceptive analysis of Tagore, she said the poet's 'pan-Asian approach, his views on contact and conflict between the East and the West, particularly in the context of India's own freedom struggle, presented difficult philosophical contradictions.'

Some discussants felt that Tagore was probably not well versed with the political situation in some of the countries prevailing there at the time he visited them, as in Italy when Mussolini was in power or in China where his first visit had been marred by controversy. Some of his views were not appreciated by activists of the May Fourth Movement of 1919 for national independence. They were protesting the handing over of German concessions in Shandong province to Japan under the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War 1. The discussants noted those were not the days of the Internet or easy circulation of the news media across the world.

Was Tagore aware of the political situation in Italy when he met Mussolini? According to Dr Kundu, for Mussolini, the number one priority was to use Tagore's visit to earn praise across the world. A result of the visit was that he sanctioned funds for Italian language and literature studies in Visva Bharati. Tagore was 'overwhelmed' with Mussolini's gesture. Tagore's friend and author Romain Rolland as also the left-wing media in Europe disapproved of Tagore's meeting with Mussolini, so much so that the Nobel Laureate had to write a letter to Charles Andrews explaining in detail the background of his invitation from Mussolini.

According to Dr Serebriany, 'Tagore's knowledge about Russia was quite limited. His judgements are mostly misguided' but this in no way took away from "our respect for him as a poet".

Out of the polemics over Tagore's contribution to the making of India's foreign policy, one aspect on which there was hardly any divergence of opinion was his being the torch-bearer of globalization much before it became a worldwide 'mantra' in the present-day world. Tagore did not approve of a boycott and burning of foreign goods and forced use of 'desi' goods during the Swadeshi movement. This is best brought out by the war of words between Nikhilesh the Zamindar and the Swadeshi movement leader Sandip in the novel 'Gharey Bairey'. Tagore had favoured peaceful co-existence of both and competition between them.

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# The world of Federico Fellini

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With a dream of making his mark, a young man left his seaside hometown of Rimini for Florence in 1938, and then moved to Rome, the city that held great fascination for him, the year after.

He enrolled in a law school to pursue a graduate course that he never completed. He was eventually drawn into the world of art and cinema, and became one of the most influential filmmakers of the 20th century.

The man was acclaimed Italian film director Federico Fellini, better known for his unique style of blending fantasy and baroque images.

In his early days in Rome, Fellini earned a living as a writer and caricaturist drawing cartoons and sketches. He also wrote scripts for radio shows and contributed to the famous satirical magazine "Marc' Aurelio".

Through his works, Fellini had a commendable influence in Italy's popular culture of that period. He made his first contribution to film by writing comic gags for Italian actor Aldo Fabrizi. In 1943, he married Italian actress Giulietta Masina, who later appeared in most of his movies.

His crucial break as a scriptwriter came in 1944 when he was asked to contribute to the script of "Città Aperta" (Open City), directed by Italian director Roberto Rossellini. The film's immense success made both Rossellini and Fellini popular at home and abroad. Hailed as a landmark neo-realist Italian movie after World War II, 'Open City' projected a melodramatic description of war-torn Rome. The film earned Fellini his first Oscar nomination in the category of scriptwriting.

But he had to wait for six more years for his first film as co-director.

The commercial studio company Lux, for which Fellini wrote scripts, handed him the chance to work in the movie 'Luci Del Varietà' (Variety Lights) as a co-director with Alberto Luttada. Though Fellini had to work with an experienced director of that time, he made his presence felt in the movie. Its plot was deeply influenced by Fellini's childhood fascination for vaudeville performers and circus. But it wasn't financially successful.

The setback could not deny Fellini his first film "Lo Sceicco Bianco" (The White Sheikh) as an independent director in 1952. Based on the idea that Michelangelo Antonioni gave to the film's producer Carlo Ponti, the movie is a hilarious parody of 'Fotoromanzo', a true romance-type famous Italian magazine at that time. This movie was influenced by Fellini's personal vision of the world. Though the film turned out to be a financial failure, many film critics now recognise it as a comic masterpiece.

The financial failure of the first two movies had put Fellini's film career in jeopardy. But his third movie 'I Vitelloni', awarded the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival, saved him from what would have been a sad end to his film career as a director. Set in Fellini's hometown of Rimini, this autobiographical movie reflects the complex relationship between five friends.

His fourth movie 'La Strada', regarded as one of his masterpieces, gave him an international breakthrough. It won an Oscar in the best foreign film category in 1954.

The film depicts the life of a poverty-stricken woman named Gelsomina (played by Fellini's wife Giulietta Masina), sold to a brutish circus man Zampano (played by Anthony Quinn).

His next movie 'Il Bidone' (The Swindle) was not as successful as 'La Strada'. Taking a traditional Hollywood genre, Fellini added his own innovative style to 'Il Bidone'.

In 1957, he made 'Le Notti Di Cabiria' (Nights of Cabiria), starring Masina, that earned him his second Oscar in the best foreign film category.

Fellini again came under the spotlight with 'La Dolce Vita' in 1959, in which he projected the real face of contemporary Italian society. It won an Oscar as the best foreign film and was hailed by film critics around the world.

The movie was followed by his autobiographical masterpiece '8½' in which he concentrates on imagination and dream sequels. Some critics termed it a work of a director running out of ideas. But Fellini was absolutely sure what he was doing. He used surreal dream imagery and a blend of fantasy and reality without any differentiation in this film that won Oscar as best foreign language movie.

In 1965, Fellini made his first colour feature film 'Giulietta Degli Spiriti' (Juliet of the Spirits), regarded as a landmark feminist movie ahead of its time, portraying the psyche and identity crisis of a middle-aged and upper-class housewife Giulietta (played by Masina) in Italian society.

Fellini's next movie 'Satyricon', perhaps his most provocative film, goes several centuries back portraying the life of ancient Rome in the pre-Christian era. 'I am examining ancient Rome as if this were a documentary about the customs and habits of the Martians,' said Fellini in an interview in 1969. This fantasy film was criticised by many as his most decadent and undisciplined work.

Through his film 'Roma', released in 1972, Fellini paid

homage to his adored city, and tried to explore Rome the way he had viewed it. The movie reflects Fellini's experience and memories about the 'Eternal city'.

The film was not a big success. But he once again gained international acclaim through his next film 'Amarcord' which is loosely based on the incidents he witnessed in his childhood days in Rimini. It earned him fourth Oscar as best foreign language film in 1974.

But Fellini failed to see success in his future films like 'Il Casanova di Fellini', 'Orchestra Rehearsal', 'City of Women', 'And the Ship Sails on', 'Ginger and Fred', and 'Intervista', which was a tribute to his studio 'Cinecitta'.

By the late 80s, Fellini found it difficult to get financial backing for his projects. 'La Voce della Luna' (1990), starring famous Italian actor Marcello Mastroianni, was his last film.

Fellini won an honorary Oscar in 1993 for his contributions to cinema. He suffered a massive stroke that year and died at the age of 73.

Like other filmmakers Fellini too has been criticised by many film critics, who have termed some of his works ambiguous, unplanned and merely autobiographical. They argue that Fellini, who played a key role in the development of neorealist films in post-World War Italy in 1940s, gradually shifted towards 'surrealism', violating the precepts of neo-realism.

But critics like Roger Ebert, who held Fellini in high esteem, have ruled out such claims as 'unrealistic' and 'inappropriate'.

"The conventional wisdom is that Federico Fellini went wrong when he abandoned realism for personal fantasy. According to this view 'La Strada' (1954) was the high point of his career, and then he abandoned his neorealist roots. 'La Dolce Vita' was bad enough, '8 1/2' (1963) was worse, and by the time he made 'Juliet of the Spirits' (1965), he was completely off the rails. But this is completely wrong. What we think of as Felliniesque comes to full flower in 'La Dolce Vita' and '8 1/2,'" said Ebert in his review of '8 1/2.'

He also mentioned that Fellini's earlier films have their Felliniesque charm weighted down by leftover obligations



to neorealism.

Appreciating Fellini's works, film critic Stanley Kauffmann, who writes for the American journal The New Republic, said, "During his lifetime, many fine filmmakers blessed us with their art, but he was the only one who made us feel that each of his films, whatever its merits, was a present from a friend."

On Fellini's influence over world cinema, Peter Bondanella in his book The Films of Fellini, said the adjective 'Fellinian' became synonymous with any kind of extravagant, fanciful, even baroque image in cinema and in art in general. More than just a film director, Fellini had become synonymous in the popular imagination in Italy.

No matter what the critics say about Fellini, the legendary filmmaker will continue to have his influence on the world of cinema in the days to come.

Filmography

- "Luci Del Varietà" (1950) Co-director
- "Lo Sceicco bianco" (1951)
- "I Vitelloni" (1953)
- "La Strada" (1954)
- "Il bidone" (1955)
- "Le Notti di Cabiria" (1957)
- "La Dolce Vita" (1960)
- "8½" (1963)
- "Giulietta degli Spiriti" (1965)
- "Satyricon" (1969)
- "Roma" (1972)
- "Amarcord" (1973)
- "Il Casanova di Federico Fellini" (1976)
- "Prova d'orchestra" (1979)
- "La città delle donne" (1980)
- "Ginger and Fred" (1986)
- "Intervista" (1987)
- "La voce della luna" (1990)

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## FICTION

# Poribanu

SATYEN SEN

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(The first segment of this short story appeared last week)

The food arrived soon after, and Haroon almost pounced on the food like a hungry animal. He was least bothered about what others would think. Even though there was water in front of him, he didn't feel it necessary to wash his hands. Ravenously, he started eating; the way he was eating it seemed that he didn't have something good to eat for a long time.

The meal over, Haroon kicked off the conversation: "Sir, my house is at least twenty miles away from here. Now you listen to why I have come such a long way to you. I have come for some weapons. We have some freedom fighters with us, but we don't have the right arms with us excepting three active and inoperative rifles. Even rifles don't have adequate cartridges. Some of them have run out of cartridges even. How shall we put up a resistance against their machine guns? *Muktibahini* is almost falling apart due to the shortage of arms and ammunition. You can't fight with empty hands. Their morale is sinking. Already some of them have crossed over to India; those who are here are also going away in different directions. Since you have good connection with some political leaders, you might try to get us some weapons."

Disappointedly I answered: "It's no point telling it to me. We are also in the same boat. We formed a group of *Muktibahini* here, too. Conducting some paramilitary training, like rifle shooting and parade, eventually we also couldn't give sufficient arms and ammunition to the freedom fighters. When the Pakistani perpetrators will come here to attack, how are our fighters going to defend?

It's not our problem only, it's everywhere."

Stunned by the disclosure, Haroon cast a blank look at me. With high hopes, he had come here from such a great distance, but now he would have to return disheartened. What else could I do? Like him, I was also helpless in this regard. Finally, when Haroon could understand that I was in a quandary, he didn't pester me anymore with it.

To veer away from the topic, I asked: "How's your wife? Since you are on the move always, how does she spend her days?

Poribanu, Haroon's wife, was known to me. The name 'Pori' wasn't uselessly given to her by her parents. Not only was she stunningly beautiful like a fairy, but also she possessed admirable qualities. Unfortunately, often they would squabble over trifles jeopardizing peace in their small family. When their bickering would transform into a fracas, Haroon wouldn't bother to announce publicly his plan to divorce his wife. But when he would calm down, all those utterances would go buried deep under his chest. This was how their tumultuous life kept going. Initially, it came to me as hearsay, but later on, Haroon himself disclosed it to me.

*Is there any family where there is no internal strife? Under heavy family burden and compulsions, it is obvious that the husband and wife relationship would at times reach a breaking point and would bring a fresh fragrance immediately after.*

Grilling Haroon over this issue, what I could retrieve was that Poribanu had a significant trait in her character. The common factors that would trigger hitches in a husband-wife relationship were not the ones responsible for their family feud. Although Poribanu was a girl from an ordinary family, she had an opportunity to study a little. She wanted her personality to blossom in a free environment outside the confines of the kitchen. It was her quality, not fault. Perhaps such desires remain locked in the hearts of many girls like her. A lot of impediments stand in their way when daughters and daughters-in-law of a Muslim family try to pursue their dreams. However, a serious blow was hurled at the girl who was determined to pursue her goal. As a result, perhaps many of them were forced to abandon their ideas. Or else they had to rise in revolt to break the shackles despite the possibility

of denouement. Poribanu was that type of a girl who would go for the last option.

That was the main reason behind their quarrel. At least, this was the idea I had formed about Poribanu listening to Haroon on different occasions.

But just the opposite happened today. When I picked up the Poribanu subject for our talks, to my utter surprise, Haroon evinced great interest in her and started praising her spiritedly. He seemed unstoppable in his passionate outburst – to him she was a girl not yet discovered fully. His delightful outpourings of emotion, however, made me laugh.

"Haroon, but you said something otherwise one day about her..."

"Just forget about those days, Sir. Whatever I said that day was not my actual realization. Now I can understand that I did wrong that day. Instead of looking at the thing straight, I twisted and misinterpreted it in a different way. That's why; I always tried to stifle her hopes and aspirations."

In our male-dominated society, this sort of attitude by males towards females wasn't very uncommon. But what surprised me was his straight and plain recognition of the truth.

"How and when did you come out of this wrong perception of reality?" I asked.

"It wasn't long ago," smilingly he said, adding, "For the first time I could realize this truth through our present movement a few months ago. I was engrossed in thoughts and activities about the movement. I didn't have the time and the appropriate mental state to look at her. All of a sudden, Pori asked me one day whether Bangladesh was for the males only. Also she wanted to know whether or not the names of females were meant for inclusion in the pages of the census report only."

"What sort of a question is this? Why are you asking me this question?" It had been Pori's curious inquiry.

"Still you want to know why? The movement for an independent Bangladesh has been on for so many days. You people have been conducting meetings and processions, but did you ever call us for any duties?" She had

exuded her genuine concern for the apathy we had shown towards our female counterparts.

I just kept mum for some time. In such a combative atmosphere, her words of wisdom gave me a good feeling. Our strength would have increased manifold if the girls had joined us in our fight against the pillaging hordes. It sounded so true! Immediately, I recollected what I had advised Poribanu one day. In a commanding voice I said: "Home is the best place for the girls, not outside. Like the so-called 'civilized' girls, I wouldn't like to see any girl going crazy and becoming deliberately whimsical." Perhaps Poribanu had been thinking about the same thing that time, but she hadn't wanted to embarrass me by reminding the same thing.

Hesitatingly, I told Haroon: "Do you think the girls of our homes will come to the street with us breaking apart the traditional barriers existing in the society for a long time? Our society..."

Interrupting me, he said: "Won't they come? Why not? Don't their minds crave for it? Like us aren't they the people of this country? You people forcibly keep the door shut for them; that's why they can't come out. Opening the door, why don't you call them once? See what happens."

Pausing briefly at that point, he looked at me and then continued: "We'll talk about the rest later; let me talk about me. If I join you people, will there be any objection? I hope there won't be any trouble between us like before." Meaningfully, he smiled as soon as he finished the last sentence.

"Poribanu joined us. Also, she regularly kept bringing new girls to join the work. This was how the number of the group members kept rising. Instead of creating impediments, I facilitated her joining us. Since then we have been working together, at times staying close to each other, at times maintaining a distance. In fact, we have been in agreement with each other while carrying out our duties and work. Sir, you are my teacher; as a student I shouldn't tell you these things.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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