

# Intuitions of Harmony: The Vibrant Vision of Rabindranath Tagore

Ever since the COVID pandemic began, ‘distance’ and ‘isolation’ have become catchwords in our code for survival, but these words also assume a wider resonance in geopolitical terms, for today we inhabit a world that is increasingly riven by social, economic, religious and political fissures. At this moment, it is worth reflecting on the broad, inclusive vision of Rabindranath Tagore, whose words conjure up a diverse yet interconnected universe, where all things, great and small share an underlying unity: “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures” (Gitanjali).

**RADHA CHAKRAVARTY**

Born in 1861, Rabindranath was brought up in a large family with an open, eclectic approach to culture, religion and the world of ideas. This receptivity to heterogeneous influences remained with him throughout his life, expressing itself in his thought, writings and practices

As a humanist, Rabindranath believed in reaching out beyond the comfort zone of home, to seek out the unknown and unfamiliar. A compulsive globe trotter, he travelled across continents, to connect with people and cultures in different parts of the world. In fact, he came to be regarded as a mediator between nations, almost a prophet and mystic, and India’s international cultural ambassador. Contact with diverse cultures widened his horizons, and sensitized him to the importance of embracing otherness:

Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not. Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own. Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother of the stranger. .... (Gitanjali)

Exposure to other cultures also enhanced Rabindranath’s nuanced understanding of East-West relations. Although he strongly opposed imperialism, even surrendering his knighthood in protest against the Jalianwallah Bagh massacre in 1919, he admired English literature, Western music, and other elements of European culture. “Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit in any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house,” he writes (letter to C.F. Andrews, 1920). Rabindranath’s desire was for “the co-operation of all peoples of the world,” while respecting mutual differences.

In Rabindranath’s vision, humanism represents a higher value than nationalism. All the same, he does not actually reject the idea of nationhood. Rather, he insists on a more nuanced understanding of what the term “nation” can imply. In “What is a Nation?” (1902) he describes the nation as a construct based on the collective memory, aspirations and will to action of an entire people. As an alternative



to the Western nation state, he speaks of *samaj* or society, “a spontaneous self expression of man as a social being,” where relations between people “are not mechanical and impersonal but based on love and cooperation” (“Society and State,”*Swadeshi Samaj*, 1904). Novels like *Gora* and *The Home and the World* demonstrate his evolving ideas on nationhood and identity. His songs became the national anthems of India and Bangladesh, and inspired the Sri Lanka anthem too.

What frequently troubles Rabindranath is the prescriptive, monolithic imagination behind many social, political and religious systems. He critiques the idea of “one nation” being imposed on the world by imperialist power. To H G Wells (June 1930), he complains: “The tendency in modern civilization is to make the world uniform. Calcutta, Bombay, Hong Kong, and other cities are more or less alike, wearing big masks which represent no country in particular.” Seen in retrospect, these insights appear far-sighted, for they anticipate contemporary debates about the culturally homogenizing effects of globalization.

Rabindranath’s writings also reveal his anguish at different forms of oppression prevalent in society, and a prophetic sense of the rising tide of resistance to come. His views on social issues, especially on women’s empowerment, appear ahead of

their time in many respects. Texts such as *Chokher Bali*, *Gora*, “Khata,” *Chitrangada* and “The Wife’s Letter” address questions of female desire, gender stereotypes, the predicament of widows, women’s role in nation-building, their right to education and need to find a voice. “Nari” argues that women will usher in a new and better world. Issues of caste, untouchability, and women’s access to religion take centre stage in *Chandalika*. During his sojourn at Silaidaha, the young Rabindranath had witnessed the plight of the rural population in Bengal, and developed an empathy for the downtrodden. We see this concern in *Ghare Baire* and “Dui Bigha Jami.” “It is the poor who bear the responsibility of freeing a society that has been trampled upon by the wealthy,” Rabindranath insists ((*Samabanyiti*, c. 1928; translated by Fakrul Alam). In *Stray Birds* he predicts: “Man’s history is waiting in patience for the triumph of the insulted man.”

The song *himsaye unmotto prithibi* expresses Rabindranath’s distress at the violence and hate he sees around him:

THE WORLD today is wild with the delirium of hatred, the conflicts are cruel and unceasing in anguish, crooked are its paths, tangled its bonds of greed. ... O Thou of boundless life, save them, ...

Let Love’s lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey open its petals in thy light. (*Poems*, 1942)

*Natir Puja* draws on the Buddha’s image to make a plea for religious tolerance and inclusivity. *Gitanjali* questions religious rituals and orthodoxies, recognizing a god who lives in people’s hearts:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy

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mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

Rabindranath’s writings exude a vivid sense of oneness with the natural world. *Chhinnapatrabali* manifests his visceral ecological consciousness: “This earth, like someone I have loved long, through many births, remains ever-new to me; the two of us share a very deep and extensive acquaintance.” The story “Bolai” depicts a special affinity between human and natural realms. Rabindranath’s songs, poems and paintings are suffused with this love for nature. Today, as the world reels from the impact of global warming, his ideas acquire a special resonance.

The educational experiments of Rabindranath Tagore also stem from this visionary dimension in his

thought. As a school dropout unable to adjust to conventional methods of teaching, his own experiences fuelled his desire to invent an alternative system of education closer to nature and indigenous elements. In 1901 he founded a school in Santiniketan, in the heart of rural Bengal, where children would be taught in unorthodox ways intended to foster their intellectual curiosity, closeness to nature, creativity and self-reliance. Visva-Bharati, formally established in 1921, was a university inspired by Rabindranath’s dream of bringing together “All the world in one nest” (*yatra visvam bhavatyekanidam*). The university was meant to draw together the finest elements from different cultures across the world, providing a space for dialogue across languages, intellectual systems and creative traditions. The idea was to develop the human personality as a whole, in order to promote the fullest possible realization of human potential. Rooted in local tradition yet truly international, Santiniketan aspired to combine modern science with spirituality. Sriniketan, the project for rural reconstruction that developed alongside, was designed to create social awareness among students while improving the living conditions of the underprivileged sections of the local community at Bolpur.

Rabindranath’s often dystopian view of the world he saw around him paradoxically inspires his vibrant, inspirational imagination of a more harmonious existence. Perhaps it is time for us to revisit that dream:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls ... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (*Gitanjali*)

**Radha Chakravarty** is a writer, critic and translator. She has co-edited *The Essential Tagore* with Fakrul Alam. Her recent translations include *Our Santiniketan* (Mahasweta Devi) and *Char Adhyay* (Rabindranath Tagore). She was Dean, International Affairs and Professor of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies at Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi, India.

## From Rabindranath Tagore’s CHHINNAPATRA

TRANSLATED BY SOHANA MANZOOR  
*Shelaidaha, 1888*

Our boat was docked by a sandbank on the other side of Shelaidaha. It was a gigantic strip of sand where the contour of a river could be seen. Sometimes streaks of sand could be mistaken as streams. No sign of a village, or people, tree or grass, but spots of chapped and dark earth interspersed the dry white sand. If one looks to the east, a fathomless blue above was visible, and a profound expanse of whiteness at the bottom. It was as if the earth offered a poverty-stricken barrenness and the sky mirrored an ethereal futility. Desolation of this kind is difficult to match. On the west, appearing like a dreamland was a quiet stream. Under the rays of the setting sun lay a high bank on the other side of the river and small huts. It seemed that one back saw the creation of the world, while on the other saw the apocalypse. I specifically remember the sunset because that is the time when we made our visits. In Calcutta, we tend to forget how beautiful the earth really is. That the sun sets everyday amidst this peaceful abode of trees,

and thousands of stars rise over the endless grey, lonesome and desolate sandbank every night – seem simply sublime. You will comprehend the incredible beauty of the land only if you live here. How can one explain the strange act of turning the pages of a huge volume on the eastern sky at dawn, and at dusk retracing the same pages on the western horizon? The narrow stream, the wide expanse of sandbank and a picturesque embankment on the other side, seemed like an abandoned edge of earth. A hushed repose of learning! These words might sound like mere poetry in our capital city, but here, this was the reality.

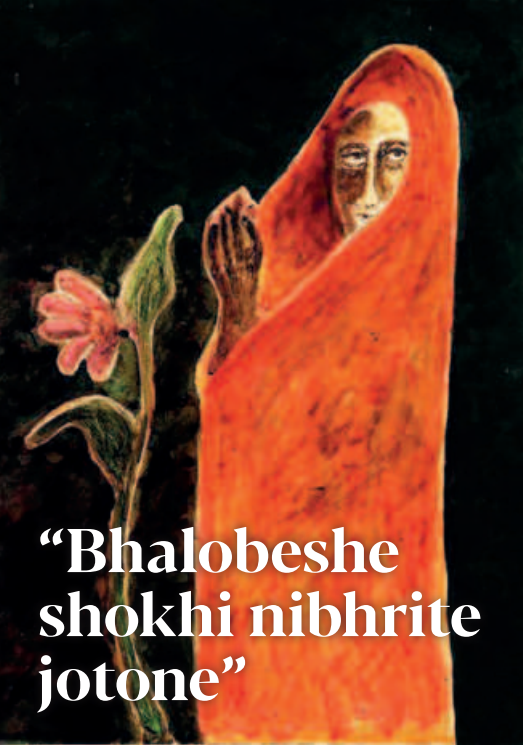
In the evening, the boys along with their friends went to explore the sandbank. Bolu went one way and I another. The two women walked towards yet another direction. Sometime later, the sun went down and the golden glimmer disappeared. The scenes around me became indistinct and the small shadow by my feet made me realize that the crescent, pale moon had risen. The moonlight on the white sandbank caused delusion—where was the sand and where was the water, where was

the sky and where was the land? It seemed like a mirage.

Yesterday, after spending some mesmerizing moments around this place I had gone back to our boat to find that only the boys had returned. I sat on a chair and started reading a book on an obscure topic called “animal magnetism.” The light from the lantern was low, and others seemed to have disappeared. I placed the book face down on the bed and headed out to look for them. In that vast land of pale sand, I saw not a single black head. I shouted, “Bolu.” The sound travelled in all ten directions and mingled with the sphere, but no responses came. My heart sank like a large umbrella when it is shut forcefully. Gofur came out of the boat with a light, Proshonno came out too as did the boatswains. We divided into small groups and spread out looking for them. I went on calling Bolu and Proshonno kept calling “chhoto ma.” The boatmen could be heard hollering, “Babu, babu.” In that silent and deserted land, many voices kept on calling but to no avail. Once or twice, Gofur shouted, “I see them,” but then he said, “No, I don’t.” Just think of the

mental agony I was going through. You have to imagine the silent night, the pale moonlight, a lonesome and desolate sandbank with the light from Gofur’s lantern flickering in the distant. Some plaintive cries from one side turned into echoes far away. We were hopeful one moment and then our hearts plunged into despondency. All kinds of horrific thoughts flashed through my mind. Did Bolu get trapped in quicksand? Perhaps she had fainted away. Or, maybe they were attacked by some ferocious animals. I found myself positioned against the freedom of women. Suddenly, someone said that they had ended up on the other side of the upward slope and hence could not return. The boat sailed on to the other side and the mistress of the boat returned. Bolu was heard saying, “I’ll never take you people with me again.” Everybody was tired and embarrassed. Under the circumstances, I could not utter any of the reproachful words I had rehearsed. Even when I woke up the next morning, I could not say anything to them.

**Sohana Manzoor** teaches English at ULAB. She is also the Literary Editor of The Daily Star.



TRANSLATED BY VINCENT DIP GOMES

Inscribe my name, beloved,  
With care and affection  
In the temple of your secluded heart.

Trace the beat of the music  
That plays in my soul  
In the anklets on your feet.

Caress in your loving embrace  
My cooing bird of songs  
And hold it your palace garden.

Do not forget, beloved, to tie  
The friendship band I gave you –  
Along with your gold bangles.

Pluck a bud from my creeper  
Unmindfully, and place it  
In the curly arrangements of your hair.

In my fond memory  
Paint a vermilion dot on  
Your fair forehead.

Let the sweetness of my enchanted heart  
Melt and blend  
In the scent of your body.

Collect the broken pieces of  
My distraught life and death to mingle  
With your unparalleled glory.

**Vincent Dip Gomes** is a fourth-year student in the Department of English, ULAB.