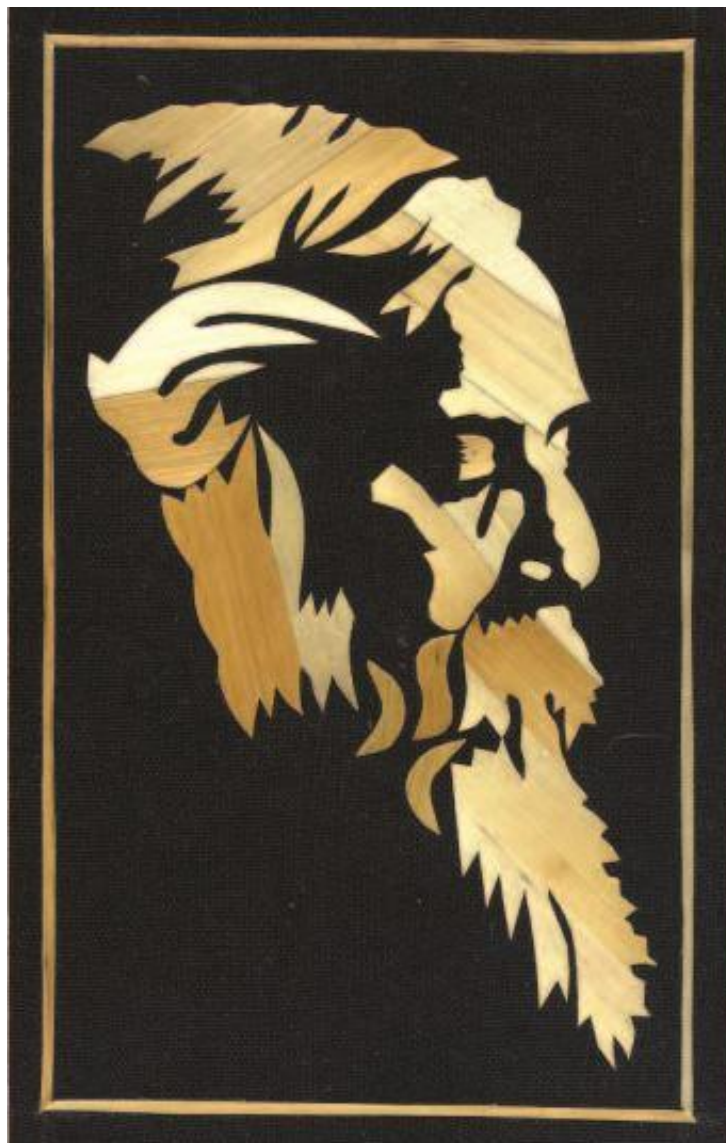


# Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy



Indian Council for Cultural Relations  
भारतीय सांस्कृतिक सम्बंध परिषद्

# Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy

# **Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy**

Based on the Proceedings of the International Seminar held on 4 August 2016  
at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> Death Anniversary of  
Rabindranath Tagore

Edited by

**Sandagomi Coperahewa**



Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS)  
University of Colombo, Sri Lanka  
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*Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy*

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## **Remarks by His Excellency Y.K. Sinha, Former High Commissioner of India**

Senior Professor Lakshman Dissanayake - Vice Chancellor, Dr. Martin Kämpchen – today's keynote speaker, Prof. Amrit Sen and other eminent speakers of the academic panel, Prof. Nayani Melegoda, Dean |FGS, Professor Sandagomi Coperahewa, Director |CCIS, Ms. Rajashree Behera, Director |ICC, other distinguished invitees, ladies and gentlemen.

I am greatly honoured to be here this morning to participate in this very important seminar 'Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy' organized by the Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies, University of Colombo in collaboration with the ICC to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Gurudev Tagore. I am delighted to mention that during the past few years CCIS played a leading role in organizing various activities to explore Tagore's legacy in Sri Lanka.

The year 2016 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Nobel laureate Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore – a litterateur par excellence , a musician, a playwright, a painter, an educator, a visionary philosopher and a committed anti-colonialist who was born and died when India was still under the British rule. Tagore belongs to India, but he had a deep vision to the world at large. *Gitanjali* and the Nobel Prize set Tagore on the world stage raising him to the glorified status of *Visva Kavi*. Among the many aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's diverse personality was his fascination for travel and interaction with other personalities. He favoured dialogue among a cultures. He visited more than thirty countries in the world including Sri Lanka. During his travels, Tagore explained his ideal of *Visva-Bharati* and continued with his dream of establishing contacts between different cultures and people. Tagore came to Sri Lanka three times, and in fact, his last overseas visit was to Sri Lanka in 1934. In this visit Tagore laid the foundation stone and named the institute Sri Palee at Horana and also presented a dance drama *Shaap Mochan* in Colombo and Jaffna. Tagore was very optimistic of the future cultural and social cooperation between two countries – India and Sri Lanka.

Gurudev Tagore is fondly remembered by a wide spectrum of Sri Lankan people as a cultural figure who exerted an immense influence on Sri Lankan arts and culture. The reverence accorded to Tagore in Sri Lanka is a reflection of his abiding legacy in the region as a whole. It is also a manifestation of the symbiotic cultural links that bind our two countries together. So it is appropriate that we commemorate this important personality in Sri Lanka in this 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary year. Even today, after 75 years of his death, many intellectuals think that there are many things yet to be discovered and discussed about Tagorian contribution. Tagore's work and legacy must be studied further and documented, for the benefit of future generations.

Finally, I would like to commend the initiatives of the Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies, University of Colombo for organizing an international seminar on Tagore on this 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary year. I hope discussions in this academic forum will provide new interpretations and understandings to revisit Tagore's legacy in our region and the world.

## **Remarks by Senior Professor Lakshman Dissanayaka, Vice Chancellor | University of Colombo**

His Excellency Mr. Y. K. Sinha, High Commissioner of India, Mr. Arindam Bagchi, Deputy High Commissioner of India, Dr. Martin Kämpchen – today's keynote speaker and Prof. Amrit Sen, University of Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, Prof. Nayani Melegoda, Dean |FGS, Prof. Sandagomi Coperahewa, Director |CCIS Professors, Ms. Rajashree Behera, Director |ICC, other distinguished invitees, ladies and gentlemen.

At the very outset, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all our visitors from India.

As the Vice Chancellor of this University, I am very happy to be here today to participate in this important seminar 'Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy' organized by the Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies, University of Colombo in collaboration with the Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Gurudev Tagore.

The CCIS was established in 2012 under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the High Commission of India in Sri Lanka and the University of Colombo. During the past four years, the Centre served as a facilitator for lectures, seminars and other events in the field, including collaborative programmes. It also published two volumes on Rabindranath Tagore and Anagarika Dharmapala. Both of them were friends and also worked towards strengthening India – Sri Lanka relationship in many ways.

As a visionary scholar and poet, Rabindranath Tagore established long standing cultural relations between two countries, and made a great impression on cultural and scholastic circles providing a scope for people-to-people contacts between India and Sri Lanka. So it is appropriate that we organize this important commemoration of Tagore in Sri Lanka in this 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary year.

Every year CCIS commemorates the Birth Anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore on 7<sup>th</sup> May by garlanding the bust of Tagore at the Main Library of the University. Not just remembering him once year on his birth anniversary, I am happy that as a multidisciplinary research Centre devoted to contemporary Indian studies, the CCIS took



the initiative to revisit Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy in connection with the 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary. Therefore, I congratulate the CCIS for organizing this seminar with the presence of Indian and Sri Lankan scholars. I hope discussions in this seminar will provide new insights to understand Tagore's legacy in cultural revival in Sri Lanka and its influence on India – Sri Lanka relations.

## **Introduction by Professor Sandagomi Coperahewa, Director | CCIS**

A Very Good Morning to all of you.

His Excellency Mr. Y. K. Sinha, High Commissioner of India, Mr. Arindam Bagchi, Deputy High Commissioner of India, Mrs. Maleka Parveen, Acting High Commissioner and Counsellor, Bangladesh High Commission, Senior Professor Lakshman Dissanayake - Vice Chancellor, Dr. Martin Kämpchen – today's keynote speaker, Prof. Nayani Melegoda, Dean |FGS, Deans of the other Faculties, Professors, Ms. Rajashree Behera, Director |ICC, other distinguished invitees, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my pleasant duty as the Director of the Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS), University of Colombo to welcome all of you for this International Seminar ' Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy' organized by the Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies, University of Colombo, in collaboration with the Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo.

As we all know Gurudev Tagore had a fairly strong association with Sri Lanka. His main three visits to the island in 1922, 1928 and 1934 clearly left an abiding imprint. Tagore's visits and his extensive interactions with artistes and intellectuals of Sri Lanka significantly contributed to the country's cultural resurgence. An important cultural landmark was thus established in the socio-cultural relations between India and Sri Lanka.

For CCIS, the past four years have been a journey of discovery on Tagore's work and legacy. In 2011, the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Tagore provided an opportunity to celebrate the poet and also to revisit Tagore's contribution to the country. The University of Colombo took a leading role in organizing various events associated with this birth anniversary. On this occasion, a special commemorative volume titled *Remembering Rabindranath Tagore* was published by the University of Colombo. In June 2012, a one day Seminar on 'Tagore and Sri Lanka' was held in Colombo under the auspices of the Indian Cultural Centre and in association with the newly-established Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 2012, a bronze bust of Rabindranath Tagore was unveiled at the main library of the University of Colombo. The year 2013 marked the centenary of winning the Nobel Prize for

Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Gitanjali*. As a tribute to this genius the CCIS decided to bring out a collection of essays titled *One Hundred Years of Gitanjali* as a step to explore the relevance and poetic value of *Gitanjali*.

Today we are commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. In connection with this today's seminar, first I would like to welcome H.E. Mr. Y.K. Sinha, the Chief Guest of today's event. Thank you Sir, for accepting our invitation to grace this inaugural session of the Seminar. I also appreciate your keen interest and continuing support to the activities of the CCIS in the last three years. I am happy to see Mr. Arindam Bagchi, the Deputy High Commissioner of India as a person who comes from the Tagore's locality – West Bengal. A very special welcome also to Mrs. Maleka Parveen, Acting High Commissioner and Counsellor, Bangladesh High Commission, Colombo.

On behalf of the CCIS a warm welcome to our Keynote Speaker today Dr. Martin Kampchen and Prof. Amrit Sen - two renowned Tagore scholars from Santiniketan. Thank you for accepting our invitation.

I must also welcome the Vice Chancellor Senior Professor Lakshman Dissanayake, Deans, Members of the University Council, Registrar, Bursar and other academics of the University.

I am pleased to welcome officials of the Indian High Commission and Indian Cultural Centre, SAARC Cultural Centre, Tagore Society of Sri Lanka, Sri Palee College Past Pupils Association, other invitees, students and media personnel for this function. It's a pleasure to see so many of you here.

We are fortunate to have a panel of renowned scholars both from India and Sri Lanka for the academic session of this Seminar. I hope that discussions in this seminar will provide new insights to revisit Tagore's legacy 75 years after his demise and its influence on the common cultural space, we share between India and Sri Lanka as close neighbours.

Thank you.

## **Keynote Speech**

# **Rabindranath Tagore's Legacy Seventy-five Years after his Demise**

**Martin Kämpchen**

It is not a habit on the Indian subcontinent to commemorate great men and women on their death anniversaries. Birthdays are great occasions for celebration and re-dedication – but not deathdays. In Santiniketan from where I have arrived a few days ago, as well, there are no events to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore except that touching little ceremony *briksha ropan*, the planting of a tree sapling. This of course happens every year in early August.

In Europe we witness the reverse. For example the “feastdays” of all great Christian saints fall on the date they expired. It is not, of course, their death that is being “celebrated”, but it is their entry into heaven, or their salvation, their liberation. But great statesmen and writers and artists, too, are being remembered in Europe on their death-anniversaries. Here the reason is simply that after a personality retreats more and more into history after he or she has died, it is important to take stock: What has been the influence of that person in our lives and on the cultural or political scenario? Do we have to revive the memory of that person, revive his/her values and ideas, revive the appreciation of his/her works? Here the emphasis is on making the influence of the person live on beyond his or her terrestrial existence. Death anniversaries are good occasions to give new energy and content to the cultural survival of such a personality.

This is exactly what we are about to do today here at the University of Colombo. With this seminar we wish to give a new impetus to the pervading influence of Rabindranath Tagore in our own life and in our society. We want to revive Rabindranath's presence beyond his death.

Seventy-five years is not just three quarters of a century which is the reason why normally that number is being singled out for celebration. Seventy-five years is the average life-span of a person. That means that Rabindranath's life is now as far removed from our present time as a man's full life lasts. It means that we no longer have contemporaries who witnessed Rabindranath alive. The immediate connection with him is snapped. The charisma, the life-force,

the spirit of Rabindranath that worked miracles in those who were directly exposed to it, has faded away because there is no one anymore who has received it and can bear witness to it. There is that idea in Indian thought that the guru transmits his spiritual power to his disciples by touch or by a mere meeting of the eyes. This directness of relationship with Rabindranath Tagore no longer exists seventy-five years after his death.

I remember one of the last persons in Santiniketan who was still intimately connected with Rabindranath. She was Amita Sen who died a few years ago at a very old age. I visited her house in Santiniketan quite regularly and rarely would the conversation not converge towards Tagore and her days as a student at the Santiniketan ashram. She called herself an *ashram kanyā*, an Ashram Daughter, and in her simplicity she did not want to be anything more but that: a daughter of the Ashram. This simplicity and moral authority were, I felt, not merely due to her old age, but they were shaped during her youth in Rabindranath's school and then became the hallmark of her personality. Her famous son, the economist Amartya Sen, who still received his name from Rabindranath and spent the first few years of his life in his benign light, is noticeably shaped by quite different influences. His cosmopolitanism is derived from long years in the cities and abroad as a student and later as a professor. His appreciation of Tagore is clearly the result of the diligent study of Tagore's books in the context of his experience of "high" world culture. The typical "Santiniketan culture" with its subtle habits is less shared by him.

So we are at a crucial juncture of time right now: While the exposure to his charismatic personality and the immediate memories of Rabindranath have become history, we have to reflect on how to perpetuate the cultural presence of Rabindranath for the benefit of future generations. While Tagore was alive, his personality often made a deeper impact than his writing, especially in Europe and America. In the West, his works were known in inadequate English translations. His poetry in English was peculiar and had an exotic flair, but as poetry their literary merit was limited and certainly not on a par with his Bengali originals. Since these English versions of his poetry had been done by Rabindranath himself, they survived for many years because they were considered authentic. Therefore new translations from the Bengali into English and into other languages that could be considered congenial translations started much later, perhaps from the 1980s.

I am a translator of Rabindranath's poetry from Bengali to German, my mother-tongue. The initial impetus to launch into the translation of his poetry was exactly that discovery: How

deficient Rabindranath's own English translation into lyrical prose was compared to the vigour and charm of the originals. The original German translations were made from the English versions. I felt the call to attempt direct translations and fashion an actual German poem from the Bengali poem. The difficulties are considerable and it would need another lecture to articulate them. But after a twenty-five year effort and several volumes of translation ranging from his early poetry up to the lines he dictated on his death-bed, I can now say that Tagore has "arrived" in German-speaking countries. On the occasion of his 75<sup>th</sup> death-anniversary the third popular selection from my translation of his poems has appeared. It is meant for the general reader. This means that the interest in Tagore is not purely historical and academic: Poetry is meant for everybody as nourishment for the soul. This development in German-speaking countries justifies me to proclaim that the first and foremost duty of those who uphold Tagore's legacy is to initiate *new translations from Bengali*. I have learnt from Professor Sandagomi Coperahewa's writing that – as of now – Rabindranath's poetry has not yet been translated from Bengali into Sinhala. Only two novels have been rendered from Bengali, *Gora* and *Chaturanga*. May I suggest that this Centre which has very kindly invited me to Colombo initiate a programme to hone a translator capable of rendering Bengali poetry into Sinhala. I am unsure about the situation with translations into Tamil.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us who may wonder why Rabindranath Tagore is still being read and admired 75 years after his death, the simple answer is: A poet's importance is never exhausted. Novels, stories and plays may become dated because their context no longer conforms to reality, their message becomes historically irrelevant. Thus they become fodder for books on literary history. But genuine poetry retains its relevance, its sap, its actuality because there is something eternal about poems. Genuine poetry becomes a window into the soul of the poet and into the soul of humankind. Here we have the most relevant justification why Rabindranath Tagore's poetry still needs to be read – and why good translations from Bengali are still worth attempting.

Are there other reasons why Tagore's legacy needs to be nourished and kept alive? Here we should discuss whether the attraction which he exerted for decades does continue for our modern

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<sup>1</sup> Sandagomi Coperahewa, Sri Lanka. In: *Rabindranath Tagore: One Hundred Years of Global Reception*. Ed. by Martin Kämpchen and Imre Bangha. Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi 2014, p. 109.

concerns and problems. The seventy-five years that elapsed since Tagore's demise have seen major transformations. The Second World War came to a traumatic end with 50 million people killed. India became divided. India became independent. The Communist Block crumbled and left Communism in shambles. After that a multitude of new nationalisms evolved particularly in Asia and in Europe. Is this world still akin to the world that Rabindranath spoke to? Can his voice have any meaning in 2016?

My view is: Yes, his voice, his work has meaning *especially* today. A major writer like him is always what is called a *démoralisateur*. He challenged conventional values, he questioned clichéd ideas during his life-time and continues to do so even in the time after him. He dares us to rise from our dearly held views and look at them with stricter honesty, with a more penetrating mind, with creativity.

In this context I focus on Rabindranath's *Cosmic Consciousness*. Reading his poems, reading his essays we realize that from his adolescence onwards he was immersed in a consciousness which was capable of viewing what is small and seemingly insignificant as part of a greater Whole, and conversely, he was capable of viewing the Whole as made up of a multitude of interconnected smaller parts. This consciousness of continuously moving to larger generalities and back to the small and particular, this constant shift of perspectives, is a characteristic feature of his poems and songs. One song begins:

My freedom lives in all the lights across the heavens,  
Every speck of dust, every blade of grass celebrates my freedom. (*pūjā* 339)

Further, the integration of human action and the action of nature, the total porousness of human life which moves into nature's life is noteworthy. In one of his *sisu*-poems a child imagines that he will meet his mother as a fresh gust of wind, or as a star, or in the melodies of his flute (*bidāy*). In another poem, the child meets his mother in the form of waves and then as a cloud (*mātrībatsal*). In a *gītāñjali*-poem, the poet feels that God's songs make the forest flowers bloom (*gītāñjali* 71). Here the circle widens taking in, not just the human element and nature, but it integrates the divine as well. God visits humans in their plight and sorrow –

He has gone where the farmer

breaks the hard soil.

Where the stone-cutters build the road

In sweat all year. (*gītāñjali* 119)

This inclusiveness which combines the human, the natural world and the divine into one Cosmic Consciousness made Rabindranath look at our human life, its difficulties and its aspirations, in surprising freshness and originality. This inclusiveness is capable of challenging our views and ideas. I do not claim that Rabindranath had a “modern” outlook or a “conservative” one, it transcended these categories to formulate a spirituality which is akin to certain precepts of Hinduism and Buddhism. But Rabindranath translated these precepts imaginatively into a spirituality which touches all spheres of life – the intellectual, the emotional and the every-day practical life.

As a natural consequence Rabindranath applied this Cosmic Consciousness to the fields in every-day life which are particular precious to him. He developed his attitude to nature into an *eco-spirituality*. Long before ecology and the protection of the environment became a trendy and urgent subject, he wrote the poem *briksha-bandanā* (“In Praise of Trees”) eulogizing the utility but also the spiritual dominance of trees as “the friend of men” and their dynamic energy which provides constant renewal. It is, we would term it today, a hymn to “Green Power”.

Rabindranath fostered the vision of an ecologically sound ashram-life. In his Ashram of Santiniketan he wanted to emulate a “Forest University” and later lectured in Europe on “The Message of the Forest”.

This Cosmic Consciousness made itself equally felt in his *educational ideal*. Not the book-learning of the British colonial schools (which he himself had to endure in his youth) was his model of education in Santiniketan, not the heartless “by-hearting” practiced in those schools as a method of acquiring knowledge – no, Tagore’s method of education was through songs and theatre, art and instrumental music, through dance and games. What courage he had to confront a petrified education system and proclaim the diametrically opposite to the standard practice! For him Intuition was a teacher, Leisure was a Teacher, Melody and Rhythm were teaching his children more than human instructors with a book in their hands.

His Cosmic Consciousness made him develop his eco-spirituality, his pedagogy, but also his political credo. His wholesale *rejection of nationalism* made many people turn against him, both



in India and abroad. The intellectuals of several countries asserted that nationalism alone can hold their country together, not ideas and neither ethical values. Rabindranath, in contrast, never tired of proposing an internationalism based on ideas and values. To read his book *Nationalism*, is useful particularly nowadays while nationalisms again spring up in Asia, in Europe and also in the USA.

We have so far touched upon the *content* of Rabindranath's legacy and why it must be kept alive. Let us briefly ask how this legacy was received globally in the decades after his death. Tagore's grand project was to bring the 'East' and the 'West' together and make them jointly work for world peace and for a more just, more humane, more spiritual society. His lectures, conversations and letters build upon this theme with untiring constancy. At the present time, we may no longer appreciate such a neat division of 'East' and 'West', for we prefer to see the countries subsumed under these tags as a more complex reality. Asia has never been a uniform culture – with India, Japan and China, for instance, being widely different. But in Tagore's time, this broad division was a political instrument for identifying what he felt should be together and fight together – the 'East'.

From Egypt to Japan, this sense of a pan-oriental solidarity evolved in many peoples due to Tagore's influence. This solidarity was more spiritual and emotional than depending on social and political realities. It was only the intellectuals who tended to opt for 'Westernisation' and therefore opposed Tagore's view of a pan-Asian spiritual East.

In Europe, Tagore's philosophy connected well with traditions and world views of Romanticism and Idealism. In Germany, for example, Tagore integrated well with its tradition of Romanticism which was then a hundred years old. In the USA, he inspired nostalgic associations with the spiritual back-to-nature tradition created by the American authors Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Many of the political and socio-cultural movements of the early twentieth century can be seen in the light of inclusiveness. Hence several movements could claim to be inspired by Tagore's idealism, even though, at the core, they did not share Rabindranath's moral and spiritual outlook. This influence of inclusiveness extended into the post-colonial and post-imperialist era when Tagore's work was projected as an example of the anti-imperialist struggle and of the cultural wealth which had emerged from the former colonies. This happened particularly in the former Soviet Union.

Such inclusiveness was also at work in countries of the Middle East such as Turkey Iran, and the Arab world which demonstrate the rich reception of Tagore in Islamic cultures. They present a hitherto unknown perspective, namely that an attempt was made to 'Islamicize' Tagore's spirituality, for example in Turkey. Muslim cultures searched for the Sufi in him. Countries with a Buddhist majority also claimed Tagore. As his interest in the Buddha is well documented, Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand feel a special closeness to Tagore. Christian minorities within the Arab world or in Japan, as well as in Latin American countries with their mostly Christian populations easily found a common ground with Tagore in the Christian ideals of love and service. These examples elucidate that Tagore was able to integrate into the cultural fabric of countries of different religious and cultural backgrounds, encouraging and guiding national movements towards greater inclusiveness and humanity.

However, there were dissenting voices as well. In a few countries, Tagore was deliberately censured and not published or publicized. This happened, for example, after the 1917 Revolution in Russia, during the Second World War in Germany and during Franco's regime in Spain. Criticism and a partial rejection of Tagore also occurred in societies which strained to rebuild themselves materially after a period of war and strife. Critics in Europe after the First World War deemed that Tagore's 'pacifistic' attitude and his 'Asian mildness' were detrimental to the dynamic reconstruction of a country.

In the USA, after the Second World War, the socio-political climate was unfavourable to Tagore's anti-war and anti-nationalistic sentiments. Similarly, Tagore's stand against nationalism was rejected in Yugoslavia, Poland, Turkey and in Japan because, as mentioned, nationalism was believed to keep these countries united in their difficult time of political and cultural transition.

The cultural élite in a few countries doubted how well Tagore understood the socio-cultural environment to which he was subjected and urged to respond in each country. For example, in Russia, some roundly refused to listen to him as he had not lived through the First World War and the sufferings of the Revolution and hence he could not gauge the pain Russians had felt. However, contrary examples have been related as well. A British soldier was known to carry *Gitanjali* with him to the battlefield; and in the Warsaw Ghetto, Jewish children enacted Tagore's play *The Post Office* to prepare themselves for death in the concentration camp.

It cannot escape our attention that in our times Tagore is only at the periphery of global cultural discourses. The success of modern postcolonial authors overshadows Tagore's legacy.

Nevertheless, his works keep being reprinted and translated which indicates that he continues to speak to modern readers even seventy-five years after his death.

# Bridges of Culture: Performing *Shapmochan* (The Redemption) in Sri Lanka, 1934

**Amrit Sen**

While the multiple aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's visit to and impact on Sri Lanka have been discussed, the choice of text to be performed in 1934 remains intriguing. Why did Rabindranath Tagore choose *Shapmochan* as the performance text for this particular visit? Did the rediscovery of the self and the lifting of the curse of ugliness create a framework within which Rabindranath was attempting to situate the Sri Lankan experience? This paper will locate the *Shapmochan* performance as a point of entry into Tagore's theory of travel, his ideas of using the example of Buddhism as an Asian cosmopolitanism as opposed to the European model and as an allegory into Tagore's exhortation to rediscover a Sri Lankan cultural identity. Using the programme notes on the *Shapmochan* performance and other archival sources, this paper will try to see this performance as Tagore's allegorical message to the Sri Lankan community.

While Rabindranath's visits to Sri Lanka in 1890, 1922, 1930 were shorter ones, it was his visit in 1934 where he interacted with Sri Lankan intelligentsia at large. Arriving in Colombo in May 1934 with an entourage of 25 performers, Rabindranath held an exhibition, delivered lectures and staged *Shapmochan* on five separate occasions across Sri Lanka. The dance drama was therefore at the centre of this particular trip. Significantly he was accompanied by Nandalal Bose and two younger exponents, Santidev Ghose and Sailajaranjan Majumder both of whom would go on to become major exponents of Rabindrasangeet and Nritya.

The emergence of the nrityanatya or the dance drama was a comparatively late phenomenon in Rabindranath's creative oeuvre. Earlier he had experimented with Gitinatya where the music was the soul of the playtext. However music, even though it could retain the rhythm of the soul failed in the communication, especially since it depended on language. Dance on the other hand had the facility to create a universal semiotic system. Interestingly the poet's gravitation towards dance

as integral to theatre was provoked by his overseas tours. At Japan Rabindranath had witnessed the stunning effect of the Kabuki and Noh theatre forms, while at Java the reinterpretation of the myths and the masculine force of the dances made him rethink his creative strategy. The ballet also deeply influenced Rabindranath, although he did not react very favourably to the rigid formal strictures. The infusion of Manipuri and Kathakali dances also influenced the poet. Thus 1927 seems to be a point of departure where the language of dance becomes integral to the language of theatre. Mandakranta Bose notes how Rabindranritya was distinguished by its ability to accept and accommodate within a constant pattern of experimentation:

This aesthetic scheme made rabindranritya an essential constituent of Indian modernity by claiming for the individual artist the unfettered freedom of imagination and expression. Its main characteristic was an eclectic choice of stylistic idioms drawn from several dance traditions that included Indian and Southeast Asian styles, but it also emphasized the liberty of the artist to interpret character and situation. At the same time, rabindranritya also demonstrated the need to explore a far wider range of human experience by constructing narratives of much greater complexity than accommodated in the classical Indian dance styles of Tagore's time, which confined themselves to narrowly defined plot situations. (Bose, 1086-7)

Even here, Rabindranath's attempt seems to fuse different traditions of dance, yet remove the formal strictures from them to seamlessly operate with the songs and the themes. What is interesting here is that the Nrityanatya became a surrogate for the ideal of Visva-Bharati. It accepted the hospitality of all forms of dance, yet evolved its own salient identity and presented a cultural identity that was unique to Santiniketan. It is this context that needs to be highlighted before any discussion of Shapmochan can be initiated.

The story of Shapmochan revolves around the Gandharva Saurasena, cursed at the court of Indra and condemned to a life of ugliness, a fate shared by his wife Madhusri. Reborn as the disfigured Aruneswar, he sends the Veena to the wedding with the reincarnated Kamalika. When he reveals his self to Kamalika she renounces him but the plaintive tunes of the Veena haunt her and she finally returns to Aruneshwar accepting him with the words, "My master, my beloved, what

unsurpassable beauty is yours”. With Kamalika’s realisation, the curse is finally reversed in redemption. The question remains, why choose this particular dance drama for the Lankan audience, especially when the cost of taking such a large troupe could be prohibitive? Indeed as points out \*\*\*\*\*

In the programme notes published on 12 May 1934 Tagore writes about

the immediate impression of the whole, to capture the spirit of art which reveals itself in the rhythm of movements, in the lyric of colour, form and sound, and refuse to be defined or described by words.

One understands that the dance drama form was a major vehicle for communicating the cultural uniqueness of Santiniketan with its infusion of Rabindrasangeet, music and dance traditions. The components of stage décor, costumes would also have been an integral factor in the creation of a cultural ambience. The dance drama form therefore could be a microcosm of the totality of the Santiniketan experience that Rabindranath wished to convey.

Rabindranath also must have been conscious of the churnings in Sri Lanka at this point of time through his interactions with the students and intellectuals from Sri Lanka whom he had met and felt that the island felt the need for a reassertion of its identity within an overall structure of nationalism. Wilmot A. Perera recollects his experience at Santiniketan:

We often used to discuss whether we could not do anything to help develop the theatre and the music of the East in our country. We had nothing concrete. No definite views except an urge to do something.

When I saw some of Gurudeva’s dance dramas at Santiniketan, I thought to myself that here was this opportunity. Before I left Santiniketan, I mentioned this to Gurudev and told him that if he could come over to Ceylon with a troupe of his student players and show us something of the art form he had evolved and developed, he would bring about a reawakening of the cultural

traditions we had inherited from India and more particularly from Bengal. He replied that he would be only too happy if an opportunity presented itself.

In 1922 in the company of Rev. C.F. Andrews, the poet had delivered an address on his 'Forest University', and his lament about the Sri Lankan youth submitting to colonial ideas while ignoring their own norms was to remain a constant thread in his writings on Sri Lanka.

It is interesting to note how deliberately the court of Indra becomes a replacement for the colonial authority with its powers to curse and therefore create a complete distortion of identity. This thesis of distortion finds its way into Natir Puja as well where the theme of disease, mercy, (karuna) of the Buddha have moral dimensions. In this case however the distortion is one that is most acutely felt by Madhushri who cannot come to terms with the reborn Aruneshwar. The redemption is therefore a journey of a return and revalidation of a former identity, a quest for rediscovery – a process of loss and regeneration.

Can we then suggest that Rabindranath's text was not merely talking about a mythical distortion but a cultural distortion that had led to a displacement of identity in its totality? The performance of Shapmochan was therefore a subtle cultural reminder about a potential culture that the South Asian people in general and Sri Lanka in particular had lost and which could be revived. I would like to mention the presence of the Veena on the stage in this context. Characteristically it is music that stands as the moment of contact between the present and the past and acts as a mode of refurbishing the memory. Even when Kamalika has shunned Aruneshwar, it is the haunting tunes of an earlier time that pull her towards him. I would like to place this in context of the idea of identity that Rabindranath saw within cultural practices. Elsewhere he had written, "For nations are destroyed or flourish in the proportion of their poetry, painting and music are destroyed or flourish ... it is they alone who establish status of nations". (Kumaraswamy quotes this in Art and Swadeshi)

At this juncture I would also like to take a careful look at the visual memories that we have of this event, especially the photographs that show Rabindranath on stage while the performance was being staged. Undoubtedly the audience would have been captivated by the spectacle of the

production, yet a part of their attention must have been directed to the figure of the poet in the wings as part of the production, his very presence announcing a message through the performativity. In other productions In India, Rabindranath would deliberately be on stage to sanction the performance of women dancers because it had created a tremendous uproar in contemporary conservative society. The only other photograph which I could trace in the archives of Rabindranath's presence was during Kshitimohan Sen's reading of his essay *Crisis in Civilization* in 1941 where the sheer presence of a very ill Rabindranath was meant to convey the terrible anguish that had forced him to pen the essay.

My seminal point is therefore that the choice of Shapmochan was a deliberate gesture on the poet's part. Having been to Sri Lanka on several earlier occasions and having made his point in several speeches, Rabindranath wanted to emphasise the idea though his cultural form. Shapmochan emerged as a unique dance drama form that showcased Santiniketan as an emblem of the culture of India as opposed to a colonial model and sought to enthuse the Sri Lankan intelligentsia and school children to follow a similar model.

The visual impact of Shapmochan seems to have been significant. As S.W.R.D Bandanaïke notes: "The curtain went up and my first impression was one of aesthetic satisfaction at the setting and the grouping, which had the simplicity and the beauty which Greek drama alone has been able to achieve ... to some of us whose spirits had been saddened and deafened by the creaking seraphina and the discordant tone of the West hall actors, this was like the breath of another air."

Tagore's visit seems to have galvanized a major contribution to reminiscence in the Sri Lankan arts. One witnesses the effect on the rapid rise of Sri Lankan students who visited Santiniketan and went on to become major figures in Sri Lanka art. Chitrasena and Epitawala are credited with creating the Sri Lankan tradition of the Mudranataka or the ballet.

Let me here juxtapose Rabindranath's messages delivered in his various lectures during this trip. He urged:



I hope that my coming to your country will not end in an ephemeral sensationalism; that even when I leave your shore the memory of it will speak to you about the greatest of your problems which is that of finding your own true voice – in your own true language ... in order to testify your existence you must make yourself and to others. Do not waste your time and intellect in carefully imitating other people; however imitating their gestures, their manners, their idioms and be utterly lost in a vagueness of futile insanity.

He added:

I should consider myself as having failed in my message if I have not sufficiently impressed you with the truism that you cannot belong to yourself ... if you do not produce your own literature as the truest documentary of mastery of your mind ... I am not pessimistic, I speak to you this evening ... My own land of Bengal has passed through the same phase as you are now passing through. We have had our stages of uncertainty. But we have had our Renaissance and you shall have yours.

There seems to be a fine calibration between Rabindranath's speeches on this occasion and the performance that he directed. While the message spells out the need for rediscovery of a cultural identity and therefore shake off the curse of slavish colonial imitation, the performance demonstrated Rabindranath's own version of what could be achieved. While the lectures were setting a theory into motion, he was also looking at a form of praxis in the performance. The response in Sri Lanka seems testimony to the fact that there was a lot of percolation of Rabindranath's message. The impact was also heightened with Uday Shankar's arrival in 1935.

The response in the local press reports seem to be interestingly on the same lines: Ceylon Press praised the performance as a "feast of dance and song and music", and The Daily news wrote, "Since the unknown artist put the last finishing touches to the frescoes on the face of the rock at Sigiriya, nothing greater in the way of Oriental Art has been achieved in the island than that created by the Tagore players in the presentation of Shapmochan.

Also in it: While the people of Ceylon accept gratefully and with humility the boon Tagore has given them, they may well ask themselves whether it is not their duty to do something more. It would be a poor compliment to the poet to praise him but fail to be influenced by his example and his personality. Political advancement will not restore the self-respect of the people. If they are to lift up their heads without fear and take their place beside the other Eastern nations that are challenging the attention of the world, they must be able to show that they are capable of enduring achievements in the realm of the spirit.

21 May 1934: A visit to the present exhibition in the Art Gallery and to Shapmochan ... will convince the most skeptical that there is a special quality in the Bengal art traditions which could not blossom in an artificial or alien atmosphere or through the medium of a foreign tongue. When they have given us of their beauty and gone away ... it will be the duty of men and women who are anxious that the national genius of Ceylon should be re-inspired, to keep the flame that Tagore has lit from flickering out.

But the process was not unilateral, because we also note Rabindranath's fascination with the Kandyan dance in his Sri Lanka voyage. Not only did he study this dance carefully, he was so fascinated that he wanted to actually take the dancer home: Wilmont Perera notes:

He was so fascinated that he mentioned to me that I should arrange for a dancer and drummer to go back with him to Santiniketan... he made a reference to the beauty of these dances and chided us for allowing it to languish. Until then Kandyan dancing was confined to the Peraheras and ceremonials in the Kandyan homelands.

Writing on the Kandyan dance he later composed a poem, recording his deep appreciation:

The Kandyan dance in Ceylon did I see,  
It seemed to me,  
That sal trees from their root chains were breaking free

No barriers and no bondages shall be brook  
Behind we shall not look.

One recalls his tone of rebuke when he discovered the lack of respect that he found in the contemporary Sri Lankans to the form of the Kandy dance. The rebuke was not a mere tokenism, the fact that he sent Shantidev Ghosh to learn Kandy dance and infused it within his own creations ensured that the Sri Lankan intelligentsia would take cognizance of national identity through cultural forms. The fact that Rabindranath was sanctifying this dance and including it as part of his creative repertoire renewed an interest in Sri Lanka adding to this context of shaking of the curse and rediscovery of identity.

This process of reciprocity and mutual recognition without structures of power is what Rabindranath saw as a potential model for an Asian cosmopolitanism. In his earlier text *Java Jatri Patra* (subsequently translated as *Letters from Java*) Rabindranath had outlined the motif of his travel, ‘to see how India’s knowledge had travelled and in this travel to see the spirit of travelling knowledge’ using the term ‘pilgrimage’:

we are on an pilgrimage to see the traces of this old time expansion of India, the thought also strikes me that what India offered was not any dry preaching. What she gave roused the inner wealth of man in all its aspects – architecture, sculpture, painting, music and literature. Its traces one to be found in deserts in mountains, in far away islands ... India sent forth her wisdom outside herself, inasmuch as when she did so it came to be accepted by outsiders.

Interestingly he located Buddhism within this idea of seamless travel of ideas because he saw it as an example of a non-violent, yet extremely potent creation of a community of ideas:

It was the first spiritual force to us in history which had been able to draw us together in the bonds of a common fellowship, many diverse races of men separated by the most difficult barriers of language and distanced by the natural obstacle of sea, river and mountain ...

Draws the idea of Santam, Shivam and Advaitam and the Buddhist idea of Dharmayaka ...  
“dwelling in the constant consciousness of unbounded love.

Was this another reason that he had chosen Shapmochan as a text that would have resonated with the Sri Lankan audience? The story is based on the Kush Jataka and Rabindranath's source was the volume edited by Rajendralal Mitra The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal. Rabindranath had earlier used a version of this narrative in his play Raja.

This brings me to my point about an Asian cosmopolitan model that Rabindranath was searching. He saw the European model as one dictated by economic might and imperial power that involved transfer of men and resources and ideas but at a terrible human cost. His alternative to this idea was a transaction that happened through Buddhism. In all his Asian voyages he talks about a transfer that happens on a reciprocal basis, creating bonds of sympathy and exchange. Thus in the Japanese Haiku he writes, while even in China he alludes to the passages that Buddhism had carved out. Rabindranath does not discount that trade was an integral part of this exchange, but suggests that unlike the European model it was far more of a practice that involved transfer of sympathy, culture and resources. This is a point that he makes repeatedly in his 1927 visit to Siam.

\*\*\*The question of the curse and redemption might raise interesting debates especially when Rabindranath was in earlier essays accepting the incursion of modernity with the British presence. One however notices that by the 1930's he has made significant departure dividing the English colonialists into the individual *baro ingrej* and the more institutional *choto ingrej*. In *Crisis in Civilization* the tone is one of a bitter sense of disappointment:

I could never have remotely imagined that the great ideals of humanity would end in such ruthless travesty. But today a glaring example of it stares me in the face in the utter and contemptuous indifference of a so-called civilized race to the wellbeing of crores of Indian people. That mastery over the machine, by which the British have consolidated their sovereignty over their vast Empire, has been kept a sealed book, to which due access has been denied to this helpless country.

Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises. A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.

To conclude, Rabindranath's 1934 trip to Sri Lanka was one where he definitely wanted to convey his support to the search for a unique cultural identity and free the nation from an imposed cultural shackle. Shapmochan with its tableau of music, dance and stage décor offered them an alternative and coupled with the poet's inspiring addresses on this occasion. The response to the dance drama suggests that Rabindranath had succeeded in his venture. At the same time Shapmochan also offered an Asian model of exchange of ideas and cultural forms in a true spirit of reciprocity whereby both societies and cultural traditions could be reinforced thereby holding up a practical example of the ideal of Visva-Bharati at work. The visual records of his presence on stage and the archival press records make this point apparent.

In a speech held prior to his journey organized by the Greater India Society he noted this ability:

The real wealth of India was never kept hidden, like an old deed in an iron safe. The only true expression of India was in all that she gave openly and freely. The surplus of her cultural life, which she scattered everywhere, was the core of her personality. Through our capacity to give our real assets to others we earn the title to call the outsider our own.

In Singapore, Rabindranath drew upon the history of the colonial process to highlight the experience of India:

Two thousand or fifteen hundred years ago our ancestors used to come to this land. They came for purposes of trade no doubt. But they also came to give something to the lands to which they came with the fullness of spirit, and because in their own lives they realised the truth, they could make the whole world share in this realization. They raised up a great civilization in Malaya, and in the islands. This they did, not by suppressing the original peoples, but by holding them by the hand as an elder brother, and by guiding and putting them in the path of finding themselves, finding their latent powers. In this matter let the ways of our ancestors be our guidance. Let us be worthy of ourselves, and then we can be fit to serve others. (154)

Amitava Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement*:

Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge: To recognize, then, is not the same as an initial introduction. Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognize mutely ... The most important part of recognition thus lies in the first syllable, which harks back to something prior, an already existing awareness that makes possible the passage from ignorance to knowledge: a moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change of our understanding of that which is beheld. Yet this flash cannot appear spontaneously; it cannot disclose itself except in the presence of its lost other. The knowledge that arises from recognition, then, is not of something new, it arises rather from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself. (Ghosh 5-6)

Responses:

In our own family this change of spirit was welcomed for the sake of its sheer rational and moral force and its influence was felt in every sphere of our life. Born in that atmosphere, which was moreover coloured by our intuitive bias for literature, I naturally set the English on the throne of my heart. Thus passed the first chapters of my life. Then came the parting of ways accompanied with a painful feeling of disillusion when I began increasingly to discover how easily those who accepted the highest truths of civilization disowned them with impunity whenever questions of national self-interest were involved.

For nations are destroyed or flourish in the proportion of their poetry, painting and music are destroyed or flourish ... it is they alone who establish status of nations. (Coomaraswamy quotes this in *Art and Swadeshi*)

Although the collection of funds was a reason that the troupe did visit Sri Lanka, Tissa Kariyawasam mentions that the venture was not as successful as expected, “ I have doubts as to whether Tagore was able to settle the expenses of his 25 member toupe during the visit”.

# A very Modern Tagore

**Madhubhashini Disanayaka Ratnayaka**

The first question that we need to ask anyone who has read Tagore in English like I have is whether he or she really knows this writer who wrote mainly in Bengali. The answer must surely be no. His translated works are very little compared to his prolific output in Bengali. This is true of any writer who is read in another language from that which he or she writes but it is particularly true of Gitanjali, the work I will concentrate on today in my speech and which Tagore himself translated – for what we have here is not the Bengali version which is in three volumes, only one of which has the name Gitanjali – but 103 poems which are made up of some from the Bengali three volumes and some from other sources.

The casual compilation of the English Gitanjali – one has read often of Tagore carrying a sheaf of papers with him as he travelled to the West, recalls to mind the casualness with which Shakespeare is believed to have written some of his plays, scenes sometimes being hastily scribbled while the actors were on stage. We often forget, in this age of perfectionism and seriousness, how it is sometimes better not to try too hard – as Andre Gide says in the introduction to his French translation of Gitanjali, about the disparity of the poems that made up the book, ‘Yes, I am glad that the author was caught off his guard. At the age of 54, inspired by several friends, he, so famous on the border of the Ganges, decided to present an English version of his poems, but did not have enough to suddenly fill up his volume. . . . Isn’t it pleasant to see, for once, the gigantic tide of India making three, four, five attempts to fill the narrow cup that the English publisher extends to him!. . . . Ah, how grateful I am to India, thanks to Rabindranath Tagore, for not trying hard enough – and we gain so much for this exchange of length with quality, the weight of quantity with that of density. Almost each of the 103 short poems of Gitanjali has an admirable weight.’

This casualness, this being off guard, this lack of efficiency if we consider efficiency in the way it is regarded today, is an idea I will try to find in Gitanjali and relate it to a book published in the West a hundred years after the publication of Gitanjali called 'Lived Time' by charted psychologist Mariana Funes – to show how current Tagore's ideas were, how we can glean concepts that are considered rather radical or new in the world today – especially in the western world towards which all eyes are often turned.

According to an article about Germany's reaction to Gitanjali about a century ago, 'Without doubt the understanding of Gitanjali which is Tagore's vision of a harmonious society is not free from problems and difficulties for the European reader. In our efforts to understand Tagore's personality and his work, we have to try to imagine what exactly being 'progressive' meant in a society where feudal structures dominated and colonial exploitation hindered its growth and development. Tagore watched the destruction of the traditional Indian society and realized that industrialization according to the Western formula was not the solution to India.'

Now the question is, had it been the answer to the West? What do we see hundred years hence, of what we have done to the world with industrialization? Just as impressive scientific, industrial and technological break-throughs are happening in the West, it does not take more than a cursory glance to see the price human beings are paying for it in stress, inequality in the division of wealth, the danger posed to the environment and the intolerance of difference and so on. Just a few days ago, Amitav Ghosh in an interview titled 'We are living our lives as if we are mad,' in the website of Live Mint on 3 August 2016, said

“ . . . the 20th century was this great carbon-fuelled party. And we arrived at that party very late. So, in a sense, we are still in party mode. Most of us, the Indians, Chinese, we Asians, we arrived at this party late, so we want it to go on. So I suppose we just aren't looking at the reality, which is that this party is now on its last legs. That there are natural limits in this world which won't allow it to continue.”



Mariana Funes quotes J.K. Galbraith from his book *The Affluent Society* published in 1998 which speaks of the squirrel wheel as being the model for good society. The squirrel runs inside the wheel for the momentum he himself creates by his running – there is no way out except to stop running altogether. Funes says that ‘An effect of this model that should be already embarrassing us, if we stopped long enough to notice, is the social imbalance created by our slavery to production.’”

When Tagore took the poems he translated to the West, he was aware that he was taking knowledge – knowledge from the East to counter the materialism of the West. In his Nobel acceptance speech, he has said, ‘I can remind you of a day when India had her great university in the glorious days of her civilization. When light is lighted, it cannot be held within a short range. It is for the whole world. And India had her civilization with all its splendours and wisdom and wealth. It could not use it for its own children only. . . . We know what we have to be proud of, what we have inherited from our ancestors and such opportunity of giving should not be lost – not only for the sake of our people, but for the sake of Humanity.’”

What then, are the gifts of Tagore? What did he take to the West, and what could the West – and us who generally through the international media take much, too much, from the West - learn from him even now? He did want to make a difference, for Tagore believed in action that made an impact in the world, small as it may be – actual difference and not symbolic action for a lofty ideal – as evidenced by his setting up of the Santiniketan university “to establish an international institution where the Western and Eastern students could meet to share the common feast of spiritual food.” How much Santiniketan affected the world and Sri Lanka in particular is a theme for a different talk, but this is an example of how he believed in actually doing something where action was needed. This is also what he says in poem 64 of *Gitanjali*

‘Maiden,

Where do you go shading your lamp with your mantle?

My house is dark and lonesome –

Lend me your light! She raised her dark eyes

For a moment and looked at my face through the dusk.  
“I have come to the river,” she said,  
“to float my lamp on the stream  
when daylight wanes in the west.” I stood alone among tall grasses and watched  
the timid flame of her lamp uselessly drifting in the tide.

Thrice he calls her – thrice she tells of loftier aims than lighting his dark house: dedicating the lamp to the sky, joining the carnival of lamps – and does not come where the light is actually needed. The adverb Tagore uses for all the verbs that describes what she does is ‘uselessly’.

The world needs people who do – who make changes – but what then are the changes that Tagore might be advocating? More efficient people, more hardworking, more driven?

Listen to him: In poem 48, he says

I laid myself down  
By the water and stretched my tired limbs on the grass.  
My companions laughed at me in scorn;  
They held their heads high and hurried on;  
They never looked back nor rested; they vanished  
In the distant blue haze.  
They crossed many meadows  
And hills, and passed through strange, faraway countries.  
All honour to you, heroic host  
Of the interminable path!  
Mockery and reproach pricked me to rise,  
But found no response in me,  
I gave myself up for lost in the depth  
Of a glad humiliation – in the shadow of a dim delight.

Or this, in poem 60, where he speaks of the joy of children who do not have any other aim in playing than the joy of playing

They know not how to swim, they know not  
How to cast nets. Pearl fished dive for pearls,  
Merchants sail in their ships while children  
Gather pebbles and scatter them again.

They seek not for hidden treasures,  
They know not how to cast nets.

What the children do is useless – the gather and then scatter pebbles – but it is just the uselessness of that action that brings forth joy as seen in the two lines immediately afterwards

The sea surges up with laughter and  
Pale gleams the smile of the sea beach.

This idea of the value of uselessness, of inefficiency, is echoed in Funes who quotes Edward Luttwak from his book *Turbo Capitalism – winners and losers in the global economy*.

“Whatever is worthwhile about us, as individuals, groups and societies is the inefficient part. Inefficiency is where human life exists, social life exists, where love, hatred and culture exists.”  
(pg. 158)

It is not more efficient, driven people that Tagore is speaking about or identifying with in Gitanjali. It is people who can lie down in the middle of a journey – people who can make the decision to lie down because in the journey of drivenness and efficiency where

‘We sang no glad songs or played;  
we went not to the village for barter;  
we spoke not a word nor smiled;

we lingered not on the way.

We quickened our pace more and more as time sped by”

is not worth it.

So what is it that we should do? What kind of people then would make a better world? Is there any idea of a solution that we can glean from Gitanjali? Funes says “religion used to teach us how to live beyond our front door, but we have little secular guidance today and have retreated to the safety of the shopping mall. We put the individual at the center and all else loses value.”

(141) Religion and love of God is central in Gitanjali. All over, it is saturated with love for and identification with God. Let me just read one – poem 34

Let only that little be left of me whereby  
I may name thee my all.

Let only that little be left of my will whereby  
I may feel thee on every side,  
And come to thee in everything,  
And offer to thee my love every moment.

Let only that little be left of me whereby  
I may never hide thee  
Let only that little of my fetters be left whereby  
I am bound with thy will, and thy purpose is  
Carried out in my life – and that is the fetter of thy love.

But the nature of religion, and the place it has in our lives, have changed over the decades. Man’s quest for spirituality, however, has not. If at all, more and more people are turning towards alternate destinations to find peace and spiritual solace. And that quest, the turning away from yourself to something bigger, is important. Funes says that “There is evidence to suggest that we need to switch off the ‘me centers’ of the brain to be able to find true rest.

Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist at the University of Pennsylvania, has studied the neurobiology of religion for decades. . . . [He] argues that when we feel limbic activation (the limbic system is the seat of our emotions) and deactivation of the parietal lobes (which is ego centric) we can have an experience of ‘a sensed presence’ or, in common terminology, an experience of God. (pg 141)

A simple change of lifestyle too, can be taken as such a move. Funes speaks of how much we can achieve for our peace of mind simply by slowing down – of looking at time in a different fashion to what we are used to. She gives the western view of time as “a non-renewable resource that can be measured and used up. This is clock time, where the resource is time, which is used by a person for a purpose. The resource of time has a value, and the purpose for which time is being used has a value too. God forbid we might waste time for a purpose that is not valuable” (pg. 100)

The problem with this view of time, however, is, as she says is that “We may be running very fast to nowhere. The speed of change will keep getting faster until society comes to a halt as it declines and breaks up in the name of efficiency.” (pg 131)

There are those, however, who choose to slow down, to be inactive. Before I come to the present day examples, however, let me turn to Tagore. In poem 17, he says

They come with their laws and their codes  
To bind me fast; but I evade them ever,  
For I am only waiting for love  
To give myself up at last into his hands  
People blame me and call me heedless;  
I doubt not that they are right in their blame.

The market day is over and work is all done  
For the busy. Those who came to call me in vain  
Have gone back in anger. I am only waiting for love  
To give myself up at last into his hands.

Tagore is not part of the busy, the market day does not concern him – he is waiting in silence – probably in inactivity. That this kind of behaviour is not generally accepted is clear in the poem itself where the poet says that people blame him and call him heedless.

An interesting parallel is found in Funes, where she cites an article in the Financial Times that looks at people who made the lifestyle choice to work as little as possible. The article talks of these ‘rare’ creatures who choose to work less in a world ‘obsessed with productivity and competition.’

Though she is happy that the Financial Times had actually chosen to carry an article featuring people whose behaviour challenges “the conventional wisdom that laziness is always bad” because it “maybe an indication that, as a society, we are starting to become conscious of the limits of a life in clock time”, (pg 187), she is nevertheless unhappy with the tone of the article. The article itself, she says, speaks about the ‘social stigma attached to choosing laziness’ – laziness being the only word that is employed to speak of this lifestyle choice – and the tone itself, she says, mocks and talks about these ‘rare’ people ‘in a derogatory tone – implying we would have to be at best slightly eccentric to choose to work less. (pg186/7)

In most poems that speak of the poet choosing to step away from the business of the world, Tagore has also spoken of the reprimands that he gets for it.

It is important to note that it is not inactivity in the sense of not doing anything that these writers are talking about – but of doing less, so that that less would get complete attention and be meaningful and heartfelt. Tagore had great respect for work and workers. In poem 11 of Gitanjali – made very popular in Sri Lanka through the Sinhala song called ‘Anduru Kutiya Tula’ based on its words, he asks

Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with the 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 path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them  
In sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust.  
Put off thy holy mantle and even like him, come down to the dusty soil!

So it is not inaction – it is simply that Tagore conceived of Time differently – he knew the difference between what Funes calls clock time and Lived Time - that is, time which is not clock time. And it was in time that was not clock time, that wonder resided.

In poem 81, he says

On many an idle day have I grieved  
Over lost time. But it is never lost,  
My lord. Thou has taken every moment  
Of my life in thine own hands.  
Hidden in the heart of things thou art  
Nourishing seeds into sprouts, buds into blossoms,  
And ripening flowers into fruitfulness.  
I was tired and sleeping on my idle bed  
And imagined all work had ceased.  
In the morning I woke up and found  
My garden full with wonders of flowers

Lost time is never lost. That is that time that is in the hands of God. And it is that time that will have the wonder of flowers.

A person in modern society, that is we too can approximate the state of existing outside clock time, according to Funes “If each day we turn up, attend to our breath, note our opinions, and choose to relate to a moment with deep attention. ‘Then,’ she says, ‘we are making the most of our time. It really can be that simple.’” (pg 159)

The fact that that process is simple, is echoed in Tagore as well, when he finishes poem 48 with

At last when I woke from my slumber  
And opened my eyes, I saw thee standing by me,  
Flooding my sleep with thy smile.  
How I had feared that the path was long and wearisome,  
And the struggle to reach thee was hard!

Such minute attention to the moment, and the awareness of things as they are also has its pitfalls. Most of us are on autopilot in our lives – we don’t really see what we don’t want to see and try to put off feeling if it makes us uncomfortable. In *Lived Time*, David Whyte “tells us that a quality of deep attention is required to access our imagination, it requires us to come face to face with our dark side, the aspects of ourselves we have neglected, the aspects of ourselves that make us less than perfect and more imperfectly human.” (pg 121)

Such attention Tagore seems to have given himself and come face to face with the duality that is sometimes unavoidable if one is to live. He, or the poet of *Gitanjali*, confronts his own self in a couple of poems in the book – in 29 he says -

He whom I enclose with my name  
Is weeping in this dungeon.



I am ever busy building this wall all around;  
And as this wall goes up to the sky day by day  
I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow

And in 30

I came out alone on my way to my tryst.  
But who is this that follows me in the dark?  
I move aside to avoid his presence  
But I escape him not.  
He makes the dust rise from the earth  
With his swagger; he adds his loud voice  
To every word that I utter.  
He is my own little self, my lord, he knows  
No shame; but I am ashamed  
To come to thy door in his company.

Tagore's poetry, one that spells out for us a different pace of life, can help modern man in a myriad of ways. In fact, all literature and an aesthetic vision can. Funes says 'efficiency does not allow us to stay with the moment for very long. Clock time living requires that we use a given moment for more and more activities. What we gain in 'efficiency' we lose in the quality of interaction with each moment. This is a reason why we can use aesthetic vision to develop a different kind of relationship with each moment beyond what the efficiency of clock time allows. . . . To belong to an Anima Mundi is to swap efficiency for service to the world. Aesthetic vision can be an entry point to this way of living.' 120

Service to the world is the creed by which Tagore lived. It is what we give that we gain. I see no poem more beautifully exemplifying this as in poem 50 –

I had gone a begging from door to door  
In the village path, when thy golden chariot

Appeared in the distance like a gorgeous dream  
And I wondered who was this King of all kings!  
My hopes rose high and methought  
My evil days were at an end,  
And I stood waiting for alms to be given unasked  
And for wealth to be scattered on all sides in the dust  
The chariot stopped where I stood  
Thy glance fell on me and  
Thou camest down with a smile. I felt  
That the luck of my life had come at last  
Then of a sudden thou didst hold out thy right hand  
And say 'What hast thou to give to me?'

Ah, what a kingly jest was it to open  
Thy palm to a beggar to beg!  
I was confused and stood undecided,  
And then  
From my wallet I slowly took out the least  
Little grain of corn and gave it to thee.

But how great my surprise when at the day's end  
I emptied my bag on the floor to find a least  
Little grain of gold among the poor heap.  
I bitterly wept and wished that I had had  
The heart to give thee my all.

When the world moves further down on the road to spirituality – when even science might come close to recognizing the truths that are now limited to areas of alternate belief systems or alternate medicine – for example the theory of the quantum universe spoken about in books like the Secret – is now closer to being scientifically experimented after the discovery of ..... this year, we might realize that the songs of Gitanjali say much more than they are believed to be saying. For example, the idea of an energy filled universe is found in books and concepts of the quantum universe, Feng Shui, Reiki, Chakra etc. that are becoming increasingly popular in the

west. It had been beautifully expressed in a poem written more than a hundred years ago by Tagore. Poem 69

The same stream of life that runs through my veins  
Night and day, runs through the world  
And dances in rhythmic measures.  
It is the same life that shoots in joy  
Through the dust of the earth  
In numberless blades of grass and  
Breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.  
It is the same life that is rocked  
In the ocean-cradle of birth and of death,  
In ebb and in flow.  
I feel my limbs are made glorious  
By the touch of this world of life.  
And my pride is from the life throb of ages  
Dancing in my blood this moment.

We shall see what the immortal Tagore has to offer the world in ages to come. Simply by what was picked up for this speech - the necessity of slowing down, of being less efficient, of trying to get less done in more time as Funes says – will, I believe, help modern man or woman much. I will quote the book again to end:

We are after all ‘lived by powers that we pretend to understand’ (Auden) . . . . All we can do is attend to the world and be humbled by its immensity if we want to belong to it. Our attempts to control the world through the clock have given us much more inner disquiet than we ever predicted. And to seek inner quiet through yet more attempts to control ourselves and our lives seems analogous to telling that proverbial hamster that it will find rest if only it can keep turning that wheel a bit faster each day. (189)

# The Impact of Tagore's Legacy in Sri Lanka, 1922-2016: Notes for an Overview Interpretation

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**Susil Sirivardaana**

As we all know Tagore left his imprint here on his three visits to the island. That was in November-December 1922, May-June 1928 and the last, in May-June 1934. It is the last visit that is clearest in our memory. During it, he opened the Sri Palee College in Horana, he brought a particularly large troupe of artists and some of his closest co-workers at Santiniketan, and staged his dance drama, Shap Mochan, in Colombo, Jaffna and Galle, apart from numerous speaking assignments wherever he went. This preliminary overview of his legacy, is periodised into three phases as follows.

Phase I        - 1930s to 1948  
Phase II       - 1948 to 2000  
Phase III      - 2000s to 2016 .

These dates are broad markers only. The 'preliminary' nature lies in the fact that these are a set of notes for much deeper investigation, which I hope, would complement it.

## PHASE 1 - 1930s to 1948

During this period, Sri Lanka was a British colony, and was called Ceylon. This historical reality is important because it sets the stage for the impact of Tagore's Legacy. We know for a certainty that the foremost issue for the nation was, National Independence and Cultural Regeneration. Hence it was a period of ferment, as well crystallized here, by H.A. Ian Goonetilleke.

“Neither communal hang-ups nor ethnic tensions had begun to raise their ugly heads, and the over-riding national urge was for a sovereign Sri Lanka (or Ceylon as it was then) after four centuries of European influence and domination. The visit of Gandhi in 1927 had aided and abetted this tendency, and the “Quit

India” struggle and “Swaraj” ideal were in the ascendant. Indian leaders of the stature of Jawaharlal Nehru, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and C.R. Rajagopalachariar were welcomed and listened to with rapt attention. Two decades of the remarkable Jaffna Youth Congress idealism and its links with the South of the island were a powerful impulse towards freedom from crown

colony to independence on less rigid, restricted and communally infected lines. The socialist thrust in this direction had also begun in the thirties.

It was, also, a time of great intellectual ferment in Colombo which had seen the emergence of Lionel Wendt as a supreme exponent of the medium he made his own\*, as well as the creative impulse which led to the formation of the 43 Group of artists, and the clear enunciation of a return to the best cultural traditions of the Indian heritage in music, dance and drama. It was therefore an environment tailor-made for the 28 year old enthusiast\* to make his debut as an interpreter of his own transformation or rather the early beginnings, of such an initiation.

This historical cameo has to be complemented by a few more tidbits in order to complement the times we are talking about. One is the ferment and intellectual stirrings by a dissident group of Buddhist monks, associated with Vidyalankara Pirivena in Kelaniya, who were emerging as a critical mass of monks asking hitherto unasked questions about the socio-political role of the Buddhist monk. Second, were the debates in the State Council where Councilors of the stature of Dr A.P. de Zoysa, G.K.D. Perera, F.R. Freeman, Dr S.A. Wickremasinghe, Philip Gunawardena and others were also articulating new frontiers of political discourse. Third, was the rise and voice of the Sinhala, Tamil and English Press, which were also trying to reflect the spirit of the times. Fourth, was the silent and dedicated efforts of individuals like P. de S. Kularatne and C.W.W. Kannangara, who were courageously innovating in the realm of school education. (Another particular reason for sketching in this larger canvas of these times, is the fact that in the view of the author, the period of the 1930s and 1940s, has been inadequately researched.) Tagore's Legacy had relatively speaking, deep and wide-ranging impacts in this context. First, there was the hard fact that a rich young national-idealist, Wilmot A. Perera, was sufficiently inspired by the Great Sage and Shanthinikethan, to found a campus modelled on that symbolic institution, called Sree Palee, a name given by Tagore himself, when he responded to the invitation to come over and ceremonially open it. Second, was the very expansive cultural reawakening brought about by a large critical mass of Shanthinikethan alumni, who had returned home and experimented with what they learnt from the great place and, in the process, produced a large body of work which **facilitated the transition to "returning to the source" with lasting creative impacts.** This came close to being a renaissance of sorts and made its impact on the whole spectrum of the arts and letters.

Particularly noteworthy in this large group were artists and writers of the stature of Ediriweera Sarachchandra (dramatist, novelist and literary critic), Sagara Palansuriya (former Buddhist monk, poet, writer, and Member of Parliament), Sunil Shantha (lyricist and singer), Chitrasena (creator of modern Sinhala ballet), Chandralekha (female dancer), Premakumara Epitawela (creator of opera, thinker and writer), Ananda Samarakoon (composer of the national anthem and other popular songs), Surya Shankar Molligoda (musician), Makuloluwa (music researcher, performer and educator), Manjusri (painter) and many others. All of them became **national** figures and made solid contributions to the institutions they were associated with, and also successfully challenged the outworn premises of the colonial era and created new authentic models and exemplars, which could in turn, inspire their successive generations.

In retrospect, we may sum up their achievement as being of a threefold nature. First, they successfully committed themselves and engaged in the challenge of National Regeneration, though within the limits of Nationalism. Second, they were successful as innovators, breaking new ground in the forms and rediscoveries of forgotten modes of artistic creation, and often providing in addition, a set of theoretical writings for the new premises, which were avidly absorbed by their publics. Third and in the sphere of Nationalism, they espoused a form that was never chauvinistic or communal, because they had internalized deeply the realms of the “Indian other” at Shanthinikethan. Hence, they were a sharp contrast to the later hordes of chauvinism and communalism that led to serious ethnic conflict a few decades later. It was unfortunate however, that this group of dedicated alumni did not access, and hence could not be influenced by, Tagore’s prophetic critique of Nationalism, and the advocacy of Civilisationism as the positive alternative.

#### Phase II – 1948 to 2000

While this second Phase was interpenetrated by the influences and impacts of the first Phase, it appears to be more elusive and a period of drift in comparison to it. For example, the work of Sri Lanka’s greatest modern multifaceted literary figure, Martin Wickremasinghe, falls into this period. And though he did write two essays on Tagore in English, and has references to him in his autobiography, it is quite apparent that Tagore was not one of his primary inspirations, unlike in the case of an eclectic group of writers like Chekhov, D.H. Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Teilhard de Chardin, Malinowski etc. For example, there is no acknowledgement by Wickramasinghe of his

having read or being inspired by Tagore's great series of novels, of which he was a particularly avid student and explorer.

Though I may be wrong in this assessment \*, my own impression of the outputs and alumni of Sree Palee campus which Tagore opened in 1934, is that they had lost the momentum of the Tagorean inspiration. Intellectually speaking, Sree Palee never emerged as a national centre of thought and creativity. My impression is that after the death of its founder-benefactor (Wilmot A. Perera), that it fell back into a position of a provincial teaching institution, with no original vision of its own. Later in the sixties, this private campus, was nationalized along with many others and became a state institution. It has now been elevated to the level of an integral affiliated institute of Aesthetic Studies under the University of Colombo.

What did survive during this period of drift was, translations of Tagore's more popular works, led by Gitanjali\*, done by enthusiasts and admirers of his works. These became integral parts of the artistic tastes of the times.

#### PHASE 111 - 2000 to 2016

During this last period, several noteworthy attempts to seriously and critically engage with and discover Tagore's intellectual foundations take place. Hence, this we feel is the engagement with Tagore that Sri Lanka, given its tortuous post-Independence history, needed for it to come to terms with harsh historical realities. Ironically and necessarily at an acceptable remove, we may pose to ourselves the question, whether these pitfalls which befell us subsequently, were not implicit or explicit in what he talked about in his addresses to a colonial Sri Lanka?

We would like to summarise this phase in three processes. First there are the pioneering critical explorations of two leading contemporary cultural critics, Liyanage Amarakeerthi and Sunil Wijesiriwardhana. Second, there is the work done by the Contemporary Institute of Indian Studies in investigating at a concrete level, the roots of Tagore's visits to Sri Lanka, and documenting them with valuable photographs not published hitherto. Third, there is the work of Samskriti magazine, a critical journal in Sinhala with a distinguished history, and still being published, which committed itself seriously with engaging with the mature legacy of Tagore over a number of issues, which had not been attempted before. In this limited process, I would venture

to say that a great deal more than what was actually fulfilled so far, has been implied for immediate further research and exploration.

We may use Amara Keerthi's long essay in Sinhala titled, which in translation would read as NATIONALISM VERSUS COSMOPOLITANISM: GURUDEV TAGORE'S CULTURAL CRITICISM \* published in 2011 for his 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. He begins by stating upfront that the essence of Tagore has not been experienced by the Sinhala reader and further states that this experience has now come decades late. He also begins by stating that Tagore is a 'cosmopolitan' figure and gives his working definition of the word. A cosmopolitan person is one who feels at home in a language and culture that is different from his own. He refers to cosmopolitanism as a condition where a person is not centered on his native culture for understanding the other. It can be nurtured more deeply by education. He believes that Asians cannot do without this perspective. After recalling Tagore's own cosmopolitan family background and his challenging of received ideas in books like GORA, he mentions that Martha Nussbaum in America has been influenced by Tagore's cosmopolitanism to raise a similar agenda of queries in relation to American culture. Thereafter he goes on to make a detailed analysis between Tagore and Nussbaum's own perspective on cosmopolitanism. While I do not agree with Amara Keerthi's assumption that Tagore was talking about 'cosmopolitanism' because what he talked about was counterposing Nationalism with Civilisationism (or Asian civilisationism), and the two are different in its connotations, his critical intentions are worthy of praise. \*

Sunil Wijesiriwardhana's interest in Tagore, is also provocative and in context to the broader aspects of the discourse on culture, colonialism and the meaning of Independence. He does this in a very interesting chapter in his book on conflict studies\* titled POST-COLONIAL CULTURAL CHALLENGES. In it, he chooses to juxtapose the two parallel Renaissances – the Bengali and its Sri Lankan parallel – as a contextual entry point, and thereafter goes on to compare and contrast the socio-political and socio-cultural attitudes of the country's two leading intellectual writers, namely Martoin Wickramasinghe and Munidasa Cumaratunga, on key issues like politics, caste and the role of the citizenry. The point of departure for this exploration is the critical zeitgeist generated by Tagore and his writings. In the process, he makes two valuable critical contributions. First, the scope and depth of the two Renaissances shows that the Sri Lankan version was seriously limited in the societal issues it dealt with and in its sustainability.



Second, with regard to the comparison of the two leading writers, he attempts to show that contrary to received opinion, Cumaratunga Munidasa is more progressive than Martin Wickremasinghe. This is in fact a valuable critical mind asking hitherto unasked and highly relevant questions in a stagnating cultural milieu.

The second process we alluded to was that of the Centre for Contemporary Indian Studies (CCIS), University of Colombo which from the date of its founding in 2012 ,devoted its attention to focusing on Rabindranath Tagore as a critical lever to help it to lay down its roots within the cultural institutional arena of contemporary Colombo. This it began in partnership with the Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo, by reconnecting links with the community of Tagore admirers, and proceeding to research and resurface in a series of pioneering forays into documenting and publishing the forgotten legacy of his three visits to Sri Lanka in elegant publications circulated free to enthusiasts. This well-thought out exercise has yielded a valuable set of publications like

1. *Remembering Rabindranath Tagore* (150th Birth Anniversary Commemorative Volume) edited by Prof. Sandagomi Coperahewa and published by the University of Colombo. – 2011
2. *Tagore's Visits to Sri Lanka* – Essay written by Prof. Sandagomi Coperahewa and published by the ICC. – (2012)
3. *Tagore and Sri Lanka* (Rabindranath Tagore 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary Volume) edited by Prof. Radha Chakravarty and published by Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo. - 2013
4. *One Hundred Years of Gitanjali (1913 – 2013)* edited by Prof. Sandagomi Coperahewa and published by the CCIS. - 2015

This carefully edited series succeeded in whetting the appetite of Sri Lankan lovers of Tagore, to re-engage with him on today's terms.

The third instance is the effort of Samskriti magazine to make a **serious engagement** with the mature thought of Tagore. In its first mention in 2011, it expressly stated this commitment, and said that it expected to bridge the decades of past neglect. Apart from its publication of the two long articles by Liyanage Amarakeerthi and Sunil Wijesiriwardhana mentioned above, it accurately restated the context in which Gitanjali was derived in terms of its other antecedents. It

republished two translations of the poem selected for its excellence (out of many), together with the English originals. This was published in the Centenary of Gitanjali in Samskriti (issue 24:01) of December 2013. In the August 2011 issue (22: 01) it published for the first time in Sri Lanka, a translation of Tagore's The Kandyan Dance, again with the English version of Indiradevi Chaudhurani.

True, this is only a beginning. But it is a sound beginning on a serious self-questioning note. For example, Tagore's key essays on Nationalism are clearly alluded to, and its strategic - intellectual significance for rethinking Sri Lanka's intellectual - civilizational discourse is pin - pointed. There is obviously a great deal more follow up that the Contemporary Institute of Indian Studies has to do.

# De-Anglicizing Tagore

**Daya Dissanayake**

De-Anglicizing Tagore could begin by calling him Gurudev Rabindranath. If we have accepted *Rabindra-sangeet*, instead of Tagore-sangeet, we are not creating a new precedent in calling him Gurudev Rabindranath, and his writings as *Rabindrasahitya*, and he too probably would have been happy to be accepted by this name. If we do not need a family name for Valmiki or Kalidasa, why do we need a family name for Rabindranath?

Anglicization of Rabindranath had probably begun with the adoption of the name 'Thakur'. Rabindranath's lineage dated back to the 8th century, to the first group of learned Brahmins that came from Kanauj and settled in Bengal in the eighth century. They served as priests, and were addressed as Thakurmoshai, and Thakur had then been anglicized to further convenience the British, by changing it to Tagore. In our country, Sarachchandra and several other writers always used the name 'Thakur' instead of Tagore. We are fortunate that Europeans did not try to change Rabindranath to fit their tongue. Had they done so, like the way Greeks changed Chandragupta to Sandrocottos, we would have had something like Robbingnuts for Rabindranath.

In his presentation speech Harald Hjarne, Chairman of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, introduced Rabindranath Tagore as an Anglo-Indian poet<sup>2</sup> but there is no trace of any English or European blood in him. We do not find any record that Gurudev had objected to the statement. Fortunately for us, it is now almost forgotten.

One hundred and three years after Gurudev Rabindranath was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, we can still celebrate his greatness, as a leading literary giant of the 20th century in the world, and among all 112 Nobel laureates of the past 114 years. Some of the Nobel laureates never got into World Literature, and not many into *Vishvasahitya*. Many have been forgotten after a few years, but "Rabindranath had composed more than two thousand songs, thousands of poems, many novels, drama and short stories."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/press.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tagoreweb.in/>

What Karl Ragnar Glerow of the Swedish Academy said in his presentation speech on the award of the 1971 Nobel to Pablo Neruda is more valid for Rabindranath. "No great writer gains lustre from a Nobel Prize. It is only the Nobel Prize that gains lustre from the recipient - provided the right one has been chosen."<sup>4</sup> We have to honour our Gurudev not because he won the Nobel, but because of all his contributions to the world of arts and for the well being of mankind.

Gurudev Rabindranath's third visit to Sri Lanka, in 1934, and the subsequent journeys by our artists to Santiniketan, resulted in their de-anglicizing their own names. In 1939 Baddeliyanage Joseph John, changed his name to Sunil Santha, within one month of arriving at Santiniketan. Eustace Reginald de Silva changed his name to Ediriweera Sarachchandra, George Wilfred Alwis became Ananda Samarakoon, and Albert Perera became Amaradeva.

Even if de-anglicizing the name may not be so important, we have to seriously think of de-anglicizing 'Tagore literature' as *Rabindrasahitya*, to fulfill Gurudev's dream of a *Vishvsahitya*. To Rabindranath, *Vishvsahitya* was not 'world literature'. It transcends geographical, racial, language and political boundaries.

Rabindranath wrote, 'The word '*Sahitya*' is derived from the word 'sahita'. Thus etymologically there is a sense of unity inherent in the word '*Sahitya*'. It is not merely the unity of thoughts of language or books. Nothing but '*Sahitya*' can create an intimate link between peoples, between past and present, between far and near."<sup>5</sup> It is this togetherness we need and why we have to bring *Rabindrasahitya* to the world.

Unfortunately in India they translated *sahitya* as literature in the late 19th century, and we in our country too re-translated 'literature' as our *Sahitya*.

In our part of the world, we try to anglicize everything, like we now use the term 'Lord Buddha', probably because Europeans wanted to bring Him to an equal footing with YHWH, who became

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1971/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1971/press.html)

<sup>5</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Sahitya* (Vishva-Bharati 2004) p. 112

Lord God in English, even though Buddha does not need any epithet. Indians, while retaining the name India, instead of calling it Bharat Varsha, have been de-anglicizing the names of their cities, to Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bangaluru, while we still retain our anglicized names for Colombo, Galle, Kandy. The only name we dropped, to my knowledge, is Kernigalle for Kurunegala.

While we Indians and Sri Lankans became anglicized in many ways, we in our country have been suffering a colonial mindset for over two millennia, when we became indianized. This indianization was disguised as aryanization very often, which was once again used by the Europeans who attempted to justify their invasion and occupation of our countries by showing ancestral links.

People around the world have a right to read *Rabindrasahitya* in their own language, without any deletions, distortions, misinterpretations. We in Sri Lanka need to read *Rabindrasahitya* in Sinhala and Tamil. To achieve this the writings have to be translated by committed writers, who have mastered their own mother tongue and Bangla, or Vanga, as we call it, but without anglicizing or indianizing them. The SAARC Cultural Centre started a very ambitious project, to translate the great literary works by South Asian writers, to share them first with all South Asians, and then the world. But unfortunately it has come to a standstill.

A very sad situation is that we had to read Gitanjali only as Sinhala translations of the English prose translation by Gurudev. We in our country ended up with eight such translations of Gitanjali. It is only now that Prof. Upul Ranjith Hevavithanagamage has undertaken a translation from the original. The first verse from the original Gitanjali (which had not been included by Rabindranath in his translation), is published in the CCIS publication, 'One Hundred years of Gitanjali'. This should convince us of the need to translate all *Rabindragita* direct from Bangla, because of the similarities of the two languages and what we have in common.

Prof. Sandagomi Coperahewa has listed 50 translations of Rabindranth's works into Sinhala, which includes 7 translations of Gitanjali, and 4 of Gora. Some of them are said to have been translated directly from Bangla original writings.

It often comes to my mind, how rich our songs could have been, if our great lyricists like Mahagama Sekara, Dalton Alwis, Arisen Ahubudu had a real Gitanjali translation available to them for inspiration. Sunil Santha may not have been able to master Bangla well enough to read the original Gitanjali, as he had spent only six months at Santiniketan. But he was able to grasp the essence of Rabindra thoughts, and his music, that he was able to not only use *Rabindrasangeet*, but also develop his own *Sunilsangeet*.

Coming to the present day, I have been searching for a Sinhala writer who has also mastered Bangla, who could translate '*Purno Chobir Mognota*' by the Bangla Academi Award winning Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain, into Sinhala. It is a biographical novel woven around the time Gurudev Rabindranath spent in Shahjadpur, Shelidah and Patisara and the river Padma. It had been written after researching this subject for over ten years, reading all the stories and poems Gurudev had written while he was looking after the Tagore family estates, and also his notes and letters. It is the Padma river and the river basin which turned a *Zamindari* into the Gurudev and it is the story Hossain is telling us here. She puts these words into the mouth of the village postman, Gagan, "Padma flows inside my body....I feel the river coursing through my veins". It is the same river which flowed through Rabindra's veins, and that is what would have made him feel one with the people there.

I had the good fortune to read the English translation 'The Painter's Palette' by Dr. Debjani Sengupta. Even though she has done an excellent job, it is still not the original which Hossain had created. The original Bangla work, which in translation into Sinhala would be very much closer to '*Purno Chobir Mognota*', than The Painter's Palette.

Thinking beyond this small island, still more unfortunate is that most of the Gitanjali translations into other major languages in India and Europe too had been from the English version and not from the Bangla original. In India access to his works was also limited. Gurudev wrote in Bengali, which is spoken only by about 8% of the total Indian population. The others had to read his work in translation in their own language or in English, and it would not have been the same as reading him in his own writing. There could have been many variations in the translations too,

because translating Gurudev is not an easy task. There are 38 different translations of Gitanjali in Hindi, and 6 in Kannada.<sup>6</sup> William Radice claims that not only the translations into German, Russian, French but even most of the translations into other Indian languages had been from the English translations and not from the original Bengali.<sup>7</sup>

One reason why Rabindrasahitya did not survive for long after the initial popularity with the award of the Nobel, could have been the not very successful translations into English.

In a way Gurudev became his own enemy, with his attempts to translate his own writings. But I believe that Yeats and other poets like Ezra Pound are also responsible. They praised, and promoted Rabindra translations, and then suddenly decided to drop him and criticize him. Harold M. Hurwitz, writing about Yeats and Tagore had said that Yeats had introduced Tagore to London literati, "I know of no man who has done anything in the English language to equal these lyrics". The same Yeats, two decades later had said "(Tagore) knows no English....no Indian knows English. Nobody can write with music and style in a language not learned in childhood and since then the language of his thought". (quoted by Buddhadeva Bose in Kabi Rabindranath).

Whether this change in attitude was political or out of naked jealousy we would never know.

Michael Collins says that Gurudev had been thinking of translating his works into English for some time, and most interestingly he had been encouraged since 1908, by Ananda Coomaraswamy, to translate his works into English.<sup>8</sup>

"....I do believe that the changes that Yeats made - to the order and selection of the poems, to the paragraphing, to the punctuation, and above all to Tagore's choice of words and phrases - would have contributed to Tagore's growing feeling over time that in the English Gitanjali, as presented and edited by Yeats, he had betrayed his true self....The subtle relationship between poetry and

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<sup>6</sup> <http://rabindranathtagore-150.gov.in/sahitya-akademi.html>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.williamradice.com/Recent%20Events/Tagore\\_the\\_world\\_over.htm](http://www.williamradice.com/Recent%20Events/Tagore_the_world_over.htm)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/4466944/History\\_and\\_Postcolonial\\_Thought\\_Rabindranath\\_Tagore\\_s\\_Reception\\_in\\_London\\_1912-1913](https://www.academia.edu/4466944/History_and_Postcolonial_Thought_Rabindranath_Tagore_s_Reception_in_London_1912-1913)

song; the careful way in which he had chosen representative poems from a number of contrasting books; and the creative pleasure that in a mood of confidence he described in a letter to J. D. Anderson of 14 April 1918 as 'a magic which seems to transmute my Bengali verses into something which is original again in a different manner'; all that had been spoiled." (Rothenstein)

William Radice, who translated Gitanjali, using the original Bengali poems and the Rothenstien manuscript, found that Yeats had made "many unnecessary and faulty changes in the manuscript", that Yeats had changed the sequence which Gurudev had carefully designed, that the sequence and punctuations "made it sound very biblical.....the published book has as many small paragraphs like the Bible....For one hundred years no one has objected to this text....All translations of Gitanjali have been based on this text. But actually it's a bad text, very bad text.....but Rabindranath's genius is actually there, in the manuscript."<sup>9</sup>

Partha Pratim Ray, librarian, Institute of Education, Visva-Bharati, had done a study of the different editions of Gitanjali. The first publication of the Gitanjali in Bengali was in September 1910. There were 157 songs and poems, of which 20 had been previously published 'Sharodutsav' (1908) and 'Gan' (1909). The other 137 poems had been written between August 1909 and August 1910. The English translation had only 103 poems, "These translations of poems contained in three books, '*Naivedya*', '*Kheya*' and '*Gitanjali*', but the collection had really been from 10 other books. Only 53 of the 103 poems in the English Gitanjali was from the original Bengali Gitanjali. 16 were from *Gita-malya*, 15 were from *Naivedya*, 11 from *Kheya*, the other 8 from *Chaitali*, *Kalpana*, *Smaran*, *Shishu*, *Utsarga* and *Achalayatan*. The Bengali Gitanjali had been reprinted 40 times from 1910 to 2007."<sup>10</sup>

For the past 100 years, we have all been imprisoned inside the English Gitanjalie, translated by Gurudev for the Western reader, and claimed to be edited by a man who did not understand Gurudev or India.

Tagore is needed now, in the 21st century, perhaps more than when he wrote Gitanjali, or when

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.newstoday.com.bd/index.php?option=details&news\\_id=2345121&date=2013-05-17](http://www.newstoday.com.bd/index.php?option=details&news_id=2345121&date=2013-05-17)

<sup>10</sup> Partha Pratim Ray, Publications of Rabindranath Tagore: A Bibilometirc Study. 2015



he won the Nobel Prize. Sitakant Mahapatra and Prafulla K. Mohanty, sums it up in their introduction to 'Tagore and Nazrul Islam Vision and Poetry', where they write, "Tagore's poetry brought a humanist universalism with abundance and amplitude of the traditional soul of India...(p.14)...The 21st century reader living in the post-modern world encounters only demystification and decentering to lose hope in life. For such readers Tagore offers hope for life and confidence in living. p.21)

One probable reason for the failure of Gurudev's own translations could have been that he had first written in Bangla, and when he attempted to translate them into English, he would still have been thinking in Bangla. It is a very difficult task for a writer to attempt translation of his own writings which have been created in his mother tongue. Writing first in a second language could give better outcome, as the writer could think in the second language and put them into words. Translating such a work into the mother tongue would be easier because it would be easier to switch into thinking in the mother tongue. That is my personal experience too.

Ediriweera Sarachchandra has shown us how an author could translate his own works successfully. Sarachchandra improved on his original work, '*Heta Echchara Kaluwara ne*' in 'Curfew and the Full Moon', and more so in 'Foam Upon the Stream', where he combined '*Malagiya Etto*' and '*Malawunge Avurudu Da*'. Gurudev Rabindranath could have done it himself, or he could have collaborated with a native English user with a good mastery of Bangla to do the translations. Rabindranath would have done all his creative writing, as the thoughts came to him, unmindful of who would be reading them. Sarachchandra would have done the same, when he first wrote in Sinhala, and also when he rewrote them in English, but Rabindranath had manacled his creativity in his English writing, because he wrote them for the western reader in mind.

Basudeb Chakraborti's study of Gurudev's play *Rakta Karabi*, (The Unrecognized Work of Tagore as Translator: An Assessment of Red Oleanders), covers most of the issues faced by Rabindranath himself, and other translators, in their efforts to bring the Bangla writings into English.<sup>11</sup> He quotes Sisira Kumar Ghose, "the problem, hard to avoid, is that the 'Englised

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<sup>11</sup>

<http://rupkatha.com/V2/n4/12TagoreRedOleandersTranslation.pdf>

Tagore' is not the same as the Bengali Rabindranath."<sup>12</sup>

Most of the Indian critics only commented on *Rakta Karabi*, ignoring Red Oleander. The western critics, almost everyone, could not find anything noteworthy in the English translation.

However all the adverse comments by western critics affected Rabindranath very badly. Chakraborti sums up the situation, "The unkind comment on Red Oleanders by Western critics shocked Tagore so much so that after this translation, Tagore never ventured to publish anything in English for the West. Perhaps Tagore realized that it would be futile to make the Western reading public familiar with the imagery and symbols, which are interwoven with the themes of his writings, until the people of the West internalize the composite understanding of Indian life, religion and philosophy, which are intrinsically connected with one another. Perhaps Tagore realized the problem of an unhappy mismatch between the theme of his plays in Bengali and the rendering of those into the linguistic framework of English. Ananda Lal's comment in this regard seems to be pertinent here: 'Understandably, Tagore never published any other play in English translation in the West after this disaster'.<sup>13</sup>

Radha Chakravarty quotes from Gurudev's own letter where he admits that he has misrepresented himself to the Western Reader, that he has done gross injustice to his original productions.<sup>14</sup> This is not the place to discuss the fidelity of translation, or Vishva Bharati's attempt to ensure true to the original translations, or if an author could translate his own works.

Asru Kumar Sikdar, poses the question, 'Why did Rabindrnath translate his works to English?' in his paper published in 'Contemporarising Tagore and the world'. The first poem Gurudev had translated had been from his '*Manashi*' at the request of an English surgeon, in 1888. Later he had started his historic translations while convalescing in Shiladaha. Many of his early works had been translated into English by fellow Bengali writers. Ananda Coomaraswamy, was perhaps

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<sup>12</sup> Sisir Kumar Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore. 1986 p.6

<sup>13</sup> Ananda Lal, Rabindranath Tagore Three Plays, p. 74

<sup>14</sup> Chakravarti, Radha. Translating Tagore: Shifting Paradigms. Contemporarising Tagore and the World. 2013. p. 291

the first non-Bengali to have translated Rabindranath into English. Sikdar mentions Maud MacCarthy as the first native English translator who had produced 'My Father's Home' from '*Tomari gehe palichho snehe*', in 1911.

In the same article Sikdar writes, "these translation were made in unbelievable haste. The translation of '*Sharodotsab*' as 'Autumn Friends' was done in less than two days. Rabindranath's English translations thus became a commodity. In the commercial interest of the publishing house the fact that the works were originally in Bangla was suppressed." Sikdar continues, "The publishers could continue with such irregularities with impunity because Rabindranath was a member of the subjugated Indian nation, and they were white men belonging to the country that had colonized India."<sup>15</sup> And again, "In order to be acceptable to the western readership, he (Rabindranath) ended up presenting through his English translations only a pale and lacklustre reincarnation of himself. "(p312). "He wanted to reach out to them (western readers); to be accepted by them; to be understood by them. In order to be acceptable to the west, he failed to be faithful to his original works. He was unconsciously under the pressure of colonial 'cultural hegemony'. And as a result, he presented in English a denuded, meagre, mutilated form of his work." (p314)

Subas Sarkar gives one example, of the translation of '*Āji jharer rāte tomār abhisār*'. Rabindranath "takes liberties with the original and spoils the poetic charm with the patent view of reaching out to the average English or European reader. Here Tagore was hardly a translator; he was more of a purveyor of his merchandise to customers of other lands who took a fancy to his wares." (P 164)

(Studies in Translation. ed. Mohit K. Ray. Tagor in Translation: A Case for Revaluation. Subhas Sarkar. )

One person from the west, who really understood Rabindranath was Alex Aronson, who came to know Bengal and Rabindranath so well, during his seven year stay at Santiniketan and later at the University of Dhaka. But the world and *Vishvasahitya* lost a great opportunity to have *Rabindrasahitya* translated into English, and perhaps German too, because Aronson had not

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<sup>15</sup> Sikdar p. 306-7

made an attempt to learn Bangla. Yet the German readers are fortunate that Prof. Martin Kampchen has taken up the challenge to introduce Gurudev Rabindranath to them, in place of the 'Englished Tagore'. We in Sri Lanka are unfortunate that we could not produce our own Martin Kampchen, though many had been at Santiniketan, and learned Bangla, and admired and venerated Gurudev.

Copyright is over, but that should not give the liberty for anyone to translate Gurudev, anyway they wish. A translator should not be given a poetic license, specially if his interest is in riding on the fame of Gurudev or to earn filthy lucre.

'The Essential Tagore' edited by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarti is a good start to de-anglicize Rabindranath. However let such English translations be for the Western readers, but for us in South Asia, let us have our own translations in our own languages, which would be definitely much closer to the original works of Gurudev.

*Rabindrasahitya* does not need any awards, or any added publicity. But we need translations which will be with us even for many generations to come. It would be wonderful if we could all lean to read Bangla, if it is only to read Rabindranath. But we cannot all of us become polyglots. We have to depend on translations.

Our children today have an opportunity to learn many languages, but unfortunately not the Bangla language. It is time for India or Bangladesh high commission to set up a facility to teach Bangla to our children, and for our universities to include Bangla also as a subject, because our two languages have so much in common.

While de-anglicizing *Rabindrasahitya*, we should also ensure that we do not continue to indianize our *sahitya* and our culture.

What is needed is *Rabindrasahitya* to enrich *Vishvasahitya*.

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