



## *Tagore's Visits to Sri Lanka*

*Sandagomi Coperahewa*

*As a poet, it is my mission to restore that ancient association of mind through my efforts that speak through a direct language of art.*

Rabindranath Tagore, Colombo – 1934

### **Introduction**

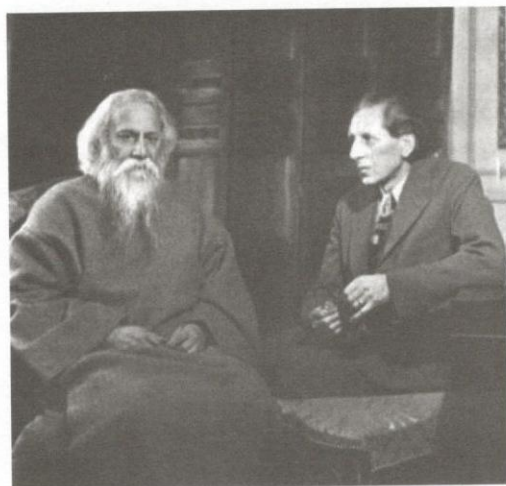
Among the many aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's diverse personality was his fascination for travel. He kept his doors open to ideas from the East and the West. As Supriya Roy says, Tagore's journeys to the East are quite distinct from those he made to the West; "whereas his travels to the West had an air of adventure, his travels to the eastward were like pilgrimages – in the footsteps of his ancestors who travelled to the East from India carrying a message of truth and love" (2011: 2). Tagore visited more than thirty countries in the world including Sri Lanka. In fact, his last overseas visit was to Sri Lanka. During his travels, Tagore explained his ideal of Visva-Bharati and raised funds for its development and made a deep impact on the cultural life of the people. He also continued with his dream of establishing contacts between different cultures and people. Focussing on Tagore's most well-known visits to Sri Lanka, 1922, 1928 and 1934, this paper discusses the socio-historical background of Tagore's travels and his impact on Sri Lankan cultural life. It also explores Tagore's lesser known three other transit visits to the island, and shows his abiding interest in the island of Sri Lanka. By examining the ways in which he interacted with the cultural personalities of that era, this paper revisits Tagore's legacy in Sri Lankan cultural and intellectual life. In general --- this paper provides insights into the nature and effect of Tagore's Asian voyages.

During the early twentieth century, when Tagore visited Sri Lanka, both India and Sri Lanka were under British colonial rule. Britain's colonial relationship with South Asia led to many cross-cultural exchanges in the arts and sciences. Many South Asian intellectuals and academics established influential contacts and friendships within the region. At the same time, Bengal was the most vibrant intellectual and cultural nerve centre of South Asia. Two important institutions attracted Sri Lankan scholars: one was University of Calcutta (founded in 1857) and the other was Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan founded by Tagore in 1918. Tagore's visits to Sri Lanka and his close contacts with Sri Lankans had a profound influence on the socio-cultural relations between the two countries. An important cultural landmark was thus established in the mutual relationship between India and Sri

Lanka. Tagore himself had shown a great interest in the Sri Lankan people and had an emotional attachment with Sri Lanka's history. According to scholars Tagore's fascination with Sri Lanka seems to have been prompted by two factors: first, the general belief that the Sinhalese, the majority of Sri Lankans descended from immigrants from Bengal and second, profound respect for Theravada Buddhism and the Buddhist heritage of the island (Dharmadasa, 2011: 2).

### Tagore and Sri Lanka: Early Contacts

According to Kalidas Nag, the historian and a Tagore follower, Rabindranath's father, Debendranath Tagore had visited Sri Lanka in the 1860's with his son Satyendranath Tagore (1944: 4). This shows that the Tagore family had an abiding interest in the island of Sri Lanka. In the 1890s when Tagore edited the literary journal *Sadhana* invited articles on Buddhism and Tagore was aware of Anagarika Dharmapala's (1864-1933) Buddhist revival work in India. The *Maha Bodhi* journal started by Dharmapala as the organ of the Society was patronized by Indian intellectuals such as Tagore who contributed articles and poems to it. Moreover, during 1903-05, Asit Kumar Haldar (1890-1964) an artist-colleague of Tagore was a frequent visitor to the home of Dharmapala (Halder, 2011: 132). In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the cultural and spiritual collaboration between India and Sri Lanka was deepened through the initiatives of Dharmapala, Asutosh Mookerjee and Tagore.



2. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Rabindranath Tagore

While in India, Sri Lankan art critic and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) formed close relationships with the Tagore family, and was involved in both the literary renaissance and the *swadeshi* movement, an early phase of the struggle for Indian independence. It is clear that Tagore had already met Sri Lankans before he travelled to Sri Lanka.

On the 13th of November 1913, the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Tagore by the Swedish Academy; the Bengali poet had become a world figure. Soon after the World War (1914-1918), in May 1920, Tagore sailed for Europe, where he was received with immense admiration.

### Tagore's First Visit to Sri Lanka – October 1922

The beginning of the twentieth century saw a remarkable social, political and cultural change in Sri Lankan society. The English-educated elite were politically involved in constitutional reform activities and at the same time they were interested in various cultural and reform movements (Coperahewa, 2009). It is clear that during the early 1920s Tagore had many connections with Sri Lankan Buddhist priests, politicians and intellectuals including D. B. Jayatilaka, Dr. W.A. De Silva, Rev. Rambukawelle Siddhartha. All of them studied at the University of Calcutta and Tagore had a close association with the university.



In 1918 Tagore laid the foundation for his ideal institution Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan and made adequate provisions to study Buddhism and Pali (Nag, 1944). Thus, the conducive socio-cultural atmosphere that existed in Sri Lanka in the early decades of the twentieth century paved the way for Tagore to visit his neighbouring country. At this time, Tagore was famous in the region for his literary and intellectual contribution and the Nobel Prize (1913) established Tagore's status as a 'World Poet' (*Visva Kavi*).

Tagore's first visit to Sri Lanka in October 1922 was on the invitation of Dr. W. Arthur De Silva (1869-1942), a scholar, politician and philanthropist, who was an alumnus of Calcutta University. When he visited Sri Lanka in 1922, Tagore was 61 years old and had a considerable reputation in the region both as literary icon and an anti-imperialist. Tagore was accompanied by Rev. C.F. Andrews. In this visit Tagore stayed at 'Sravasti', the home of Dr. De Silva, and then went to Kandy, and spent a week in Nuwara Eliya. At this time, in Sri Lanka, the political elite were forming the Ceylon National Congress (1919) following the example of the Indian National Congress (INC). Tagore's friend Dr. Arthur De Silva was a Member of the Executive Committee of the CNC and became the President of the Congress in 1928. In this visit, Tagore gave a lecture at the newly-established Ceylon University College (1921). He spoke on the 'Ancient Indian Universities' and the "tradition of close engagement between the *guru* and *shishya* (Goonetilleke, 2001: 51). Robert Marrs, Principal of the College, presided the occasion. On 10th November 1922, Tagore visited Ananda College, as the chief guest of the annual prize giving. During his visit to Kandy he was honoured by politician George E. De Silva and Albert Godamunne. Tagore also gave a lecture at Trinity College. During this visit he addressed gatherings in Colombo, and Mahinda College, Galle. At this time Tagore's disciple Dr. Kalidas Nag served as the Principal of the Mahinda College, Galle. In one of his speeches Tagore said:

Although the political constitution of modern Ceylon separates this country from India, it is no secret that its history, religion, language, morals, culture and everything else are closely linked to India. Briefly stated, the fact that Ceylon became great because of India is no exaggeration. Although the spiritual bond between the two countries that was there in the past has collapsed, time has come to put that together again and strengthen it (Cited in Dharmadasa, 2011: 4).

### Tagore's Second Visit to Sri Lanka – May 1928

In 1927 Tagore staged *Natir Puja* in Kolkata where he acted the role of the Buddhist monk. In the same year he went on a trip to South East Asia, including Myanmar, Singapore, Java, Bali. In 1928 the University of Oxford invited Tagore to deliver the Hibbert Lectures. Tagore had embarked on a ship on 12th May 1928 but had to cancel his trip to Europe due to his illness. Instead he visited his Sri Lankan friend Dr. Arthur De Silva in Colombo. It was a longer visit and it lasted for ten days, from 29th May – 11th June 1928. Tagore stayed at 'Sravasti' and then went to Nuwara Eliya. Rev. C.F. Andrews was with him during this trip also. When Tagore visited Sri Lanka in 1928 he was known to the Sinhala intelligentsia as a recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature and also as a great Indian poet. Sinhala and English newspapers announced the arrival of the great Indian poet. In connection with this visit the Sinhala daily *Dinamina* published several poems in praise of 'Maha Kavi Ravindranth Tagore' including a poem written by Katunayaka Lionel W. De Silva wishing good health for the poet (See *Dinamina*, 1928-5-31).

During the early 1930s Tagore had many connections with Sri Lanka. At this time, Arian Williams, a Sri Lankan Tamil from Jaffna served as the poet's Secretary and also worked as a teacher at Santiniketan (Nag, 1944: 7). Moreover, Tagore's interaction with Sri Lankan students in Santiniketan provided scope for another visit to the island.

### Tagore's Last Visit to Sri Lanka – May 1934

During 1931-32 Tagore had financial difficulties and his friends and well-wishers in Sri Lanka invited him to the island and helped him in many ways to raise funds for Visva-Bharati. Tagore's last visit to Sri Lanka was in May 1934. In fact, this was his last overseas visit. It was the most important visit and the invitation was extended by an admirer, Mr. Wilmot A. Perera (1905-1973). He was a business magnate and visited Santiniketan in 1932. The friendship between Wilmot A. Perera and Tagore had a profound influence on the cultural relationship between the two countries. By this time, the name and work of Tagore had become familiar to those embarking on literary and artistic careers.

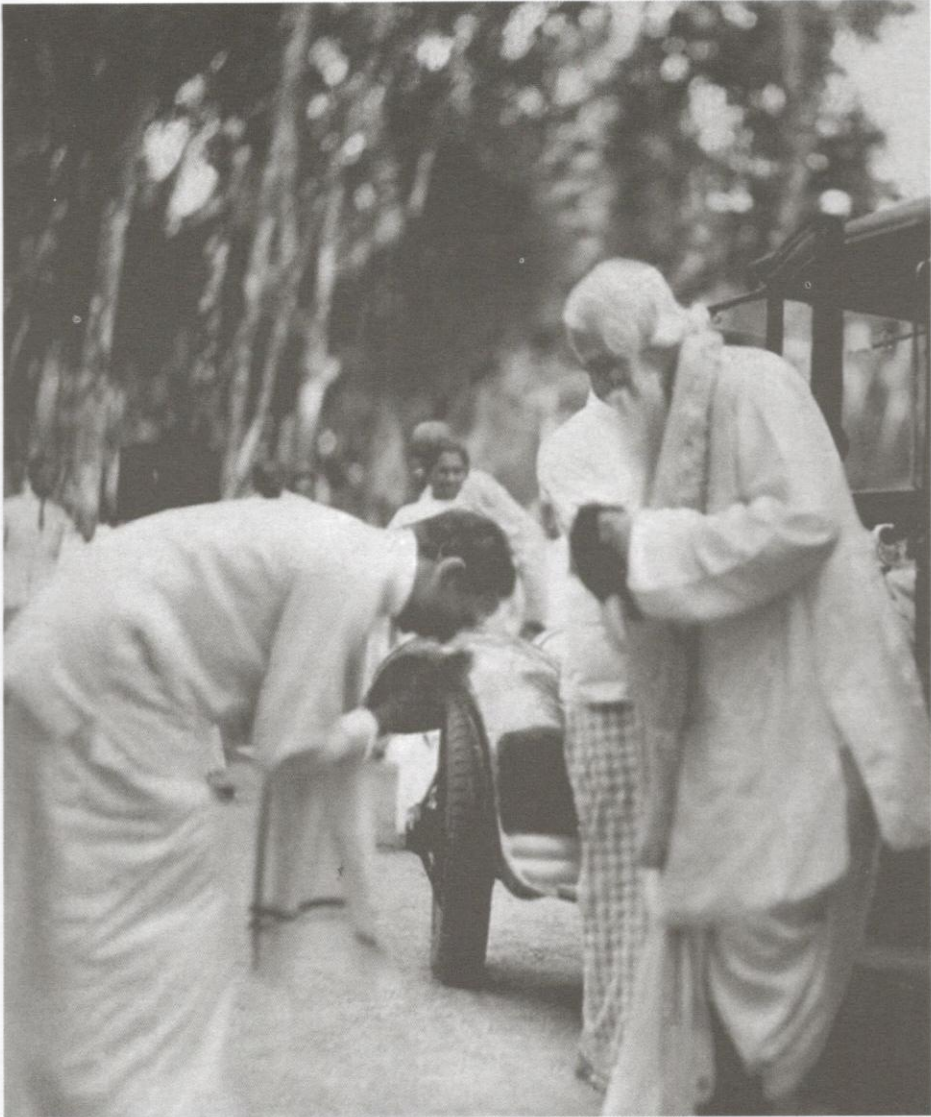
On 9th May 1934, Tagore and a group of 23 students from Santiniketan arrived in Colombo. His 73rd birthday was celebrated on board ship. He was accompanied by his daughter in law Pratima Tagore, the daughter of the poet, Mira Devi and the renowned artist Nandalal Bose. Huge crowds welcomed Tagore and his group. The personalities who were present to receive him included Sir D. B. Jayatilaka, who was then the Leader of the State Council of Ceylon and also an alumnus of Calcutta University and W.L. Murphy, the Mayor of Colombo. On his arrival to Lanka, Tagore stated:

I know your island and her beauty. I have been here more than once. And this time I have a special mission. I have brought some part of our culture which Santiniketan represents. I hope I will be able to please you. I hope my mission will be fulfilled... I have brought something from India, some aspect of the culture, some delight of her arts and I hope you will realize that it that it is of eternal value. With politics I am not concerned. My mission is spiritual delights of art and beauty far and wide (Cited in Nag, 1944: 2).

Tagore stayed as a guest at Helena Wijewardana's Colombo residence – 'Sri Ramya'. The coverage of this visit was intensive compared to his earlier visits to Sri Lanka. The Sinhala and English press gave wide publicity for this visit and also produced a large body of reports and coverage of the event. Both Sinhala and English daily newspapers carried page 1 news items on Tagore's visit. The Sinhala daily, *Dinamina* described Tagore as 'Sage of Santiniketan' or Great Poet (*Maha Kavi*) of India. On 9th May 1934, an editorial appeared under the title 'Tagore and National Revival' and Martin Wickremasinghe, (1890-1976) the foremost Sinhala writer of the twentieth century, wrote a feature article for *Dinamina* on Tagore's life and works. During his stay in Colombo, Tagore gave interviews to the English press expressing his views on national culture and the language problem, and delivered several lectures. D.B. Dhanapala, a leading English journalist who interviewed Tagore in 1934 gives the following interesting account:

I remember an interview both of us [DB Dhanapala & HAJ Hulugalle] had with Rabindranath Tagore when he was the guest of Wijewardane at 'Sri Ramya' now occupied by the American Embassy. Both of us listened to Tagore for two hours only now and then putting a timid question to him. We came away without taking down a single note. He wrote down





3. Wilmot A. Perera welcoming Tagore at Sri Palee for the Foundation Stone laying ceremony

from memory half the interview and I wrote the other half in the first person singular in Tagore's own words. We sent the proof to Tagore for approval keeping our fingers crossed. It came back with only one word altered – 'catastrophe' changed to 'cataclysm' – just in time to be rushed to the front page to be published as "The Island of Lotus Eaters" (Dhanapala, 1962: 174-175).

On 10th May, he delivered talked on Visva-Bharati under the title 'Ideals of an Indian University', and it was broadcasted over Radio Ceylon. He also recited his poems at the YMBA and YMCA and spoke in Jaffna, Kandy, Horana and Panadura. His speeches made a deep impression at that time. On 12th June 1934, speaking at the Jaffna Central College, Tagore said:

The spirit of India once visited Lanka. The best moral ideals, the deepest spiritual philosophy which had been produced in that land, travelled across the barriers of mountains and seas,



4. Verses on Tagore in Sinhala Daily Dinamina



5. Editorial and feature article in Dinamina 1934.



6. Page one news item on Tagore's visit in Dinamina 1930

consecrating this beautiful land. But centuries passed by and she became alienated from India, and today India's gifts lie disassociated from their sacred source. As a poet, it is my mission to restore that ancient association of mind through my efforts that speak through a direct language of art (*Ceylon Daily News*, 13-6-1934; also cited in Nag, 1944: 3).

In this visit to Sri Lanka, Tagore also hoped to raise funds for the Vjsva-Bharati with his dance troupe. He was accompanied by a troupe of 23 artistes and performed dance-drama *Shap Mochan* in Colombo and Jaffna. On the evening of 12th May, the Santiniketan artistes presented the first show of the Bengali dance drama *Shap Mochan* at the Regal Theatre, Colombo. It was a memorable show and the performance was reviewed for the *Ceylon Daily News* by SWRD Bandaranaike, who became the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in 1956:

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 yet been able to achieve. There was Tagore seated at one end, approximately garbed in a yellow robe, a typical bard and seer with his flowing grey hair and beard. The first thing that stuck me was the beauty of his shapely hands and the long tapering fingers; only a great artist could have hands like that. The music started, low and soft, and the slow movement of the dance... Love and wrath and sorrow and joy and chivalry – all human emotions find their place in this play, and the delicate and sure touch with which they are conveyed by the music and dancing is a revelation of art its highest.. (*Ceylon Daily News*, 1934).

This dance-drama was so popular that it was extended to three performances in Colombo and three in Jaffna. *Shap Mochan* brought a new theatrical experience to the local theatre and later several plays modelled on it were staged in Colombo and other provincial towns (Ariyaratne, 1999: 158).

On 14th May 1934, an exhibition of Arts and Crafts of Santiniketan was opened at the Colombo Art Gallery by Sir Graeme Tyrell, the Chief Secretary. At the opening ceremony,



Tagore spoke on 'The Ideals of Indian Art'. The exhibits included paintings by Tagore, Nandalal Bose and by students of Kala-Bhavana and this exhibition created an awareness and enthusiasm on the traditions of Indian art among the Sri Lankans. Tagore was delighted to find that some of the pupils of his art school had already served as teachers of drawing and painting at the Ananda College, Colombo and other schools (Nag, 1944: 7). At this time, there was also a suggestion that the task of painting the murals of Kelaniya Temple be handed over to Nandalal Bose (see *Dinamina*, 1934 - ). On 16th May Tagore was accorded a reception by the Colombo Municipal Council and the following day he delivered a lecture and recited his poems at the YMCA building in Colombo.

During this last visit, besides giving lectures and interviews, on May 20 1934, Tagore laid the foundation for the new institution called Sri Palee in Horana. Sri Palee was the dream institution of Wilmot A. Perera. As a scholarly pursuit, he visited Santiniketan in 1932, and after his arrival to the island Wilmot A. Perera went on to build a school for the rural reconstruction on similar lines with the Santiniketan. Tagore even gave the name for this institution "Sri Palee"—the place where the goddess of fine arts resides. At the founding of Sri Palee Tagore said:

My heart goes out to these simple people from the neighbouring villages and I feel unhappy that I am not able to speak to them in their own language, but I hope that they will realize that they have my heartiest blessings and I wish them well. It reminds me of my own work in Bengal, this institution which you have started, and I feel that this will be a channel of communication of hearts between your island and our institution in Bengal. It makes me feel so happy (Cited in Sri Palee College website).



7. Rabindranath Tagore with Shap Mochan troupe in Colombo



8. Tagore after the opening of an exhibition of art and crafts of Santiniketan at Colombo Art Gallery

On the following day (21st May) Tagore addressed a public gathering at the Panadura Town Hall and stayed at 'Swarnagiri' in Panadura, as a guest of Wilmot A. Perera's mother (Sri Palee, 2010:345).

On 22nd May, he visited Galle and then Matara where he witnessed the mask-dance. On 4th June, Tagore visited Kandy where he was fascinated by the Kandyan dance on which he wrote a beautiful poem. Tagore encouraged inmates of Santiniketan to learn and imbibe these dance forms and adapted some elements of those dances in his later choreographic productions. Moreover, his words of encouragement helped the Kandyan dance form emerge into the mainstream of Sri Lankan culture. During this visit, Nandalal Bose who travelled with Tagore did some beautiful paintings and sketches, including some on Kandyan dance. While in Kandy, Tagore completed his novel *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters). After a visit to Anuradhapura and other places of historic interest, he went to Jaffna on 9th

June where *Shap Mochan* was performed on three successive evenings. He left Jaffna on 15th June and returned by way of Danushkodi-Madras to Calcutta by rail (Mukhopadhyaya & Roy, 1961: 496).



9. Sri Palee College, Horana



10. Kandyan Dancer - Drawing  
Nandalal Bose

It needs to be mentioned that Tagore visited Sri Lanka at a time when the English-educated Sri Lankan elite treated with contempt the ancient cultures of India and Lanka. This period also marked 'linguistic decolonization'—actions taken to undo the social, political and cultural effects of the dominance of colonial language<sup>24</sup> within the Sinhala and Tamil communities (Coperahewa, 2009). In this socio-cultural context, Tagore truly believed in the mutually interactive relationship between the two cultures and often showed his regard for the glorious history and cultural traditions of India and Sri Lanka. In one of his speeches during this visit Tagore had stated:

I thought it was my mission to come Ceylon to spread this message of our Oriental culture to those who by some unfortunate external circumstances have forgotten their own past and who are ready to disown their richest inheritance (*Ceylon Daily News*, 1934-5-21).

### Tagore's Lesser Known Visits to Sri Lanka

Apart from these three main visits in 1922, 1928 and 1934, there were three other lesser known visits. These were stopovers rather than visits.



11. Dr. Arthur De Silva

On 27th May 1915, the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* newspaper of the Mahabodhi Society published a news item about the postponement of Tagore's visit to Sri Lanka in May 1915.

In September 1924, on his way to Argentina he stopped at Colombo and was the guest of Dr. W. Arthur De Silva at 'Sravasti'. He was accompanied by his son, Rathindranath, daughter-in-law, grand-daughter and Surendranath Kar.

In 1929, on his way to Canada via Japan, he left Bombay on board S.S. Naldera. He stopped at Colombo on 4 March and it was a brief halt.



On 5th March 1930, Tagore stopped at Colombo on his way to Oxford to deliver the Hibbert Lectures which had been postponed owing to ill-health in 1928.

Tagore's three visits to Sri Lanka in 1922, 1928 and 1934 and three transit halts had clearly left an abiding imprint. Moreover, his extensive interactions with artists and literary personalities of Sri Lanka significantly contributed to the country's cultural resurgence, inspiring young artistes, dancers and singers to develop new artistic creations. A reporter at the time of Tagore's visit to Lanka in 1934 said:

Here in Ceylon, Tagore has kindled a new enthusiasm. He was awakened a great yearning, he has held aloft a great idealism. It is not this generation that will thank him for his inspiration to Ceylon. Generations cannot measure the value of his services. It is not history that will record his achievements. Even history cannot give a niche to 'an impetus' that has opened our eyes to a vision of the joy and grandeur of our song and music, of our art and culture (Cited in Nag, 1944: 8).



12. Ananda Samarakoon, Ediriweera Sarathchandra, Sunil Shanta, W.B. Makloluwa and Chitrasena

In the following years (1934-40), Tagore's popularity in Sri Lanka reached its culminating point. We find that several young intellectuals and artistes proceeded to Santiniketan to study music, dancing, painting and Indian philosophy (See Ariyaratne, 1999; Dharmadasa, 2011). Some of them had an opportunity to interact personally with Gurudev Tagore. Later, they became major figures in Sinhala art and literary movements and enriched the cultural life of post-independence Sri Lanka. Among them were Ananda Samarakoon, Edwin Samardiwakara, Surya Shankar Molligoda, Ediriweera Sarathchandra, Devar Suryasena, Sunil Shantha, L.T.P. Manjusri, Lionel Edirisinghe, Chitrasena, Premakumara Epitawela, and W.B. Makuloluwa.

During the 1940s and '50s several poets of the 'Colombo school' of Sinhala poetry were also inspired by Tagore's poetical creations. For example, the veteran Sinhala poet P.B. Alwis Perera's *Sabadahama* (1942) displays influence of Tagore's philosophy. Several Tagore poems were published in *Dedunna*, the poetry magazine edited by poet P B Alwis Perera. Writing an article on 'Tagore and Ceylon' Sinhala writer Martin Wickremasinghe said:

Tagore encouraged these young poets to break away from the traditional Sinhalese poetry which was influenced until the 13th century by the Sanskrit poetry of Magha and others... The enduring appeal of Tagore to the intelligentsia of Ceylon is his attitude to religion and life which he expressed artistically in his poetry and with imagination and religious perception in his lectures and essays (Wickremasinghe, 1964: 71).

Tagore's works began to be published in local languages – mainly in Sinhala and these translations provided access to more of Tagore's works. *Gitanjali*'s popularity was so great

that more than one translation of the work appeared (see Coperahewa, 2011). As more and more of his works began to appear in the Sinhala language, Tagore became very popular as a literary icon among the Sinhala reading public.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to look into the history and bring out facts and details about Rabindranath Tagore's visits to Sri Lanka and the manner in which he emerged as a key personality in the cultural renaissance of modern Sri Lanka. Tagore was successful in achieving the goals of his visits to Sri Lanka. He was very optimistic of the future cultural and social cooperation between the two countries. His relations with Sri Lanka were always friendly. He had personal friends in Sri Lanka who visited Santiniketan and helped him in many ways. His main three visits to Sri Lanka established long standing cultural relations between the 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. In the twentieth century, among the foreign individuals who exerted an influence on Sri Lankan arts and culture, the greatest was Rabindranath Tagore. It is not an exaggeration to say that Tagore had become a household name in Sri Lanka and every educated Lankan is aware of his contribution to Sri Lankan music, art, literature and education.

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# **Tagore and Sri Lanka**

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Cover: Portrait of Tagore taken while he was in Sri Lanka in 1934  
Courtesy: Rabindra Bhavana, Santiniketan

Inside: Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore  
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