



Foreword

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When we established the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs) at Edinburgh Napier University in November 2011, the idea was to rely on Rabindranath Tagore as a representative of India's modern consciousness and create a platform not only for educational and cultural collaboration between British and Indian institutions, scholars, researchers and artists, but with the world, to take forward the message of Rabindranath's internationalism. ScoTs now has a website which has been developed as a hub for Tagore Studies and may be viewed at <http://www.scots-tagore.org>. ScoTs is a research centre welcoming scholars to work/write on Rabindranath and his circle which is global. It has established a Distinguished Lecture Series, organises seminars, conferences, film festivals, curates exhibitions, has an excellent library and has started an International Tagore Network through its website. While its various activities have expanded, making it a vibrant academic and cultural centre, it has been working on establishing its own international peer reviewed e-journal with two sections: Part I: Academic and Part II: Creative, which encapsulate Rabindranath as the thinker and his creative persona and accommodate his international circle of intellectuals and artists. The name of this very special journal was conceived by me early in 2012 and I shared the idea with many Rabindranath scholars and lovers who agreed that *Gitanjali and Beyond* would be most appropriate as a title for our purposes.

So what signifies the choice of the title, *Gitanjali and Beyond*? It is true that Rabindranath's translated prose poems in his English collection, *Gitanjali*, was central to the Nobel Committee's decision in conferring the Nobel Prize for the first time on someone beyond Europe and the USA—to an Asian, after which it became one of the most translated books in the world in multiple countries and languages and has never gone out of print.¹ However, it was and is still widely believed that the Nobel Prize for Literature was based on this one book of 'Song Offerings': namely, *Gitanjali*. Michael Collins² has shown this assumption to be erroneous as the Nobel Library received other English translations of Rabindranath's works in *The Gardener* (1913), *Lyrics of Love and Life* (1913) and *Glimpses of Bengal*. Moreover, the Nobel Library also received Bengali editions of Rabindranath's works: *Naivedya*, *Kheya* and *Gitanjali* and had a Bengali scholar in Esais Tegner, Jr who had the facility to read the original works. So the Nobel Prize award went to books beyond the *Gitanjali*, and not just to English translations of Rabindranath's writing, but also to some of his original Bengali works. William Radice³ has, in his 'Introduction' to his translation of *Gitanjali*, pointed out (as many other scholars have done) that the English *Gitanjali* was not a full translation of the Bengali collection of the same name; in fact, only 53 poems in the English version are from the Bengali *Gitanjali*. The English collection included an eclectic selection of poems made by Rabindranath himself from other collections: *Naivedya* (1901) and *Kheya* (1906).

As Radice also affirms, *Gitanjali* is a collection of more than songs, as it has 'song-like poems' (Radice, xvii), a variety of sonnets and 'ballad-like poems' (ibid), so the collection is not just of songs or poems from the Bengali *Gitanjali*, but of poems and songs beyond it.

Rabindranath arrived in England with his manuscript of 103 prose poems for his friend William Rothenstein who had expressed a wish to read Rabindranath's work in English. The collection was published the same year with an ecstatic and moving 'Introduction' by W.B. Yeats. The volume became the iconic text associated with what the West hailed in Rabindranath as the mystic poet, the eastern Sage—an image Rabindranath did not contradict and went along with in the immediate heady days of the global attention he received in his many invitations to speak at public gatherings and meet leading intellectuals and dignitaries of

¹ See Bashabi Fraser, 'Rabindranath Tagore's Global Vision', special guest edited issue of *Literature Compass*, Guest Ed. 'Introduction: Rabindranath Tagore's Global', Vol 12, issue 5, May 2015, DOI: 10.1111/lic3.12231.

² Michael Collins, *Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World: Rabindranath Tagore's Writings on History, Politics and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

³ William Radice, 'Introduction' in Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011).

his time across the world. But Rabindranath's writing, as is well known, covered many genres, not just songs and poem-like songs and were not only on mystical and spiritual subjects. His oeuvre is epochal. While he was a poet, lyricist and composer, he was also a novelist, short story writer, playwright, essayist, a prodigious letter writer, a sermon writer and an artist. So his writing moves far beyond the horizon of the *Gitanjali*. He started writing and publishing from an early age and continued to write till he died in 1941, his writing career spanning over seven decades, so while the Nobel Prize recognizes his work till 1913, Rabindranath's body of writing goes far beyond the *Gitanjali*.

He was a Romantic but also a Modern, thinking decades before his time, making him much more than a mystic. While he was a writer and an artist, he was also a pragmatist and an activist. His many projects—educational, environmental and social, make him one of the foremost nation-builders of modern India. He began the cooperative system in his family estate at Shelidah. He established his school and his international university, Visva-Bharati at Shantiniketan and his rural reconstruction centre at Sriniketan. He was a Renaissance Man who strove all his life to bring the East and West closer together through interchange and interaction in a climate of mutual appreciation⁴.

As an expressive vehicle of ScoTs, *Gitanjali and Beyond* seeks to embody not just Rabindranath's ideas but that of his circle⁵, which includes several transnational individuals across the world, who shared his views on the efficacy of love and compassion and had faith in the inherent potential and will power in human beings to create global understanding, nurture the planet and sustain life. So this journal will be a platform for work, both academic and creative that shares the ideals, philosophy and concerns of Rabindranath and his circle, of those who come after them and continue to put their ideas into words and their work. *Gitanjali and Beyond* explores the connections he established and the impact he had around the world.

In 2014, ScoTs co-convened with the Edinburgh International Centre of Peace and Spirituality an International Conference on Tagore and

⁴ A term used by Rabindranath in *Nationalism* (1917). Also see Bashabi Fraser, 'Mutual Appreciation: Tagore on Nation and Nationalism' in eds., Sanjukta Dasgupta and Ramkumar Mukherjee, *Towards Tagore* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Press, 2014).

⁵ His circle included national figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Prasanta Mahalanobis and international figures like Patrick Geddes, Albert Einstein, William Rothenstein, W.B. Yeats, Helen Keller, Sigmund Freud, Leonard Elmhirst, Victoria Ocampo, Edward Thompson, Romain Rolland, Liang Qichao, Xu Zhimo, Zhang Junmai, Phan Boi Chau, Okawa Shume, Kakuzo Okakura and Yonejiro Noguchi, to mention a few. See Bashabi Fraser, 'Beyond Binarism: the agency of the writer at the crossroads of change' in *Scottish Affairs* (84). pp. 1-16.2013.

Spirituality. The promise of our first issue of *Gitanjali and Beyond* on the theme was made at that time. This debut issue has invited articles from scholars and writers and artists world-wide to contribute to the theme and a selection from the many submissions has been made and peer reviewed to compile a cohesive issue that adheres to the idea of Rabindranath's nuanced approach to spirituality.

In the special issue, *Rabindranath Tagore and Spirituality*, the articles consider Tagore's spirituality and its expression in socio-cultural, educational, ecological and artistic realms, and place Rabindranath in his context alongside his contemporaries, while evaluating the current relevance of his ideas.

While *Gitanjali and Beyond* embraces academic discourses on Tagore's ideas and works, it also includes creative writing in the form of poetry, short fiction, the adaptation of a play and art, as a tribute to Tagore as the creative writer. As a journal, it thus reaffirms the impact and resonance of Rabindranath amongst contemporary writers and artists today.

Rabindranath Tagore's spiritual ideas are complex but unified. They are this-worldly but also based on the belief of a deeper reality. They are based on traditions, but also unique to him: his ideas were inspired by the Vedas and the Upanishads, by Vaisnava and Baul traditions, the socio-political and religious reformist involvement of his family in the Brahmo Samaj, and his encounters with ideas and people from around the world. At the same time, he creatively selected and reframed these ideas on the basis of his own revelations/intimations/experiences.

Spirituality for Rabindranath touches every aspect of life and leads humanity to fullness and joy by connecting people with nature and with Truth. This connection is established through love, action and knowledge. There is a Wordsworthian belief in a spirit that connects and flows through all things in our cognitive universe, a Platonic philosophy that establishes a deep understanding which allows human beings, in moments of illumination and peace, to 'see into the life of things'⁶. Rabindranath's

⁶ The relevant lines are:-

...with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.'

And again, further down in the same poem, Wordsworth speaks of the spirit which Rabindranath too experiences:-

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things. (William Wordsworth, from 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, see Ed. Poems Selected by Seamus Heaney: William Wordsworth (London: Faber & Faber, 2016, 2nd Edn) pp. 35, 36-37, ll. 48-50, 101-103. I have discussed Rabindranath and Wordsworth elsewhere. See Fraser, 'Tagore on the Creative Principle' in *Tagore's Vision of a Contemporary World*, ed., Indra Nath Choudhuri (New Delhi: ICCR and Har-Anand Publishing, 2015). See Rabindranath Tagore's description in *Reminiscences*, Ch 34,

spirituality is complex and evolves as the articles in this issue illustrate. His life proved a search for and a connection with his Jiban Debata, the Lord of his Life, one he sought and felt through *anubhuti*, an inexplicable experience and feeling born of the creative impulse⁷ and an acute sensitivity. Rabindranath's spiritual engagement has many social and political facets, as it encourages active involvement to make the world a better place by developing internationalism/cosmopolitanism, tolerance and social engagement. It is relevant for its environmental consciousness as it advocates a sustainable future for our dwelling place, our planet. Rabindranath has expressed all these ideas through his poetry, prose, plays, songs, dance dramas, essays, his art, his educational and rural reconstruction/regeneration projects and through the various folk festivals he imbibed/adopted and introduced through the seasons at his twin institutions at Shantiniketan and Sriniketan. Rabindranath's ideas have been described as an artists' religion⁸, as they encourage creative interactions with our immediate surroundings and with the world.

In this first issue of *Gitanjali and Beyond*, we bring together Rabindranath's action at home and his reception and legacy in India and the world, considering how his spirituality may have been affected or changed by his national and world experience, as our contributors make an effort to gauge his impact and assess the continuing relevance of Rabindranath's spiritual ideas today and in the immediate and distant future.

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'Morning Songs', 'As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. The radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light' (1917, Madras: Macmillan Pocket Tagore Edition, rpt. 1987), p. 217. His poem which was the result of this illuminating vision is 'The Fountain's Awakening'. See Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Press, 2011), pp. 205-206.

⁷ See Niharranjan Ray, 'Rabindranath and World-Life', in Parabas, <http://www.parabaas.com/rabindranath/articles/pNiharranjan.html>. Also see Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Man of My Heart', Chapter VII in 'The Religion of Man' in Ed. Sisir Kumar Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: A Miscellany*, Vol III (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 129-133.

⁸ See Tagore, 'The Artist' in 'The Religion of Man', *Ibid.*, pp. 138-143.