

**Gitanjali and Beyond**  
**Issue 6 (2022): Samaj (Society)**  
**and Freedom(s): The Relevance**  
**of Rabindranath Tagore and**  
**Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas Today**  
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and Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas Today

A Journal of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs)  
Edinburgh Napier University



Guest Editor  
Dr Talat Ahmed

Senior Lecturer in History  
Co-Director, Centre for South Asian Studies  
(2019-2022)  
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# **Gitanjali and Beyond**

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# *Gitanjali and Beyond*

*Samaj/Society and Freedom(s): The Relevance of  
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Today*

**Issue 6, Spring 2022**

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## Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	i - iv
<b>Section I: Academic</b>	<b>1 - 132</b>
1. Kamalika Mitra - Moments of Truth: Otherness and Wavering in Rabindranath Tagore's <i>Gora</i> .	2 - 19
2. N. T. Bhat - Literature as a handmaid of social activism in Heinrich Böll.	20 - 31
3. Blanka Knotková-Čapková - A Close Reading of Two Selected Rabindranath Tagore's Poems Through Gender and Intersectional Lens.	32 - 44
4. Krishnapriya T. K, Manjula Venkataraghavan, Padma Rani - Examining Motherhood and Son-preference in Colonial Bengal: A Textual Analysis of Tagore's <i>Chokher Bali</i> and <i>Jogajog</i> .	45 - 61
5. Sahara Ahmed - Muses on the 'Cult of the Charkha'.	62 - 75
6. Sayantan Ghosh – Rabindranath Tagore's Idea of Social Change: An Interpretation of his Selected Plays.	76 - 98
7. Dipannita Datta - Tagore's Heaven of Freedom and the Realms Beyond: Certain Perspectives in Time and Social Life.	99 - 132
<b>Section II: Creative</b>	<b>133 - 260</b>
<b>Prose</b>	134 - 214
8. Reba Som - My grandfather, Atul Chandra Sen: Rabindranath Tagore's ' <i>birputra</i> ' (Braveheart).	135 - 159
9. Somnath Batabyal – Lucky.	160 - 183
10. Sanjoy K. Roy -I Believe # Art Matters.	184 - 193
11. Tom Hubbard - The Red and the Black: America's 'Despised Races'.	194 - 200
12. Kaushik Goswami - <i>My Father's Face</i> : Kaushik Goswami in Conversation with Chandra Gurung.	201 - 206
13. Priya Sarukkai Chabria in conversation with Malashri Lal - Sing of Life: Revisioning Tagore's <i>Gitanjali</i> .	207 - 214
<b>Poetry</b>	<b>215 - 250</b>
14. Richard 'Spike' Munro –Thistle, Geeta Devi.	216 - 220
15. Beth Junor - On the Day Kabul Fell.	221 - 222
16. A C Clarke - To Lou Strauss-Ernst aka Rosa Bonheur.	223 - 225

17.	Simon Fletcher – Ring.	226 - 228
18.	Stewart Sanderson – Unicorn, The Old Couple.	229 - 231
19.	John Eliot - The Angel of St Clémentin.	232 - 234
20.	Stuart Paterson – Fash, Worry.	235 - 239
21.	Hugh McMillan - Long View.	240 - 242
22.	Utpal Mitra - A Dream.	243 - 244
23.	Lakshmi Arya Thathachar – Unfinished Poem.	245 - 247
24.	John Purser – Maccowan.	248 - 250
	<b>Art</b>	<b>251 - 260</b>
25.	Anupa Lewis – Late Summer Sands.	252 - 253
26.	Praseed Nair – Distant Houses, Spark.	254 - 256
27.	Dattatreya Paul – Untitled, The Fire Song, Spring.	257 - 260

**Section III: Book Reviews** **261 - 332**

28.	Jayati Gupta –Review of translations by Somdatta Mandal of Bengali Women’s Travel Texts.	262 - 265
29.	Averi Saha – <i>Across and Beyond</i> edited by Nishi Pulugurtha and <i>A Bengali Lady in England</i> by Krishnabhabini Das translated by Nabanita Sengupta.	266 - 270
30.	Olga Wojtas - <i>Dundee Street Songs, Rhymes and Games. The William Montgomerie Collection, 1952</i> -Margaret Bennett and Illustrated by Les McConnell.	271 - 273
31.	Mario Relich - Scottish Writers: ‘standing on their own ground’. <i>Walter Perrie in Conversation with Scottish Writers.</i>	274 - 281
32.	Jameela Muneer – <i>Letting Go</i> by Gerda Stevenson.	282 - 284
33.	Tom Hubbard - The Meadows and the Maidan. <i>Patient Dignity</i> - Poems by Bashabi Fraser, Paintings by Vibha Pankaj.	285 - 289
34.	Sue Pepper - <i>The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line</i> by Ruth Thomas.	290 - 292
35.	Tania Chakraverty – <i>In Memoriam: Smaran and Palataka</i> - english translation by Sanjukta Dasgupta of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry in Bengali, <i>Smaran</i> (1902) and <i>Palataka</i> (1918).	293 - 297
36.	Debapriti Sengupta - A Lasting Transience. <i>Transient</i> by Tapati Gupta.	298 - 305
37.	Swarnava Chaudhuri - Quietly flows the Hooghly: A Review. <i>Hooghly: The Global History of a River</i> by Robert Ivermee.	306 - 311

38. Anasua Bagchi - *A Poet's Experiment in Rebuilding Samaj And Nation: Sriniketan's Rural Reconstruction Work, 1922-1960* by Dikshit Sinha. 312 - 315
39. Jolly Das – *Frames of Memory. This Life at Play: Memoirs* translated from the Kannada by Girish Karnad and Srinath Perur. 316 - 322
40. Anindya Raychaudhuri – *Rabindranath Tagore's Śāntiniketan Essays: Religion, Spirituality and Philosophy* by Medha Bhattacharya. 323 - 326
41. Debapriti Sengupta - *People Fall Apart: A Review. Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People* translated by Jolly Das et al. 327 - 332

## FOREWORD

### ***Samaj* and Freedom(s): The relevance of Gandhi and Tagore's Ideas Today**

In February 2019 the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs) at Edinburgh Napier University collaborated with the Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE) and held an International Conference on '*Samaj* and Freedom(s): The relevance of Gandhi and Tagore's Ideas Today'. We had thought provoking and insightful reflections on the subject from several established academics, educationists and social workers in the field, presenting on the subject. The ensuing debates and discussions proved to be both educational and enriching. That was when Dr Padma Rani, Director of the School of Communication and Prof. Varadesh Hiregange, Director of the Centre for Gandhian and Peace Studies, my co-convenors at Manipal University and I, decided that we needed to invite some of the key speakers to edit their papers and contribute to a special issue on the subject. At that point in time, the pandemic had not struck and COP26 had not brought the reality of the climate crisis to our immediate attention.

Yet the issues that were discussed in relation to the value of our freedoms in society, raising questions about basic human rights, the liberation of the mind that enables creativity, the necessity of communication through dialogue to create understanding and ensure respect for all communities, the social foundations laid by holistic education, the urgency to bridge the urban rural divide for effective economic development in a world where the local and the global are interdependent, still remain intrinsic to human development, progress and to nation building and transnational transactions. Yet added to that realization is the knowledge that planetary degradation on the scale we have witnessed recently through relentless deforestation, industrial farming, the continued burning of fossil fuels, the dominance of corporates and manmade wars and devastation, can jeopardise not just our *samaj*, but human life itself on earth, threatening the very continuity of human society, which we must collectively stall.

The reliance on *samaj*, rather than the state (Rabindranath's Nation with a capital 'N'), should rest with the people rather than the ruling power, a tradition that is, according to Rabindranath, intrinsic to India's sense of collective unity, a unity in diversity which guarantees India's continuity as a nation. This is the *samaj* that Gandhi sought to ignite with a sense of its own worth, rousing a nation to unite as one voice to seek *swaraj*, self-rule, the freedom of the people to rule themselves. As Gandhi said to Rabindranath, 'Our

national struggle is in reality a struggle for liberty worthy of a self-respecting nation.’<sup>1</sup> The self-respect and self-reliance that Gandhi wished to arouse in the Indian nation/her *samaj*, was through implementing social justice by ensuring social inclusion. Rabindranath reflected the same idea in his essay on ‘Freedom’ where he said, ‘In India the real cause of the weakness that cripples our spirit of freedom arises from the impregnable social walls we raise between the different castes.’<sup>2</sup> In tune with Gandhi’s concerns, Rabindranath went on to say, ‘To gain this freedom we need to liberate ourselves from the fetters of self and from all those passions that tend to be exclusive. It is this liberating principle that we must apply to an imprisoning world.’<sup>3</sup>

In a world experiencing a pandemic leading to lockdowns and a temporary ban on international travel, the rising numbers of the infected and the death toll, have, over two years, driven home the reality of the marginalized and deprived as the hardest hit in a world where inequality is rife. While we continue to be confronted by succeeding natural catastrophes (e.g., super-cyclones, underwater volcanoes, unprecedented floods, earthquakes, landslides, raging forest fires and devastating drought across the globe), we witness the role the community plays in bringing relief to the victims during a crisis. Global conflicts continue in spite of a call for an international cease fire by the UN Secretary General, and narrow nationalism sweeps across Nations, driving wedges between social groups and nations, as borders are policed and walls constructed, while majoritarianism marginalizes minorities, reinforcing the peripheral positioning of the ‘Other’ in a climate of intolerance and fear. Under these circumstances, *samajic* (social) stability is jeopardised and threatened and holistic progress of a community can thus be obstructed. Tagore and Gandhi’s concerns about *samajic* freedom(s) thus remain more relevant than ever.

So while our academic contributors have responded to the literary and social significance and the resonance of Rabindranath and Gandhi’s ideas and work in their interventions, creative writers and artists have addressed the global concerns of the threat to our freedoms, our civil rights and the curbing of our choices in democracies under the power of corporate economies,

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1 In a letter from Gandhi to Tagore, dated 5 April 1919. Quoted by Uma Das Gupta, *Friendships of Largeness and Freedom: Andrews, Tagore and Gandhi: An Epistolary Account* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. xv.

2 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Freedom’, in Ed. Nityapriya Ghosh, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol. IV* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007), p. 628.

3 Ibid.

as authoritarian rule suppress the voices and choices of the people and curbs their liberties, stifling creative growth and expression.

Scholars/researchers and social workers, writers and artists have, through their contribution to this issue, helped to keep the spirit of freedom alive in society and confirmed ways in which we can protect and exercise our freedoms in a *samaj* marked by its sense of social responsibility, relying on the foundational tenets of acceptance, accommodation and creative experiment. This creative alertness and action can guarantee progress for the nation which signified Rabindranath and Gandhi's work. Carrying the burden of the times today with a fresh urgency to push back the tide of destruction through cooperation in a concerted effort to bring the planet with its multicultural societies back from the brink of disaster.

This issue comes with scholarly articles that discuss social issues and liberty in Rabindranath's work that is timeless in its pertinence and the practice of Gandhian values in the samajic/societal context. The creative section has been enriched by essays on the central role of the artist that needs to be protected when threatened by a pandemic, a memoir on the dedicated work of an idealistic Tagorean grandfather, a short story about an inexplicable surge of nationalist violence against the constructed 'Other', and an essay on the plight of a first nation community at the mercy of powerful incomers - all reflecting the urgent theme of this issue. The poetry and art sections continue to reaffirm Tagorean and Gandhian principles of social inclusion and the validity of and vital role that literature and art play to uphold truth, especially in times of crisis. And this time we have an expressive endorsement of life from a seven-year-old, proving Rabindranath's belief that creative expression needs to be encouraged and nurtured from childhood, making the child ready for life's journey through the freedom of self-expression and beauty.

The COVID crisis stultified several industries and threatened many livelihoods, including the publishing sector, stalling the publicity outlet for many writers whose books came out during these unprecedented times and have been waiting to see the light as it were. Once the lockdowns across the world were lifted and people tried to return to some semblance of life as they had known it before 2020, those who had not given up reading, were on the lookout for new publications. We have had a large number of reviews that were submitted to us as if the sluice-gates of a dam had been opened. Many more books have been submitted for reviews which will be picked up in the next issue. But for now, our dedicated reviewers will alert you

to books that are worthy of a wide readership which believes in freedoms that a just society should offer its deserving citizens who invest in a sustainable future for the next and subsequent generations, in the spirit of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi.

**Bashabi Fraser**

Editor-in-Chief

*Gitanjali and Beyond*, Issue 6

# Section I: Academic

## **Moments of Truth: Otherness and Wavering in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora***

*Kamalika Mitra*

### **Abstract:**

Rabindranath Tagore's 1910 novel *Gora* is a tale of transitions and transformations. It is a story of the eponymous character's self-discovery; the novel traces Gora's journey from bigotry to redemption, from his intolerant pride and prejudice rooted in what he believes to be his religion to his realisation that he is, in fact, not even an Indian, let alone a Hindu. Gora is not the only character in the book who undergoes a change in religious and social outlook. Almost every important character in the story moves from one stance to another; most of the principal players experience changes in beliefs and loyalties. In this article, I will focus on one or two specific moments in Gora's journey which unsettle the narrowness and rigidity of his beliefs and nudge him towards a fresh, and arguably broader, mindset; that compel him to question his preconceived notions. I will study who and/or what may influence a person's religious or social tenets; when, why and how may a person view 'the other' with respect and sympathy rather than mistrust and disapproval. Inter-cultural dialogue is one of the main themes of this novel. I shall try to show how this theme — a tension between diverse beliefs and practices and the possible resolution of that tension — remains relevant more than a hundred years after *Gora's* publication.

(Note: The names of the characters are sometimes spelled differently by different translators/scholars.)

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, otherness, travel, adoption, changes

### **Moments of Truth: Otherness and Wavering in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora***

*'...in this world, it is those who bravely get ready to solve new and newer problems with their lives that make society greater. Those who only obey rules merely carry society along; they do not help it to progress.'*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 407. Translation mine (unpublished)

*‘Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts.’<sup>2</sup>*

*Gora*, Rabindranath Tagore’s 1910 novel, is the story of an Irish orphan adopted by a Bengali Hindu couple. The boy grows up, unaware of his true identity, to be a remarkable young man—the Gora of the title. Through his close friend Binoy, Gora meets Paresh-babu, a Brahmo, and his family. He is drawn towards Sucharita, Paresh-babu’s adopted daughter, while Binoy falls in love with Paresh-babu’s daughter Lalita. Binoy and Lalita defy social and religious barriers to get married, but it is only after Gora learns of his real background that he can see his way to be united to Sucharita.

It might be helpful to explain my understanding of ‘otherness’. One dictionary definition states, ‘being or feeling different in appearance or character from what is familiar, expected, or generally accepted.’<sup>3</sup> Beginning with and building upon this, I would first and foremost clarify that otherness is essentially fluid. It is context-dependant and may adopt as its parameter(s) race, gender, ideology, class, caste, opinion, feelings or anything that is capable of producing differences as well as producing sameness. Woman is other to man; Brahmo is other to Hindu; open-minded is other to narrow-minded (and vice versa)—or not. Otherness may arise and dissolve; become important and then insignificant, with changing time, context, attitude and priorities. In a paper on white orphans and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901), where the writer calls *Kim* ‘the record of a longing to be Indian’<sup>4</sup>, reminding us strongly of Gora, Teresa Hubel writes:

while class can to a certain extent be theorized in abstraction, it is, like race, gender, and sexuality, fundamentally observable through the contexts in which it is made to mean something.<sup>5</sup>

I think the same can be said of otherness. *Gora* is permeated and pervaded by the question of otherness: who or what is the other; when is the otherness uncomfortable or unacceptable; and when is it irrelevant. Hindus and Brahmos take centre stage, but there are different kinds of each. Muslim and Christian characters are also present, perhaps deliberately at the margins. It is also a story of transitions: not just Gora but several other characters move

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Twain, ‘Conclusion’ in *The Innocents Abroad*, Paragraph 3, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3176/3176-h/3176-h.htm#CONCLUSION>>

<sup>3</sup> <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/otherness>>

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Hubel, ‘In Search of the British Indian in British India: White Orphans, Kipling’s *Kim*, and Class in Colonial India’ in *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 38, Number 1, February 2004, pp. 227-251, 249.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 229.

from one place to another — ideologically and/or emotionally. In this paper, I want to study a particular incident in Gora's story that aids his transition — how a poor family solves a problem by breaking certain rules, but rises above such rules by the same action; an event in which an unnamed minor character sets an example of the ideal described in the first epigraph.

Gora's first words in the novel are addressed to Binoy:

Listen, then. That Avinash was condemning Brahmos proves that the man is normal and healthy. Why did you flare up at it?<sup>6</sup>

He thus enters the scene as an intolerant, narrow-minded person. He is distrustful of Brahmos, calling them 'predatory creatures.'<sup>7</sup> This will change, but before that there is a history of other changes in Gora: from leadership qualities in school to patriotic speeches in grown-up assemblies; from being attracted to the Brahmo Samaj to being impressed with an expert in Vedanta; from Vedanta philosophy to a vehement defence of Hinduism, going so far as to writing a book on it and beginning to practise customs and rituals. This is how we meet him as the novel opens. He sounds like a bully, with more force than logic in his arguments, and little or no patience for a more open-minded attitude.

When Gora meets the Brahmo family it brings about yet other changes in him. 'At first, Gora was completely indifferent to the existence of Sucharita and Paresh-babu's daughters. Then, a scornful antagonism had risen in his mind. Now, he was feeling curious about them.'<sup>8</sup>

Eventually, thanks to Sucharita's enduring charisma, he learns to include women in a fuller role in his vision of ideal India. In the end, when Gora learns that he is Irish by birth, neither a Hindu nor an Indian per se, he comes to Paresh-babu and says,

Today I have become that which I wanted to become all the time — day and night — but could not. Today, I am Indian. Hindu-Muslim-Christian — no society has any opposition in me. Today, in this India, everyone's class is my class; everyone's food is my food.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 14. Translation mine (unpublished).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 137. Translation mine (unpublished).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 500.

Sucharita's role in Gora's life encourages investigation from several interesting angles, like feminism or desire. In this essay, however, I want to focus on an incident which is not related to Sucharita, but which, like her, unsettles Gora's prejudices. This incident is not a climax, but it has an extremely important effect on Gora: it makes him waver. It makes him wonder and question his stance and rethink—or even ignore for the time being — some of his most rigid inhibitions. The incident happens during his travels in rural Bengal. One day, Gora and his companion reach a Muslim neighbourhood, and after searching, find a lone Hindu household. However, they cannot rest here, for the old Hindu barber and his wife have adopted a Muslim boy. When Gora reproaches him, the barber says, 'We say Hari, they say Allah, there's no difference.'<sup>10</sup> Gora is yet to fully realise this profound and profoundly simple truth. Yet, he does not pass this family unaffected. He moves on in order to eat at a Brahmin household, but comes back.

Hunger and thirst had overwhelmed Gora, but the more he thought that he would have to protect his caste by eating the wicked rogue Madhab Chatterjee's food, the more intolerable it felt. [...] He thought, "By making sanctity an external thing, what a terribly irreligious thing we are doing in India! My caste shall be safe in his home who has caused trouble and is torturing Muslims, and my caste shall be ruined at his home who is suffering that trouble and protecting the Muslim's child and also preparing to bear society's censure! Anyway, I shall think about the pros and cons of these customs later; I can't do it now."<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, it is not a philosopher or a pundit this time, but a humble barber who teaches Gora a tremendous lesson in humanity. The Muslim boy's family was impoverished and suffering for standing up to a cruel British manager. The decision of sheltering the starving Muslim child is such a humane one that Gora finds no scope to begin his arguments; he is stunned in his tracks, forced to re-examine his own priorities. Gora's doubts here find an echo in certain words spoken by Lalita in a different context:

Many of the members of Brahma Samaj that I have met share the same religious opinion that I do, but who are in no way the same as I am. Even then, taking refuge in a name called Brahma Samaj I shall pick these people out as especially my own, and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 188.

keep everyone else in this world at a distance—this does not make any sense to me nowadays.<sup>12</sup>

Just as her Brahmo identity cannot keep Lalita away from her lover, who happens to be a Hindu, it cannot unite her to every other Brahmo. The same religion or caste does not imply harmony; why then should different religions or castes cancel it? This novel focuses mainly on the tension between Hindus and Brahmos, but there is no one kind of Hindu or one kind of Brahmo in the story. Even the two orthodox Hindus, Gora and his foster father Krishnadayal, are radically different from each other. Paresh-babu is worthy of reverence, but not all Brahmos are, as proved by the almost caricaturish Haaran.

When the people in this story try to deal with the idea of Binoy and Lalita's marriage, the question of whether one or both of them must abandon their faith naturally comes up. The answer to this question that Tagore offers is that any such sacrifice is unnecessary. Lalita realises,

No matter what a person's religious belief or society, it cannot be that people can associate with one another only after erasing all of it. If it was so, then Hindus and Christians could not even be friends. If that was the case, then we might as well put up tall walls and keep every community within a separate fence.<sup>13</sup>

If a certain association—religious, social or political—stops feeling like a chain around one's feet, then it becomes unnecessary to have to remove the chain. If religion or society does not interfere with a choice that brings happiness to one and no harm to any other, then one would not need to defy the religion or society in order to pursue that happiness.

To return to Gora's travels, however, we find their resonance in certain significant others' journeys. 'One of the characteristics of modern patriots like Swami Vivekananda and later, Gandhi,' writes Tanika Sarkar, 'would be to try and travel across the length and breadth of the country: the first step towards being an Indian in the true sense of the word.'<sup>14</sup> Vivekananda, in fact, comes up very often while discussing Gora's character and the possible inspiration behind it. Many scholars have noted the similarity between the real man and the fictional one; many too, have suggested that Gora could also have been based on Sister

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<sup>12</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 390. Translation mine (unpublished)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 387.

<sup>14</sup> Tanika Sarkar, 'Rabindranath's "Gora" and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 44, Number 30, July 2009, pp. 37-46, 39.

Nivedita and/or Brahmabandhav Upadhyay. Without going into those comparisons, I shall only make some brief notes about Vivekananda's travels.

They went about in the guise of beggars, often repulsed, at times almost dying of hunger and thirst, *with no regard for caste* and willing to smoke even the pipe of the pariah.<sup>15</sup> [my italics]

This very first journey had brought ancient India vividly before his eyes, eternal India, the India of the Vedas, with its race of heroes and gods, clothed in the glory of legend and history, Aryans, Moguls and Dravidians—*all one*. At the first impact he realized *the spiritual unity of India* and Asia, and he communicated this discovery to the brethren of Baranagore.

From his second journey in 1889 to Ghazipur, he seems to have brought back some intuition of *the Gospel of Humanity*...<sup>16</sup> [my italics]

*One by one his prejudices disappeared—even those which he had thought most deeply rooted.*<sup>17</sup> [my italics]

I have emphasised these phrases because they find a reflection in Gora's story. Gora is obliged to disregard caste; he gets at least a glimpse of the oneness of all, the spiritual unity of the country; he gets a mini lesson in humanity from an unexpected source. Last but not the least, his prejudices receive a blow.

The other real person with whom Gora is often compared is Tagore himself. William Radice writes about Tagore,

his travels all over the world, and his meetings with people from many sorts of background, made him able to identify with Christ's ability to connect with people from different communities.<sup>18</sup>

The second epigraph from Mark Twain reflects this sentiment. Mohammad A. Quayum adds:

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<sup>15</sup> Romain Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama (Publication Department), 2015), p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> William Radice, 'Tagore and Christianity' in Martin Kämpchen Ed. *Gitanjali Reborn: William Radice's Writings on Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2017), pp. 159-182, 170.

Tagore's closest contact with the Muslim culture of course came from his interaction with tenants of his family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), who were mostly Muslims. He would often go there and spend weeks with these villagers, away from his family in Calcutta (Kolkata), which obviously enabled him to develop a sympathetic understanding of their lifestyle and customs.<sup>19</sup>

Leaving one's home could imply leaving behind a possibility of seclusion from others; travelling could imply traversing the distance between the self and the other; and visiting others at their homes could bring about pleasant surprises, eye-opening discoveries — perhaps small when taken individually, but significant when considered closely. The same writer points out another story:

Jayakali [in 'Trespass'] who has fiercely guarded the sanctity of a temple all her life, one day decides to shelter a pig in the same temple to save its life. This act of kindness to an unclean beast at the risk of polluting the house of god makes her a true human and a woman.<sup>20</sup>

Jayakali, in the first part of this excerpt, sounds like Gora, fiercely guarding her idea of tradition and sanctity. Then she performs an act similar to the Hindu family's gesture: she shelters the helpless and the hapless at the cost of social and religious censure or even ostracisation. Like the Hindu barber in *Gora*, she transcends false barriers to become a truer human being — something Gora gets to do only at the end of the novel, by losing one identity and finding another, bigger one. Neither Jayakali nor the Hindu barber is what is usually considered an important member of the society; one may assume their voices go unheard and lives unknown (unless they trespass). Yet, Tagore represents them as role models of sorts, the model act being the rejection of socio-religious barriers to follow the gospel of humanity.

If Gora sounds like an obstinate, intolerant bully at times, he is redeemed by the honesty of his beliefs, the sincerity of his emotions and his genuine compassion. Following his discovery of the troubles besetting the Muslim neighbourhood, he picks a fight with the police, the magistrate and manages to get himself arrested. His meeting with the barber thus has a ripple effect, and one of the effects is that by supporting the villagers so passionately,

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<sup>19</sup> Mohammad A Quayum, 'A Herald of Religious Unity' in *The Poet and His World: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore* (Kolkata: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2012), pp. 68-95, 86-87.

<sup>20</sup> Mohammad A Quayum, 'A Herald of Religious Unity' in *The Poet and His World: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore* (Kolkata: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2012), pp. 68-95, 79.

he earns Lalita's respect. 'He used to speak too forcefully,' she tells Binoy, explaining why she had not liked Gora. 'But his force is not just on others, he demands the same of himself—this is a genuine force; I have not seen anyone like this.'<sup>21</sup>

I have mentioned that the importance of this incident in the story is in making Gora waver. It makes prominent an uneasiness, a tension in him with regard to the other: no longer can he comfortably and completely despise, criticise or reject the other. In truth, this tension and this conflict is present in multiple layers within the novel, most particularly in Gora's character, in his non-singular identity (Irish-born, brought up as Indian Hindu) and evolving ideology — even in his very name. In one of the texts which make a note of this, we find:

The name 'Gora' has a number of connotations. It means fair-complexioned. A very popular medieval saint, whose cult still has followers in Bengal, was called Gora or Gourango. Harimohini [Sucharita's aunt] compares Gora to this saint, when she first sees him and is fascinated by his appearance. Ironically it is his appearance, his unknown European heritage that makes him appear a true Hindu saint, an ideal Brahmin. But the British ruler was also known as 'gora', the white-skinned one, in terms of contempt and fear, rather than admiration.<sup>22</sup>

The writers then go on to compare Gora to Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita. In a text on the novel, where she also compares Gora to Vivekananda, Tanika Sarkar notes the same connotations of Gora's name and writes about the many strands in Gora's character and story:

...it seems undeniable that Rabindranath of the Swadeshi era provided the model for the patriotic language of the early Gora in the novel. The novel is, therefore, autobiographical in a split mode. The early and the later Gora reflect the two different political moments in Rabindranath's life. [...] *Gora* traverses multiple social worlds which are repeatedly brought into interfaces, collisions and reconciliations.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 206. Translation mine (unpublished)

<sup>22</sup> Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti and Mary Mathew, 'Nation, Politics and Gender in Colonial India' in *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2014), pp. 140-186, 174.

<sup>23</sup> Tanika Sarkar, 'Rabindranath's "Gora" and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 44, Number 30, July 2009, pp. 37-46, 41.

What makes him [Gora] especially convincing and compelling, however, is that he himself is torn: he admires the Muslim, he is furious when he sees the low caste Hindu exploited and insulted by the high caste Hindu.<sup>24</sup>

Tagore's stance with regard to the Swadeshi movement is perhaps better discussed in the context of *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)*, a novel frequently studied alongside *Gora*. Radha Chakravarty writes about the latter, '...the text presents a spectrum of possible positions within Hindu and Brahmo systems of thought'<sup>25</sup> and that

The tensions in *Gora* are also the product of Tagore's own inner conflicts, dramatized through the extensive use of dialogue, argument, discussion and disagreement.<sup>26</sup>

Tagore was living and working at a time of historical changes. What could be more natural than that his ideas and beliefs would also evolve? What more apt than that he would capture that evolution and that development in an important character? It is difficult to call Gora a hero, eponymous though he is to the novel; Binoy is a more likeable, endearing character, much like Sribilash as compared to Sachish in *Chaturanga (Play of Four)*. But Gora is perhaps better than a hero: he is realistic and credible; in his misplaced ideals he is like many people we know; in his progression into a true Indian we find an ideal.

It is in fact worthwhile to wonder if these conflicts within Gora, even within the meanings and associations of his very name, are meant to show that various ideas can coexist at the same time in the same place without necessitating the exclusion of some or erupting into violence. To find that a name can mean both someone revered and someone detested can be a lesson in acceptance; to find that a member of one's own religion has endangered his 'purity' in order to save an innocent life can be a good kind of shock, an unsettling of the hopeful sort. It is a message worth repeating and remembering that there is 'a spectrum of possible positions' in this world, not merely one or two.

The other reason why this incident is important is because it is a microcosm of a bigger pattern running through the novel: the explicit adoption of the other. In a previously quoted text, we find:

What is also to be noted is the fact that three of the main personages of the novel [Gora, Sucharita and Binoy] are brought up in families, biologically not their own [...]

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Radha Chakravarty, 'Introduction' in *Gora* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. v-xxii, vii.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. viii.

Benoy is not adopted but we understand that Gora's family was his real family and Anandamoyee his real mother, from his boyhood.<sup>27</sup>

The writers further point out about the incident in focus here that

A Hindu barber had temporarily adopted Tamiz [...] just as Gora, born in another violent era had been adopted by Krishnadayal and Anandamoyee.<sup>28</sup>

In the same vein, Radha Chakravarty notes:

The text also destabilizes the notion of identity in order to demonstrate its mutable, multiple and contingent nature. The presence of many orphaned characters in the text — Sucharita, Binoy, Gora — constitutes a questioning of the myth of fixed origins.<sup>29</sup>[...] the recurring motif of the foster-parent's love for the foster-child may be taken to represent the 'inexhaustible generosity and hospitality' of Bharatvarsha.<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly enough, all these cases of adoption involve the overcoming of some degree of religious or ideological difference. When Anandamoyee adopted Gora, she knew that he was Irish, not a Hindu Brahmin. Yet she tells Gora, 'Do you know that I let go of my customs the moment I took you in my arms? [It is a hint to a truth that Gora does not even suspect at that time.] Hugging a small child to the heart makes it clear that no one is born in this world with a caste.'<sup>31</sup> Her feeling is shared by the barber's wife, who had actually brought the Muslim boy to her home when he was starving. Perhaps somewhere in Gora's mind Anadamoyee's words were ringing a bell when he heard of the barber's wife's kindness.

As for the other adopted characters, the Hindu Radharani became Sucharita when adopted (along with her brother) by the Brahmo Paresh-babu. Binoy and Anadamoyee may belong to the same religion, but that is not what binds them together; rather, it is affection and respect. They are devoted to each other, but early in the novel, when Anandamoyee invites

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<sup>27</sup> Sanjukta Dasgupta, Sudeshna Chakravarti and Mary Mathew, 'Nation, Politics and Gender in Colonial India' in *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2014), pp. 140-186, p. 176.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 180.

<sup>29</sup> Rukmini Bhaya Nair, *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch: The Idea of Indifference* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 59, cited in Radha Chakravarty, 'Introduction' in *Gora* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. v-xxii, xii.

<sup>30</sup> Radha Chakravarty, 'Introduction' in *Gora* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. v-xxii, xii.

<sup>31</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 22. Translation mine (unpublished)

Binoy to eat in her room, Gora would not let him, because Anadamoyee is not a strict enough follower of rules.

In 'Why War', a correspondence between Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, the former writes:

All that produces ties of sentiment between man and man must serve us as war's antidote.

These ties are of two kinds. First, such relations as those towards a beloved object, void though they be of sexual intent. The psychoanalyst need feel no compunction in mentioning "love" in this connexion; religion uses the same language: Love thy neighbour as thyself. A pious injunction easy to enounce, but hard to carry out! The other bond of sentiment is by way of identification. All that brings out the significant resemblances between men calls into play this feeling of community, identification, whereon is founded, in large measure, the whole edifice of human society.<sup>32</sup>

What can serve as an antidote to war may also be expected to stem conflict and violence. 'Love thy neighbour' may be easier said than done, the difficulty seems to be unfortunately widespread, and yet, this barber in this novel makes it look beautifully easy. In the sameness of his god and the other's, he finds a tie of sentiment; the difference in the names of those gods is trivial; it is not a barrier. He identifies with the child as another human being who is going through tough times and could use a bit of help and compassion. Gora, when he comes across this family, does not know that he is adopted, but he has seen his bosom friend Binoy being loved and cared for by his mother the same as himself; it must be one of the things he loves and reveres in his mother. It would be natural for him, therefore, to be reminded by this humble couple of his mother and to find a significant resemblance, in spite of other stark differences, between this home and his own.

In a text on Gora's mother, Nikky Singh writes:

The clear thinker who can enter any house and accept water from any hand, Anadamoyi is Tagore's paradigmatic figure for his vision of true freedom.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud. 'Why war? A letter from Freud to Einstein' in *The UNESCO Courier*, March 1993, <<https://en.unesco.org/courier/marzo-1993/why-war-letter-freud-einstein>>

<sup>33</sup> Nikky Singh, 'Infigurations and Configurations of India: Anadamoyi in Tagore's "Gora"' in *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Volume 31/32, Number 1/2, 1996/1997, pp. 1-31, 8.

Whether at progressive Paresh Babu's or at orthodox Harimohini's, she is equally at home everywhere.<sup>34</sup>

This is what Gora finally manages to become.

In spite of the terrible hatreds aroused during the Indian "mutiny", she did not question who the baby was; she simply took him in her arms. [...] only after loving the Other, the totally different Gora, does she gain insight into the essential "Oneness" of Upanishadic philosophy.<sup>35</sup>

And then, about a quilt Anandamoyee can be seen working at:

The quilt becomes a symbol for linking different cultures together. It stands for diversity and creativity. In Tagore's social consciousness, it is important that Anandamoyi does patchwork rather than spin.<sup>36</sup>

the patchwork quilt that Anandamoyi is engaged in with her Christian maid sitting beside her discloses Tagore's picture of India full of different races and religions. The warmth and comfort of the multi-colored quilt is symbolic of an India embracing a variety of cultures, languages, religions and races.<sup>37</sup>

What the writer observes about the quilt may remind us of a different metaphor in Tagore's own words: 'It is God's purpose that in the societies of man the various should be strung together into a garland of unity.'<sup>38</sup> Lachhmiya, the Christian maid, is a minor, but a not insignificant character: she is, in fact, almost symbolic. Anandamoyee's fond acceptance of her is yet another proof of this maternal figure's large-heartedness. At the beginning of the novel, when Gora demands that Anandamayee send Lachhmiya away, Anandamayee reminds him that until his recent attack of orthodoxy, Gora had been very partial to Lachhmiya's cooking. She also says, 'I can never forget how Lachhmiya nursed you back to life when you had contracted smallpox as a child.'<sup>39</sup> This nursing is not merely a duty or a task; in a way it is adopting a child of a different religion, caste and class, albeit not permanently, and taking care of him with affection and sincerity. When Lachhmiya nursed the child thus, she must

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Nikky Singh, 'Infigurations and Configurations of India: Anandamoyi in Tagore's "Gora"' in *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Volume 31/32, Number 1/2, 1996/1997, pp. 1-31, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Tagore's essay, The Cult of the Charkha' in *The Mahatma and The Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997), pp. 103-116, 103.

<sup>39</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 21. Translation mine (unpublished)

have been undeterred by the consciousness of being in any way superior or what is often more inhibiting inferior to him. What is that if not an unquestioning acceptance of the other, an easy win of love and compassion over any other possible issues? At the end of the novel, the last words Gora says, blessed with the feeling of having finally become a true Indian, are, 'Ma, call your Lachhmiya now. Tell her to bring me water.'<sup>40</sup> In losing his religion and nationality, Gora finds himself as a better human being.

An earlier Gora defends his strictness to Binoy,

I want to maintain the exact limits of everything everywhere. If you begin letting go of the slightest ground with any excuse, then nothing remains in the end. [...] If I begin to disobey customs, then perhaps one day I shall disobey my mother too.<sup>41</sup>

These words come from an insecurity about the ground beneath one's feet, fearing that it is so very easy to lose the ground that every inch of it must be guarded jealously. Disregarding a custom need never translate into disrespecting one's mother; it is a non-argument; if anything, it implies that the speaker has scant respect for himself, painting himself as someone who, once unleashed from the obligation of following any one rule, will run amuck defying everyone and everything. Binoy's protest, made in a different argument when Gora mocks him for having tea with Paresh-babu's family, rings truer:

If drinking a cup of tea strikes a blow to the entire country, then such a blow will benefit the country. Protecting it from such blows will make the country extremely weak and delicate.<sup>42</sup>

But as noted, Gora is not all bigotry. He flares up when he is witness to a random incident: a man in a carriage almost runs over an old Muslim, throwing the goods that he was carrying to the ground and striking him with his whip. After Gora tries to help the old man, he tells him,

Remember, goodness is not religious; it only encourages the wicked. Your Muhammad understood that, which is why he did not preach his religion in the guise of meekness.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 503. Translation mine (unpublished)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Granthana Vibhaga, 2010), p. 74. Translation mine (unpublished)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 112.

Gora's redemption lies in the fact that he is incensed to see shameful acts of cowardice and injustice, just as he is moved to see the Hindu family's love for the Muslim child. Of course, the final factor that brings Gora's epiphany is the discovery that he is Irish — not Anandamayee's son, nor a Hindu or even an Indian — the otherness of his origin goes beyond any Hindu-Brahmo-Muslim question. And in being informed of this 'truth', Gora realises the hollowness of it. He does not belong to anyone: or he does not belong to any...one; he now has the freedom to choose. If in his heart and soul he is a Hindu and an Indian, then who can claim otherwise? He has gained everything and lost nothing but false externalities — the ones he had questioned after his encounter with the barber's family. The very personal shock helps him by waking him to the superficiality of categorisation. Freud puts forth a commonsensical rationale while writing about violence even within the same group

when conflicting interests are at stake. But the common needs and habits of men who live in fellowship under the same sky favour a speedy issue of such conflicts and, this being so, the possibilities of peaceful solutions make steady progress.<sup>44</sup>

Tagore depicts one such peaceful solution in the adoption of the Muslim child by the Hindu family, the two unified by poverty, suffering and affection. Elsewhere, he states his hope thus:

I have no hesitation in saying that those who are gifted with the moral power of love and vision of spiritual unity, who have the least feeling of enmity against aliens, and the sympathetic insight to place themselves in the position of others will be the fittest to take their permanent place in the age that is lying before us...<sup>45</sup>

Why did Tagore write a novel about a white character adopted by a Hindu family? In a paper titled 'The Dreams of Reason', Shiv Visvanathan writes about Tagore and Jagadish Chandra Bose's understanding of the differences in creativity between poetry and science, and remarks that Tagore

realised the differences were important, that differences needed to be bridged and this relationship [between Tagore and Bose] was an outstanding example of how

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<sup>44</sup> Sigmund Freud. 'Why war? A letter from Freud to Einstein' in *The UNESCO Courier*, March 1993, <<https://en.unesco.org/courier/marzo-1993/why-war-letter-freud-einstein>>

<sup>45</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Nationalism in India', <<https://tagoreweb.in/Essays/nationalism-216/nationalism-in-india-2626>>

differences are bridged through friendship, conversation and translation which has a sense of crisis, but understands the everydayness of the struggle.<sup>46</sup>

Visvanathan then goes on to add:

What one needed was a claim to identify a culture which could still read the other as a possibility, be at home in it and yet be one self. This was the kind of cosmopolitanism, Tagore wished to create.<sup>47</sup>

Hubel quotes another writer:

The division between white and non-white, in India and elsewhere, was absolute, and is alluded to throughout *Kim* as well as the rest of Kipling's work; a Sahib is a Sahib, and no amount of friendship or camaraderie can change the rudiments of racial difference. Kipling would no more have questioned that difference, and the right of the white European to rule, than he would have argued with the Himalayas.<sup>48</sup>

'Sometimes, we have to argue with the Himalayas,'<sup>49</sup> notes Hubel, but Tagore does not merely question or argue with this notion. He turns it on its head. The white European in *Gora* called Gora pines not to rule but to belong to India. At the same time, Tagore challenges another assumption that one needs to be born an Indian to revere India and the best of what it stands for. Gora is born white and Irish, a 'race' which has fought to be free of the British. It is a subtle reminder that the white (Europeans) are no more invariably united than are Indians or Hindus.

*Gora* is universal and timeless, as so much of Tagore's work is, because it is not really limited to Hindus, Brahmos, or even India. Its themes are forever relevant, its tensions hardly ever or anywhere resolved for good — unfortunately. The age where love and spiritual unity take a permanent lead may sometimes feel always to be before us, in an unreachable future, rather than in the lived present. But perhaps the story of a poor Hindu family taking care of a Muslim boy (at an age and place when many considered it unthinkable), tucked away as it is in a long novel full of discourse, can remind us that acts of love and compassion are also always taking place alongside the most violent quarrels; that even when such acts are

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<sup>46</sup> Shiv Visvanathan, 'The Dreams of Reason: Rabindranath Tagore and the Invention of Science in India' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 48, Number 47, Nivember 2013, pp. 43-49, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf: New York, 1993), p. 134-5, cited in Teresa Hubel, 'In Search of the British Indian in British India: White Orphans, Kipling's *Kim*, and Class in Colonial India' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 38, Number 1, February 2004, pp. 227-251, 234.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

inconspicuous, they are neither insignificant nor ineffectual. As that home provided rest and relief to Gora in his arduous journey, similar instances in real life can serve as oases of hope and gladness in an ever-troubled world.

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## Literature as a handmaid of social activism in Heinrich Böll

*N. T. Bhat*

### **Abstract:**

For Heinrich Böll literature was not just piece of art, an aesthetic expression in language, but a practical instrument of social transformation. Metaphorically he uses the phrases “Rose and Dynamite” to describe literature. He chose literature, both as creative and practical forms of speeches and journalistic writing to point out the follies of the ruling politicians, authorities of the church, the business class, journalists and the general public. He was conscious of the functions of literature. Criticism in both communicative and creative forms of literature he used as a tool of social service, making men in responsible positions by coming to the help of the poor by reducing their poverty by freeing them exploitation and repressive tactics. He believed in reasoning and tried by means of literature to improve the condition of his country and of the world at large.

**Keywords:** Literature - instrument of social transformation - Social criticism in literary works – Satire - Real spiritualism - social justice.

As a student of German language and literature I discovered some salient features in Böll’s thoughts and ideas. I would like to present my impressions of Böll in this paper with the intention of making non-German readers from other nations get a little acquainted with Böll. A major aspect of his personality is his radicalness, his way of thinking not in a conventional, convenient, cozy frame of mind but being agitated about many unsavory aspects of the war torn and post war Germany.

Heinrich Böll, the sixth child of Viktor and Maria Böll was born in Köln in the Federal Republic of Germany on 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1917. When he was growing up, Germany was undergoing a terrible phase of inflation. Heinrich, born in a Catholic family, started going to a Catholic school in 1924. After four years of attending a Church School, he went to the Kaiser William Grammar school. The parents had to sell their house in 1930 and move to a rented house in another part of the city.

When Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933 there was fear of war. In the family circle there was quite a good deal of anti-authoritarian talk. Maria Böll spoke bitterly

against Hitler's regime. Among friends and visitors there were socialists, communists, strong critics of the Hitler regime. Böll absorbed socialist ideas from their conversation.

Heinrich Böll was against joining any Nazi youth group like Hitlerjugend. He preferred the penalty of going to school on Saturdays and cleaning the library.

In his 17<sup>th</sup> year Böll began to write stories, novels and poems. He had decided to become a writer. His writings were not inspired voices but the expressions of his experience of the stark realities of life around him. He wrote about what he knew about poverty, about fear, about helplessness.

In 1937 Heinrich Böll began as an apprentice in a bookshop which he gave up in a year. Staying at home, Böll gave tuitions, read a lot and wrote a great deal. After a "passive resistance" of five years Heinrich Böll was finally, in 1938, dragged into the Hitler regime. After the compulsory experience of the labour camp Böll joined the University of Köln, but in 1939, when he was 21, he was summoned to the army. During his service in Poland he witnessed the repressions of the Nazi rule. As an infantry man in France Böll practiced an inner isolation by remaining at the rear end of the line of marchers.

In 1942 Böll married Annemarie. While still serving in France he pretended to have contracted an illness which forced his shift to Paris, where he was comparatively free. Böll was wounded during the movement of the troupe to Russia in 1943. In the hospital he met a fellow patient, a former communist who explained to him the tenets of communism. In 1944 he was in a camp in Hungary. In August that year Böll managed to get a false transfer certificate and got himself moved to France, from where with a genuine sanction of leave he came home. He extended his leave by artificially inducing fever in himself. In 1944 Böll's mother died. Böll deserted the army. The theme of his short story, "Entfernung von der Truppe," was based on his personal war experience. But it was too risky to stay at home. In 1945 he returned to the army office with a forged transfer order. On 9<sup>th</sup> April he fell into the hands of the Americans. A month later with the surrender of Germany the war ended. In September he was brought back to Germany. In November Böll and his family returned to Köln, which was now a devastated city.

Böll was not happy about the political developments in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1945. He became a vehement critic of the Adenauer government for the politics of restoration and rearmament. He regretted that after 1945 a great chance of achieving a just distribution of wealth in the society had been missed. The currency reform unduly favoured those who owned land.

Böll became gradually a cultural ambassador of Germany. He began to be respected in Western countries and in the socialistic countries. He visualized a new political course with democratic movement in Czechoslovakia. He was sorely disappointed with the march of the armed Soviet tanks on the city of Prague. In 1968 he spoke in favour of the radical students of Czechoslovakia.

In the early seventies when Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik came under criticism from Right wing politicians, Böll also became the subject of attack. He was criticized as a supporter of terrorists, when he pleaded for justice and fair play for the accused. Böll maintained that even criminals should be handled according to the law of justice.

Böll became increasingly critical of the role of the Roman Catholic Church and though a Christian in principle he refused to pay the church money, the tax collected by the state for the church.

Böll became the President of the International PEN club in 1971. In 1972 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Though there was a general rejoicing there were critics who said that he was given the Prize on political considerations. Böll, as the President of the International PEN Club, and even later intervened on behalf of several persecuted writers like Amalrik, Soleschenizyn, Kopelew and Sacharow.

In 1974 Böll sued Mathias Walden for an article in the press in which he considered Böll as one of the propagators of terrorism and violence.

In the early 1980's Böll took part in the peace movement which was launched against the stationing of the Pershing II rockets on German soil. On 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1985 Böll died after a prolonged illness.

In his public lectures, journalistic writings and literary works Böll is a moralist of high rank. As a real activist he led resistance movements against repressive measures of governments. He spoke against the hazards of capitalistic exploitation. He led a systematic campaign against capitalism. His argument against the persecution of radicals and extremists was dubbed as support to terrorism.

Böll was a builder of public opinion; his writings had an educative purpose. He tried to arouse the conscience of the public. Böll pre-occupied himself with devising newer and newer forms of narrative technique. In Böll there is rather a tone of self-defence in referring to things like buying from black market. He mentions his acts of sacrilege, which under the circumstances could no longer be held as any form of sacrilege. Böll seemed very unorthodox though he too recognized the original value systems like the teachings of Christ as enunciated in the Bible.

Böll was a self-conscious writer and was aware of the necessity of a writer's resorting sometimes to exaggeration. He was primarily a creative writer and he took part in active politics only in a marginal manner and with a great deal of hesitation.

Böll's influences can be classified under three heads – as a writer, as journalist and as intervener in the socio-political life of the Federal Republic. Böll was the most representative of the writers of post war Germany. The literary form of the essay became popular in Germany because of writers like Böll. He improved the German image abroad, an image which had touched an all-time low because of Hitler's atrocities during the war. Böll firmly established a tradition of a literature of humanity. Even in his innumerable speeches Böll appealed to the human sensibility. But at the same time, he constantly tried to awaken his countrymen from a state of harmless self-indulgence.

Political journalism and literature were two channels in which Böll's quest for justice found its powerful expression. Böll's public utterances reveal that writing was his way of mixing with public affairs. He wrote against compulsory military service, against rearmament and warned against nuclear armaments. Böll launched a campaign against the proposals for introducing emergency provisions in the German constitution.

To some extent Böll was a practicing politician too. He was the spokesman for the weak, the persecuted and the oppressed. He never denied help to anybody who needed it. He was greatly helpful to Marcel Reich Ranicki who got his help to organize his life in Germany, which he chose as his home after leaving Poland. He came to the rescue of several others, most of whom were writers and intellectuals.

Böll's intervention on behalf of the persecuted terrorists and extremists alienated him from several Federal German citizens. There were strong attacks on his sympathy for the terrorists. But in the conflict between the state and the individual Böll almost always sided with the oppressed and the persecuted individual.

As a writer Böll is like Dickens setting a deliberate social goal for his works. His imagination does not deviate from social reality. He is aware of the social and individual situation of an author. He formulated in his Frankfurt lectures his aestheticism of humanity – whose themes are: "living, neighbourhood, home, money, love, religion and meals". Literature can take up as theme what the community considers to be a drop out. Böll is of the view that Literature should not merely slide into beautiful but meaningless statements. In spite of his utopian thinking Böll believes that a writer should keep the reality in mind, not simply say what the world should be. In one of his essays, he speaks of literature as rose and dynamite, a sweet-smelling explosive. In another essay Böll refers to the power of words:

words are sometimes more feared than bombs. Literature should however have the purpose of wearing out the unfamiliarity between people and establish mutual knowledge between them. Literature and politics are not really separate in the sense that literature can influence politics.

Literature is a constituent of culture, and should be free. Paradoxically art offers no comfort and on its “comfortlessness” itself there is its ability to offer comfort.

Böll is predominantly a critic of his time and society. He is a rational thinker and his criticism has a certain element of objectivity. He was foremost among West-European thinkers who could fight against the prejudice that only in communistic countries human rights are violated.

Böll criticizes the misplaced values in the society – which tend to glorify cleanliness as purity of conscience and to denounce poor and unkempt workers. The average man pays his attention to purely secondary things, ignoring the main ones. Böll is disappointed because of the discrimination against the poor and the underprivileged. He is distrustful even of the healthiest national spirit.

Böll directs his strongest attack on Hitler’s policy of repression and persecution. He regrets that the chance to bring about a socialist society was lost in post war Germany.

Böll fights against the powers that suppress and persecute thinkers who follow a radical, leftist attitude. The fear of radicalism leads to absurdities like praising Marx and Engels as German thinkers in speeches in foreign countries and not encouraging their views to hold in Germany itself.

In his literary works Böll criticizes the cruelty, and the lack of sympathy among men. How the individual suffers because of poverty and scarcity engages his mind again and again. Böll is an effective commentator upon the situation in post-war Germany. He criticizes social injustice.

Böll’s criticism of the Church was based upon the fact that it did not effectively fight against Hitlerism. During the war the Church was more bothered about sexual morality than with the morality of the war itself. The Church was irrational in the attack of the people of communistic countries as atheists. The church neglected, in the post war years, its duty of caring for the hungry, and suffering people, people who did not have food, people who had no dwellings. Both in the essays and literary works this criticism is present. The Church, by insisting on rituals like the Sunday mass, ruined the happiness of many families. The Church was thoroughly hypocritical in its attitude towards sexuality, advising for example a priest who expressed his desire to marry, to go to a prostitute. Böll was against ‘fiscalizing’ and ‘materializing’ man’s relation to Religion. The reduction of religion to meaningless rituals is

the theme of several stories of Böll like “Not only for Christmas time”, and “Views of a Clown”.

War is the background for most of the stories and novels of Böll. Stories like “the Attack”, “The Will”, “Wanderer”, “Reunion with Drueng” etc. deal with situations in which war degrades mankind. Böll refuses to glorify war. Stories like “The bowl of bread”, “Udessa”, “Postcard”, “Where were you Adam?” deal with the devastating effect of war.

Though the freedom of the press is an essential part of the democratic system, this should not be allowed to throttle individual freedom. Böll criticizes the Springer Press, particularly the “Bild”, for encroaching upon the individual’s right for dignity and self-respect. “The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum” is a story showing how a misrepresentation of the lady as an abettor of crime, just because she happened to fall in love with a young man whom she gave shelter in her apartment, leads ultimately to the emergence of violence.

Criticism of capitalism is a constant note in Boll’s works. He distrusts free trade which is based on profit motive. He is against the unrestricted exploitation of the earth’s resources. The philosophy of consumerism is harmful to the human society. In many essays and stories Böll laughs at the greed for money, at blind consumerism (‘the sinking of working morality’) and unnecessary academic pursuits (‘in the land of Rujuks’). Resistance is closely associated with criticism. In addition to being a critic Böll was a leader of resistance movements. He was not just an arm chair critic, but a fighter for people’s rights and liberties. Boll’s participation in the war was characterized by an inner resistance. Böll was known for his polemics. He supported the students’ movement of the 60’s, defending the extra parliamentary opposition as a necessary move, when no other effective means of resistance was at hand. Literary examples for Boll’s resistance are ‘The Will’, “On the Bridge”, “My sad face”, “The scales of Baleks”, “Dr. Murke’s splices of silence”, “Group Portrait with Lady” etc.

Boll’s criticism appears in the form of satirical representation. “Not only at Christmas”, are “In the Land of Rujuks”, “Here is Tipten”, “The undying Theodora”, “Something is going to happen”, “The laughter” etc. are examples.

Böll has, in his non-literary and literary works, mocked at the social systems or organizations which are inimical to the individual’s freedom. Criticism is the other side of the coin of man’s idealism. Though Böll shows sometimes features of existentialism, he is at the same time a seeker of truth, an explorer for a world with less injustice, less exploitation, less discrimination and more humanity.

Böll's defence of many other writers and statesmen lets us know that he holds them as sacred and valuable. Böll hoped to effect social reform through writing. He liked the ideals of poverty and love-enunciated by Leon Bloy. Böll set up the ideal of sympathizing and helping the poor. In Karl Marx Böll found a great man who fought for a classless society, free from exploitation. He admired the goodness of Mother Ey. Böll could recognize the passion for justice in Georg Buechner, the humanity of Solschenizyn. He agreed with the criticism of Sachrow against excessive use of machines. Böll shared Tolstoy's sympathy for the poor. He admired Willy Brand's effort to ensure peace. He approved of the methods of Guenter Wallraff to expose the unscrupulous practices of the Springer Press. Kopelew represents, according to Böll, the highest form of internationalism.

Böll considers a society worthy of respect when it rejects consumerism and practices the principle of equitable distribution of wealth. Real spiritualism is ensuring social justice and not just taking part in the rituals of the Church. The synthesis of Christianity and socialism is the ideal that Böll sets before the world. Böll was deeply disappointed that socialism did not become a reality in the Federal Republic but became bogged down by currency reform and rearmament. Böll believed in nationalization because that would serve the purpose of general welfare. He sets great store by the dignity of man, which should not be degraded by any means of oppression. He is a defender of freedom. Freedom is the prerequisite for man's ability to avail himself of his rights. Of course, Böll's utopia doesn't exclude the consideration of the harshness of reality. He is aware that the utopia of technology has become a reality but not the utopia of socialism. Böll's ideal nation is a nation where the values of peace and social brotherhood prevail.

"The train was on time" deals with the hope for happiness, peace and home, though contrasted with their negatives. Andreas enjoys in the company of Olina a short period of idyllic happiness. "House without protectors" deals with the possibilities for a new life. "And said not a single word" suggests the healing powers of love. Leni, the heroine of "Group portrait with a lady" is the model of many virtues of mankind; sympathy, fearlessness, sensibility, love. Böll is a practical idealist. He passed from an exclusive period of social criticism to a period of political engagement. He pleaded for an intervention in matters affecting freedom, whether it was at the national or at the international level. Böll has an international consciousness. His themes are not limited to the national level: Love, sympathy, fear, poverty misery of soldiers, life, suppression, death, and the search for freedom, rebellion and protest, the unwillingness to obey. "Irish Diary" is an expression of Boll's internationalism. His views on Marx extend to consider his influence on the workers'

movement in the entire world. Böll believes in the need to distribute the available resources on the basis of equity. Böll is against fanaticism and extremism. He would like to seek the third alternative which can avoid a direct conflict between the extremes. He hopes that the human race would be ultimately unified. The problem of the human race is more important than provincialism. He makes no distinction between Jews and Christians.

Though Böll refused the citation, he has been called a moral instance, the keeper of his nation's conscience. In Böll's own words, politicians, the parliament, the law are the conscience of a nation, but he too, as a conscious writer should be considered a keeper of his nation's conscience. Böll insists on justice which he associates not with punishment but the need for an individual to make use of his rights. Therefore, Böll defends the democratic system. He calls upon artists to help establish the democratic order.

Böll's democracy requires the fulfilment of the condition of equality of opportunities, and the establishment of a classless society which is free from the motive of profit. Böll favours democracy because it protects the dignity of man. He holds the view that the freedom of the individual should be preserved at all costs.

Böll's concept of the ideal leads to his prescription of a moral duty. He calls for an intervention in the affairs of other societies or other nations when human rights are endangered. As the President of the international PEN Club he took up the cause of several persecuted authors. In his appeal to Brezhnev Böll acted as the defender of human rights. Böll is against violence. His ideal is that of the Guevara who said that he did not have the courage to shoot. He is not in favor of relativizing terror. But Böll is not against protest movements and resistance. Even extra-parliamentary measures are not a threat, but he warns against the possible proclamation of emergency. Böll is not in favor of a showdown in the face of a conflict. He would seek a third alternative to ease the conflicts and to bring about a reconciliation. Because Böll lays great stress on human dignity he is opposed to all kinds of denunciation, which he considers to be an expression of violence. It is not on the basis of the result that Böll decides whether an action is violent or not. A driver of a car, in causing death by careless driving, is guilty of violence but not the one who, while being arrested tries to push aside the arm of the policeman, who comes to arrest him. Böll is not much worried about the legal formulations of guilt and innocence. Persecution and fear are the roots of violence. Violence has been universally practiced; even Homer deals with violence. Violence arises when freedom is threatened.

Some critics have found in Böll a destructive tendency, a tendency to debunk and negate everything. A superficial survey of his literary works may lead one to conclude that

Böll doesn't disapprove violence. In Böll's words of support to Fritz Teufel, ("An endearing anarchist") Klaus Bresser finds a justification of violence.

Böll himself denies the charge that he ever defended violence. He would provoke the society but not with violence. He doesn't absolve all kinds of protest groups and rebels in the same way. His pleading for the trial of the Baader-Meinhof group was not a case of defending terrorism.

Though Böll has claimed to have never spoken in defence of violence, the suspicion has remained that he does not totally keep out the use of force. A few situations in the literary works lead to this surmise. "No tears for Schmeck" is a story where physical assault seems to be considered as a way of wresting justice. Even in the novels there are quite a few figures who act aggressively and whose aggression is not openly condemned. Mrs. Hostelge (House without Protectors) slaps on the cheek of Rai, in "End of the official Trip" the Gruhls burn a jeep belonging to the Federal Army and "The lost honour of Katherina Blum" is apparently nothing but finding an excuse for the use of violence by the heroine.

But we should remember Böll's own words of caution that delineation of violence in literature doesn't amount to a defence of it.

We see thus two contradictory views about Böll's attitude towards violence but certainly Böll was not deliberately a defender of violence.

Humanity is Böll's ideal, it is also his moral principle. Böll offers people comfort and hope. His literature is nothing but the expression of his sense of duty, his feeling of being involved in the suffering of people.

Böll sympathizes with the outsiders in the world, who think differently, who feel differently. The humble, anonymous people interest him. He reflects on their needs, on their feelings, on their fortune. Böll has been called the author of the ordinary people. His humanity finds its focus in his praise for the seven acts of kindness: to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty to drink, to comfort the sick, to bury the dead, to clothe the naked, to visit the prisoners and to shelter outsiders. The principle, Böll is sure, can apply to all humanity. Böll underlines the principles of equality and brotherhood. Brotherhood involves suspension of all conflicts, the preferences to brotherly feeling and reconciliation. He calls upon the students to demonstrate against injustice, because that is the only way left for redressing evils. He pleads on behalf of several persecuted authors like Wolf Bierman from GDR. Böll is against sanctions and boycotting etc., because the worst-affected by such measures would be the poor people themselves.

Several of the literary works reveal this aestheticism of humanity. The indefinite “they” in “And never said a Word” refers to the forces to which the helpless individual is exposed. Böll sympathizes with the people who are affected by the war. “Message”, “Seeing again in the Alley”, “Lohengrin’s Death”, “The Will” express this aspect of Boll’s morals. Uncle Otto of “the Black Sheep” is a typical outsider, an unsuccessful individual, the likes of whom win Boll’s sympathy. “Wanderer” is also a touching story of a wounded soldier. There are many other stories of this kind.

Böll assigns to man a place of dignity. When legal issues arise Böll considers man to be superior to rules. (“Politeness in several Instances of deviating from Rules”) Morals and religion are closely related. Religion is perhaps a systematized moral code, though religion is traditionally associated with the belief in God. Böll as a moralist has a high respect for religion, but just for this reason he distrusts the institution of the Church which has shown in practice the lack of true religious feeling. Böll never misuses the word God, who is not a dumping ground for human problems. His theology is one of kindness and gentleness, in which he finds the essence of religion. Religious feeling goes with purity of conscience. Religion makes no distinction between human beings and avoids all kinds of exploitation.

There is a secular touch in Boll’s religious attitude. Böll uses the word “God” not in the orthodox sense. In his view religious attitude is essentially following one’s conscience. In Böll there is a greater stress on the moral responsibility of man in society than a complete dependence on God. Böll finds the celebration of religion, not in the rites or rituals of the Church, but in the togetherness, in the union of the family in everyday life. That a wife or husband works the whole month for the sake of the family has something holy in it. Even a breakfast where all the members of the family take part would be a celebration. Böll doesn’t value the idea of heaven. Heaven is nothing but metaphysical fake coins which wouldn’t really buy anything.

In a world threatened by war and destruction, the only source of comfort and moral strength seems to be love as maintained by Matthew Arnold. The story “Stay in X” seems to uphold this sense of resignation. “The Bread of Earlier Years” is also a story which seems to imply this view. The relationship between individuals interests Böll a great deal. Love is a means of support for many suffering individuals as seen in “So were Evening and Morning” and “Hide in the Thundering Valley”.

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## A Close Reading of Two Selected Rabindranath Tagore's Poems Through Gender and Intersectional Lens

*Blanka Knotková-Čapková*

### **Abstract:**

The material for analysis in this critical essay is two Tagore's poems, Santali meye and Kāla meye. They were chosen for an interesting comparison of intersectional discrimination the main characters represent. The methods applied are that of close reading, gender and intersectional analyses. Both of the female characters face discrimination from gender perspective. The Santali woman is a poor tribal who is hired to work on a construction of the narrator's house; her social position is a marginalized one from the perspective of caste (outcaste) and race/ethnicity. The Kāla meye, girl with dark skin is, unlike the Santali, a victim of discrimination of a traditional racist discourse – she remains unmarried, although she seems to be a daughter of a middleclass family and her dark skin is probably just a matter of a “bad luck.” In both of the cases, the narrator's position and situation is compared with that of the women. While there is drawn a certain correspondence in the case of the dark-skinned girl – the narrator is also caught within the system of social hierarchy and his free choice is, to some extent, also limited, in the case of the tribal woman, the narrator feels reproaches for participating in her exploitation. Psychologically, there appears to be a remarkable difference between the two female characters. The black-skinned girl is motionless and silent – without voice, which refers to an important feminist symbol of freedom/dependancy. The Santali woman is also silent but she is metaphorized as a bird with invisible black wings and homologized with lightning. There can be suggested an interpretation of her silence as a subversive way how to deal with the oppression, a hidden strength which may promise a potential of freedom.

**Key words:** Tagore, femininity, gender, intersectionality, discrimination, subversion, voice, Santali meye, Kāla meye

In this text, I will skip over the usual introductory words about the excellence of the work of Rabīndranāth Thākur (Tagore), his multilateral talent and his importance for the Indian (Bengali) and world literature. In my previous studies, I focused on his influence and extensive popularity in the Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia) and on the ways and

methods of translating his texts, especially poetry.<sup>1</sup> Although there have been a lot of translations of other Indian authors into the Czech language so far, Tagore probably remains the best-known Indian writer among Czech readers.

The development of Czech Tagore studies has been influenced by historical and political shifts and changes. Before the World War II, the main attention was paid to his ideas and conceptualizations of spirituality, which was influenced not only by world's success of the Nobel Prize winning *Gitanjali* but also by the translations and academic studies of Professor Vincenc Lesný, a founder of the Czech Bengali studies, who was Rabindranath's personal friend and who articulated especially Tagore's unique contribution to figurations of spirituality/spiritualities. Later on, between 1948 and 1989 – during the period of the so-called state socialism of the Soviet type in Czechoslovakia – the official line rather emphasised Tagore's socially critical discourse and texts of that kind were recommended for translation. After the transition to democracy, manifold and balanced interpretations became an effort of specialists in Bengali literature, possibly enriched by other methodological approaches. One of them definitely would definitely be reading Tagore through gender lens (also a title of the Tagore conference in Kolkata in 2013), or in dialogue with feminist theories.<sup>2</sup> This approach will be the main theoretical and methodological framework of the following analysis.

Focus on Tagore's representations of various kinds of femininity or questions about Tagore's feminism (if we can characterize his discourse as feminist which has remained a matter of discussions) has become a topic of many academic studies and conferences (e.g. Kolkata, 2013, see above, also a conference at the Metropolitan University Prague, 2015, *Tagore on Discriminations. Representing the Unrepresented*). Here, we should refer to the work of gender and literary scholars and philosophers like Jasodhara Bagchi, Sutapa Bhattacharya, Malashri Lal, Sanjukta Dasgupta, Bashabi Fraser, Asha Mukherjee, Shefali

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<sup>1</sup> See, eg., Historical Introduction to Czech Tagore Studies. In, Knotková-Čapková et al, 2015, pp. 4-7.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of gender studies and feminist studies may find – and have found – various interpretations. Feminism(s) are historically older than the concept of gender, as an activist movement and as a theory (theories). In the beginning of the development of feminism, the focus was aimed at equal rights of women, and this approach dominated till the last decades of the twentieth century. Afterwards, the concept of gender as an academic termented the feminist discourse and the thematic focus became wider, not articulating only discrimination of women but intersectional discriminations like those depicted in 1980s (as mentioned also further in the text), i.e. those of race/ ethnicity, class/ social status and gender (in the sense of men-women binary conceptualization), but also of those gender and sexual identities (LGBTQ studies), cultural identities (especially post-colonial studies) and other types of identity as a fluid concept (cf., e.g., *nomadic identities* in Rosi Braidotti's theory, cf. Braidotti 2006 and in her later works). In my understanding, gender studies represent the latest phase of feminist studies, but they would not exist without feminist theories from which they grew up.

Moitra and others.<sup>3</sup> The writings of these authors have usually been broader than contributions to Tagore studies or even to literary studies; that corresponds with the core characteristics of gender studies as an interdisciplinary. The work of feminist scholars often encompasses more disciplines and there is an embedded aspect of contextualization in it.

In this critical essay, I will approach my material from the gender viewpoint, both theoretically and methodologically. A particular attention will be given to figurations of femininities, especially within the broad theme of social criticism. This essay will concentrate not on Tagore's biography but on the text itself. However, it will not be a specifically structuralist approach; although the interpretation will not be primarily derived from the facts or knowledge about Tagore's life, it will focus on both internal and external aspects of texts analysis. By those, I refer to the classical structuralization by René Wellek (1949), meaning that the internal aspects cover, in general, the issues of poetics, while the external aspects take into account especially contexts – intertextual, historical, social, political etc. From that point of view, a significant part of the analysis will be carried out with the intersectional method, as it was first articulated by the Afroamerican feminists (see, e.g., Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1991, or bell hooks, 2000) in 1980s, and since developed also by Indian authors (e.g. Mohanty, M. ed., 2004, or Mohanty, C.T., 2003). Within the intersectional reading, I will highlight the intersections of discourses of inequality and discrimination, especially those of race/ethnicity, gender and class/ social status which will play an important role in my interpretation.

I will also apply the method of close reading (see the title of this text) on two selected poems which reflect the above mentioned topics and which have not been analysed in my previous articles.<sup>4</sup> Namely, it will be the poems *Kālameye* (“Black girl”, or rather, “Black young woman”,<sup>5</sup> from *Palātakā*, 1918/1997) and *Sāotālmeye* (“Santali young woman”, from *Bīthikā*, 1935).

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<sup>3</sup> These feminist academicians focused on Tagore's works in specialized books or touched various aspects of his life and/ or work in particular chapters or articles framed within a broader topic of Bengali literature (see also bibliography). In the above mentioned MUP Publication (2015), chapters by Sanjukta Dasgupta, Bashabi Fraser, Shefali Moitra and others were included).

<sup>4</sup> I analysed *Sāotāl meye* from the perspective of translations into the Czech language in *Gitanjali and Beyond, Tagore and Spirituality*, 2016/1, pp. 119-134, see bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> Although a prospective bride could be very young according to the Hindu tradition, even a girl, here the translation of *young woman* – with reference to the sixth line of the poem, *bayas uṭche jame* ([her] age is growing) – seems to be more appropriate.

In Tagore poems, I see the following main representation of femininities: Woman<sup>6</sup> as the Motherland (India, or in a more specified way, Bengal – like in the poem which is today the national anthem of Bangladesh, *Āmār sonār Bāṅglā*). These poems can be found especially in the collection of poems *Gītābitān* (2011). The image of the Motherland blends there with the image of the Mother Earth and Mother Goddess who gives birth to her children, Indians (Bengalis); she represents the ultimate beauty and love; she always personifies such understanding of patriotism which never resembles a narrow-minded nationalism but which always corresponds with universal humanism. In that way, her children are expected to love her, too.

Another figuration of femininity would be Woman as a lover and/ or beloved. In Tagore's love poems, the narrator or the main character is not always a male lover. There are also some texts in which the female speaks and expresses her feelings; we can bring examples from *The Gardener* (1914) – e.g., *O mother, the young Prince is to pass by our door*, and others. There, love – from the point of view of the female character – is portrayed as a dream, an illusion and disillusionment. For Tagore's love poems, a typical feature is a kind of blending of various images of the feminine, especially those of Woman metaphorized (or both metaphorized and metonymized) as Nature. She can personify the beauty of Nature (as Mother or Lover, see above), she can personify fascinating powers of Nature, but also misuse, exploitation and subjection of Nature by people (e.g. in the poem *Aphrikā* from *Patrapuṭ*, 1936 where the critique is interconnected with that of colonial violence). Woman as a lover and/or beloved (partner, mother or daughter), is also often an image situated at the border of a dream and reality, an etheric image, a source of inspiration, elusive desire (eg. *Nārī* in *Caitāli*, 1896). The image may be also spiritualized and oscillate between a picture of a real, and spiritual, celestial being (eg. *Hāriye yāoyā* in *Palātakā*, 1918).

As mentioned earlier, Tagore's poems also often reflect a socially critical discourse. There, Woman is usually represented as a victim of discrimination(s) and marginalizations, often in an intersectional perspective (femininity + poverty + low caste/ outcaste + dark skin). This picturing is eloquent e.g. in the poems analysed below, *Sāotālmeye* from *Bīthikā* (1993/1935) and *Kālameye* from *Palātakā* (2014/1918).

### **Close reading of the poem *KālaMeye*: The plot and its figurations**

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<sup>6</sup> I am writing Woman with capital “W” it denotes a certain abstraction, a generalized concept of femininity.

The sujet of this poem draws a situation of two young people sitting on the opposite sides of a street. One is the male narrator of the story (if we can use the notion of a “story”); the poem is rather lyrical than epic but has also some epic development) who speaks in the first person (ich-form), and a neighbour’s daughter who does not speak at all, she has no independent voice, she is figured as an object of the narrator’s gaze and his feelings of solidarity. Although the title of the poem refers to the young woman, the major part of the text discusses the narrator, his experience, troubles and feelings. What can the reader learn about the young woman? She sits every day at a broken window with rusty bars. She has black skin; that’s why – as the text puts it – she is still unmarried, without much chance to get married, alone since a long time. She herself can hardly change it, the one who can be and tries to be active is her worried father (*cintita tār bāp*). The father is looking for a bridegroom for his daughter – as it has been (or was) the traditional setting in the Hindu society at the beginning of the twentieth century, as was prescribed by the distribution of duties within the specific shape of its patriarchal gender order. The woman cannot be active, her marriage is the responsibility of her father who should arrange it (also according to the classical Hindu ethical code, *The Manu’s Laws*). These are the only actual pieces of information the text gives us about the eponymous female character. None of the other/later references to her brings any new information, they just develop the given description, metaphorically or symbolically. These poetical figurations will be analysed below.

However, the main character is in fact not the young woman but the narrator. He also faces difficulties in the present situation of his life: he is under a hard pressure of university studies and exams; he has very limited means of living, thinking about a job as a teacher – even if it was half-paid (he “begged” for it – *bhikṣā karā*); this crisis of material existence is underlined by a certain existential, or at least psychological crisis of the young man: he feels like a peacock dancing in an iron cage the bars of which hurt. He rambles through the sun-striking city, hungry, tired, feeling uneasy and worried about his future.v

### **Male gaze, or a socially critical gaze?**

The rest of the text brings no information brings in terms of new facts. It is purely lyrical, repeating the peripeties of the plot in poetical variations. The narrator’s gaze dominates, or even more, it is the only point of view presented. From the feminist perspective, we could say it is the typical *male gaze* (cf. feminist theorists like Judith Fetterley, 1978, Elaine Showalter, 1977 and 1984, Pam Morris, 1993, or others) which

silences a possible female voice, and/or objectifies female character(s). Although the *black girl* in this poem has no voice, I would rather interpret the poem as social criticism, not as overseeing the female character's feelings, thoughts and wishes; on the contrary, I would rather interpret it as social criticism – the text intentionally points at her socially weak position which stems from the traditional social and gender order. The girl (or young woman) is utterly disempowered, forcefully passive, symbolically (or even actually) deprived of voice in the sense of articulating her own decisions. She is even depicted as motionless – there is no movement ascribed to this character, she is only sitting, waiting (probably in vain), and dumbly looking at the black sky (the sky is *kalā* like her, the young woman is homologised with it). Her deep, voiceless wishes and feelings (*gabhīr maner nīrab kathākhāni*) are locked in her gaze – as imagined by the narrator's perception. The motif of Woman's voice is well-known from feminist analyses – the female voice works here as an expression of empowerment (or disempowerment),<sup>7</sup> although only in imagination. The narrator's voice, of course, does not refer to that feminist critical discourse explicitly (we could certainly hardly expect that an openly feminist stance would have appeared in Tagore's text in the second decade of the twentieth century); even so, it is clear from the text that the narrator sympathizes with the powerless young woman.

And there is not only a pity but – quite typically for Tagore's representation of black-skinned women<sup>8</sup> – a feeling of attraction. The metaphors associated with the image of the young woman clearly connote beauty, e.g., her silenced words are associated with dim early morning light (*ālor nīrab bāñī*), the wind plays with her hair down and loose (*elocul*), she herself is metaphorized as a bird who is awoken at night (*rāt-jāgā ek pākhi*); the metaphors mostly connote natural beauties, again typical poetics in Tagore's poems where female prettiness is represented and adored.

Another line of imagination is drawn by the *cage symbolism*. The broken window of the neighbour's house through which the narrator can see the young woman is equipped with rusty bars (*marace-parā gadār*). That associates a cage which, as a metaphor, is even explicitly mentioned when the narrator speaks about himself – he feels like a peacock in the cage who just dances for a fun of the others, he is also powerless in a way, trapped in his social position; here especially, we can read allusions to a kind of existentialist thinking, although the poem was written much earlier than this philosophical stream developed. The

<sup>7</sup> Cf., Cixous (1991), Fetterly (1978), Spivak (1988), Sengupta (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Cf., e.g., *Kriṣṇakālī*, *Sāmtāl meye*, *Caṇḍālikā*, and others.

narrator draws a parallel between the social trap of the young woman and his own one, a trap that connects them, joins them together. We can interpret it as an example of Tagore's humanist universalism: all human beings are interconnected in a way.

It can be hardly denied that from the feminist perspective, such a comparison is a bit androcentric, i.e. male-centered. Although the narrator is obviously poor, although he must try to earn money for supporting his studies or for finding means of living which will provide him food at least once a day, he *can* study, he *can* go out of his hostel, he *can* look for a job, no matter how difficult it may be. Compared to the situation of the young woman, he can be much more an agent of his life while she cannot be of hers at all – she can only passively wait if another person (her father) finds a bridegroom for her; marriage is presented as the only positive social perspective of her life. She has no choice, no agency. She can only send her silent song, full of grief, to the stars like a night bird.

### **Intersectional reading of the poem**

The main female character of the poem is obviously discriminated within the traditionally patriarchal gender order as has already been explained above. As a woman of the beginning of the twentieth century, her predestination is to be married – to specify it, it is an arranged marriage. If her father does not succeed to find an acceptable bridegroom (of a suitable caste, class and material level), the woman will have no other way than staying in her parents' family or a brother's family where, however, she will fill a place of an unlucky, undesirable burden; in case she had no brother, after the death of her parents she will stay alone without any financial support, or will have to find a shelter where the lives of lonesome women (or widows) were very hard.

The neighbour's family seems to be poor. First, the rusty bars in the broken window indicate it. Second, if the family was rich, the father could compensate the "lack of beauty" (fair skin has traditionally been regarded as a sign of beauty, dark skin as unattractive) by a good dowry but he obviously cannot. If the woman remains single and poor, her future will seem the more sad. Last, there is a question about the colour of her dark skin. The text of the poem does not reveal if the girl is black because her family is ethnically different, or the colour is only a matter of a "bad luck". This issue would have an influence on the interpretation; in case the family belonged to an ethnic minority, we could also speak about a race/ ethnic discrimination from the side of the society or the social system. If she just "unluckily" did not match the dictate of beauty, it would rather point to gender discrimination

again; as Naomi Wolf put it in *The Beauty Myth* (1991), the demands for women's look have often been much more strict than those cast upon men, and have often been used, as Wolf emphasizes, against women, to control and discipline them. Implicitly, one possible interpretation could be a possible racist discrimination, although ethnical minorities usually stay together in specific quarters of cities. Another interpretation would point to the social status discrimination if the family was of a low caste – low caste women may be of darker skin than Brahmin women, although it is not possible to generalize. The third possible interpretation (the girl is treated ugly because she does not have a fair skin) would come back to the perspective of gender discrimination, gender stereotypes and gender power, disciplination and control of women by the family and society.

### **Close reading of the poem *SāntālMeye*: The plot, positionality of the characters and the “male gaze”**

The main character of the text of the poem is an anonymous Santali woman. She is introduced in the first stanza as wearing a rustic sari which embraces her black body (*kālo deha*) – so here, we can see another, rather similar figuration of blackness in connection with a female character like in *Kālameye*. Unlike the young woman in *Kālameye*, however, blackness is not a social problem for this woman, as a Santali she would hardly have fair skin. She wears white (i.e. not golden or silver) shellac bangles on her strong (*niṭol*) arms – the rustic sari and (cheap) lac bangles show she is a poor woman. She carries a heavy basket on her head, which is another explicit sign of her physical strength. Like the young woman in *Kālameye*, she is simlised to a bird, black bird; when black birds were created, as the poem says, this woman was – as if just by the way – created, too. The metaphor of the bird is further developed; the young woman has two invisible wings, hidden inside (*or duṭipākhā / bhitare adriśya āchedhākā*). So, she is not only strong, her strength (or even power?) is hidden, and together with the image of wings, it also connotes freedom, or at least internal freedom, a capacity to be free. The path she is walking is gravelled, i.e. it is not easy to walk it (a metaphor of a hard life), but in spite of that, her step is light, she nearly flies – again an allusion to birds and to overcoming of obstacles. Several further lines go on depicting the surrounding nature; as if the woman was a part of it, of its beauty and peace.

Then another character appears in the text – the narrator. A reader learns that he is an owner (obviously a rich owner) of a new house in construction. The Santali women is employed by him, together with other day labourers. Like in the poem *Kālameye*, we can see

a symbolically opposite position of the two protagonists. In *Kālameye*, they are divided by a street and windows of their dwellings; in this poem, they are divided by action and by social and material status. The man (narrator) is sitting and watching the labourers; the woman is walking, working and acting – although the action is not freely chosen and not an expression of her agency but of her social subordination, she is definitely not passive. The man (in ich-form narrative) even feels to exploit her – he tore her from the heart of her home to work for him as a slave, she was bought by him. He bought her strength with money.

On the first plan reading, we could again connect the sujet of the poem with a male gaze when a woman is only a viewed, observed being. In this specific setting, however, we can trace a socially discursive tone which goes deeper. The narrator does not just lazily stare at a pretty working woman and is not only sinking in feelings of being attracted to her into self-pity; there is a self-reflection, a self-critique on his side. In spite of that, such a reflection does not lead him to any real change of behaviour to the woman. The self-reflected knowledge remains to be purelylyrical, he pities her – but did he decide to give her at least a better wage? There is just a charming poetics of his feelings of pity. Nothing more.

By depicting “Black as beautiful”, Tagore – intentionally or not, corresponded with the Latin American movement of the *Négritude* from 1930s and anticipated the Afroamerican feminist movement of that name of the second half of the twentieth century. This concept also found reflection in his other poems, as stated above.

### **Conclusion: Power(lessness) and intersectionality**

The Santali woman is a tribal, a *dalit*, i.e. according to the categories of race and ethnicity, she belongs to a marginalized minority. As a dalit, she is an outcaste, her social status within the mainstream society is the lowest possible one. She is poor – she has to work hard as an unqualified, manual labourer for a wage, the text does not say what the wage is and what she can afford to buy for it. From the intersectional perspective, she is marginalized and discriminated several times: from the perspectives of race, social status, class and gender. The last aspect is perhaps least articulated in the text, we can only deduce that as a woman, she may receive even lower wage than the male labourers (traditionally, she would get a lower wage, we can only ask – will the repenting narrator change that?) and the work may be more demanding for her, although she is physically strong. Compared to the situation of the female character in *Kālameye*, the oppression she has to face comes solely from outside. The Santali woman may live in a happy family community but has to leave it for earning money.

She is discriminated by the mainstream community; from the text of the poem, we know nothing about a possible discrimination in her home community (e.g. if she has to suffer a patriarchal subjection and if she has, how is it carried out). She may feel happy in her community. Unlike her, the black young woman in *Kālameye* seemingly cannot be happy. She probably is not a dalit, a subaltern, obviously not a tribal because as a native tribal, she would very probably live in a village, not in a city. Still, she faces a perspective of isolation and loneliness, not being a social outcaste in the literally meaning of the word but a probable future outcaste of her own family, if the father does not succeed in finding a husband for her. We can anticipate that if she finally gets married but will be regarded as an ugly bride and there will not be a good dowry compensation, her future will not be much better. Can she do anything with that?

The *Kāla meye* protagonist has only dreams and wishes. Unlike her, the Santali woman has wings, not only silent songs; the wings are invisible and hidden, that's true, but they are there, there is *śakti* in her, although chained *śakti*. *Śakti* can mean strength but also power. This woman is not powerless, although she is an object of exploitation. She is not only dreaming about birds; in her mind, she *is* a free bird.

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**Examining Motherhood and Son-preference in Colonial Bengal: A Textual Analysis of  
Tagore's *Chokher Bali* and *Jogajog***

*Krishnapriya T. K., Manjula Venkataraghavan, Padma Rani*

**Abstract:**

Motherhood in Colonial India appears as a complex juxtaposition of the familial, the cultural, the social, and the political. Generally, the ideology of motherhood is defined from a patriarchal standpoint that deems mothering as a natural function of women and at the same time denies women the right to choose the parenting conditions. Colonial Bengal bore a similar attitude towards motherhood and mothering, and that was strengthened by colonialism which had effectively decapitated the native culture. As struggles against colonialism gained momentum, homes became a site of resistance. Naturally, women became the protectors and also a symbolic representation of a culture that was untouched by the arrival of an alien civilisation. Among the women, mothers were especially important as nationalist connotations came to be associated with motherhood in particular. This paper aims at a transgression from this norm to explore motherhood and mothering in relation to certain implicit political undercurrents while explicitly placing due importance on the domestic and familial during the colonial times. Rabindranath Tagore's domestic novels *Chokher Bali* (1903) and *Jogajog* (1929) are chosen for this study. The novels are set during a period of grappling changes that witnessed an emergence of a new middle class – the *bhadralok*. Tagore paints vivid and contrasting models of motherhood through his characters - Rajlakshmi Annapurna, Kumudini, Nistarini, and Nandarani- that are as relevant almost a century after the publication of the novels. The character of Rajlakshmi reflects elements of 'intensive mothering, though the concept itself was discussed much later by Sharon Hays (1996). All these mothers also represent the powers and powerlessness of motherhood (Rich, 1976). Nandarani breaks the conventional norms surrounding mothering while Annapurna is a powerless mother as she has no biological children. Another element that we seek to explore within the backdrop of the novels is the distinctive problem of son-preference in the country (Nabar, 1995). Amidst this backdrop, this paper seeks to construct the institution of motherhood and experiences of mothering anchored in the *bhadralok* domesticity of Colonial Bengal through textual analysis.

**Key words:** Tagore, Motherhood, Colonial Bengal, Son-preference, *Jogajog*, *ChokherBali*

### The Socio-cultural Context

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1903)<sup>1</sup> and *Jogajog* (1929)<sup>2</sup> unfold in the complex dynamics of the domestic home. Although the novels are set apart by a substantial time frame - *Chokher Bali* was shaped in the colonial Bengal of the late nineteenth century<sup>3</sup> and *Jogajog* in the early twentieth century<sup>4</sup> - there are obvious displays of common underpinnings characteristic to the period. Moreover, these novels represent the critical social discourses of the period. Two such vital themes of motherhood and son-preference are chosen for further exploration in this study. Following Maithreyi Krishnaraj's (2010) assertion that 'women are mothers and *also women*'<sup>5</sup>, this paper seeks to examine motherhood and son-preference embedded in the novels. It also attempts to implicitly draw from the corresponding larger socio-cultural set-up to understand the women's location (and dislocation) within the novels.

Patriarchal societies view motherhood as defining and 'unifying' experiences. However, women often face a deep sense of alienation in their experiences of motherhood and mothering.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, whilst motherhood determines the social standing of a woman, the conditions under which its 'privileges' are granted remain inconsistent. Various factors such as the validity of the woman's marriage and the woman's location within the family can be determinants of this privilege.<sup>7</sup> Further, parenting experiences are not uniform across genders. A common disparity is evidenced in the connotations of 'to father' and 'to mother' in a heteronormative society. The associations of the term 'to father' a child is often limited to men's contribution to the biological process of procreation. At the same time, 'to mother' a child surpasses the nine months the child lays 'unfolding' in the womb to embody a 'continuing presence' that can often last for a lifetime.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Chokher Bali*, translated from Bengali by Radha Chakravarty, (India: Random House Publishers, 2012). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Relationships: Jogajog*, translated from Bengali by Supriya Chaudhuri, (India: Oxford University Press, 2006). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Radha Chakravarty, 'Introduction', in *Chokher Bali* (India: Random House Publishers, 2012), pp. 5-9 (p.6).

<sup>4</sup> Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Introduction', in *Jogajog*, (India: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 1-31. (pp. 4-6).

<sup>5</sup> Maithreyi Krishnaraj, 'Introduction', in *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?*, ed. by Maithreyi Krishnaraj (New Delhi, India: Routledge, 2010a), pp. 1-8(p.6).

<sup>6</sup> Veena Poonacha, 'Preface', in *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?*, ed. by Maithreyi Krishnaraj (New Delhi, India: Routledge, 2010), pp. vii-xiii (p. vii-viii)

<sup>7</sup> Poonacha, 2010, p. viii.

<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, NY: WW Norton, 1976), p.11.

Before we further understand the narratives of motherhood and the role of son-preference, it is imperative to locate the two primary temperaments of the period relevant to the current study. Hence, we first consider the construction of the subjects within the familial/private space and then the political/public spaces.

The social reform era of the nineteenth century witnessed the integration of the women's question into mainstream society. As female education was deemed necessary for progress, a new strain of educated women – the *bhadramahila*- emerged from the *zenana* of *bhadralok* households.<sup>9</sup> The rise of *bhadramahila* impacted the institution of marriage and motherhood. Conjugal ties slowly drifted to adopt a more 'conscious partnership'. However, the semblance of equality in *bhadralok* marriages was built around the notion of women as 'equal' yet 'separate' entities. An additional emphasis was laid on their roles as mothers and wives.<sup>10</sup> It also maintained that 'motherhood was the most important function in the life of a Hindu woman'.<sup>11</sup> It not only strengthened marriage but also 'sanctified' it.<sup>12</sup>

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw political formulations on motherhood centred on the nationalist struggle. Bagchi (2010) says that the colonial Bengal of the period used 'the image of the mother to represent the nationalist aspiration'.<sup>13</sup> Previously, the era of social reform viewed motherhood in a positive light. Nonetheless, the fundamental problem with the nationalist era was that it posited motherhood as the only worthwhile representation of Bengali women. This belief gained significant momentum in the last two decades of the century as the colonised constructed the 'Bengali mother as a sign' in a bid to alienate themselves from the coloniser. This symbolic motherhood was untainted and unclaimed by the colonisers and, thus a representation of the domain of the colonised. Moreover, the country itself was represented as a 'Mother' or '*Bharatmata*',<sup>14</sup> falling in line with the then prevalent Hindu concept of Goddess/mother.<sup>15</sup> Rabindranath Tagore himself penned multiple songs on the glory of motherland. One such song caused a major stir as a young revolutionary

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<sup>9</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian colonial history*, ed. by Kukum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (India, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) pp. 127-179 (pp.128-130).

<sup>10</sup> Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), p.150.

<sup>11</sup> Borthwick, 2016, p. 151.

<sup>12</sup> Borthwick, 2016, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi, Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal in *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?*, ed. by Maithreyi Krishnaraj (New Delhi, India : Routledge, 2010), pp. 157-185 (p.159).

<sup>14</sup> Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata* was an amalgamation of Bengali women and Goddess Shri. See Bagchi, 2010, p. 178.

<sup>15</sup> Bagchi, 2010, pp. 160-163.

Ullaskar Dutta invoked his motherland with unparalleled passion under a court trial. He recited,<sup>16</sup>

Blessed is my birth in this land  
 Blessed is my birth, O my mother,  
 in having loved you.<sup>17</sup>

The political glorifications chained colonial women to divine motherhood, and ‘the ideal of motherhood permeated the entire lifestyle of mothers in colonial Bengal.’<sup>18</sup> For instance, Bagchi (2010) says,

Child-bearing and nurturing became the only social justification for women’s lives. Without any control over her own reproductive powers, this amounted to a form of slavery, however magisterial it may have been made to look.<sup>19</sup>

Significantly, the glorification and idealisation of motherhood created dissonance between the expectation and lived realities of women. As the physical capability of women was glorified, motherhood was weaponised as a ‘justification for their exclusion from all avenues of power, position and creativity’, limiting their public participation.<sup>20 21</sup> The bogus glorification curbed women’s individual existence depriving them of basic freedom and rights while exalting them onto a holier, symbolic status. Thus, motherhood essentially posited and continues to posit a conflict between the lived experiences (of womankind) and ideological existence (of the ‘eternal icon’<sup>22</sup>).

As women’s lives were authenticated through motherhood in the colonial era, a tragic irony impeded the lives of *daughters of these mothers* (the future mothers) as son-preference threatened their social and biological existence. According to Bagchi (2010), it was the sons who brought ‘glory to the womb’ in the nationalist era, and it was in the fight to birth yet another son that many mothers lost their lives.<sup>23</sup> When ideal motherhood invaded and women’s lives, men were engaged in various social and political activities. To further collate

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<sup>16</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement In Bengal 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), p. 293.

<sup>17</sup> Translation in Bagchi, 2010, p. 179.

<sup>18</sup> Bagchi, 2010, p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> Bagchi, 2010, p.181.

<sup>20</sup> Poonacha, 2010, p. ix.

<sup>21</sup> Maithreyi Krishnaraj, ‘Motherhood, Mothers, Mothering: A Multi-Dimensional Perspective’, in *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?*, ed. by Maithreyi Krishnaraj (New Delhi, India: Routledge, 2010b), pp. 9-44 (p.9).

<sup>22</sup> Krishnaraj, 2010a, p.1.

<sup>23</sup> Bagchi, 2010, p.181.

the dismay of women's existence, they were meant to fulfil the biological responsibilities and were expected to seek fulfilment through their services and self-sacrifices to their progeny. Moreover, the sex of the child impacted the privileges of motherhood and the mother.<sup>24</sup> The birth of a male child granted mothers higher status while the failure to produce sons led to the wife's abandonment by the husband<sup>25</sup>. Sons were vital to the families for multiple reasons,

Temporally, he was the provider and inheritor of property; spiritually, he was the only one who could perform the ritual offering of oblations to ancestors. The son was the perpetuator of the family lineage.<sup>26</sup>

If a son was born to a family, his arrival was celebrated with the auspicious sound of the conch shell and the distribution of gifts to family members. Concurrently, the birth of a girl child was met with grief.<sup>27</sup> Such practices have diminished the value of women ever since their birth. Thus, it is essential to address the combined impact of son-preference and motherhood in the lives of women who spent all their lives within the household?

Perhaps, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* (1882) offers the most influential representation of motherhood in the nineteenth century. The author constructs three mothers as the allegorical phases of the motherland – past, present and future.<sup>28</sup> In *Kamalakanta* (1885), Bankim Chandra expresses a similar disposition as he calls upon the mother/motherland to awaken and promises that her 'sons' shall breach the fortress of selfish motives.<sup>29</sup> These representations stray towards a nationalist allegory of motherhood that shaped the temperament of the period. Moreover, in both these instances, the mother is the divine who guides her children with tender affection. Tagore's political novel *Gora* presents Anandamayee as the mother whose virtue pushes Gora to eternal truth. Bagchi says that the portrayal in *Gora* dismantles the popular narrative of the 'institutionalised' mother of the nationalist period:<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the institutionalised, essentialised mother, celebrated in the Brahminical Hindu nationalism, of both the last quarter of the nineteenth century and that of the Swadeshi movement at the beginning of the twentieth, is actively replaced by Rabindranath with

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<sup>24</sup> Poonacha, 2010, p. viii

<sup>25</sup> Borthwick, 2016, p. 151-152.

<sup>26</sup> Borthwick, 2016, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> S. C. Bose, cited in Borthwick, 2016, p. 151.

<sup>28</sup> Bagchi, 2010, p. 174.

<sup>29</sup> Bagchi, 2010, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> Jasodhara Bagchi, *Interrogating Motherhood* (India: Sage Publications Ltd, 2017), p. 42.

the principled pluralism of an experiential mother, more if not less than a biological mother.

Drawing from Bagchi's assertions, this study aims to locate motherhood not in the clutches of the political realm overridden with symbolism but in the 'experiential mother'. The mothers in Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, and *Jogajog* are located in their centuries-old sanctuary – the home. In this home, women exist as people in their own experiences, lapses, and fallacies in their flesh and blood. Hence, homes represent the abode where women were just women. For the study, a textual analysis method is employed, and the theoretical framework is primarily formed by the feminist inquiry of Nabar (1995)<sup>31</sup> with inputs from Hays' (1996)<sup>32</sup> and Rich's (1976)<sup>33</sup> formulations on motherhood.

### **(Dis)location of Womanhood and Motherhood in *Bhadralok* Homes**

Rabindranath Tagore's engagement with novels has produced a plethora of women characters who can still be considered examples of the liberated *new woman*. His novels often portray the injustices experienced by colonial Indian women. For instance, the plight of widows and the strangled existence of educated women within patriarchy have often found a home in Tagore's novels. His novels have also advocated for women's liberation from social bondage.<sup>34</sup> Tagore often places the women and the mothers of his novels at the centre of his writing. Though, the socio-cultural setting of the novel restrains them to the margins.

Novels like *Chokher Bali* and *Jogajaog* unravel through the journey of their subjugated women. The motherhood in *Chokher Bali* can be distinctly characterised into two – the mother Rajalakshmi and the *barren* Annapurna. A suitable frame to analyse the mother Rajalakshmi can be drawn from Sharon Hays' (1996) intensive mothering<sup>35</sup>. Hays' gendered model of parenting is founded on the western mothers of the late twentieth century. Despite the geographical and time dislocations, Tagore has brilliantly crafted a character fitting into certain specifics of Hays' mould. Hays states that intensive mothering 'advises mothers to

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<sup>31</sup> See Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Women* (India: Penguin Random House, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, NY: WW Norton, 1976).

<sup>34</sup> Monali Chatterjee, 'The Delineation of the Female Subject in Rabindranath Tagore's Novel Farewell, My Friend', in Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century, *Sophia Studies in Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures* 7 ed. by Debashish Banerji (New Delhi: Springer India, 2015), pp. 145–156 (pp. 147-148).

<sup>35</sup> See Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children.<sup>36</sup> Rajalakshmi spends most of her time looking after her son, Mahendra. As she is a widow, she is free of the conjugal ties that would have otherwise defined her existence. However, her widowhood binds her to a precarious position in the novel as a woman's existence without a male patron to shelter her is almost parasitic in a patriarchal world. Thus, the widow Rajalakshmi latches to her son Mahendra to find legitimacy and value in her existence. She expends all her time and energy looking after her son. Interestingly, the strength of the nurturer/mother constructs embedded in her is such that her 'maternal tenderness' extends towards Mahendra's close companion Bihari. Even when she is sick and bedridden, she seeks to feed 'the bangal son' Bihari with food of his liking (B 200).

The significant basis of Rajalakshmi's life is that she was fortunate to birth a male heir for the family, a purpose that Nabar (1995) says 'even today single-mindedly determines a woman's status as wife and mother'.<sup>37</sup> Hence, it is expected that Rajalakshmi, the widow, enjoys a higher social standing as she was blessed with a son. She finds absolute fulfilment in rearing her son. She spends all her life in her aristocratic home and has never ventured into any realm apart from her devoted service to the men of the house. Nabar (1995) posits that such a mother, due to their confinement to homes and their inability to develop and grow in aspects apart from roles related to their house and children, succumb to the idea of utmost service of the children. Most importantly, they wholeheartedly accept the mother/goddess construct. This acceptance also makes the patriarchal 'imprisonment' of women appear as 'empowering'. Rajalakshmi sees the dynamic between her and Mahendra as a sign of great love, and she takes pride in it. His initial refusal to marry delights her as Mahendra refuses to cast aside his mother on the pretext of marriage.

Rajalakshmi assembles her world around her son's existence to the extent that their relationship is categorised as oedipal in nature.<sup>38</sup> This form of mothering is 'child centred', 'labour intensive', and 'emotionally absorbing'.<sup>39</sup> Her son is like 'a baby kangaroo that lives in its mother's pouch even after birth', and he revels in the care of his mother (CB 10). Thus, it is predictable that Rajalakshmi starts perishing as her son moves away from her. The grief and estrangement manifest in her physical deterioration as she develops a 'weak heart and symptoms of stomach problems' (CB 238). Her deteriorating health can be read in the light of

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<sup>36</sup> Hay, 1996, p. x.

<sup>37</sup> Nabar, 1995, p. 178.

<sup>38</sup> Dipankar Roy, *Woman in Tales of Love, Sex and Danger; A Study of the Representation of Women in Tagore's Three 'Domestic Novels'*, *Muse India* (2015): pp 1-23, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Hay, 1996, p. 8.

her diminishing selfhood (and the only identity of being a mother) that she has not only accepted but carefully constructed. She cannot find fulfilment and purpose as the goddess/mother as her son removes himself from her life, and hence, her existence loses its legitimacy. This figurative loss of her motherhood (her identity) results in her physical ailment and actual death. Thus, Tagore's portrayal of Rajalakshmi exemplifies women who are not individuals, but living manifestations of a role approved and granted by the patriarchal society. Her obsession with her son is a result of how integral her son's existence was for her selfhood. She is effectively a 'possession' passed on from the father to the husband and finally, to her son.

Rajalakshmi's sister-in-law, Annapurna, is the *barren* woman of the patriarchal society. She is widowed at the young age of eleven, and after that, she finds solace in spirituality. She is the loving *kakima* of Mahendra and Bihari. Despite the maternal love, her social standing is compromised initially due to her widowhood and then primarily due to her childlessness. The widowhood of Annapurna does not warrant a similar dread to her childlessness as the novel was set in the late nineteenth century<sup>40</sup>, many decades after *Satidaho* was abolished through legal intervention in Colonial Bengal. However, the period witnessed the ideal of motherhood reverberating across political and social arenas. Thus, her childlessness is a great sin, and she holds no power within the household compared to her sister-in-law, who has a son. Rajalakshmi considers her an intruder in the house. Rajalakshmi thinks that Annapurna 'envied a mother like herself' (CB 12). Thus, Rajalakshmi regularly unleashes venomous attacks on Annapurna. Once she asks Annapurna,

"Were you after my son?" she hissed, like a serpent, and swept out of the room without waiting for a reply (CB 14).

This culminates in Annapurna withdrawing herself from her home and setting off on a pilgrimage. The stigma of childlessness meant that Annapurna receives no privileges or rights as she is *barren*.<sup>41</sup> Further, as Rich (1976) says, these terms - 'barren' and 'childless' - effectively negates any further identity of women.<sup>42</sup> If motherhood allows little self-actualisation, being childless not only decimates the woman's identity but also prevents any formations of it and makes her existence unbearable.

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<sup>40</sup> Chakravarthy, 2012, p.6.

<sup>41</sup> Poonacha, 2010, p. viii.

<sup>42</sup> Rich, 1976, p.11.

*Jogajog* is set almost three decades after *Chokher Bali*. Even as the social, political and economic realms were changing rapidly, the thrust on motherhood appears intact in the novel. Nevertheless, the portrayal of motherhood in both novels is the polar opposite. While *Chokher Bali*'s mothers approve of the socially granted virtues and vices, the mothers in *Jogajog* resist and denounce the ideal motherhood. The female protagonist Kumudini and her mother, Nandarani, are examples of definite rebellions against the social bondages of holy matrimony and motherhood.

*Jogajog*'s Kumudini is portrayed as a woman at war with her inner-self. Chadudhuri (2006) says that 'Kumudini is located in a double construction of selfhood' of an 'unknowable personal entity' and a 'quantifiable' personal traits.<sup>43</sup> Even as she is educated and possesses various modern skills like photography, her elusive mind is not of the modern mould as the question of 'personal choice in marriage never entered Kumudini's head' (J 44). Her trouble develops from her failure to consolidate her ideals of marriage with her husband, Madhusudan, as she despises his nature. Her inner turmoil dampens her marital life despite her concern that it is a sin to not 'surrender with reverence to her husband' (J 187). She feels alienated in her new home as she holds no rights or independent possessions within its territory. However, her husband wants to tie her 'life securely to his: by making her the mother of his children' (J 112). Despite her reluctance and utter misery, Kumudini becomes the '*Barobou*'-the elder daughter-in-law - of the home. Inevitably, she asserts her tarnished identity as she wails in the humiliation of her person - 'I am their *Barobou*; does that mean anything, if I am not Kumu?' (J 253). Thus, the heartache at the hands of her husband initiates a metamorphosis in her as she forgoes the identity of the girl who pledged to be a 'slave' to her husband in the pursuit of free will.

As a result, Kumudini transgresses as she - a married woman - returns to her ancestral home as her 'soul aches to be free' (J 249). But, her rebellion is short-lived as she ends up pregnant from an unconsented sexual union with her husband. Kumudini's initial reaction to the news frames her resistance, as she says, 'no, no, this can't be' (J 249). Here, Tagore gave a nuanced depiction of Kumudini's grief as the narrator explains her predicament,

The fear that she might be pregnant made clear to Kumu how monstrous a form her brief encounter with her husband had taken in her mind (J 249).

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<sup>43</sup> Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 12.

The 'ultimate cruelty of fate' devastates Kumudini (J 250). But with her vocal protests, Kumudini becomes a beacon of hope against the wretched idealisation of motherhood that defines and dictates women's lives. She rejects her fate as she values her selfhood and her identity above all. However, as she readies herself to become a mother, the identity she holds dearly is dismissed off by the child's father. Thus, the patriarchal man in Madhusudan confines Kumudini's rebellion through the assertion of his parental rights. Even her brother Biprodas who supported her rebellion, says, 'How could I dare to deprive your child of its home' (J 252).

Ironically, the child is 'unfolding' in Kumudini's womb, but the parental rights are bestowed to Madhusudan as he has completed his fatherly role 'to beget' a child. Kumudini is expected to 'earn motherhood' and the new identity as a mother by 'learning to nurture'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Kumudini is forced into the ideal motherhood as she loses her selfhood. Here, Nabar's (1995) assertion on the denial of a woman's individualistic identity is further constrained by the woman's total dependence on her husband.<sup>45</sup> Fortunately, Tagore does not completely renounce her rebellion at her incumbent motherhood. As she leaves for her marital home, she asks her brother to set her free one day because by the time she will have 'handed over *their* child to them' (J 252). Her dissociation from the notion of unending service to children expected of women and the ideal motherhood becomes more apparent as she tells Biprodas that one day she will gain freedom and chooses her mother's memories to substantiate her stance,

Do you remember our mother? She died of her own free will. She could not find her place in her own household, so she could easily leave her children behind and go. When a person wants to be free, nothing can stop her. I am your sister, dada, I want freedom (J 252).

Kumudini admires her mother, Nandarani, who has exercised free will and choice. Tagore calls Nandarani 'a spirited woman' who could not attain the 'habit of endurance' characteristic of her peers as she refuses to tolerate her husband's misgivings (J 45-46). Comparable to Kumudini's transgression, Nandarani leaves her husband's home as the injustices mount. She leaves her children as she frees herself from the desperate existence. Further, after her husband's demise, she chooses not to find comfort in her children.

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<sup>44</sup> Rich, 1976, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Nabar, 1995, p. 173.

Nandarani drew a thick line of vermilion in her hair-parting, wrapped herself in a red Benarasi sari. Without a glance at her household, with a smile on her face, she left them (J 51).

Nandarani fulfils her rebellion and asserts her identity even in her death. Kumudini as a child was enraged at her mother for leaving her father, and ‘she placed her head at her father’s feet, as though asking pardon on her behalf’ (J 50). But, as she is chained and bound by the same ties of patriarchy, she feels a profound connection to her mother’s predicament. As she aspires for freedom from the bonds of relationships, she says that ‘one day, when the bonds snap, Ma will bless me; I can assure you of that’ (J 252). Kumudini and Nandarani invert the dominant paradigm of motherhood as they do not fit into the construction of an ideal Indian woman.<sup>46</sup> They also steer away from ‘intensive mothering’ despite patriarchy’s attempts to succumb them to the role of a mother.

Nistarini, Kumudini’s sister-in-law, represents motherhood sanctioned by patriarchy. Unlike Kumudini, Nistarini is unperturbed by her lack of identity. She is a patriarchal woman who considers the husband ‘greater than his wife; there could be no dispute about it’ (J 228). An interesting nuance is contained in the way the characters of the novel address Nistarini. She is ‘Moti’s mother’. Her name (her identity) is irrelevant to them as motherhood becomes her only identity. The narrator introduces her as ‘this girl was Kumu’s second sister-in-law, Nabin’s wife. Her name was Nistarini; everyone called her Moti’s mother’ (J 87).

Nistarini registers no protest at the disintegration of selfhood even as her circumstances are similar to Kumudini’s plight of being referred to, and in the process reduced to, *barobou*. As she witnesses Kumudini’s devastation, Nistarini reasons that it was easier for her to adapt to the marital life as she came to it as a child bride, and she finds no time to ‘feel the mystery within herself’ (J 101). Thus, she represents the woman posited by Nabar (1995), whose individuality is completely restrained by society. She finds fulfilment in the patriarchal constructs surrounding the mother and not in the individual woman as it confines her to home and does not allow her to develop beyond the domestic duties.<sup>47</sup> Nistarini represents the women whose socialisation primarily teaches motherhood as the supreme role. Nistarini accepts her role willingly and is delighted about Kumudini’s pregnancy. She considers it an irreversible chain between Kumudini and her husband’s family as now ‘she was tied to it by

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<sup>46</sup> See Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Women*. (India: Penguin Random House, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> Nabar, 1995, p. 185.

her nerve-strings' and not merely through 'wedlock' (J 249). Nistarini though initially sympathetic, renounces Kumudini's struggle owing to her social conditioning.

### ***Bhadramahila, Motherhood and Son-preference: The Unholy Trinity in Bhadrak Homes***

Rich (1976), in her seminal work, discusses the powers and powerlessness of motherhood.<sup>48</sup> But, deducing this in the Indian context is a cumbersome process as Indian women embody supra-individual categories and exist in a present layered with mythological conceptions.<sup>49</sup> Here, we seek to look at the powers and powerlessness of motherhood through the unique problem of son-preference rampant in India to date. The birth of a son often grants women 'higher status' and 'privilege'. Sons are still seen as keepers of the family legacy as they are the spiritual and economic inheritors.<sup>50</sup> Further, the novels of the nationalist period placed the responsibility on the sons to carry forward the cause of the nation's freedom.

In the case of Rajalakshmi of *Chokher Bali*, the powers come from the *privilege* of bearing a male child. She rejoices in the power<sup>51</sup> and superiority she gained from the glory of birthing and rearing Mahendra. She tirelessly works and services Mahendra, and she perceives his marriage as an obstruction to her motherly duties,

His mother had neglected the tasks of folding his clothes, making his bed and cleaning his room. Not having performed these habitual duties of maternal love, her heart ached inwardly, like breasts overfull with milk. That afternoon, she thought, 'Mahendra must have left for college by now. I shall take this opportunity to go and set his room in order. When he returns, he will instantly detect his mother's touch in the room (CB 26).

As Mahendra slowly drifts away from her after his marriage, Rajalakshmi loses her pride and life purpose. When her life is invalidated, she chooses to taunt Asha and Annapurna even as the troubles are mostly resultant of Mahendra's actions. Her love for her son surpasses all her emotions as she chides the unfortunate Annapurna. Rajalakshmi thinks the 'sonless woman envied a mother like herself, fortunate enough to have a male child' (CB 12). Further, Asha's entry into the house propels Rajalakshmi's dejection as she loses power

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<sup>48</sup> See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, NY: WW Norton, 1976).

<sup>49</sup> See Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Women*. (India: Penguin Random House, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Borthwick, 2016, p. 151-152.

<sup>51</sup> Nabar, 1995, p. 185.

over her son. The wedlock also destabilises her carefully constructed relationship with Mahendra. As a result, she treats Asha (and also Annapurna) as an intruder in her home. She appears jealous of the new bride, and she tries her best to separate the couple while imposing ‘impossible norms of good-wifeliness’ on Asha.<sup>52</sup> For instance,

Rajalakshmi showed a sudden zeal for training the bride in household duties. Asha’s days were spent in the storeroom, kitchen and prayer room. At night, as compensation for the loss of her own relatives, Asha was made to share Rajalakshmi’s bed (CB 24).

Even though Rajalakshmi evidences ‘maternal tenderness’ towards Bihari, the same warmth is never extended towards Asha or Binodini. Rajalakshmi views Asha as a threat. As for, Bindoini, Rajalakshmi wishes she was her daughter in law (but not the daughter). Thus, Rajalakshmi’s character perpetrates injustices on other women through her devotion to her son. These women turn hostile towards the daughters-in-law and hold them at impossible standards, as in Asha’s case. Additionally, their role as a ‘selfless slave’ in the son’s life, convinces the son that they are ‘someone special and he should expect the woman/women in his life to feel the same’.<sup>53</sup> Mahendra expects all women in his life to bend to his will. It is Binodini’s brutal rejection that humiliated and humbled him.

*Jogajog* also displays subtle underpinnings of son-preference. There is a clear distinction between the sons and daughters in the novel’s setting. Biprodas is the head and scion of the family. He handles all the finances of the family, and he is also the inheritor and keeper of the aristocratic legacy of the Chatterjees as Kumduini belongs to the Ghoshals’ post her marriage to Madhusudan. Further, Kumudini understands and propagates this division as she echoes the very reasons embraced by many for such preferences across the country. For her,

Men supported their households by their own powers, while women brought prosperity to the home by the virtue of their good fortune [...] The Almighty has not given women the means to solve such a problem only the capacity to feel its pain (J 12).

A vital detail that Tagore incorporates in the novel is the mention of dowry. The practice essentially places sons over daughters as the latter becomes a financial burden on their families. One such instance in *Jogajog* portrays a man Baikuntha who is desperate to arrange the dowry for his daughter, who has been married off on the promise of ‘twelve

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<sup>52</sup> Nabar, 1995, p. 187.

<sup>53</sup> Nabar, 1995, p. 186.

hundred rupees, in addition to eighty *tolas* of gold' (J 84). The custom of dowry not only deprives women of self-worth but has tragic consequences in the form of dowry deaths, female infanticides and foeticides.<sup>54</sup> The overt preference for sons denies women space and identity not just in the public space but within homes as she becomes the subordinate (slave) to the superior (master) existence of the men of the house.

## Conclusion

Interestingly, Tagore's nuanced portrayal of motherhood was framed much before such considerations gained momentum in the feminist scholarship. These mothers are free of the nationalist connotations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence, they appear foremost human and flawed as opposed to motherhood, which was a weapon to channelise the 'sons' of the nation. Further, within the ambit of home, the mothers like Kumudini and Nandarani, topple the dominant paradigm, whilst mothers like Nistarini and Rajalakshmi, revel in patriarchy's approval. Largely, both the rebellious and conformist mothers demonstrate a lack of autonomy in their existence.

The clutch of the ideals of motherhood and son-preference take monstrous forms for the women of the novels. Together, both these constructs choke the existence of these women whilst patriarchy soothes her existence with the feigned symbolic supremacy of motherhood. Moreover, they collate to remove individual identity and selfhood from the lives of the women. Unfortunately, this subliminal conditioning has remained intact for centuries. For instance, the climax of *Chokher Bali* reveals that the next generation woman has already taken up the mantle. In Mahendra's words, 'Chuni has become an expert housekeeper' (CB 278).

Moreover, a rereading of Tagore's novel is challenged by the author's feminist concerns, which cannot be pinned down and placed under a particular school of thought. Tagore's attitude towards women and women's issues have varied considerably throughout his life. Some aspects in his non-fiction writings stand proof of this divergence and changing sentiments. Yet, we cannot disregard that Tagore's novels are in most ways a mirror to the colonial Bengal and its ideological mayhem. Perhaps, at these intersections of time and geography, the study situates the relevance of the novels that have transcended borders to reflect in the newer feminist critical paradigms. Most importantly, rereading these early

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<sup>54</sup> Tonushree Tyagi, *The Economics of Dowry: Causes and Effects of an Indian Tradition*, *University Avenue Undergraduate Journal of Economics* (2001): pp, 1-18, 2.

twentieth-century novels through the framework of the late twentieth century postulations by Nabar, Rich and Hays display a troublesome time dilation as the clutch of these patriarchal constructs have remained brutally and adamantly intact for almost close to a century.

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## Muses on the ‘Cult of the Charkha’

*Sahara Ahmed*

### **Abstract:**

When the national movement was inert and an ambience of ennui was evident, Gandhi's call for rural reconstruction and spinning the charkha as an activity was to be the locus of the Swadeshi and Non-cooperation movement which imparted a rejuvenating effect on the masses. However, Gandhi's retreat from active politics and the Non cooperation Movement's disillusioned aftermath had created a void in its trajectory. Tagore questioned the viability of this exercise and wrote the essay "The Cult of the Charkha" as a critique against it. He questioned the exclusive emphasis on a particular craft for the improvement of the country's economy. The moot question was to build a formidable edifice to win the war against colonialism. One could muse that a country could be united on the realms of economy if not religion and that could perhaps be a platform for the Swarajists to build the sinews of the movement. On the flip side are the implications indicating a new stray of enslavement – that of the machine akin to the apprehensions of the poet. Nuances of both the ‘Poet's’ and the ‘Mahatma's’ rationale behind their convictions tender a piquant understanding of the country's dwindling economy and the silver linings that could herald a beginning. Muses on the charkha shall also reflect on Sufi interpretations of it in initiating the trend towards rural reconstruction, refurbishing the lost élan of a once flourishing country.

**Key words:** Semiotic space, charkha, rural reconstruction, swadeshi, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, ecological humanism, self-reliance, Khadi nationalism, sufi ideas, Punjabi sufi poetry, syncretistic trends.

The study of representation has gained considerable popularity amongst academia. The field of semiotics is dynamic and fluid interspersed with new ideas that reinterpret and redefine symbols and icons. This essay, however, does not seek to redefine or reinterpret the charkha, rather it is an endeavour to reiterate its significance as a symbol of ‘unity in diversity’. The wheel is often visible as a prominent icon in several Buddhist relics. The chakra or the wheel signifies the source of all formative ideas, movement and the law of order (dharma). Early evidence unravels the use of the charkha in Baghdad (c.1200 CE) and

may have travelled to India and China from there. The etymology of 'charkha' is derived from the Persian word 'charkhi' which denotes 'circle' or wheel. The spinning wheel was the fulcrum of several revolutions. Eventually, the spinning wheel metamorphosed into industrial machinery such as the flying shuttle, the spinning jenny, the spinning mule and the power loom. Gandhi's clarion call invoked the traditional use of the charkha to improve upon the sagging morale of the freedom movement.

The Gandhian model of development was based largely on the use of renewable resources and was predominantly village centric. Gandhi vouched for rural development fervently, "If I preach against the enjoyment and ask men and women to go back to the simple life epitomised in the Charkha, I do so because I know, that without an intelligent return to simplicity, there is no escape from our descent to a state lower than brutes."<sup>1</sup> "My machinery", he said, "must be of the elementary type which I can put in the homes of the millions."<sup>2</sup> Swadeshi and decentralisation were the basic prerequisites of founding the ideal society of Gandhi's dream. He believed that it would be possible only in village development and prosperity. Gandhi envisaged a strong India through self-support, self-reliance as against temptations and exploitation. It is possible only through integrating the Charkha, Khadi and village industries that symbolise Gram Swaraj. An interrelated and mutually interdependent society was envisaged by Gandhi that earned the epithet of 'ecological humanism' combining the spiritual and ethical perspectives that embodied eclectic thoughts as evident in Sufi ideas.<sup>3</sup> The Mahatma ingeniously deployed the charkha or the spinning wheel as a tool for political emancipation by using it as a metaphor of 'ancient work ethics' and as a symbol of social and economic reaction against the subjugation the country was writhing under.

The national movement debunked a phase of inertness and an ambience of ennui was perceptible when Gandhi's call for rural reconstruction breathed new life in to the movement. Spinning the charkha as an activity was to be the quintessence of the Swadeshi and Non-cooperation movement and the rejuvenating effect found fruition in a new economic programme. However, Gandhi's retreat from active politics and the Non-cooperation Movement's disillusioned aftermath had created a void in its trajectory. Tagore questioned the viability of this exercise and wrote the essay "The Cult of the Charkha" as a critique against it. He questioned the exclusive emphasis on a particular craft for the improvement of

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<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol XIX, Delhi, 1976, p. 455.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456

the country's economy. The moot question was to build a formidable edifice to win the war against colonialism. One could muse that a country could be united on the realms of economy if not religion and that could perhaps be a platform for the Swarajists to build the sinews of the movement. On the flip side are the implications indicating a new stray of enslavement – that of the machine akin to the apprehensions of the poet. Nuances of both the 'Poet's' and the 'Mahatma's' rationale behind their convictions tender a piquant understanding of the country's dwindling economy and the silver linings that could herald a beginning. This essay shall also make an attempt at unravelling Sufi interpretations of it in initiating the trend towards rural reconstruction, refurbishing the lost élan of a once flourishing country.

### **A Dialogue between Two Great Minds**

It would be interesting to probe into the initiation of this dialogue between Tagore and Gandhi that invoked a critique of the charkha. Gandhi's spiritual quest through the charkha attracted some philosophically profound interventions even from his admirers. Tagore was one of them. Gandhi took cognisance of these criticisms; Gandhi wrote a long piece in *Young India*. In this article, entitled *Cobwebs of Ignorance*, he said:

That is just the sort of handicap under which the simple and straight movement of the spinning-wheel is labouring today. It is expected to fulfil conditions which no one ever claimed it to fulfil, and when it fails to do so, the blame is laid at its door rather than at the critic's!<sup>4</sup>

Tagore's essay entitled 'The Cult of the Charkha' appeared in September 1925, after rounds of correspondence between the two. Critiquing Gandhi's position on the charkha, Tagore said:

How often have any personal feelings of regard strongly urged me to accept at Mahatma Gandhi's hands my enlistment as a follower of the charkha cult, but as often be a party to the raising of the charkha to a higher place than is its due, thereby distracting attention from other more important factors in our task of all-round reconstruction.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier, in October 1921, Tagore had written a more critical essay on the issue, entitled *Call of Truth*. But Gandhi's conviction in the charkha was unshakable. Referring to Tagore's essay even while he appreciated his criticism, Gandhi wrote an elaborate article in *Young*

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<sup>4</sup> M. K. Gandhi, 'Cobwebs of Ignorance' in *Young India*, May 16, 1926.

<sup>5</sup> Rabindranath Tagore 'Cult of the Charkha', Some Letters to C.F. Andrews, *Modern Review*, May, 1921.

*India* on October 13, 1921, comparing the verses of the Bhagavad Gita with the role of the charkha. He wrote:

I have again and again appealed to reason, and let me assure him, that if happily the country has come to believe in the spinning-wheel as the giver of plenty, it has done so after laborious thinking, after great hesitation. I am not sure, that even now educated India has assimilated the truth underlying the charkha. He must not mistake the surface dirt for the substance underneath. Let him go deeper and see for himself whether the charkha has been accepted from blind faith or from reasoned necessity.<sup>6</sup>

In the essay, "The Cult of the Charkha", Tagore offered a critique on the Gandhian ethic of 'charkha-spinning' as an activity which could reinvigorate the Indian masses during the struggle for Indian independence. Both nurtured great mutual respect for each other but often had significant points of departure. One such issue was Gandhi's call for spinning the charkha in propagating the concept of self-help (*atmasakti*) which was to be the basic prerequisite of the Swadeshi and Non-cooperation movement. Tagore was sceptical of the benefits of this enterprise and wrote the essay as a critique against it. This text provides the pretext for a dialogue on the role of technology, prospects of employment generation and its rejuvenating effect on the intellectual life of the nation.

Bhattacharya opines that Tagore's experience as an active participant in the Swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal (1905) may have sensitized the poet to the limitations of the pre-Gandhian Congress and its politics.<sup>7</sup> Bhattacharya posits that perhaps in Gandhi he foresaw the possibility of an altogether new turn to the Indian struggle for freedom.<sup>8</sup> He further muses that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi of South African fame might have sent his Phoenix School students to Tagore's Shantiniketan because he saw that something was under way in that remote corner of Bengal, which shared some traits with his own endeavour and philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

Tagore put forth his argument by stating that the caste system had preordained one's role in society that led to a "levelling down" of the masses over the ages.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> M.K. Gandhi, 'Call of Truth', *Young India*, 16 October, 1921.

<sup>7</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, Letters and Debates between 1915-41, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Cult of the Charkha', *Modern Review*, p. 10.

Every individual of every caste has his function assigned to him, together with the obsession into which he has been hypnotized, that, since he is bound by some divine mandate, accepted by his first ancestor, it would be sinful for him to seek relief therefrom. This imitation of the social scheme of ant-life makes very easy the performance of petty routine duties, but specially difficult the attainment of manhood's estate. It imparts skill to the limbs of the man who is a bondsman, whose labour is drudgery; but it kills the mind of a man who is a doer, whose work is creation. So in India, during long ages past, we have the spectacle of only a repetition of that which has gone before.<sup>11</sup>

The poet believes that the human mind and soul is in chains due to such predetermined divine dispensations, that either attributed an exalted status to a few or a denigrated one to some in society. People are incarcerated by blind faith or hypnotic texts.<sup>12</sup> He foresaw evil forebodings of enslavement of the mind by another machine (the charkha) in conformity with the colonial system that would imprison the mind and soul rather than revitalize a nation from its state of dormancy.

Human nature has its elasticity; and in the name of urgency, it can be forced towards a particular direction far beyond its normal and wholesome limits. But the rebound is sure to follow, and the consequent disillusionment will leave behind it a desert track of demoralization... .. I am afraid of a blind faith on a very large scale in the charkha, in the country, which is so liable to succumb to the lure of short cuts when pointed out by a personality about whose moral earnestness they can have no doubt.<sup>13</sup>

Tagore considers another significant issue that the charkha entails, the psychological impact of being enslaved by a machine. He also questions the nature of labour involved. Incessant and monotonous engagement with the machine might hamper spontaneous development of the intellect. Tagore emphatically explicates this argument with the following example:

By doing the same thing day after day mechanical skill may be acquired; but the mind like a mill-turning bullock will be kept going round and round a narrow range of habit.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

That is why, in every country man has looked down on work which involves this kind of mechanical repetition.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his regard for the dignity of manual labour he opined that survival instincts often dampen intellectual pursuits. It would however, be too farfetched to envisage aspects of comfort in manual labour and hence Tagore negates the positive impact of the time consumed in manual labour while spinning the charkha.

On the contrary Gandhi believed that, “Hunger is the argument that is driving India to the spinning wheel. The call of the spinning wheel is the noblest of all. Because it is the call of love. And love is Swaraj. The spinning wheel will ‘curb the mind’ when the time is spent on necessary physical labour can be said to do so”.<sup>15</sup> He jettisoned the Poet’s criticisms in his weekly paper, the *Young India* in the following words,

The Poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation — his world of ideas. I am a slave of somebody else's creation—the spinning wheel. The Poet makes his *gopis* dance to the tune of his flute. I wander after my beloved Sita, the charkha and seek to deliver her from the ten-headed monster from Japan, Manchester, Paris etc. The Poet is an inventor — he creates, destroys and recreates. I am an explorer and having discovered a thing I must cling to it. The Poet does not, he is not expected, he has no need, to read *Young India*. All he knows about the movement is what he has picked up from table talk. He has therefore denounced what he has imagined to be the excesses of the charkha cult. He thinks for instance that I want everybody to spin the whole of his or her time to the exclusion of all other activity; that is to say that I want the Poet to forsake his muse, the farmer his plough, the lawyer his brief and the doctor his lancet. So far is this from truth that I have asked no one to abandon his calling, but on the contrary to adorn it by giving every day only thirty minutes to spinning as sacrifice for the whole nation. I have indeed asked the famishing to spin for a living and the half-starved farmer to spin during his leisure hours to supplement his slender resources. If the Poet spun half an hour daily his poetry would gain in richness. For it would then represent the poor man's wants and woes in a more forcible manner than now.<sup>16</sup>

One can infer that Gandhi justified his preference for the charkha with his own political expediency and the economic need of the hour. He argued that, “it was our love of foreign

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 13 October, 1921.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *Young India*, 13 October, 1921.

cloth that ousted the wheel from its position of dignity. Therefore, I consider it a sin to wear foreign cloth. I must confess that I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics.”<sup>17</sup> Further questions on the viability of the western model of production and the charkha’s utility in providing an economic alternative in the 1920s assumed primacy.

These questions basically were concerned with Gandhi's “constructive programme”, especially the economic programme focusing upon the charkha.<sup>18</sup> There is dignity in weaving and spinning- that is what Mahatma Gandhi reiterated in 1920 in an article entitled *The Music of the Spinning-Wheel* in his weekly paper.<sup>19</sup> He invoked two examples of weavers drawn from medieval Indian history – Aurangzeb and Kabir. The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, noted for his austerity, is believed to have made his own skull caps. Kabir, who Gandhi believed to be a “greater emperor”, was a weaver who immortalised the art in his poems.<sup>20</sup> Reacting favourably to Madan Mohan Malaviya’s efforts to persuade India’s maharajas and maharanis to spin yarn and use handlooms to weave cloth for the nation, Gandhi pithily stated that:

The queens of Europe before Europe was caught in Satan’s trap, spun yarn and considered it a noble calling. The very words – ‘spinster’ and ‘wife’, prove the ancient dignity of the art of spinning and weaving. ‘When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman’ also reminds one of the same fact.<sup>21</sup>

Tagore had written in 1921 that “The question of using or refusing cloth of a particular manufacture belongs mainly to economic science”, but a tendency in vogue was to use the “magical formula that foreign cloth is impure” and thus “economics is bundled out and a fictitious moral dictum dragged in its place”.<sup>22</sup> Gandhi clarified the socio-economic, political and spiritual embodiment of the khadi. The charkha to him was the symbol of self-reliance that the Swadeshi movement, epitomised. It was a socially-liberating instrument, as anyone, irrespective of caste, gender, age and status, could spin thread with minimum technical knowledge and literacy.<sup>23</sup> In fact the charkha “kept the villagers from idleness”.<sup>24</sup> It also

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<sup>17</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 16 October, 1920.

<sup>18</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 10 June, 1920.

<sup>19</sup> M. K. Gandhi, ‘The Music of the Spinning Wheel’, *Young India*, 14 April, 1920.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, *Young India*, 14 April, 1920.

<sup>21</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 13 October, 1921.

<sup>22</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Call of Truth’, Some Letters to C.F. Andrews, *Modern Review*, May 1921.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 13 October, 1921.

<sup>24</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 10 October, 1921.

created work associated with spinning and weaving such as ginning, carding, warping, sizing or dyeing.<sup>25</sup>

Gandhi explicated the liberating potential of the charkha in his own terms. It incorporated an interesting analysis of the uniqueness of the charkha. The musical effect produced by the whirling sound of the charkha was part of his spiritual attainment. He extolled the virtues of the charkha on various occasions by calling it *annapurna* (the giver of food and nourishment), Kamdhenu (a wish-fulfilling cow), yajna (a ritual sacrifice), an instrument for those aspiring to brahmacharya (celibacy), and the gateway to moksha (spiritual salvation).<sup>26</sup> This drew a lot of criticism from various quarters.

Although his critics always pitted the charkha against the more organised and efficient production system of mills, in Gandhi's understanding of economics, the charkha was never meant to compete with mills. He substantiated his argument in the following words:

I have not contemplated, much less advised, the abandonment of a single healthy, lifegiving industrial activity for the sake of hand-spinning. The entire foundation of the spinning-wheel rests on the fact that there are crores of semi-unemployed people in India. And I should admit that if there were none such, there would be no room for the spinning-wheel. But as a matter of fact everybody who has been to our villages knows that they have months of idleness which may prove their ruin. Even my appeal to the middle class people to spin for sacrifice is with reference to their spare hours. The spinning-wheel movement is destructive of no enterprise whatever. It is a life-giving activity. And that is why I have called it Annapurna or the butter for bread or the replenisher.<sup>27</sup>

Gandhi, however, was sensitive of the misuses that khadi and the charkha could be subjected to, as a tool to assert self-righteousness. He cautioned against this tendency in the strongest words in an article published in the Gujarati weekly newspaper *Navajivan* on December 4, 1921:

Wheat is sacred grain, but it is eaten by a sannyasi and also by a thief. Likewise, the wicked and the virtuous both may wear the sacred khadi...It is true that, in this period

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., *Young India*, 10 October, 1921.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., *Young India*, 13 October, 1921.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., *Young India*, 10 October, 1921.

of transition, other virtues are attributed to khadi and hypocrites prosper in their hypocrisy by dressing themselves in khadi. This cannot go on for long.<sup>28</sup>

Bhattacharya observed that the objection here is not to the substantive point about foreign cloth but to the terms of discourse, the use of moral language in place of the economic.<sup>29</sup> To this, Gandhi's reply was that he had not drawn any distinction between economics and ethics.<sup>30</sup> Tagore raised the pertinent issue of the economic drain that was perpetrated by colonial rule and that the Mughal rule fortunately did not witness. The ruination of handicrafts was "only one of the external symptoms" of the process of impoverishment.<sup>31</sup> He believed that a programme with its exclusive focus on the handicraft industry was devoid of concern for larger issues. He believed that a holistic assessment of economic growth would be beneficial for the country. Significant issues like commercial growth cannot be brushed aside. How long would it be possible "to hide ourselves away from commerce with the outside world?"<sup>32</sup> As we shall see later, from a philosophical standpoint, Tagore had other doubts as well about the charkha. Although Gandhi was "in retirement", need not import from Bombay. Likewise, Bhattacharya argues that the editorial comments of Bombay Chronicle, about the same time in 1925, were directed against the Poet's rhetoric, his ironical style, his emotionalism— which, it was said, failed to convince anyone who looked for reasoning.<sup>33</sup> Tagore's critique of the charkha was vilified in many Bengali dailies.<sup>34</sup> Gandhians in general condemned Tagore's criticisms of the charkha.<sup>35</sup> The exchanges between Gandhi and Tagore weren't only sparks and fire produced by crashing of two flint stones.<sup>36</sup> 'Mahatmaji' and 'Gurudev' as the two referred to each other, privately loved and remembered each other in despair, while flaying each other's ideas in public.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Gandhi's was a temperate, measured response "to ensure a dispassionate view being taken of the Poet's criticism."<sup>38</sup> He knew that Tagore fundamentally disagreed with him, but "frank criticism pleases me. For our friendship becomes all the richer for our disagreements."<sup>39</sup> Tagore's tranquil courage in facing the

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<sup>28</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Navajivan*, 4 December, 1921.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ananta K. Giri, *Conversations and Transformations – Toward a new Ethics of Self and Society*, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002, p. 49.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., *Conversations and Transformations*, p. 49.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., *Conversations and Transformations*, p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., *Conversations and Transformations*, p. 51.

revulsion of popular feelings against him was matched by Gandhi's generosity in allowing the right of criticism.<sup>40</sup>

### Syncretist Traditions of the Charkha

The symbolic significance of the charkha attributed to it myriad connotations through the ages. Since spinning cotton and making cloth was often associated with women, so it has come to symbolize the dignity of a woman's labour in some cultures.<sup>41</sup> In Punjabi Sufi poetry, however, the charkha appears as a central symbol around which other symbols are woven in a complex whole.<sup>42</sup> The rotation of the spinning-wheel resembles the rotation of the earth on its axis, bringing about day and night.<sup>43</sup> For Shah Husayn, the spinning-wheel is a symbol of the material or temporal world, a symbol of the span of human life with all its ups and downs like the day and night.<sup>44</sup> The process of spinning cotton on the wheel symbolizes the drudgery of human life as well.<sup>45</sup> Since cotton-spinning is mindless, backbreaking, and a plodding task, it is evoked as a symbol of the humdrum and monotony of daily life of an average individual involved in some kind of menial job.<sup>46</sup>

Charkha embodies the essence of India. It has inspired poets, mystics and political theorists. Some Vedic chants refer to *vaya*, the weaver, and *trasara*, his shuttle, *tantra* the warp, and *tantu* the woof, the peg or pin for *mayukha* or weaving, and the *tantumetam* or out spun thread.<sup>47</sup> Some verses also render an occasional piece of advice to the yarn maker.<sup>48</sup> The Grihya Sutras speak of the use of hand spun yarn for social and religious ceremonies.<sup>49</sup> Jaina canon, *Suyagadanga*, alludes to the practice of spinning which gradually led to such ancillary industries as ginning, carding, warping, dyeing and weaving.<sup>50</sup> Many Bhakti and Sufi saints used the symbolism of charkha to explain the basic *sine qua non* of their philosophy. Charkha denotes the cycle of existence.<sup>51</sup> Its music or sound, indicates that man cannot be at peace as

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Tanvir Anjum and Naila Pervaiz, Ghum Charkharyā/Spin, O Spinning-wheel: Cotton-spinning and Weaving Symbolism in Shah Husayn's Poetry, *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* Volume No. 56, Issue No. 1 January - June, 2019, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., Ghum Charkharyā/Spin, O Spinning-wheel: Cotton-spinning and Weaving Symbolism in Shah Husayn's Poetry, p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Spin O Spinning Wheel, p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., Spin O Spinning Wheel, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., Spin O Spinning Wheel, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> Flood Gavin, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Frits Staal, *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights*, London: Penguin Books, p. 333.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., *Discovering the Vedas*, p. 334.

<sup>49</sup> Arvind Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion*, Manhattan: Springer, p. 193.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., *A Primal Perspective*, p. 194.

<sup>51</sup> John C. Huntington and Diina Bangdel, *The Circle of Bliss, Buddhist Meditational Art*, Chicago: Serindia Publications, p. 232.

long as he is caught in the cycle of birth Its spiritual message is that resurrection lies not in inaction but in transcendence in life and death.<sup>52</sup> The spindle in the charkha has been interpreted as the first Arabic letter ‘Alif’ in Sufi literature which denotes ‘a beginning’.<sup>53</sup>

In Asa di Var, Guru Nanak Dev employs the symbolism of charkha to argue that worship does not consist in dancing or whirling one’s head, for if that were the true path, such objects as the oil man’s press, the spinning wheel, the grinding stones, the potter’s wheel or the spinning taps too could acquire a religious connotation as they keep revolving most of the time.<sup>54</sup> Charkha also brings about communal harmony as can be seen from this verse: Hindu naheenMusalmaanBaheatiranjan taj abhimaan — ‘Neither Hindu nor Muslim, let us sit to spin, abandoning our (religious) pride.’<sup>55</sup> Charkha reminded M. K. Gandhi of “the ever-moving wheel of the Divine Law of Love” and he wished “to die with his hand at the spinning wheel”.<sup>56</sup> To him, spinning was like penance or sacrament, a medium for spiritual uplift, a symbol of dharma, of self-help and self-reliance, of dignity of labour and human values. Besides, it was an emblem of nonviolence.<sup>57</sup> In every thread that was spun Gandhi experienced divine creativity. His movement for Khadi was a protest movement against the evils of an industrial society that was alien to the economic and cultural ethos of India. It was also thought of as a perspective of a viable economic alternative aiming towards building a self-reliant India. Gandhi reiterated that,

The message of the spinning wheel is much wider than its circumference. Its message is one of simplicity, service of mankind, living so as not to hurt others, creating an indissoluble bond between the rich and the poor, capital and labour, the prince and the peasant. That larger message is naturally for all.<sup>58</sup>

To Gandhi, charkha had therapeutic use too — it was a nerve relaxant and could help in concentration, and in controlling passion. The yarn we spin was ‘capable of mending the broken warp and woof of our life’.<sup>59</sup> Gandhi’s obsession with charkha is evident from his speeches and writings on Khadi-economics, Khadi-science, Khadi-learning, Khadi-spirit,

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<sup>52</sup> Gurnam Singh Sidhu Brard, *East of Indus: My Memories of Old Punjab*, New Delhi: Hemkunt Publishers, 2007, p. 330.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Tanvir Anjum and Naila Pervaiz, *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* Volume No. 56, Issue No. 1 January - June, 2019, p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., *My Memories of Punjab*, p. 330.

<sup>55</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, July, 1926, p. 187.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., *Young India*, p. 187.

<sup>57</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, September, 1921, p. 407.

<sup>58</sup> M, K. Gandhi, *Young India*, October, 1928, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., *Young India*, p. 28.

Khadi-epoch, Khadi-franchise, yarn currency and Khadi-romance.<sup>60</sup> Charkha found a place in the programme of the Indian National Congress, as well as on the first national flag (Swaraj flag) in 1921. The flag began to be officially hoisted from the 38th session of Congress held at Coconada, Andhra Pradesh in 1923. Congressmen adorn Khadi caps and the Indian National Flag too was hand spun. Khadi eventually wove its way into the common man's imagination over the last century.

In *Dhorai Charit Manas*, the charkha is symptomatic of the *sudarshan chakra*.<sup>61</sup> Sumit Sarkar, however, opined that, the charkha had to tarry for Gandhi's emergence in Indian politics to bear fruition.<sup>62</sup> The semiotic space has also unravelled gender politics in interpreting the charkha as a shelter from patriarchy as women flocked to the ashrams to escape the monotony of household work or the tyranny of a patriarchal family.<sup>63</sup> These narratives offer nuances of the semiotic paradigm shifts and on the flip side Gandhi's unflinching convictions for developing a holistic programme involving all sections of the society.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., *Young India*, p. 28.

<sup>61</sup> Satinath Bhaduri, *Dhorai Charit Manas*, Bengal Publishers, Calcutta, 1941, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Sumit Sarkar, The condition of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, C.1905-22, in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies*, vol III, OUP, 1984, p. 276.

<sup>63</sup> Sadan Jha, Charkha, "Dear Forgotten Friend of Widows", Reading the Erasures of a Symbol", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 39, No.28 July 10-16, 2004, p. 3118.

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## Rabindranath Tagore's Idea of Social Change: An Interpretation of his Selected Plays

*Sayantana Ghosh*

### **Abstract:**

Issue of “Social Change” has been dealt with by many thinkers of 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century both in the “East” and the “West”. In Sociology Comte, Spencer, Durkheim and Marx have discussed this issue at length. While some thinkers have an evolutionary and/or functional approach, others, following Marx advocated a revolutionary model in this regard. These theories can be viewed in the context of Enlightenment, the French and Industrial revolution and their effects on modern Europe. In India, thinkers, social reformers and political activists were reacting to the colonial rule during 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From Rammohan onwards, thinkers were critical about different aspects of colonial rule as well as about various traditional Indian social, religious rituals and practices. Nevertheless, each of them envisioned and/or acted for their respective version of an ideal Indian society. Optimism for a new India was common among them. What varied was a difference in emphasis on society/state, tradition/modernity and East/West. However, Rabindranath Tagore cannot be understood in terms of these binaries. He was distinct in his analysis and unique in his solutions. Neither a fictionalized Indian past nor an imitation of modern west was his ideal. He was selective in his choice. “Manusher Dharma” (“Religion of Man”) for him is “BishwaManavata” or universal humanism, not narrow nationalism. He had respect for many persons associated to Indian freedom movement but was critical about both the violent and non-violent ways. Rather he emphasized on “Atmoshakti” or “Self-Reliance” and “constructive social work” during the Swadeshi movement. His experiment of “rural reconstruction” in Shilaidaha, Patisar and afterwards through Sriniketan is crucial in this context. For Tagore “transformation of self” is a prerequisite to social transformation. His idea of social change can be traced across his writings. This paper will focus on some of his plays, particularly ‘Raktakarabi’ and ‘KalerYatra’. One can trace Tagore’s critic to various exploitative social order and depiction of several ways of emancipation in these plays. While ‘Raktakarabi’ can be read as a critic to industrial capitalism – exploitation of nature, alienation from humanitarian feeling; ‘KalerYatra’, on the other hand, deals with a philosophical question of cycle of time. It is definitely a critic of inequality in terms of caste or class but it also deals with the question of who is the driver of “samaj” and how the cycle of time or “kal” moves. Both the plays have an emancipatory vision. For Tagore, the key

agent of social change can be a woman (Nandini in ‘Raktakarabi’) or a group (in ‘Kaler Yatra’) but along with that there also exist a distinctive character as BishuPagol or Kabi who unravels more subtle aspects of the exploitative social order and often holds the philosophy of the play. What is unique in Tagore is while many thinkers of Europe and India have unilinear optimism in their respective theory of social change – Tagore depicted a cyclical model of social transformation. For him it is not just a shift in authority but it is about understanding the balance and rhythm of nature as well as maintaining the same for society.

**Key words:** social change, exploitation, alienation, emancipation, cyclical model.

### **Introduction**

Rabindranath Tagore’s idea of social change has gone through many a change throughout his life. However, some aspects remain more or less common within his philosophy- his sensitivity towards human being and nature, his belief not in the isolation between the two but in their coexistence, as well as his affective world-outlook. Like many of his contemporaries, he was against exploitation and oppression of people in the hands of other people whatever the “noble” or “civilizing” ideology of the oppressor might be. He is highly critical about any social order which fragments the human self. Anything which curtails freedom, creativity of human being and turns them into instruments of production or law-abiding machines is unacceptable to him.

Rabindranath cannot be placed within binaries like east-west, spiritualism-materialism, tradition- modernity and the like. Yes, he was influenced by many thinkers, texts and theoretical discourses-from positivism to post-revolutionary USSR, from Romain Rolland to Kamal Pasha, from several ancient Indian texts to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century writings in India and abroad. He wrote with reverence about Rammohan Roy, exchanged thoughts with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, engaged in debate and dialogue with M. K. Gandhi. He has correspondence with W. B. Yeats, W. Rothenstein and other genius minds of the world.

An in-depth reading and observation of his writings, his life and works, might be useful in getting a comprehensive idea about his idea/l of social change. Here I have focused on two plays - *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleanders) and *Kaaler Yatra* (Journey of Time), which is a collection of three inter-connected plays with a similar theme - *RathaJatra*, *Kobir Diksha* and *Rother Roshi*. Reason for the selection is - if one reads these plays one can trace the philosophical journey pertinent to his idea of social change.

*Raktakarabi* can be read as a critique to capitalist social order which has alienating effects on the workers as well as the alleged beneficiaries of that order. However, he was not only critical about industrial capitalism but about any oppressive, alienating, exploitative structure. For example, *Kaaler Yatra* can be regarded as a critique to social hierarchies in terms of caste or class. Likewise, one might find a critique to strict disciplinary techniques and dead rituals in *TaasherDesh*; *Muktadhara* can be read as an instance bearing the politics of water and racial hatred. But above all the key issue for him is – 1.) exploitation of many in the hands of few, 2) Alienation of human beings from their humane values or in his words ‘*Praan*’. So, although *Raktakarabi* and *Kaler Yatra* depict two different pictures but the stories have a similarity, as they both portray exploitation. If one begins the journey from *Raktakarabi* and reaches *Kaaler Yatra*, one not only completes a journey but also can notice a philosophical transition in his thought. Giving this backdrop, I invite my readers to this journey.

### ***Raktakarabi***

Rabindranath’s play *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*) revolves around the central theme of capitalist exploitation of a mining city *Yakshapuri* and ways of emancipation from it. The play could be interpreted from several other perspectives and carries various subtle aspects within. However due to the limitation of space I have only concentrated on the above-mentioned theme. I have engaged Rabindranath’s *Red Oleanders* in a dialogue with Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism. However, since my key argument will follow Rabindranath, Marx and Marxist perspectives will come only as a reference.

‘Come brother, on to the fight’ - This is Bishu, who summons his fellow workers to fight against the exploitative capitalist system. This represents a conscious mass who wants to change the existing social order. What is the order and who constitutes the conscious mass? The call comes from Bishu, a significant character in this play. *Raktakarabi* depicts a story of a gold mine at its centre, there exists *Makarraj* (a capitalist king) and exploited alienated workers. There are other characters like Sardars or governors with different positions in the hierarchy. They are controlling the daily affairs and are supposed to implement the king’s orders. They claim to rule on behalf of the king. Gosai is a religious guru employed by the authority. He justifies the exploitation by hypnotizing the workers through “mantras” and provides the authority’s interpretation of Dharma. There are others like the professor, doctor, and antiquarian who are brought by the authority. They with their respective skills try to

justify the oppressive order to others and perhaps to themselves as well. Even if this self-hypnotism gets challenged, they prefer to keep silence.

The workers have to work in the goldmine, day in and day out, bringing out nuggets of gold that they themselves cannot appropriate. The products of their labour (nuggets of gold) stand larger than and in isolation from them. This is alienation from the product. From a Marxist point of view, the workers sell their labor-power to the capitalist thereby making him powerful. The more they produce, the more powerful the capitalist becomes and their power is further reduced. The capitalist in turn uses that very power to dominate and coerce the workers and to make them increasingly more powerless.

Similarly, the mine workers of *Yakshapuri* (the mining town) are also alienated from the process of production because they cannot control the process nor can make any decision about their own participation. They are forced to work to meet the greed of the king which is unending. Capitalism sucks the blood and the liveliness of the workers. When they are unable to work, they are thrown away as *rajarentoor* the leavings of the king. The following extract reveals that this is an unending process.

BISHU: After the first day comes the second, after the second the third. There's no such thing as getting finished here. We're always digging – one yard, two yards, three yards. We go on raising gold nuggets – after one nugget another, then more and more and more. In Yaksha town figures follow one another in rows and never arrive at any conclusion.<sup>1</sup>

Workers are converted into numbers. They are no longer Bishu, Phagulal, Anup, Shaklu or Gogu but have become 47f, 69ng, and the like. Workers are known to each other by their name. But to the authority they are not human beings but only numbers. Capitalism believes complete human existence is antithetic to its progress as only the labour power (strength, agility and a labourer's ability to work) is required for its growth. Workers are only goal producing machines here.

BISHU: We are not men to them, but only numbers – Phagu, what's yours?

PHAGULAL: I'm no 47V

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<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Red Oleanders: A Drama in One Act* (London: McMillan & Company Ltd, 1925), p. 47.

BISHU: I'm no 69 Ng.<sup>2</sup>

In their village they were human beings with humane feelings. The gold tower attracted many of them to the mining town where they eventually find themselves at the wrong side of progress. More the peak of the gold tower grows and glows, more impoverished the workers become and less remains the humane self within these “numbers”. They are numbered, arranged alphabetically and each alphabet denotes a para or a *parish*. They are under continuous surveillance of the men in authority or the state machinery and are disciplined rather as I should say dehumanized with strict disciplinary techniques. Here and also in various other writings Rabindranath has criticized and expressed his serious concern about strict disciplining mechanisms like in *Achalayatan*, *TaasherDesh* and others. For him disciplining in an instrumental strict way often becomes dehumanizing and alienating for human beings destroying “*praan*” (life and liveliness) within man. Workers are often treated as animals and they do not have a choice but to perform such deeds which are dehumanizing and animalistic.

GOVERNOR: My wife will be driving out today. The post will be changed near your village and you must see that she is not detained.

HEADMAN: There's a plague on the cattle of our parish and not a single ox can be had to draw the car. Never mind we can press the diggers into service.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, labourers became alienated from their own selves. They become “Tukro Manush” or fragmented human beings.

PHAGULAL: Our mad Bishu says to remain whole is useful only for the lamb itself; those who eat it prefer to leave out its horns and hooves and even object to its bleating when butchered.<sup>4</sup>

Lacking in the feelings of love, desire, passion and pain and losing all that is humane, the workers become objects, estranged from their own self.

Objectified and alienated labourers are also alienated from other labourers. For Phagulal holidays (if at all they come) are far more difficult to bear.

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<sup>2</sup> Tagore, 1925.

<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das, (Delhi: *Sahitya Akademi*, 1996), ii, pp. 243-244.

<sup>4</sup> Tagore, 1925, p. 35.

PHAGULAL: Isn't it our holiday? Yesterday was the fast day of the War Goddess. Today they worship the Flag.

CHANDRA: Must you drink just because it's a holiday? In our village home, on feast days, you never –

PHAGULAL: Freedom itself was enough for the holidays in our village. The caged bird spends its holiday knocking against the bars. In Yaksha Town holidays are more of a nuisance than work.

CHANDRA: Let's go back home then

PHAGULAL: The road to our home is closed forever.<sup>5</sup>

In their villages, they had a community life where they participated in social festivals as social beings in games, music, and dance. This social or community life is undermined in *Yakshatown* where workers become isolated and estranged human beings. In this context, Marx's comment would be relevant. "Finally alienated man is also alienated from the human community, from his 'species-being'. Man is alienated from another man. When man confronts himself he also confronts men...each man is alienated from others...each of the others is likewise alienated from human life."<sup>6</sup>

### **Senses and Alienation**

Through his learning from Upanishads, Kalidas and other ancient Indian texts as well as from his own life experiences Rabindranath realised man's oneness with nature. Senses are crucial in this regard as through the senses one can experience *rupa*, *rasa* and *gandha* (beauty and fragrance) of the world. This feeling is often expressed through his writings and contributed to the planning of Vishwa Bharati – both in its pedagogy and architecture. In *Raktakarabi* one can trace sensory deprivation of the labourers. Even in their holidays they wanted to drown themselves in drunkenness and would not explore their senses. Maybe they themselves could not allow them something which is fundamental to human life. Or they know if they do, the workload from the next day would be much more painful for them. So, they indulge in self-intoxication denouncing the very possibility of feeling pain or desire. For both Rabindranath and Marx, sensory deprivation is the height of alienation. As Marx argued – Man is affirmed in the object

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<sup>5</sup> Tagore, 1925, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books Limited, 1992), p.129.

In this scenario, in comes Nandini wearing a paddy-coloured sari and ornaments of *Raktakarabi* or Red Oleanders. She brings the music of Poush, the reaping season with her. All these bring back feelings and memories of long-forgotten village days in the minds of workers. Nandini is portrayed as a symbol of agriculture, liveliness, youth, and happiness – and everything that is humane. It seems that she is the only source of life and light in the utter darkness of Yakshapuri as all other persons have become lifeless. Labourers are turned to gold producing machines. Their overseers from the king to the lower ranked sardar or governors are also fragmented and veiled entities. Nandini observes Paloan who was the best in fencing in his village and was full of life and enthusiasm becomes a squashed entity and loses all the life within him. The workers know that there is only entry but no exit from the *Yakshapuri*. Here the king's imagery as "*makarra*" is suggestive. As makar is a reptile popular in legend which resembles a crocodile. If a man enters in its mouth and the jaws close, there is only one way that is to be engulfed.

Nandini and Ranjan bring back human feelings within inhabitants of Yaksha town. Mainly the labourers are moved but men from the authority and the capitalist authoritarian structure are not unshaken. *Yakshapuri* which so long seemed to be colourless is suddenly shining with the bright red colour of *Raktakarabi* and the paddy colour of Nandini's sari. In the gold mine, there was no music, no dance, and no life. Ranjan brings melody and rhythm with him. He starts "digging dance" with the workers.

GOVERNOR: Did you set him (Ranjan) to work with the diggers?

HEADMAN: I did, I thought that pressure would make him yield. But on the contrary, it seemed to lift the pressure from the diggers minds also. He cheered them up and asked them to have a diggers dance.

GOVERNOR: Diggers dance! What on earth is that?

HEADMAN: Ranjan started singing. Where were they to get drums - they objected. Ranjan said, if there weren't any drums, there were spades enough. So they began keeping time with the spades, making a joke of their digging up of nuggets. The headman himself came over to reprimand them 'what style of worker is this?' he thundered. 'I have unbound the work' said Ranjan. It won't have to be dragged out by main force anymore, it will run along of itself, dancing.

GOVERNOR: The fellow is mad, I see.

HEADMAN: Hopelessly mad. ‘Use your spade properly’ shouted I ‘Much better, give me a guitar’ said he smiling.<sup>7</sup>

Previously the workers worked like machines but now they are dancing and digging to the rhythm of Ranjan’s music. They start playing with gold nuggets. The prohibition is removed from inside, the hypnotism of gold is now gone and instead, there is the music of *poush* (harvest time) and the desire for life. Nandini and Ranjan help them realise their humane self and bring back desire and pain within the worker. This is the prerequisite of any social transformation. If a person or a group can feel pain and then can identify the reason for it, then and then only can they strive for social change. Thus, often the feeling of pain becomes the seed of a new world. That is why Bishu calls Nandini *ghum bhanganiya* (the awakener) and *dukho jaganiya* (the awakener of pain). The ability to feel and think is a mark of human existence. Just as sensory deprivation is alienation, returning to one’s senses denotes an overcoming of alienation. From this point individual and then group or class consciousness can commence.

### **‘Tortoise’ gives place to the ‘Boar’**

The capitalist state uses different strategies to squash workers and tries to keep any voice of resistance under the carpet. Among these strategies, I will mention three as depicted by Rabindranath in *Red Oleanders* - namely religion, arms, and alcohol. As Phagulal unmasked the shrewd plan and discloses it to Chandra –

PHAGULAL: Don’t you see Chandra, (their) temple, armory and liquor shop are adjacent to each other.<sup>8</sup>

Through the spatial proximity of the three, Rabindranath symbolically represents how these are interwoven and are part of the oppressive strategy of the capitalist state. In a previous section, I have portrayed how workers have drowned themselves in drunkenness and how alcohol as a strategy is being used by the state machinery to silence any voice from below. Alcohol and other addictions do not allow a worker to speak to himself or to listen to his own voice. In order to temporarily forget the oppressive and coercive actions, he indulges in

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<sup>7</sup> Tagore, 1996, p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘*Raktakarabi*’, in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, (Kolkata: Paschimanga Sarkar, 1368 (Bengali) p. 659. (Translation mine)

addiction. To achieve a painless state (however temporary it might be) he reaches a lifeless one.

Second, there are the governors and the armory. Governors with their assistants and lower-ranked officials perform the duty of overseers, like the mechanisms of surveillance in the modern state. There exists a well-connected network to spread the news and take action. The armory may signify the police and army of a modern state where the state has a monopoly on violence. These are used as tools of hard power to squash revolts or any protest which challenges the state.

PROFESSOR: The world-famous Gajju, whose brother, Bhajan, had the bravado to challenge the King to a wrestling match, since when not even a thread of his loincloth is anywhere to be seen.<sup>9</sup>

Capitalism wanted to establish hegemony and hence does not allow any alternative. For then it is only the capitalist class process that should exist and grow in strength. All alternative viewpoints, class processes or even a very thought of it would be squashed.

WRESTLER: They only feel safe when they rob the whole world of strength.

Religion is used as a soft power to justify oppression and to maintain the status quo.

GONSAI: These people? Are they not the very incarnation of the sacred Tortoise of our scripture that held up the stinking earth on its back? Because they meekly suppress themselves underneath their burden, the upper world can keep its head aloft.

Here Marx-Rabindranath again engages in dialogue as religion becomes the ‘opium of the masses’

Despite all these Rabindranath believed that one day the workers will break the spell, rise from their intoxications, become conscious, and will surely protest. Here it is Bishu who breaks the spell of Gonsai and intelligently uses Gonsai’s own method to defeat him.

BISHU: The Gonsai called them the incarnation of the tortoise, but, according to scripture, incarnations change, and when the tortoise gave place to the boar, in place of hard shell comes out aggressive teeth. So that all suffering patience was transformed into defiant obstinacy.

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<sup>9</sup> Tagore, 1996, p.238.

### **‘Fight against me with your hand in mine’**

The king or *Makarraj* is portrayed and believed by the workers to be at the apex and as the ultimate exploiter and decision-maker. If the workers are on the wrong side of the capitalist order, the king is believed to be the ultimate beneficiary of this exploitation. It is in his name that the governors reign over *Yakshapuri*. More than him, often it is his image that rules. He is depicted as an image of fear.

VOICE: I have smashed throughout my life.... I long savagely to prove to you how cruel I am. Have you never heard moans from inside my room?

NANDINI: I have. Whose moaning was it?

VOICE: The hidden mystery of life, wrenched away by me, bewails its torn ties...

NANDINI: Oh, you are cruel!

VOICE: I must either gather or scatter. I can feel no pity for what I do not get. Breaking is a fierce kind of getting.<sup>10</sup>

It is gigantic, fearful and so awe-inspiring that no one ever dares to revolt. Governors have consciously built and maintained an impersonal, demonic image of him that can squash any challenge. A spectator has impersonal power that can be used in a more ruthless fashion than a human presence. It becomes difficult for the deprived and oppressed to fight against the unknown. The king remains in a dark room covered in complicated webs. Just like a spider hunt, the king draws people with his gold tower, strips all humane feelings, and converts them into gold-producing machines. Although no one can see him (consciously resisting people to know that he is a human being) but he is the ultimate overseer keeping an eye on others— a perfect example of modern surveillance.

However, he who deprives others of their humane feelings lacks himself in humane existence. Rabindranath is unique in prioritizing alienation at the apex as the king laments,

VOICE: ...I who am a desert, stretch out my hand to you, a tiny blade of grass, and cry: I am parched, I am bare, I am weary. The flaming thirst of this desert eats up one fertile field after another, only to enlarge itself, - it can never annex the life of the frailest of grasses.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tagore, 1996, p. 232.

<sup>11</sup> Tagore, 1996, p. 217.

During his interactions with Nandini, the king undergoes a journey of self-contradiction. He is a megalomaniac and his ego tells him that he is the ultimate authority. He stores gold and plays with it and the gold in turn enslaves him. Interestingly the entire order that he established to alienate human beings results in his self-alienation. The play reveals how the gold nuggets, the process of its production, and the strict disciplining techniques have engulfed the king himself. He became alienated from his own humane self. He does not allow any human being to remain in his or her totality. Often it is part of his hand, a voice that comes out of that web. He who fragments others becomes a fragmented self. When Nandini summons him to come out in the fresh air, in the daylight to experience the world with his senses he expressed his inability to do so. He cannot allow himself to live a human life. At the same time, he is in pain not being able to express himself. He gets agitated and expressed his annoyance to Nandini or is it towards his own masked self? He takes pride in his authority and the power to kill but laments his inability to create.

NANDINI: King, they all say you know magic. Make him (Ranjan) wake up for my sake.

KING: My magic can only put an end to waking. – Alas! I know not how to awaken.<sup>12</sup>

Rabindranath portrays multiple selves in a human being which is crucial to understanding his philosophy. On one hand, the proud king drives away Nandini vehemently because she is “wasting his time” but at the very next moment calls her back and longs for her company. The king does not allow any holiday for the workers and his order squashes out the last drop of energy from them. In turn, he cannot allow any free time or holiday to himself. His wealth is regarded as ‘dead wealth’ as he wants to wipe away any source of liveliness from his order.

The king knows how to survive but does not know how to live. When he sees Bishu with Nandini and comes to know that Bishu is her companion, he gets enraged and threatens to kill him. Again, the king, who does not allow anyone to have a companion mourns his companionlessness. His remark – ‘Does the midday sun have any companion’- manifests a state of pride and pain.

The journey of the king through his self-contradictions and finally to his emancipation is significantly connected with the journey of the play. Initially, when Nandini raises questions out of her simplicity, the king used to get scared and angry. He never allows

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<sup>12</sup> Tagore, 1996, p. 250.

anyone but allowed Nandini inside his room or perhaps into his inner self. There were occasions when his veil was lifted. His masks got removed. He enjoyed it but then got frightened. He is used to having his masks, his veil, and his makeup as a coercive king. Through time all these became the part of his body. Through the efforts of Nandini the veil, the mask, and the makeup get removed, slowly but surely. He, who was feared by all, starts to fear himself. He feels love inside him for Nandini and is jealous of Ranjan as well as any man who comes near Nandini. This is a crucial point of his emancipation from a machine to being a human, from a fragmented self to a complete one. The feeling of pain marks the beginning of transformation first of self and then of society. For Rabindranath transformation of self is a prerequisite to social transformation. In the climax, Ranjan's death becomes the triggering factor as the king realises

KING: Deceived: these traitors have deceived me, - perdition take them! My own machine refuses my sway!<sup>13</sup>

The governors have ruled in the name of the king and benefited from his fragmented and spectre-like existence. So, when the king comes back to his senses, his humane self, they get alarmed. They sent Ranjan towards him without informing his true identity to the king. The king killed him without knowing who he is. Governors thought that Ranjan's death would weaken Nandini and workers and would eliminate threats to their supremacy as capitalism cannot tolerate any alternative to it. But this act becomes counterproductive as the soul of the King got transformed and it hastens the revolution. It is another uniqueness of Rabindranath that he believes in the transformation of the self and portrays time and again how two opposite classes can join hands to break an exploitative order. To Rabindranath, it is not an individual or group but it is more a structure or an order which is exploitative and if so, that must be overturned. In the end, the King and the workers joined hand in hand (whose class interests were in opposition) to break the "King's order".

KING: To fight against me, but with your hand in mine. That fight has already begun. There is my flag. First, I break the Flagstaff, thus! It's for you to tear its banner. Let your hand unite with mine. Kill me, utterly kill me. That will be my emancipation.<sup>14</sup>

## **Helm and Sail**

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<sup>13</sup> Tagore, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Red Oleanders: A Drama in One Act*, I, 1925, pp. 169-70.

Nandini and Ranjan can be regarded here as leaders of social change. But more importantly, they are dreamers. They hold and inculcate within others the hope of an alternative lived experience. Nandini and Ranjan carry a rhythm both in work and in leisure. The very presence or absence of rhythm marks a critical difference between two social orders an exploitative, fragmenting one in Yakshapuri and a non-exploitative co-operative one which Nandini and Ranjan upheld. Like Ranjan performs a digging dance while working, while Nandini calls out for everyone, including the King to listen to the song of Paush (Reaping season). Nandini and Ranjan are unified in one soul and hence indispensable to each other. This companionship is a key aspect of the alternative lifestyle which poses a threat to the capitalist order as in Yakshapuri isolated living has become a norm. In order to sail a boat, it requires both helm and sail, like the relationship between Nandini and Ranjan.

Rabindranath's leaders do not claim blind submission but inculcate their ideas and wait for individual and class consciousness so that people can make their inner journey on their own. In the end, the workers break the shackles of the King's prison but only after breaking the shackles within. Even the King gets emancipated and joins the workers. He breaks his own order only after a long journey of self-contradiction. So, the emancipation of self is indispensable and a pre-requisite to social emancipation. Rabindranath's leader is not someone who waits and sends others to die. But rather she/he leads from the front and is ready to sacrifice life before anyone else. In the climax when the workers and the King joined hands and respond to Bishu's cry for the ultimate fight- "Come, brother, on to the fight!".<sup>15</sup> They found that Nandini has already sacrificed her life with the slogan, "Hail Ranjan". Their companionship continues beyond life and death. Interestingly the Governor, the leader of the opponent group decorates his spear to fight against Nandini- with a garland of Kundo (a white fragrant flower) was gifted by her. Thus, a moral victory is clearly achieved even before the war has commenced.

Thus, it is clear that Rabindranath is critical of the bourgeois' social order or rather about any oppressive social order. So, what was his alternative? In analyzing Rabindranath and uncovering various micro and subtle aspects of his philosophy of social change, I have always felt that it is both thoughts and their implementations that must be taken into account. I do not wish to put him within any bracket or school of thought like "Utopian Socialism" and its champions for example Robert Owen and others. But Rabindranath with both his writings and his efforts in rural reconstruction comes to me as a very unique thinker. His

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<sup>15</sup> Tagore, 1925, p. 180.

village reconstruction efforts first in Silaidaha and Patisor and then through Sri Niketan provides us a window to his idea of alternative social order or perhaps to his ideal society. In place of competitive enmity, he propagated cooperative friendship. His and his fellows' efforts to build cooperatives in a different part of undivided Bengal is a significant response to various types of oppressions and deprivations. Implementation of his idea/1 is well expressed in the lifestyle of Santiniketan. He differentiated between Sukh (pleasure) and Ananda (happiness).<sup>16</sup>

The former is materialistic, fueled by greed, and linked to individual consumption, while the latter is often non-materialistic and can be experienced collectively. He prescribed and practiced this alternative in and through Vishwa-Bharati but was aware of other alternatives as well. Before moving any further, a question comes to mind-how does Rabindranath perceive social change? Is it linear or cyclical? That is to say, will the rise of the oppressed and the overturning of the existing order by the deprived solve the malady of exploitation and an "Ideal Society" be achieved? The answer to this question is Rabindranath's *Kaler Yatra*.

### **Kaler Yatra (The Journey of Time)**

*Kaler Yatra* or *Journey of Time* (although it has been translated as *Car of Time*) consists of two major themes, as I have interpreted it. The first can be mentioned as "rise of the opperessed"- where Rabindranath portrays the emergence of the lower stratum. This "lowest rank" of a group is linked with specific time and space. In this play, Rabindranath has depicted inequality through caste. Several scholars have interpreted *Kaaler Yatra* from the lens of Dalit uprisal. I think this play is a protest against inequality as a whole- not only caste. Through the lens of caste, he actually talked about oppressed groups and emancipation from it. So, for me, it is not just Rabindranath's view about inequality in terms of caste and emancipation from it but rather a significant part of his philosophy of social change.

This brings us to the second major theme of this trilogy (*Kaaler Yatra* consists of three short plays, namely *Ratha Yatra*, *Kabir Diksha* and *Rather Roshi*). Thinkers of social change have often searched for ways of emancipation, particularly for the lowest-ranked people and some of them have visualised the rise of the oppressed would ultimately lead to equality and the end of oppression. For Rabindranath ways of emancipation have always been key in his philosophy of social change, be it in *Red Oleanders* or in *Car of Time*. But in *Car of Time*, he

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<sup>16</sup> Anjan Chakraborti and Anup Dhar, 'Development, Capitalism and Socialism: A Marxian Encounter with Rabindranath Tagore's Ideas on the Cooperative Principle', *Rethinking Marxism*, 20.3 (2008), pp. 487-499.

predicted that the rise of the oppressed, in this case, the lower caste, is inevitable as if it is the need of time. If a group is oppressed for a long time, one day they will come up to maintain the “rhythm”. This rhythm, for Rabindranath, is crucial. He believes that nature has a rhythm and a cyclical movement through her seasons. Similarly, society must have the same. A rhythm among social groups is his prescription while a cyclical progression throughout ages of dominated and dominant groups is his realisation and prediction. Rabindranath’s car of time does not end in the rise of the oppressed but predicts that one day the now oppressed in their heyday might become oppressors. If so, then the journey of time symbolically represented through the chariot or car would have a reverse turn.

The above-mentioned two major themes and the overall philosophy of the play is expressed through the character of the poet. This poet is a philosopher and can be seen as an alter ego of Rabindranath. Even though the Brahmin priest and some other characters mock the poet and doubt his ability, Rabindranath believes that the poet does have foresight. The social position of a poet is a fluid one – not fixed as Brahmins or Shudras. Their social location in terms of class or caste is difficult to trace. Other members of society often regard them as crazy, and mad and sometimes they are not taken seriously. They are not always the beneficiary of a social structure or hierarchy but rather often have a parallel and alternative view at least as far as Rabindranath is concerned.

I have read *The Journey of Time* as a symbolic text. Rabindranath has used various words, like- chariot, rope, way or road, holes in the way, offerings, etc. to symbolically represent certain aspects of oppression and ways of emancipation. Two of the short plays of this trilogy are named as *Ratha Yatra* (Journey of the Chariot) and *Rather Roshi* (Rope of the Chariot). So, the chariot and its journey take a centre stage here. The chariot is a special kind of ancient vehicle used both in the east and the west. In Indian texts, chariot takes a significant place. For example - Krishna in *Mahabharata* became the driver of Arjuna’s chariot whom he has chosen to establish Dharma. This is so significant that picture of Krishna and Arjuna on the chariot is printed as the cover of *Geeta* and sometimes the *Mahabharata*. This picture signifies Dharma. Dharma here is not religious practices but rituals, morals, ethics, just and righteousness.

The phrase ‘ratha yatra’ has a special significance in Indian context. Ratha yatra of Lord Jagannath is regarded as an auspicious occasion. The very word Jagannath means “the lord of the Universe”. On this special day, Jagannath also with other deities descends down from his usual pulpit and starts a journey where he can be seen or his chariot can be pulled by

everyone irrespective of their caste and class location. The king on this day sweeps away the dirt with a broom in front of the chariot and even the “lowest-ranked” people can touch or pull the rope of the chariot. No discrimination is practiced on this day. According to Purana, the ratha yatra is a journey to remove the odd- the unnecessary excess. As we know Shishupal, a character of Purana had abnormalities from his birth having extra hands and legs, and was feared as a demon. After ratha yatra Krishna, the lord, took Shishupal in his lap, ended the abnormality, and made him normal. So ratha yatra is an auspicious journey to remove abnormalities in society.

As the chariot and its journey symbolises the connection between the creator and the common people. No discrimination is practiced since everyone could touch the rope, the chariot, and even the Lord on this auspicious day. This idea might have influenced Rabindranath’s thoughts when choosing the symbol of the chariot. Chariot to Rabindranath is not just a vehicle but has a sheer significance. As he used this metaphor several times in his writings. We can remember the poem, “with the flag upheld in his chariot which pierced the sky/this is He, He is out in the open, approaching”.<sup>17</sup> In his poem ‘The Miser’, the king himself disembarks his chariot and begged to a beggar. The beggar becomes startled, took it as a mockery, and offered only a small portion of grain only to discover at the end of the day that that very grain has turned into gold. The beggar laments with great despair wondering why he did not offer the king his entire holding. Here also the reader of Rabindranath noticed that the king of kings descended to the lowest-ranked person from his chariot.

In this play, the ratha or chariot can be thought to represent the society or social order while the yatra or its journey signifies progression. Rabindranath has named this trilogy *Journey of Time* and has depicted how a particular age is ruled by a particular group in the course of time. The cycle of time, analogous to the chariot wheel, will lead to the relocation of power. With rising oppression and passing time, the regime of dominance will lose its relevance to a newer social order. It signifies the phenomenon that hegemony will not rest with a single group over time. The social in question here, particularly with respect to caste would never be dominated by a single group eternally. For Rabindranath, the height of exploitation would only accelerate social change which is inevitable.

The next significant aspect is “the rope” which has been symbolically used to denote many aspects. The roshi or rope is so significant that Rabindranath named one of these three plays as *RaterRoshi* or the rope of chariot. The rope is indispensable as it moves the chariot

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<sup>17</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *UriyeDhwajaAbhrobhedi Rathe, Rabindra Rachananaboli*. (Kolkata: Paschimbanga Sarkar, 1368 Beng), iv, p. 67. Translation mine.

(society) forward. It establishes the connection between the chariot and its puller or the society and its drivers. As per the ideology all members of society are eligible to pull the rope but the rope was monopolized first by the Brahmins then by the Kshatriyas, afterward by the Vaishyas, or often some combination of three. Each group thinks that they are the driving force behind the chariot's progression. Thus, common people were forced down the bottom of the hierarchy and deprived of the honour to pull it throughout the ages. Although Rabindranath believed that it is the masses who day in and day out keep society moving as he wrote, "Hundreds and hundreds of kingdoms break down but those people are and had been continuing to work...they pull the oar; they hold the helm from time immemorial".<sup>18</sup> The rope has a transcendental existence as well as it is an eternal one. "It is a rope of ages, people across time had pulled it."<sup>19</sup>

Here, Rabindranath takes the rope beyond any national boundary as he himself was critical of any narrow nationalism. No particular group, nor any specific nation can exclusively be the driver of civilization. From the dialogues of this short play, we come to know that, "the rope has devoured so much that it grew fat and become immobile". It means that the religious (brahmins), political (kshatriyas), and economic (vaishyas) authorities have indulged in so much bribery that they have ceased to move. These self-appointed pullers of the chariot are so boastful that they think it will move only in their hands. The auspicious rope changed its colour to black and sometimes blue signifying negativity and toxicity in its tethered system. Sometimes it appeared to be a massive snake in the eyes of the people. Frightened women are seen presenting their offerings to the rope itself forgetting the presence of the Lord inside the chariot who has to be worshipped. They not only worship the rope but also feel the need to give their offerings to each and every small and big pothole on the road. It turns out that these potholes are infinite in number arising very frequently. One has to stop every now and then to fix them. This could be read as Rabindranath's critique of modernity, particularly the bureaucratic system or any hierarchy for that matter, particularly large and complicated ones where the middle and lower-ranked personnel have to be pleased to reach the ones at the top. They are accused of taking bribes and often the higher authorities remain unaware of it. In *Red Oleanders* too, we see that the King was oblivious to many implications, subtle and shrewd techniques of power, and intensity of coercion. Even he did not know till the death of Ranjan that who has sent to him by the Sardar. He killed Ranjan

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<sup>18</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Ora Kaaj Kore*, in *Sanchayita*, (Kolkata: Viswa Bharati Granthan Bibhag, 1406 Beng), p.832. Translation mine.

<sup>19</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Kaler Yatra*, in *Rabindra Rachananaboli*. (Kolkata: Paschimanga Sarkar, 1368 Beng), p. 1127. Translation mine.

unknowingly. This implies that in his name the sardars rule and exploit. At the end of the play *Red Oleanders*, the king's self got transformed but the sardars or the governors continued to resist the revolution. It is not only a question of acquiring wealth but also the question of power which they enjoy. Therefore, it is not unlikely that the beneficiaries of the existing orders could resist any change. Just like the dominant groups in *Kaler Yatra*. For example, the Brahmins want to pull the chariot back that is to say reverse in time towards the ancient era when religious scriptures their composers and interpreters that is to say the Brahmins had a sheer dominance over all other groups in society. The soldiers mock the Brahmins and demand that it is their sword that rules- a sheer claim of dominance. The traders, in turn, laugh at the soldiers and sarcastically ask "who fuels your arms? Is it really you people who rule?"- implying that it is the wealth or capital which is the impetus of society, sponsoring each and every aspect of the kingdom claiming that they are the actual ruler from behind.

Here Rabindranath significantly uses the image of an "Ardha Bene Rajeshwar Murti" or an "Idol of Capitalist Emperor" or half trader half king rule. He expresses an opinion through this imagery that he might be the face but it is the capitalists who are backbone of authority or rule. Rabindranath is critical about capitalist exploitation and raises an ethical question in *Letters from Russia*<sup>20</sup> to his son Rathi as well as in other texts whose labour is been appropriated and by whom. He was ashamed of his identity as a Zamindar although he was unique in his performance as a Zamindar and followed his own idea of a benevolent king. He tried to establish cooperative among his subjects, established a rural bank, and proposed an ideology of partnership between zamindars and his subjects to reconstruct rural life. The key question here is an unequal relationship between capital and labour. Viewing from a Marxist lens one can argue persons who are producing surplus are they being able to appropriate any portion of it? If not, then there is exploitation. The capitalist is appropriating the labour of labourers and the product they produced. They are gaining more and more wealth and money from it which they are using to control the state. The king or the political authority gradually became more and more dependent on capitalists. It is a two-way sword as capitalists are gaining capital by exploiting commoners then they're using that very capital to control the state which would safeguard their interest. Thus, creating a vicious circle of exploitation and reproducing hierarchy. Thus, perhaps it is no wonder that some Marxists emphasized withering away of the state to reach equality.

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<sup>20</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Letters from Russia', in *Shikhsa Satra*, (Viswa Bharati: Viswa Bharati Press, 2002) ii, p. 35.

This theme is predominant in *Red Oleanders* as the image of the king is someone who stores gold and plays with it having an image of both the capitalist and the king. In *Kaler Yatra* there exist two different groups socially but the nexus is so strange that the trader and the king, these two apparently different meaning words, are joined to construct a phrase only with a hyphen between them. Characters do not have any proper names in this play all of them are identified in terms of their profession like the priest, minister, traders, soldiers, citizens, women etc. Even when more than one person of a group is present, they are mentioned as 1st, 2nd, 3rd etc. (like the 1st soldier, 2nd soldier, or 1st citizen, 2nd citizen). No individual name is present. A person exists to others only in terms of his profession or group identity. The lowest-ranked persons – farmers and laborers- are simply mentioned as ‘they’ by “upper strata” members. It is like a numbered individual in *Red Oleanders*. They are working day in and day out– cultivating crops, or giving service to others. There is a silence about them neither they nor their contribution is mentioned. As if they do not exist as human beings or just exist as producing machines. Only the women call them by their names as if they only have a humane relationship with lower castes or classes. Both women and the lower stratum are marginalized in this society. When women come out in the public and try to please the chariot, the rope so that it can move they are discouraged and instead advised to go back and perform domestic responsibilities.

The lower stratum is always deprived of the privilege to pull the chariot they are not even allowed to touch the rope or any part of the chariot. Untouchability is practiced in two ways. No member of the high caste ever touched them (at least in public) and in turn, the “untouchables” are not allowed to touch anything sacred and auspicious like the rope of the chariot. This time when the chariot could not be moved by any of the three higher groups the lowest rank people came into the forefront. They ignored all advice, resistance, and curses and finally took the rope of the chariot in their hand. The chariot which remained as lifeless and static suddenly jerked and started to move to the utter disbelief of the members of the three upper strata. The lower castes were deprived of something which was part of their right as well. Everyone is allowed to touch the rope the chariot and even the Lord on this auspicious day. They were exploited and became alienated from the social structure. But once they became conscious of the oppression, life or liveliness returned within the rope and it started pulling the chariot symbolizing the return of consciousness within the lower caste people who then started driving the society. When they touched the rope at the very moment

‘life returned within the dead rope’.<sup>21</sup> Here Rabindranath raises a significant question through the voice of the poet, whether the rope of the chariot exists outside or within?<sup>22</sup> He emphasised the rope and each knot of the huge rope that pulls the chariot. It symbolises human bonding among human beings across occupations and social positions. If the knots loosen, the chariot will cease to move.

Finally, through the character of the poet, Rabindranath expresses his philosophy of social change. The poet does not fall within the strict hierarchy but observes it from the outside. Rabindranath believes that nature has a rhythm. Similarly, society must make a rhythm and maintain balance. If one group is oppressed or humiliated in the future the oppressor would be oppressed as well and have to suffer humiliation to re-establish the rhythm.

POET: God has turned to their side... Since one side rose too high. God came down and stood on the side of the oppressed... From there he pulls down the higher side. Thus, he restored to balance.<sup>23</sup>

From *Kaaler Yatra*, it is clear that he is depicting a journey of time where each Yuga or stage of history is believed to be dominated by a particular group: Brahmins Kshatriya Vaishya respectively. But each group in their respective heydays had become rigid and generally did not allow others in power. This gradual monopolization of power had led to their decay. He predicts in the future this journey of time will continue. Being a believer in balance and harmony he believed that the creator will restore balance if it is being distorted. The philosophy of the play is not only the rise of the oppressed or the destruction of temples, armory, and treasury (Markers of all pre-existing social orders) rather the belief which remains that whenever an individual or a particular group will think that they hold ultimate authority and this will continue forever, he or they would be removed from the apex.

POET: “In the coming age, a day will come when the chariot will commence a reverse journey. Then there will be a negotiation between the high and the low of that new age from now concentrate on the interweaving”.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

At the end of this journey, I will try to outline Rabindranath’s journey as a philosopher of social change from his *Red Oleanders* to his *Journey of Time*. This journey is

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<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 1368 (beng), p. 1113. Translation mine.

<sup>22</sup> Tagore, 1368 (beng), p. 1119. Translation mine.

<sup>23</sup> Tagore, 1368 (beng). Translation mine.

<sup>24</sup> Tagore, 1368 (beng). Translation mine.

a long and complex one, I would only mention a few points which I think make Rabindranath a unique social thinker.

The journey from *Red Oleanders* to *Journey of Time* is significant and enlightening for the readers of Rabindranath. Various scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century era tried to interpret societies of past, present, and predicted future ones. Auguste Comte in his 'Law of Three Stages' explains the transition from the Theological, through Metaphysical to his Ideal positive stage. Herbert Spencer explained the transition from Militaristic to Industrial society, while Durkheim interpreted the change from Mechanical to Organic solidarity. These three had a Functional and/or evolutionary approach while Marx has a revolutionary approach. In his six-stage model, he interpreted the transition from Primitive Communist society through Slave, Feudal to Modern Capitalist society. Then he predicted Socialism and finally Communism. All of these thinkers had a linear optimism. Rabindranath might have hoped for a future characterized by equality in *Red Oleanders* but his journey continued to *Journey of Time* where he opined that the group which is oppressed today if rises to power can become oppressors tomorrow and this might continue. This awareness of the cyclical nature of social change makes him a unique social thinker as far as I am concerned.

Second, Rabindranath has very interestingly depicted that it is not only the exploited who get alienated but also the person who exploits. This alienation at the top or of the oppressor is another unique feature of Rabindranath's thought. Third, his belief that transformation of self is key for social transformation and his insistent faith in humanity give him a significant place. Fourth, in Rabindranath's view, social change can be achieved when the exploiter joins hand in hand with exploited to break his own social order. This depiction in *Red Oleanders* gives him a special place in the discourse of social change. Finally, Rabindranath's idea of leadership is noteworthy— a transition can be deciphered from Nandini and Ranjan in *Red Oleanders* to a group in *Journey of Time*. In *Red Oleanders* it was about a protagonist or a couple who lead social change while in the journey of time the focus is on the oppressed group who have achieved caste/class consciousness and is thriving for social transformation.

While concluding I think Rabindranath's point is to reach a non-exploitative social order and to establish humane bonding instead of only occupational interdependency in society. His experiments on rural reconstruction are key manifestations of a Rabindrik society

that is based on cooperation. Not only cooperation in production but the cooperation of minds.

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**Tagore's Heaven of Freedom and the Realms Beyond:  
Certain Perspectives in Time and Social Life<sup>1</sup>**

*Dipannita Datta*

[T]rue freedom is not in isolation.<sup>2</sup>

Let not my love be a burden on you,

My friend,

Know that it pays itself.<sup>3</sup>

The Freedom of self-expression which we had once learnt  
to look upon as Europe's great gift is ruthlessly suppressed.<sup>4</sup>

The perfect freedom is in a perfect harmony of relationship and not in a mere severance of  
bondage. Freedom has no content, and therefore no meaning...<sup>5</sup>

**Abstract:**

This essay attempts to explore Rabindranath Tagore's creative understandings of 'freedom(s)' at the time of India's colonial subjectivity. Tagore was critical of the dichotomous colonial ideology that promoted otherness. Aware of the coloniser's enforcement of cultural superiority upon the subject people/nation, he said 'we do not become cyphers just because the British treat us as such...'<sup>6</sup> The Indians thus marginalised, needed the freedom of mind to recover the self from the imposed otherness and fears of oppression. Tagore moved beyond the dominant ideology, insisting on 'work' that would remove 'major obstacles to our national freedom,'<sup>7</sup> emphasising self-reliance/self-sufficiency and education that would emancipate and strengthen the total inner-self of the emerging nation, without ignoring the risks of participating in 'the wider expansion of the life's

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<sup>1</sup> A concise version of this paper — 'Rereading Tagore's Heaven of Freedom' — was presented at the international conference 'Samaj and Freedom(s)', 2019. This revised paper considers the comment of the participants and scholars present there, and is dedicated to my respected teacher, Late Swapan Mazumdar whose distinctive understanding of Rabindranath Tagore encouraged me and drew me to Tagore studies.

<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'I am He' [1934], in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 211-218 (p.211).

<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Kalantar' [1933], in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 13 (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 209-216 (p. 216). Also see, Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Changing Age', in *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Humayun Kabir (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 341-352 (p. 352).

<sup>4</sup> Tagore, 'Kalantar', p. 216. Also see, Tagore. 'The Changing Age', p. 352.

<sup>5</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Address at the Parliament of Religions' [1937], in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 704-710 (p. 705).

<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Presidential Address' [1908], *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Humayun Kabir (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 101-128 (p. 117).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 115.

freedom'.<sup>8</sup> This inclusive and holistic approach to life and the moral culture that shunned exclusive political interests led Tagore to a passionate analysis of the West. Witnessing the ways the great stream of western civilisation wasted 'its boasted love of freedom', he declared that it historically proved itself 'the greatest menace to Man'.<sup>9</sup> He was particularly critical of the interplay of freedom and violence—the modern product<sup>10</sup>— that manifested in the form of 'nomadic barbarism', cruelty, hatred and revenge across borders.<sup>11</sup> As against the colonial onslaught, domination and the humiliation associated with it, Tagore's plea to his countrymen was to overcome the unbridled passion for destruction and political extremism and focus on removing India's blind loyalty to a tradition that tolerates injustices evident in practices of discrimination through the ages.<sup>12</sup> Tagore's emphasis on freedom sans marginalization and violence draws us to Gandhi's perception of Tagore as an opponent of any discrimination and social injustice.<sup>13</sup> The paper attempts to address the Tagorean discourse on freedom vis-à-vis *samaj* and freedom that the nation-state promotes while remaining engaged with Tagore's thoughts on freedom(s).

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, Freedom, *Samaj* (Society), State/Nation-state, Oneness

As the title indicates, the 'Heaven of Freedom' is an unbridled and powerful expression of the creative understanding of freedom/s of *Visva Kavi*<sup>14</sup> Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), his dynamic vision of a just and violence-free India (within the world), when the country was under the colonial regime. The profundity of his anti-colonial thoughts (not anti-British thoughts) on freedom/s, and linked with that of decolonisation of minds, is implicit in the

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<sup>8</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore' [1921], in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 29-82 (p. 71, no. 152).

<sup>9</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* [1917], in *Rabindranath Tagore: Nationalism*, introduction by Ramchandra Guha (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, Ibid, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Tagore's ideal of freedom and Gandhi's response to it—'Tagore [is] a representative of mass mind of India' and 'humanity as a whole'— is largely drawn from Gopalkrishna Gandhi's *A Frank Friendship*. London, N Y and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007 and Uma Das Gupta's *Friendships of 'Largeness and Freedom': Andrews, Tagore and Gandhi: An Epistolary Account*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> The word *Visva Kavi* means World Poet. In Bengal/ India, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, an ardent patriot, preacher and educationist, a Vedantist and then, a Roman Catholic theologian, after reading Cardinal Newman, was the first to acknowledge Rabindranath Tagore as a major literary figure of the world, praising him as the poet of tallest stature under the title 'The World Poet of Bengal.' Upadhyaya reviewed Tagore's *Naivedya* (long before the publication of even the Bengali *Gitanjali*) in the journal *Sophia* edited by him as early as 1 September 1900, under the caption 'The World Poet of Bengal' (for further details, see, Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1980), pp. 217-218; Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.63.) The global acceptance of the poet in 1913 as Noble Laureate, however, set the stage for the world poet, *Visva-Kavi*, though often he is seen in a figure of an 'oriental sage'.

words ‘heaven of freedom’.<sup>15</sup> These words are part of his poem ‘Where the mind is without fear’ (no. 35) of his “Song Offerings” meaning *Gitanjali*.<sup>16</sup> The words embody the *Visva Kavi*’s deep thoughts concerning the removal of various types of ‘unfreedoms’<sup>17</sup> operative in his India and his struggle within to see the country awake to *that heaven of freedom* where *knowledge is free* for all, where the horizons of freedom of the mind are not limited by the *fear* of oppression, exceeding the limits of *narrow domestic walls*.

As such, this essay does not attempt to offer a close reading of the poem, for this is not a paper on poetry. Yet one cannot miss the inbuilt discerning qualities of wholeness in the poem. At one level, the poem, as evident, is representative of a creative will that intends to serve the interests of everyone in the society, including those left with little choice in overcoming injustices, little opportunity of exercising the freedom of mind and to wake up from the fear of uniting/reconciling with the expansion of life’s freedom. So, the invocation in the poem can be read as Tagore’s striving for an agency to bring about a just and violence free society across the limits of nation and geography.

At another level, the poem evokes the ‘devotional’<sup>18</sup> nature of his *Gitanjali* poems and *Naibedya*, Tagore’s first volume of Bengali poems devoted ‘(though not exclusively) to spiritual themes’.<sup>19</sup> It is true that this poem (no. 35), particularly, ‘as though supporting a new meditative rigour’<sup>20</sup> destabilises an exclusive or fixed notion of spirituality and that of freedom while combining within it the principle of the freedom of oneness that permeates his understanding of the interrelationship between the part and the whole (India within the world *that has not been broken up into fragments*), of social harmony across borders, beyond *narrow domestic walls*, and explodes the myth of freedom that the dominant Nation (N) promotes. The poem, in other words, is suggestive of the need for an individual’s selfless

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<sup>15</sup> Henceforth, all words from the poem will be in italics.

<sup>16</sup> The Bangla version of this poem (চিত্র যেথা ভয় শূন্য) was first published in 1901 in the book of verse-offerings *Naibedya* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati Publication, 1901), p. 83. The book was dedicated to his father Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, known for his contribution to the growth of culture of social-religious reforms in India.

<sup>17</sup> The idea of socio-economic freedom needed during the colonial times as much as now is taken from Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xi. This point is discussed in Dipannita Datta, ‘In Search of Fairness of Justice: Contemporising Tagore and “The Home and The World”’, in *Contemporising Tagore and the World*, ed. by Imtiaz Ahmed, Muchkund Dubey and Veena Sikri (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2013), pp. 439-468. In the current article, I focus on Tagore primarily as a *Kavi* (Poet) in an attempt to address his poetic sensibilities as expressed in his words and work on society/*samaj* which are as relevant today as they were in his time.

<sup>18</sup> See, Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1980), p.189.

<sup>19</sup> Sukanta Chaudhuri, ‘Tagore’s Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 49-84 (p. 59).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

striving and conscious sensitivity to connect and realise the collective minds and hearts of the people in the life of the nation (n) beyond *the dreary desert sand of dead habit* into *ever-widening thought and action*, of freedom and unity across borders and boundaries of race, class/caste, community, religion and gender hierarchy. Taken together, the poem can be read as the Poet's undogmatic defence of freedom and his urge to see his country free from subjectivities.

As evident, the poem with its associated meanings (of freedom sans violence and sans geopolitical or ideological borders) can function as an example of what Tagore explains later as a process in the dynamics of 'inter-communication'<sup>21</sup> that samaj/society (n) engenders because of its loose textures. This essay considers these wide-ranging aesthetic-ethical and spiritual-intercultural ideas of freedom and harmony as a context to examine the Tagorean discourse on freedom/s vis-à-vis *samaj* and freedom that the nation-state promotes. Juxtaposing the complex domination-subordination relationships against the backdrop of colonialism and its binary nationalism, the essay investigates how far should we consider revisiting the meaning and historicity of freedom as conceived by Tagore. It wishes to suggest that when violence, polarity and deception combined with fear continue to influence contemporary ways of life, we can regard Tagore's *heaven of freedom* as something that one can believe in for there is a life beyond 'the narrowness of freedom'.<sup>22</sup>

The essay will take help from a few of the Poet's interrelated texts from different periods of his life in an attempt to address the interconnected meaning of *heaven of freedom* and to learn the principles of freedom/s as envisaged by him.

The thematic pattern that follows (through a brief overview of a selection of his work) will attempt to show that Tagore's notion of freedom traverses from one text to another, including what Amiya Dev calls 'Tagore's self-intertextuality', which also allows the readers to access the meaning of '*oneness* as a valid poetic principle'.<sup>23</sup>

### **Tagore, Freedom - an Endless Journey (*Chirojatra*) and the Poet's *Samaj***

We might get a clearer picture of Tagore's thoughts on freedom and the realms beyond from the essay/talk 'Freedom' transcribed by his English friend and a trained agro-economist

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<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Freedom' [1924], in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 4, ed. by Nityapriya Ghosh (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007), pp. 627-628 (p. 628).

<sup>22</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Amiya Dev, *Rereading Tagore* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018), pp. 24-25. [emphasis in the original]

from Cornell University, Leonard K Elmhirst.<sup>24</sup> The transcript says, ‘When we regard our self as a sole and final end, we separate the self from the greater life of the world. As soon as we admit that the self must establish a harmonious relationship with the all, then, for the first time, we realize what the word freedom means.’<sup>25</sup> The Poet believed in the deeper ‘truth of inter-relation [that] goes far beyond the mere facts or the contents of the poem’.<sup>26</sup>

It is pertinent to mention at least two of his early essays here — ‘Jagater Bandhan’(1885) and ‘Ek Katha Jami’ (1885)—because both represent the Poet’s insightful assertion of freedom for a just and non-violent society and beyond conformist existence.<sup>27</sup> In ‘Jagater Bandhan’, he said, ‘I am not outside the world, and the world is not outside of me’.<sup>28</sup> Put differently, the world is inside me, and I am inside the world. By extension, the self/national self/country is within the diverse currents of the World and that World is established within the self (with conscious striving). This two-way process of convergence, or in the Poet’s word, ‘inter-relation’ — of the spiritual-ethical and social-cultural — and its underlying meaning of freedom beyond the narrow confines of self-interest is portrayed in a similar vein and a little differently in ‘Ek Katha Jami’. There the Poet says ‘The world and its universality manifests in every bit of land [*protyek bigha protyek katha tei*],’<sup>29</sup> suggesting the right of all — of any caste/class or religion, the high born and the humble, the stranger and the indigenous, to know and live in this world freely; to be at home in the world through self-realisation, knowledge and effort beyond the artificially constructed solidified lines of the self and the other and unite into all that comes within the fold of the ‘hospitality of his love’.<sup>30</sup> In other words, his emphasis was on the equal worth of all human beings inhabiting a vastly divided world, the world we (the peoples of the global South) continue to live in. While these essays may be neglected as the Poet’s idiosyncratic expressions or as expressions of romantic delight, speaking of the interaction between the self (the all-encompassing self) and the

<sup>24</sup> I have discussed Leonard K Elmhirst’s positive role in uniting cultures in India. Among others, see, Dipannita Datta. ‘Connecting Cultures: Rethinking Rabindranath Tagore’s “Ideals of Education”.’ *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 24. 3 (2017): pp. 412-423.

<sup>25</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Freedom’ [1924], in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 4, ed. by Nityapriya Ghosh (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007), p. 627.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The essays are from *Alochona -Discussions/ Discourses* [1885]. For further references, see notes 28 and 29.

<sup>28</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Jagater Bandhan’ [The Worldly Ties/ The Creative Ties], in *Rabindra Rachanabali, Sulabh Sanksharan*, Volume 15 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2000), p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Ek Katha Jami’ [A Little Plot of Land], in *Rabindra Rachanabali, Sulabh Sanksharan* (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> While Tagore has discussed these philosophical mediations in several instances, starting with his weekly *Santiniketan* talks in 1909, the words quoted are from ‘I am He’, the third lecture of three delivered in 1933 at Andhra University. See Tagore, ‘I am He,’ in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3, p.211.

collective social body, and its concomitant truth— “exchange”— of internal/inner wealth and external events, Sankha Ghosh reminds us that ‘We cannot chart this... by a straight graph.’<sup>31</sup> His perception of freedom in society calls for an understanding of the creation of an inter-relation between and among ‘all’ that comes in the ‘scheme of creation’ so that ‘the flow of life in us [would] be *one* with the universal life outside’.<sup>32</sup>

As the examples show, the Poet’s idea of freedom is a non-dogmatic defence of the ‘truth of oneness’ that can be maintained without collapsing of difference.<sup>33</sup> He believed in a plural way of life and diverse cultures that would bring social inclusion (and he was optimistic that political freedom would follow once the social obstacles were removed). Therefore, removal of (un)freedom and (in)justice, to be specific, the dark areas of tradition gyrating around society, was important for him. As against the antagonistic relationship between the colonizer/ruler/master and the colonized/ruled/slave that divided human beings into us and them and constructed ideological and geopolitical borders, in his essay ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ (1904), for example, he reiterates his emphasis on the idea of freedom and says:

To comprehend unity in diversity, to establish unity amidst diversity — this is India’s innate *dharma* [the way of life]. India does not view difference as hostility, she does not think of the other as enemy.<sup>34</sup>

The Poet’s welcoming of freedom *that has not been broken up into fragments*, reflects India’s age-long social-cultural heritage interconnected with the underlying meaning of the guest-host relationship (*atithi devo vabo*<sup>35</sup>) based on the principles of Oneness. This assimilative meaning of freedom is especially important in the context of today’s India and the world for issues of discrimination, unevenness and polarisation continue to affect human lives across borders and boundaries. It carries an analogous expression not only in one specific poem or in essays like, ‘Bharatbarsya Samaj’ (1901) ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ (1904), as we have seen. The deeper meaning of freedom is also spread across the Poet’s vast and inspiring

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<sup>31</sup> Sankha Ghosh. ‘Rabindranath Tagore: From Art to Life’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri. New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 1-10 [p. 10].

<sup>32</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Glimpses of Bengal: The Letters of Sir Rabindranath Tagore 1885–1895*, (London: Macmillan, 1921), p. 168 [Kushtea, now in Bangladesh, 5th October 1895].

<sup>33</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Realization in Love’ [1913], in *Sadhana, Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Essays* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2004), pp. 145-158 (p. 158).

<sup>34</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, in *Atmashaktio Somuha, Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 12 (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 683-707 (p. 701).

<sup>35</sup> Taittiriya Upanishad, Shikshavalli I.11.2.

oeuvre, including a variety of his poetry, prose fiction, creative nonfiction, letters and songs written earlier and later in his life. In a slightly different vein, he also recognises the possibilities of freedom in the complementary relationship between Bengal/ India and Britain in his essay ‘Bangalir Asa o Nairasya’, gathered with other essays under *Samaj*.<sup>36</sup>

Was the Poet ignoring the colonised situation of India and delving into his *antaratma* the core of his being? At this point, another question that comes to mind. What was the Poet thinking about the subject nation? Let us consider here some portions from his essay ‘Bharatbarsya Samaj’, for both the essay and the poem **চিত্ত যেথা ভয়শূন্য** / Where the mind is without fear were written around the same time. This poem voices Tagore’s devotion to his ‘god’ and his urge for an awakened spirit of freedom in him and his country. Can we think that the essay was also meant to rekindle the freedom of harmony, interdependence and exchange once prevalent in the magnanimous spirit of Indian society?

Tagore attended to the challenges confronting the freedom in ‘social life’ and said, ‘The active independence of society is greater than all other forms of independence’. He stressed, ‘it is true that in our country society is of the utmost importance...but those conditions/traditions prevalent three thousand years ago would not help us in any way’. Tagore did not ‘turn a blind eye to them and destroy them’. Instead, referring to the forefathers he tried to unfurl creative paths for a near and distant future that can ‘connect this time to those’. He also raised questions about ‘blind emulation’ of Englishness and the ‘blank imitation’ of our ancestors, the lack of ‘compatibility between the inner being and the outer’ and emphatically insisted ‘the transformation of life is development’.<sup>37</sup> Here the emphasis is on ‘development’ (*where the tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection/transformation+ development*) that is deeply aware of the local exigencies. Another important point worth remembering is about the ‘conscious’. He says, ‘Our society is also undergoing rapid transformation, but as there is no conscious core in it, it is moving towards a disease’. ‘Today, those rules [of the past] persist but that consciousness does not’. He lays the emphasis on ‘keeping in mind *the well-being of the entire society*’.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>36</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bangalir Asa o Nairasya’ [1878], in *Samaj, Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 30 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati), pp. 97-100. For the English translation, see, Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Idea of East and West* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 21. Also quoted in Swapan Mazumdar, ‘Concept of Crisis’, in *Contemporarising Tagore and the World*, ed. by Imtiaz Ahmed, Muchkund Dubey and Veena Sikri (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2013), pp. 469- 490 (p.473).

<sup>37</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bharatbarsya Samaj’ [1901], in *Atmashaktio Somuha, Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 12, (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 678-683 (p.682).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

he says, ‘nation-building requires a mind, a remembrance, but the lack of remembrance is also a necessity – a nation has to forget disunion and dissension and conflict as soon as possible.’<sup>39</sup> As for the term nation(al), he said, ‘We may not accept it as national unity – because the words nation and national are not ours, their sense and meaning has been limited by European doctrine.’<sup>40</sup>

In his essay ‘Nation Ki?’ Tagore considered Earnest Renan’s philosophy of the nation and pointed out that ‘We have to admit that there is no word for “nation” in Bengali’ and thus he had ‘no qualms in choosing the word ‘nation’ in its original sense’.<sup>41</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharjee reminds us that his use of the term and the thinker is far from uncritical.<sup>42</sup> Tagore draws upon the connotations of a nation – ‘as a living entity’ and ‘a mind-spirit element’ and observes ‘two elements have built the inner being of this entity. They are one and the same.’ Explaining the sameness in difference he says ‘One of them is located in the past and the other in the present. One of them is the ancient memory of the common man, the other is each other’s consent, the will to live together in harmony’.<sup>43</sup> He explains further, ‘the will of the common man, the past togetherness to achieve something great, and the determination to achieve something great once again – this is the earnest root or foundation of the formation of a community’.<sup>44</sup> However, ‘the field of unity of the Indian society is huge’. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain its real centre’.<sup>45</sup> So, the Poet says ‘Here, our question is – where do we concentrate? Which ideal of unity should one focus on?’ He knew that the work for political freedom cannot be ignored and for that ‘We cannot ignore political unification – the more the types of unity the better, the more the merrier’. ‘But we should comprehend and understand that in our country *samaj* is of the utmost importance’.<sup>46</sup> Behind this, there certainly lies a past, but we can find its direct goal in the present. It is nothing other than – a general consent, a conspicuous and clear expression of the wish to bear the burden of life together.<sup>47</sup> So, we see here, the Poet is not just speaking about the elite in society.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid p.679.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid p.679.

<sup>41</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Nation Ki? [1901], in *Atmashaktio Somuha, Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 12, (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 675-678 (p.675).

<sup>42</sup> Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ‘Tagore’s View of History’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 268-278.

<sup>43</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Nation Ki? [1901], in *Atmashaktio Somuha, Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 12, (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 675-678 (p.677).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bharatbarsya Samaj’, p.680.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Nation Ki? p. 678.

According to Tagore, considering the colonial context and the attending coercive forces unleashed by the Raj and the presence of the hugeness of diversity in India, the need of the time was to light the devotion of freedom, and that can be sustained by delving into the life force of the ‘inner being’ of the nation/*samaj*. For, according to him ‘to be sad, to be happy and to hope — all in togetherness — it is these that are real’.<sup>48</sup> He said, ‘Our love will be strengthened by the extent to which we have agreed to sacrifice and the extent to which we have endured suffering.’<sup>49</sup> Moreover, in his view, to ‘understand the greatness and value of these emotions - in spite of the diversity of races and languages [are] much more valuable than the allocation of charges and frontiers.’<sup>50</sup> These aspects of freedom that underscore the need for love and the value of emotions and social justice in the life of the nation lead us to what Martha Nussbaum refers to as ‘why love matters for justice’.<sup>51</sup>

As we see, Tagore allows a discursive flow in the two essays mentioned above and while extrapolating ‘the present and the past’ he tried to offer ways of uniting and connecting ‘the hugeness of diversity’<sup>52</sup> in an attempt to ‘remove unfreedoms’ and ‘clear injustices’ to the extent he could across the fragments of *narrow domestic walls*. He said, ‘Whatever name you may lend to this force of unification, it does not matter, we should be more concerned about unifying humans and nothing else’.<sup>53</sup> It is clear that his idea of freedom in unification is not what colonialism/imperialism and the ideology of aggressive and narrow nationalism capitalize on. He underlined, ‘The binding together of everyone from the lowest strata of society to the highest *in a union of well-being*, this is the subject of the biggest of all endeavours that we must put in’.<sup>54</sup> This example and the ones discussed above then gives us insight into Tagore’s idea of freedom that speaks of working together for ‘a level of perfection that must be a gain for all’.<sup>55</sup> He insisted on ‘work’ that would remove ‘major obstacles to our national freedom,’<sup>56</sup> on self-reliance/self-sufficiency and education that would emancipate and strengthen the total inner-self (*atmashakti*) of the emerging nation. Here, of course, we must bear in mind that he was writing not as a historian or a philosopher, though history and philosophy are important components of his idea of togetherness, which

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 677.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Massachusetts and England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), see, especially pp. 47-105).

<sup>52</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bharatbarsya Samaj’, p. 680.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 679.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 683.

<sup>55</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘East and West’ [1908], in *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Humayun Kabir (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 129-140 (p. 131).

<sup>56</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Presidential Address’, p. 115.

also underscores the ‘idea of literature as communication as well as expression’.<sup>57</sup> According to Bashabi Fraser, he is simply ‘the Poet’,<sup>58</sup> and his literature seeks to ensure human relationships across time and space with bonds of service.

With an awareness of India’s historical vision of *milan* and *sāmanjasya*,<sup>59</sup> of unity and harmony, ‘to perceive one in the many profoundly and unambiguously’,<sup>60</sup> it was difficult for the Poet to eschew the colonial situation that divided human relationship into us and them. He could never subscribe to the colonial enterprise that emphasises divide and rule, the inhumane consequences of which were manifest in Lord Curzon’s partition of Bengal. Tagore’s voice of protest against violence, human waste, the Hindu-Muslim divide and the nationalist excess that followed the Bengal partition are well known and we need not repeat those here. His 1916 novel *Ghare Baire* (*Home and the World* - 1919) is a representation of the ensuing cycle of violence, uncertainty and the tragic circumstances of his country. What is worth noting here is, ‘*Ghare Baire* posits Nikhilesh against Sandip’s *svadeshi*, no less a patriot but not carried away by the passion of the moment, a personification as it were of Tagore’s *atmashakti*’.<sup>61</sup>

Tagore knew colonialism was not about the ‘English culture at its best’.<sup>62</sup> He said, ‘The West has come into our homes and we cannot turn it out like an unwelcome guest’.<sup>63</sup> That was against the cultural ethos of India. The Poet considered the eternal, universal, and contingent aspects of his country. But, what was the option before the Indians? In Tagore’s view, ‘We must awaken their humanity by our own—that is the only way’ to freedom.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, he could not agree to the kind of regressive nationalism that was shaping his country’s psyche. He calls it ‘a terrible fetter,’ ‘spiralling in the narrowness of our selfish motives’, and insists we must ‘prepare ourselves to participate in a transaction of relationships’.<sup>65</sup> Later on, he was also drawn into questions surrounding inter-civilisational

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<sup>57</sup> Sisir Kumar Das, ‘Introduction’ to *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, eds. Sukanta Chaudhuri and Sankha Ghosh (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 1-21 (p. 12).

<sup>58</sup> Bashabi Fraser, *Rabindranath Tagore* (Critical Lives) (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), ‘Introduction’, p.7.

<sup>59</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bharat Itihas Carca’ [1901], *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 13 (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1961) pp. 450-453 (p. 450).

<sup>60</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bharatbarser Itihas’, in *Swadesho Samaj*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 12, (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 1027-1034 (p.1029).

<sup>61</sup> Amiya Dev, *Rereading Tagore* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018), p. 52.]

<sup>62</sup> Tagore, ‘East and West’, p. 137.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> See, among others, Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Shakti’/Inner Strength, ‘Samaje Mukti’/ Freedom in Society and ‘Jagate Mukti’/ Freedom in this World [1908-1909] in *Santiniketan*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 12, (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 175-177 & 173-175.

negotiation and with an emphasis on India's *samajic* (societal) culture he said, 'it is the reconciliation of opposites which is of its essence'.<sup>66</sup>

What he stood for was 'a history beyond history' - beyond the history of colonial archives, and that the former can be sustained through creative humanity that affective bonds ensure, as the Poet explained in one of his last works 'Sahitye Aitihāsikata'.<sup>67</sup> Speaking of Tagore's literature in relation to society, his commitment to the life of the nation, his efforts in removing all obstructive elements that lead to stagnation of the society and his 'faith in the unity of man', Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, observes insightfully, 'Rabindranath... perceived relationships hitherto unnoticed and gave humanity his vision of one world'.<sup>68</sup> Simultaneously, he 'gave the people pride and dignity' which were almost lacking in our country during the colonial times.<sup>69</sup> Vinod Joshi, a contemporary Gujarati/Indian poet and literary critic, states, Tagore's work, including *Gitanjali* was 'an inspiration for many writers, even for the emerging writers during the early thirties influenced by Gandhiji'.<sup>70</sup> Mahadev Desai, a scholar and personal secretary to Mahatma Gandhi 'was the first person to translate Tagore's work into Gujarati. His version of *Chitrangada* was published in 1915'.<sup>71</sup> It might not be out of place to mention here that emphasising on the 'outstanding reach of Tagore's poetry', Vojislav Djurić, an important comparatist and Serbian literary critic, quotes poem 35 of *Gitanjali* (1910) translated as *Song Offerings* (1912) and writes, 'One of Tagore's poems is considered the greatest and the most beautiful...poems in the world. In it, he built heavens worthy of the entire country, of the entire mankind'.<sup>72</sup> Djurić observations find their

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<sup>66</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *A Vision of India's History* [1923]. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1988, p.38.

<sup>67</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Sahitye Aitihāsikata', in *SahityerSwarup, Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 14, (Kolkata: West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 536-538. For a recent discussion, see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Tagore's View of History' in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 268-278 (p. 276).

<sup>68</sup> Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. *Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary Volume*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010), pp. xvii-xii (p. xvii).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p. xix.

<sup>70</sup> Vinod Joshi, 'Rabindranath Tagore and Gujarati Literature', in *Nameless Recognition: Rabindranath Tagore and Other Indian Literatures*, ed. by Swapan Chakravorty (Kolkata: The National Library, 2011), pp. 71-74 (pp. 71-72).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>72</sup> Vojislav Djurić. 'Lyric poetry of Rabindranath Tagore', 'Aesthetic and Literary Concepts of Rabindranath Tagore', (Beograd: Feniks Libris, 2007, *Savremenik* 1955, Belgrade). Translated by Ana Milovanović & Milica Marković.

resonance in the word *sahitya* that comes from *sahit* [together/togetherness],<sup>73</sup> and what Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta puts it as ‘being-in relation’.<sup>74</sup>

In Bengal/India, the poet’s thoughts on freedom sans boundaries were also translated into practical works, creating grounds of communication across socio-economic groups through his Santiniketan-Sriniketan educational projects (the word project/s, of course, is not used here purely in the management sense)<sup>75</sup> and in the opening of his Visva-Bharati that embodies what it is called living beyond the boundary. Visva (the world) started residing in Bharat (India) and vice versa.<sup>76</sup> That is exactly what Visva-Bharati’s motto is: *Yatra visvam bhavatyē kanidam* (Where the world makes a home in a single nest). Visva-Bharati becomes the place where the home and the world meet. His unconventional approach to freedom/s in his creative endeavours, helped the poet to expand his horizon of interactions. At the same time, it is through his words and work on creative freedom/s vis-à-vis *samaj* (based on the holistic and undogmatic concept of *atmashakti*), a new field of local-global<sup>77</sup> communications opened up for his country; India became a place of learning in world cultures in the modern age when the country was caught in the complexities of colonialism and emerging nationalism. He did play ‘an important role in the life of the nation’.

### **Freedom, *Samaj* and the Poet’s Alternatives**

One fine example of agency and creativity which offer a discursive scope to an understanding of Tagore’s idea of freedom is his 1910 novel, *Gora*. To put it very briefly, the eponymous hero and the adopted son of Anandamayi, Gora unsettles the idea of a Bharatbarsha/India. Transfixed in an idealised notion of purity and thereby the alienation and its attending rhetoric of the normative tradition of the idolatry of nation and the changing faces of alienation and separatism of colonial modernity and nation-states, Gora projects a possible non-sectarian identity of India. He moves beyond, in his words, the ‘fear of losing

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<sup>73</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Bengali national literature’ [1895], in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das & Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 179–193 (p. 179).

<sup>74</sup> Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta, ‘Rabindranath Tagore and Literary Communication across Borders’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 202–221 (p. 202).

<sup>75</sup> For a fuller account of the evolving nature of Santiniketan (abode of peace) and Sriniketan (abode of grace), having their creative and pragmatic basis in expressions of freedom, see, Uma Das Gupta, *Santiniketan and Sriniketan* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2009)

<sup>76</sup> Dipannita Datta, ‘Connecting Cultures: Rethinking Rabindranath Tagore’s “Ideals of Education”.’ *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 24. 3 (2017): pp. 412–423.

<sup>77</sup> Here the local includes national/regional and the global is about international/transnational/ supranational.

my purity',<sup>78</sup> beyond losing an 'unblemished image of Bharatbarsha', and beyond 'keeping my devotion safe within that impenetrable fortress'.

Gora in his discursive journey also awakens to 'his freedom'; realising (the co-relation of the *within* and *without*) his relation of the individual self to the universe, Gora says that he gains the 'right to true service' against any ritualistic bonds. 'The real field of action now lies before me — for promoting the welfare of those hundred crore people in the world outside'.<sup>79</sup> Proclaiming his newfound insights into Bharatbarsha, he says:

Today I have become what I earlier strove to become... Today I have become an Indian — Bharatbarshia. In me, there is no hostility towards any community, Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Today I belong to every community of Bharatbarsha.<sup>80</sup>

Gora rejects 'both ultra-nationalist politics and colonial co-optation'.<sup>81</sup> He struggles with the agencies, both the spiritual/inner/private and the material/outer/public, eventually bringing to light that the alien and the native are not directly opposed to each other no matter where one is born.<sup>82</sup> Forging national as well as world consciousness of the present (today I have become) in contrast to his troubling past experiences, Gora participates in the struggle for India's freedom, in his 'futural anticipation of a universality'.<sup>83</sup> Gora's reinterpretation of home-grown/traditional culture suggests a new search for the freedom of inter-relationship between the ethical and the religio-cultural treasures of the past (without glorifying or deifying it anymore) and the possibilities of a new open-ended future. Speaking against fanaticisms that kill individual affective ties with the land and people, Gora seeks entry and simultaneously enters into the all-encompassing self that remains open to any community or any individual, offering an alternative discourse on modernity beyond aggressive and narrow nationalism. He is not 'un-modern' in this sense but 'the modernity that breeds alienation is not his'.<sup>84</sup> His love of the people-nation, however, is yet to be achieved. Gora says to his

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<sup>78</sup> All quotations from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* are from the translation of *Gora* by Radha Chakravarty (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 505-507.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p. 505.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p. 506.

<sup>81</sup> Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Imagined Worlds: The Prose Fiction of Rabindranath Tagore', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 142-144 (p. 143).

<sup>82</sup> For further studies on *Gora*, see Chaudhuri, 'Imagined Worlds'; also see Dev, *Rereading Tagore*.

<sup>83</sup> Judith Butler, 'Universality in Culture', in *For Love of Country?*, ed. by Joshua Cohen (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), pp. 45-52 (p. 49).

would-be preceptor, Pareshbabu, ‘for this freedom...make me your disciple’<sup>85</sup>. Although this journey can be read as Gora’s self-critical idealism, his awakening to freedom triggers a message of transformation, underscoring the need to acquire freedom and move beyond political exclusivity into an understanding of human identity as one.

Reflecting on the above examples it is perhaps fair to assume that for the Poet the presence of universality contained within his ideal of freedom of humanity often crossed his mind in different moments of his life. Tagore did not fail to advance the idea of ‘establishing oneness among the various’, to ‘call the other/stranger our own’.<sup>86</sup> This expression of collective unity circumscribes the Poet’s oeuvre of literature and art, of religion and social ethics. Recognising the role of the ‘one’ in many spheres of life, the Poet said when India was at the threshold of global modernity -

We need to know that every race is a part of The Universal Man (*Visvamanab*). Every race in this world establishes itself by accounting for what it is creating to gift and help mankind. The moment a race loses the vitality of creation/innovation, it just exists as a burden, like a paralytic part of a body... Indeed, there is no glory in mere existence.<sup>87</sup>

The Poet cherished an anti-hegemonic spirit of *samajic*/social culture and he wished to extend this to his countrymen for the struggle for freedom. This spirit of freedom to a large extent explains the Poet’s idea of India. He said: ‘The objective of Indian History is not to set up Hindu or some other dominance’.<sup>88</sup>

That India establishes unity amidst diversity...cannot mean in any way that she runs steamroller and renders all diversity plain and levelled...India knows that to *accept others as one’s own* is self-fulfilment. That this rendering the *diverse as one*, that accepting the other as our own is not erasing the distinctions; but is, on the contrary, demarcating clearly the *rights of each* – do we have to shout this aloud in our country, too?<sup>89</sup>

He wished his India would ‘secure a special kind of fulfilment for humanity’,<sup>90</sup> and that would be achieved if she does not fall ‘in the grip of a violent revulsion’ of competition of

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<sup>84</sup> Amiya Dev, *Rereading Tagore* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018), p. 78.

<sup>85</sup> Tagore, *Gora*, Chakravarty (trans.), p. 507.

<sup>86</sup> Tagore, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, pp. 700-701.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 700.

<sup>88</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘East and West’ [1908], in *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Humayun Kabir (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 129-140 (p. 131).

<sup>89</sup> Tagore, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, p.706. Emphasis added.

<sup>90</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘East and West’ p. 131.

British vs. India.<sup>91</sup> The political right to freedom ‘must be earned’ by proving the inner strength of the country: ‘Sacrifice and service, not hard words and violent action, are true tests of strength’.<sup>92</sup> Also, moving beyond all social obstacles/weaknesses, for example, between the higher castes and the ones below in the social hierarchy, which have been hurting India’s development, should be taken up as the task of immediate concern.<sup>93</sup> Witnessing the moribund state of the Indian society and the unfreedom and otherness of subjugation under the colonial regime, he insisted on working towards freedom: the ‘work which will give us vitality and remove from our national character the factors which make us poor and weak, divided and subject’.<sup>94</sup> Much before that, in his negotiations with colonial modernity, he said insistently at the turn of the century,

Our very own task is to impart the knowledge of education, health, food, riches; herein lies our well-being; we should not look at it as a business opportunity and not to accept anything more than good deeds and well-being in exchange.<sup>95</sup>

Later on, he would also stress the need to work towards freedom from superstition and discrimination across time and space: ‘we need to liberate ourselves from [the imprisoned world] the fetters of the self and all those passions that tend to be exclusive’.<sup>96</sup>

Many of Tagore’s creative work exemplifies that his recourse/route to freedom/s is not a fixed universal category. According to him, there is a need to realise the humanity in the freedom of harmony and the fundamental ‘unity...of our relation to the ever-unfolding universe’.<sup>97</sup> That universe includes the spaces ‘where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones’ (*Gitanjali* no. 11).<sup>98</sup> Equally, he was disheartened to see the dehumanising colonial situation and the fearful effect of the colonial rule — the ugliness of separatist politics that caused alienation between the countrymen — ‘uneducated’ and ‘educated’ Indians, the ordinary village folks and the city-bred English-educated Indian middle-class. He wrote how those who knew the English language were ‘clearly marked off from those who did not’ and underlined that ‘the educated man could hold his uneducated

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

<sup>94</sup> Tagore, ‘Presidential Address’, p. 115.

<sup>95</sup> Tagore, ‘Bharatbarsya Samaj’, p.683.

<sup>96</sup> Tagore, ‘Freedom’, p. 628.

<sup>97</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Glimpses of Bengal: The Letters of Sir Rabindranath Tagore 1885–1895* [1913], (London: Macmillan, 1921), p. 168 [Kushtia, now in Bangladesh, 5th October 1895].

<sup>98</sup> Also quoted in, Vojislav Đurić, ‘Aesthetic and Literary Concepts of Rabindranath Tagore’.

brother in heartfelt contempt, but could find no easy way to share his learning with him'.<sup>99</sup> Tagore felt one is not fully entitled to anything one cannot give away. He believed in 'togetherness'. But the situation was complex. There were issues of superiority and inferiority of cultures; there were also issues of civilising mission that served the interest of the colonial authority resulting in an outright subordination of the colonised and the excess of indigenisation that nationalist sentiments popularised.

As against the issues of the divisiveness of power that converted people and their social institutions into machines, and fear, humiliation and suffering that got associated with power politics, Tagore's abiding alternatives were focused on restoring the agency of the village collective and the 'wellbeing' of *samaj*/society as a whole, offering new possibilities of freedom for a fuller social life and overcoming the 'wretchedness'<sup>100</sup> of the country, and this planetary earth. This spirit of freedom is all the more important in the context of today's human affairs across borders for not only India but the entire world continues to be ruled by conflicts of race, class and gender, and especially because the basic rights for self-determination and self-development are still in jeopardy.

The Poet believed 'Anything that is profoundly abounding in humanity will never get outdated' or old. In it lies perpetual freshness/modernity.'<sup>101</sup> With deep humane concerns, he held 'howsoever novel and profitable the slave trade may be, it is very old/ancient'.<sup>102</sup> So, he stood strong supporting the ideal of *samaj*, about which he noted in his essays/lectures/talks, and engaged his education efforts with an ever-new creative task to prove India's capacity to harness her latent powers, or, to create *atmashakti*, providing a workable and sustainable basis for 'the descendants of India's historical unfortunates'<sup>103</sup> and that served as alternatives to colonialism and its binary nationalism. It is obvious that he was not spared of 'scorns and threats from both sides- left and right, so-called westernisers and traditionalists'.<sup>104</sup> 'At least twice he incurred his compatriots' displeasure, once by writing *Gare-Bahire*...that did not approve of nationalist excesses, and again by *Char Adhyay* where he saw the futility of

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<sup>99</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bengali National Literature', p. 185.

<sup>100</sup> Tagore, 'Swadeshi Samaj', p. 706.

<sup>101</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Adhunikata' [1925] in *Bharati* Vol. 49, p. 300.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 318. Also quoted in Dipannita Datta. 'Connecting Cultures', p. 417.

<sup>104</sup> Uma Das Gupta, 'Rabindranath Tagore and Modernity', in *Tagore and Modernity*, ed. by Krishna Sen and Tapati Gupta (Kolkata: Das Gupta & Co., 2006, 2009), p. 1 – 11 (p. 1).

*svadeshi* terrors and its human waste.<sup>105</sup> He was especially ‘bitterly criticised by the then extremists’,<sup>106</sup> excepting those who took issues with his words and work and were later touched by his writings, his philosophy and his ideals.

### **Nation, Samaj and Freedom(s)**

As far as the national question related to freedom is concerned Swapan Mazumdar observes, ‘Political freedom was not unimportant to [Rabindranath], but freedom of mind was of much greater import’.<sup>107</sup> He quotes from Tagore’s 1905 essay ‘Saphalatar Sadupay’ – ‘Hopeless laments won’t do. We shall have to strive for what we ourselves can do’.<sup>108</sup> These first two crisp sentences of the essay underline that to overcome the fear and external compulsions of the colonial situation, the first step for Tagore was to take responsibility for nurturing and creating the capacity for governing the self/*samaj*/nation rather than depending solely on helps from the state (in Tagore’s term nation-state) that ‘superimpose’ order from outside and above.<sup>109</sup> Aware of the colonial reason that subjugates the ruled through state-centric administration, which is abstracted from Indian *samaj*, and the pessimistic attitude of the privileged countrymen to voluntarily bestow all onus of the *samaj* to the dominant order/law, he said painfully, ‘We have understood very well today that self-protection is not just hiding oneself at a distance and sitting there. The real manner of self-protection is to uplift our inner strength down to the ground or core.’ Simply ‘lamenting will not yield any results.’ On the other hand, ‘Imbibing the English in every aspect and trying to survive incognito is also nothing but deceiving oneself.’<sup>110</sup> Tagore felt that if the educated gentry put their ‘heart’ in clearing the many-layered deficiencies and dysfunctionalities in the villages, if they establish ‘solidarity between the Hindus and the Muslims’, ‘staying away from any form of useless politics’, if they address ‘the remedy of the lack of schools, roads and passageways, water bodies, etc. in the district, then in a very short time, they would be able to turn the country into a truly dynamic entity.’<sup>111</sup> The essential requirement of the time, according to him, was to ignite the light of the local communities/village societies. So, he

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<sup>105</sup> Amiya Dev, *Rereading Tagore*, p. 28. [emphasis in the original]

<sup>106</sup> Swapan Mazumdar, ‘The East-west Colloquy’ in *Rabindranath Tagore and Challenges of Today*, ed. By Bhudeb Chaudhuri & K.G. Subramanyan (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1998), pp. 294 – 306 (p. 299).

<sup>107</sup> Swapan Mazumdar, ‘The Other Face of Modernity’, p. 24.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Tagore, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, pp. 700 - 701.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 688.

urged that the upper crust of the society, the *bhadrolok* and the landlords rise to the occasion, recognise and carry out their social duties and obligations responsibly and collectively.

It is not that Tagore was particularly tuned to the disparities between village life and city life from an early age. Around 1890, when he was asked by his father, Debendranath Tagore, to take charge of running the family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and Orissa (in India), Rabindranath came in close proximity to the variety of local life in his *zamindari* in the countryside. It is only expected that the freedom of living in the abundance of nature drew the Poet to the centre of his inner-self and that he would have preferred to live in solitude. His joyful experiences, in this connection, in the vast expanse of land, water, sky are noted in his *Chinnapatra* (translated as *Glimpses of Bengal*) and *Chinnapatrabali*. These creative and lived experiences, at times transient and on occasion transcendental, however, did not stop him from realising that one must participate in the harsher realities of life beyond self-interest to the quotidian.

As Fakrul Alam observes ‘For the first time...he undertook managerial duties on a scale that immersed him in work with ordinary men and women and also involved him directly in economic and public affairs.’<sup>112</sup> On many occasions, he would refer back to the aesthetic-ethical experiences in the countryside and his keen observations are underlined in his words, ‘Slowly but surely I began to understand the sorrow and the poverty of the villagers and I grew restless to do something about it.’ The restlessness took him to the core of the nature of the problems surrounding the plight of the people/nation. He moved beyond self-interest and said: ‘I did not think helping from outside would help. I began to try and open their minds towards self-reliance’.<sup>113</sup> He realised that the freedom of relationship between the self/home/country and the world cannot be enlivened in isolation from the village community/collective or the indigenous people who form the larger part of the *samaj* and yet relegated to the backwaters of social neglect.

In the comprehensive and transformative nature of Tagore’s work, we have seen till now that Tagore did not fail to advance the idea of ‘establishing oneness among the various’, to ‘call the other/stranger our own’.<sup>114</sup> Again, in his essay ‘Freedom’, for example, Tagore delves into the idea of the ‘truth’ that implies ‘a unity expressed through many and varied

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<sup>112</sup> Fakrul Alam & Radha Chakravarty, eds. *The Essential Tagore*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), ‘Introduction’, p. 7.

<sup>113</sup> Uma Das Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: My Life in My Words*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books Ltd, 2010), p. 99.

<sup>114</sup> Tagore, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, pp.700-701.

manifestations, a unity which, when we are able to realize it gives us freedom'.<sup>115</sup> Read in the context of the current political climate symptomized by global dissatisfaction with human ties (not exclusive of intercultural ties) which leads Isaiah Berlin to assert, 'The first requirement for freedom [...] is to be able to speak in one's own voice',<sup>116</sup> it demonstrates the poet-thinker's deep knowledge of the country with which he identified himself intellectually and spiritually.

Tagore inherited the non-dogmatic intellectual-spiritual tradition of universal ties from his father Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905).<sup>117</sup> Though the Maharshi was conservative in certain ways, he was the master-mind in revitalizing India's social-religious reformation movement in the modern age by reorganising the Brahmo-Samaj (reformist-society) founded by Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) in 1828.<sup>118</sup> Rabindranath called Rammohun *Bharat Pathik* – the pathfinder of India, and he says, '[Rammohun] remains modern forever'.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, his involvement with the *samajic* (social-cultural) aspects of the country, along with his family members, did not allow Tagore to submit to 'moral slavery' or to narrow nationalism that leads to 'moral degeneracy and intellectual blindness'.<sup>120</sup> He understood the futility of mimicking the savage greed of the modern nation-state (N). Neither was he willing to sit in consolation in the bondage of immemorial tradition, which was not devoid of dogma. He saw how the social-cultural aspects of *milan* and *sāmanjasya*<sup>121</sup>—the unity and harmony—that Indian *samaj* (n) once embodied was ceasing to be creative, taking tragic shapes in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century with the birth of the Nation.

Without submitting to the limits of the self and the other, without overlooking the differences, including the social-cultural norms of different communities at different geographical locations (regional and national, and over time international), the Poet worked towards curbing unfreedom and injustices as far as possible by initiating the urgency of the

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<sup>115</sup> Tagore, 'Freedom', p. 627.

<sup>116</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality', in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*, ed. by Henry Hardy (England: Chhatto & Windus Ltd 1996), pp. 249 – 266 (p. 262).

<sup>117</sup> Sivanath Sastri, 'The Personal Reminiscences of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore-I & II', *The Modern Review*, 9, no. 1 (1911): 74-82 & 160-165.

<sup>118</sup> Both Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and Rammohun Roy are known for their contribution to the growth of culture of social-religious reforms in India.

<sup>119</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, '*Bharat Pathik* Rammohun Roy', in *Charitro Puja* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1908), pp. 61 – 79 (p. 72).

<sup>120</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Nation' in *Creative Unity, Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Essays* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2010), pp. 63-71 (p. 68).

<sup>121</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Bharat Itihas Carca' [1901], in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 13 (Kolkata West Bengal Govt., 1961), pp. 450-453 (pp. 450-451).

freedom of right to education in Bengal/India, for example. Speaking of his educational work Swapan Majumdar observes, ‘It would inevitably be an alternative education for the poor yet without any trace of poverty in thought’. He goes on to say that his alternative education would exceed the limits of the colonial policy of ‘creating a class of subalterns in the coloniser’s employment hierarchy’.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, he notes, at Santiniketan, Tagore moved ‘from a mode of education modelled after the Upanishadic Brahmoism to a secular, self-reliant and at the same time artistic and comprehensive education’<sup>123</sup> that would have resonance across the country and beyond. Amidst internal fractures and differences as mentioned above, the Poet’s ‘not for profit’ educational projects and programs that embodied his ideal *samaj* took a shape outside the metropolitan administrative centre of Calcutta (now Kolkata); the projects were located in a peripheral location at Santiniketan, Bolpur in around 1901, once begun by his father Maharshi.

His educational projects were guided by a combined process of adaptation to modern scientific evolutions and knowledge of technological advancements and indigenous ways of coordination of *tapovan* education.<sup>124</sup> In running the projects and achieving the fullness of education, it must be mentioned that he was helped by great Englishmen like William W. Pearson (1881-1923), Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940) and the Scotsman, Patrick Geddes (1854-1932). Here, Subha Dasgupta’s observation needs a mention. She writes, ‘His creative endeavours spilled over to the nurturing of an innovative system of education in harmony with natural surroundings and a university that would be the meeting place of teachers, artists, and community workers from all over the world’.<sup>125</sup> His educational endeavours also created, just and non-violent spaces of freedom for rural reconstruction, which started in the early 1890s. The continued innovative work provided an umbrella for agricultural work and related education and skill development programmes for men and women at Santiniketan and Sriniketan in light of the colonial tensions of the time. Moreover, these works facilitated the negotiation of the frontiers between domination and subordination/misrecognition, and are relevant in post-post-colonial times.

While working towards re-establishing the lost connection between societies and cultures, the Poet helped in configuring India in the modern idiom. Speaking of his contribution to India’s struggle for freedom, Ashis Nandy observes, ‘Tagore participated in

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<sup>122</sup> Mazumdar, ‘The Other Face of Modernity’, p. 28.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>124</sup> Discussed in Dipannita Datta. ‘Connecting Cultures’, p. 216.

<sup>125</sup> Chakraborty Dasgupta, ‘Rabindranath Tagore and Literary Communication across Borders’, pp. 202-203.

shaping the modern consciousness in India; his voice counted'.<sup>126</sup> Two developments in the life of the Poet and the nation can be discerned at this point. Firstly, the freedom of the self and the country had become so intertwined as to be identical. Secondly, the 'realisation of freedom'<sup>127</sup> within the stream of national consciousness that offers freedom beyond isolation towards a global unity, which he also calls 'the truth of grand unity',<sup>128</sup> ensured the foundation of international cooperation. According to Isaiah Berlin Tagore's vision of an independent India sans borders created an awareness of 'an equal citizen of the world'.<sup>129</sup>

In Tagore's view, the 'inter-relation'<sup>130</sup> between different groups of people, the continuation of which have been possible across ages through accommodation of difference, adjustments and reconciliation are intrinsic to the shifting and permanent cultural/civilisational idea of India. He said,

[W]e know from our experience in history that [...] that where men live under the compulsion of fear of their neighbours, they cannot attain their own humanity. Only those who can cultivate a feeling of sympathy with others, of understanding and co-operation [can] achieve that relationship which is a great deal more than the numerical fact of their all being on this earth together.<sup>131</sup>

Tagore believed 'Only he knows truth who realizes himself in all beings, and all others in himself'.<sup>132</sup> This truth lies at the 'basis of all that we call civilization'.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, for the Poet, the wall, both within the self/national self and without, needs to be removed first. This truth process involves an ongoing practice of social-cultural communication, which is evident in this essay and many of his writings. As noticed, at least partially, they show possibilities of moving beyond caste lines, communal narrowness and religious prejudices while seeking and opening ways to freedom to link and foster allegiance to human ties across boundaries not merely related by bonds of kinship or race similarity. Just as Gora in the novel by the same name offers a transformative idea of alternative modernity, Nikhilesh in *The Home and the*

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<sup>126</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, p. 4.

<sup>127</sup> Tagore, 'Freedom', p. 627.

<sup>128</sup> Tagore, "I am He", pp. 211-218.

<sup>129</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality', in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*, ed. by Henry Hardy (England: Chhatto & Windus Ltd 1996), p. 262.

<sup>130</sup> Tagore, 'Freedom', p. 627.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, pp. 627-628.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 627.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

*World (Ghare Baire)* projects a dynamic understanding of modernity and freedom in the Indian context (and by extension, abroad).

At the core of Poet's concerns was indeed the achieving of India's freedom from colonial subjectivity and soar beyond it into 'inter-communication' and practices associated with it, especially the human interests governing society.<sup>134</sup> Such human-centric concerns revolving around the meaning of freedom and as understood by the Poet within the overarching atmosphere of colonialism and emerging nationalism in India and linked with that the entire issue of mutually exclusive relation between the ruler and the ruled and its monolithic operations necessarily eludes any singular understanding of the same. In fact, these operations are highly complex and variable. Without submitting to the limits of domination-subordination relationships, as discussed through the above examples, Tagore negotiated the frontiers between the two and offered a vision of a self-governing and self-reliant nation, ensuring possible ways of India's continuity as a *samaj*/nation. Without depending too much upon the British administration or by glorifying the past, he offered new possibilities of freedom for a fuller social life. His words and work reflect his profound yearning and aspiration for India's awakening (as in the Poem 35) to a realisation that would generate self-empowerment (*atma shakti*), which would also serve the cause of freedom struggle without suppressing the dark tradition, especially that of constructing the 'fixed barriers of social gradations'.<sup>135</sup> In this regard, and most importantly, the Poet asserted that the circulation of *knowledge* in all strata of society needs to be free, crossing all barriers (between the countrymen and women) that breed a hierarchical system and make some people, groups or an entire community more equal than others.

He stood against exclusionary measures and although he did not succeed in all endeavours, he unhesitatingly suggested that the first step towards overcoming the fearful situation of colonial subjugation was to strengthen the links between the educated and the masses. All available means were to be adopted to minimize the schism between Indians, 'educated' and the 'uneducated',<sup>136</sup> for he knew, 'We cannot get a proper hold on anything' unless the Indians put in the effort to make learning 'stand firm' and 'build it up from bottom to top'.<sup>137</sup> On a similar note, he underscored the need for co-existence, and without

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 628.

<sup>135</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 79.

<sup>136</sup> Tagore, 'Bengali National Literature', p. 185.

<sup>137</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Vicissitudes of Education' [1892], in *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Humayun Kabir (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 39 – 48 (p. 40).

overlooking the consequences of colonial subjugation he put his faith in the common masses and said: ‘We never realize that we are no one unless we can identify with the general mass in our heart of hearts’. He stressed, ‘[w]e are erecting an insurmountable difference/barrier with the common people. We have always kept them outside the purview of all our discussions’.<sup>138</sup> Such divisiveness serves as a weakness and a viable source of domination of the coloniser over the colonised, proving their cultural superiority. A further difficulty stems from the fact that it is on such weaknesses imperialism builds its political power.

Those of us in India who come under the delusion that mere political freedom will make us free have accepted their lessons from the West as the gospel truth and lost their faith in humanity. We must remember whatever weakness we cherish in our society will become the source of danger in politics. The same inertia which leads us to our idolatry of dead forms in social institutions will create in our politics prison houses with immovable walls. The narrowness of sympathy, which makes it possible for us to impose upon a considerable portion of humanity the galling yoke of inferiority, will assert itself in our politics in creating a tyranny of injustice.<sup>139</sup>

So, by the Poet’s submission, the ‘otherness’ had to be resolved progressively by the countrymen collectively to gain political freedom from colonial subjugation. Freedom would be achieved once the changes emerge from the core of the society/*samaj*/nation. This striving towards freedom sans violence and social divisions would help in self-reliance and in overcoming the fear of reconciling/uniting with the wider expansion of ‘life’s freedom’.<sup>140</sup> He had reasons to offer this alternative, for

The idea of India is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one’s own people from others...which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts. Therefore, my one prayer is: let India stand for the *cooperation* of all peoples of the world. The spirit of rejection finds its support in the consciousness of separateness, the spirit of acceptance in the consciousness of unity.<sup>141</sup>

The passages above project Tagore’s growing sense of freedom during India’s pre-independence days, and it hardly requires a mention that he was particularly apprehensive of what he had put as the dehumanising effect of ‘the soul-stifling discipline’ and ‘the savage

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<sup>138</sup> Tagore, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, p.687.

<sup>139</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 82.

<sup>140</sup> Tagore, ‘Thoughts’, p. 71

<sup>141</sup> Letter from Rabindranath Tagore to C.F. Andrews, in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997), pp. 54-62 (p. 61).

greed of the modern nation-state' and their impact on the subject races and universal humanity.<sup>142</sup>

Uma Das Gupta observes that Tagore's was a 'world-embracing and inclusive nationalism', which was valued and adopted by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in the building of India's future.<sup>143</sup> She further observes: 'Tagore posited the idea that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationships'.<sup>144</sup> He was of the view that to gain political freedom from colonialism the primary requirement was to reorganise social unity by acknowledging differences between different races through adjustments, which is intrinsic to India's historical Truth. Was he defying the harsh binaries between the coloniser and the colonised in order to put forward his thoughts on freedom? The Poet-thinker answers the question: 'Our real problem in India is not political. It is social... We in India must realize that we cut a poor figure when we are trying to be [exclusively] political'.<sup>145</sup> He was also aware of India's weakness perpetuated through superstitious and blind reliance on tradition: 'that of the caste system, and the blind and lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions that are incongruous anachronisms in the present age'.<sup>146</sup> This is certainly not an overstatement by the Poet who intimately knew what was India's mission through the ages, and that was certainly not wanting in its basis for Truth. He saw the past and the future through the lens of the present.

Challenging the colonial state ideology and its impact on the emergent extremist nationalist ideology in India, he stated:

[Unlike the people of England who] are not burdened with communal duties, since such cares rest with the State... the people of India never depended on the King for their communal welfare [and social wellbeing] ...and the social duties were specifically assigned to the members of the society [*samaj*]... Consequently, *dharma* permeated the whole social fabric... [Moreover, he said] The vital strength in different civilisations is

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<sup>142</sup> Stephen N. Hay, 'Rabindranath Tagore in America', *American Quarterly*, 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 1962): pp. 439-463 (p. 446).

<sup>143</sup> Uma Das Gupta, 'A Self-Respecting Nationalism as Our Salvation', in *The Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2015 [2009]), pp. 337-408 (p. 339).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 76.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

variously embodied. The heart of a country lies wherever the people's welfare is centred. A blow aimed at that point is fatal for the whole country.<sup>147</sup>

Tagore's focus was on the 'fast disintegrating social system'.<sup>148</sup> He said: 'We [the English-educated] have set up an impregnable barrier [of the language of communication] between the masses and ourselves'.<sup>149</sup> The life force, the 'social liberty', within the limits of *samaj* was on the verge of getting 'crippled'. For the sake of national interest, therefore, the city dwellers (mostly the landlords) and the villagers have to be brought together. The Poet-thinker insisted: 'The great masses of our people live in villages. When the village wants to feel the throb of the greater life of the outside world, the fair (*mela*) is the best way'.<sup>150</sup> His emphasis on the fair as a way to bring back the unity of life suggests that the educated class without resorting to 'empty politics' must remind themselves of the need to surpass the imposed 'rigidity' of the colonial law; it also suggests the need to acknowledge 'human bond' as a central component of social responsibility which could be maintained by revisiting the folk cultural tradition and the spiritual tradition of unconditional hospitality which are innate to *samaj*.<sup>151</sup> He said, fairs 'will be occasions for the [highborn and the humble alike], to give and receive', opening up spaces for exchange. It is only then India's freedom in unity amidst diversity would be achieved: for, 'our people have immemorially enjoyed literature and absorbed religion [dharma] through the medium of festivities'.<sup>152</sup>

His essay 'State and Society' demonstrates the difficulties and viabilities of state-centric rule in India. In British-ruled India the Nation-State, he said, has rapidly 'taken possession of everything, from our schools to our daily markets, and has made their undivided rule conspicuous in both concrete and abstract forms'.<sup>153</sup> It is only natural that Tagore strongly disapproved of narrow power politics, and his condemnation anticipates what the postcolonial theorist and cosmopolitan thinker Homi K. Bhabha calls 'sly civility', a sense of civility imposed from above: 'living feeling power' which spreads from the words spoken to the things signified and forces the mind to take them in and make them conform to the formula'.<sup>154</sup> Imposing the abstract notion of civility, according to Tagore, was analogous

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<sup>147</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Society and State', ed. by Humayun Kabir (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 49 - 66 (p. 51).

<sup>148</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, 'Spiritual Civilisation' [1911], in *The English Writings of Tagore*, Volume 3, p. 735.

<sup>149</sup> Tagore, 'Society and State', p. 54.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>154</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *Locations of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 102.

to hypnotism, a mystical formula that not only reduced a large portion of village society to destitution but also made rural people into ‘brutes’ in a subject nation. At the same time, it was also viciously destroying the natural flow of the social process: the continuity of spiritual life, the civilisational strength of the unity of life qua hospitality that embodied the diverse indigenous configuration of the society (*samaj*).<sup>155</sup>

He puts forward his social thinking in a slightly different vein in the essay ‘Choto O Boro’.

Whatever may be the form of the present...I am hopeful...But we have some obligations here. If we *fear* our inferior position, then the British will also stoop low and prove mean to frighten us. The entire might of the lesser English is on the inferior strength of ours. The world has reached that future age where the unarmed will have to confront the weapons...The onus of proving this greatness is on us. It will be... accomplished on a great ideal – not based on sheer mercy. It will also not be achieved with guns, cannons and warships...The participation with one-sided supremacy is no union at all...Let that be our *unbounded* strength to endure pain for the sake of *truth* and *justice*.<sup>156</sup>

It is pertinent to mention here that in the struggle for Indian independence to which Tagore remained firmly rooted, although he remained outside the mainstream politics, he found in the Mahatma that unbounded strength. He said: At the juncture of tremendous political unrest ‘Mahatma Gandhi came and stood at the cottage door of the destitute millions.’<sup>157</sup>

### **From Dejection to Hope**

Tagore saw in Gandhi, and in the latter’s capacity to subvert the violence unleashed by the authorities through non-violent resistance. Even though they debated the issues of non-cooperation, burning of foreign cloth and spinning, as right and wrong methods in the struggle for freedom, Tagore wrote

[...] our authorities have shown their claws... In this crisis you [...] have stood among

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<sup>155</sup> Tagore, ‘Society and State’, p. 49.

<sup>156</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Choto o Boro’ [1917] (‘The Small and the Great’), in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Volume 13, pp. 249-264 (pp. 263 - 264).

<sup>157</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Call of Truth’, in *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 76; Uma Das Gupta. ‘In Pursuit of a Different Freedom: Tagore’s World University at Santiniketan’ *India International Centre Quarterly*, 29. 3/4 (2002-2003): pp. 25-38 (p. 30).

us [like Lord Buddha] to proclaim your faith in the ideal which you know to be that of India, the ideal which is both against the cowardliness of hidden revenge and the cowed submissiveness of the terror-stricken.<sup>158</sup>

As the above extract shows, Tagore was hopeful of India's political freedom under Gandhi's leadership, and he cautioned Gandhi in the same letter that India will win freedom 'when she can prove that she is morally superior to the people who rule her by right of conquest. He insisted '[India] must willingly accept her penance of suffering'.<sup>159</sup> It may be mentioned here that the letter stated above was written by Tagore in reply to Gandhi's request for a message on the 'national struggle' since he felt the need 'to gather round this mighty struggle the ennobling influence of those who approve of it'.<sup>160</sup> It is in reply to the letter Tagore addressed Gandhi as the 'Mahatma' and as a 'great leader of men'.<sup>161</sup> However, it is well known that when it came to the Indian nationalist discourse, the two illuminating figures of modern India, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, differed in addressing issues of the non-cooperation movement and modern education. But both the Poet and the Mahatma stood for the unity in diversity in the *samaj* and the 'freedom of the people to rule themselves'.<sup>162</sup> Tagore did acknowledge Gandhi's contribution to the idea of freedom sans non-violence in India and abroad: 'At Gandhi's call India blossomed forth to new greatness, just as once before in earlier times when Buddha proclaimed the truth of fellow-feeling and compassion among all living creatures'.<sup>163</sup> In Serbia, when he was asked, 'What is India teaching us today?' Rabindranath said

Nowadays, India is sending a new light to humanity, and it is Gandhi [the Mahatma]...He teaches us that...the vastness and beauty of a man are in his freedom, i.e., his spiritual depth, and there should be no violence as a response to the evil because it will not be eradicated in that way.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Letter from Tagore to Gandhi, dated April 12, 1919, in Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 49.

<sup>159</sup> Letter from Tagore to Gandhi, dated April 12, 1919, in *ibid*, p. 50.

<sup>160</sup> Letter from Gandhi to Tagore, dated April 5, 1919, in *ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>161</sup> Letter from Tagore to Gandhi, dated April 12, 1919, in *ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>162</sup> See more on this attribute to freedom, Bashabi Fraser, 'From Despondency to Magnanimity: The Centrality of *Ahimsa* in Rabindranath Tagore's Idea of *Samaj*', in *Ahimsa: Tagore and Gandhi*, ed. by Dipannita Datta and Aleksandra Maksić (Serbia: Gradska narodna biblioteka "Žarko Zrenjanin", 2021), pp. 119-140.

<sup>163</sup> Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion* (London: Hust & Company, 2002), p. 224.

<sup>164</sup> See for further discussion, Dipannita Datta, 'Introduction' and 'Ahimsa in an Era of Violence', in *Ahimsa: Tagore and Gandhi*, ed. by Dipannita Datta and Aleksandra Maksić (Serbia: Gradska narodna biblioteka "Žarko Zrenjanin", 2021), pp. 25-38 and pp. 58-81.

Tagore also saw the uprightness/righteousness in Gandhi to hold to the spirit of *ahimsa* beyond the caste lines and religious prejudices: ‘So the name Mahatma’ (the Great Soul). He insisted: ‘Who else has unreservedly [felt and] accepted the vast masses of the Indian people as his own flesh and blood?’<sup>165</sup> It may also be noted here that Tagore acknowledged ‘the freedom that the great European noble minds stood up for’: ‘the rights of man irrespective of colour and creed’, ‘their disinterested love of freedom that owned no geographical boundaries or national self-seeking’.<sup>166</sup> And in equal disdain, he said, modern Europe was ‘tempted out of her path [of greatness] by her pride of power and greed of possession... holding the banner of civilization of future’. Therefore, he painfully stated, the great western stream of civilisation ‘live under the delusion that they are free [but] are every day sacrificing... freedom and humanity to the fetish of nationalism’.<sup>167</sup> Tagore’s creative self ‘was a magisterial protest against the dominant theories of violence and counter-violence’, which also established an alternative discourse on freedom that the *samaj* provides and effectively rejuvenates the life of the nation under harness with all its inclusive social-cultural features (as discussed above).

Tagore’s understanding of freedom as this study shows is an engagement with the search for the ‘truth of oneness’ (unity in diversity) as inscribed in messages of Upanishads. Furthermore, as we have seen in the discussion can translate into the ‘harmony in feeling and action’<sup>168</sup> that engender possibilities of self-empowerment – of *atmashakti* (an apparatus of social justice). His pronouncement may sound too idealistic and also may not be the whole truth; nonetheless, Tagore’s conception and words of freedom is part of the contingent and historical development of ideas of truth and justice within the complex interweaving of the ‘superimposed’ modern nationhood and his quiet wisdom and practical action that assures the wellbeing of forthcoming generations.

Indeed, Tagore was a believer of freedom in its most robust sense: freedom from the slavery of taste and freedom from pride and prejudices. Most importantly, he stood for the cultures that respect the freedom of the so-called ‘other’. His was a call for creative freedom for a harmonious society where every individual would participate conscientiously in the collective knowledge and co-operate willingly to maintain an inner strength of the society.

<sup>165</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Call for Truth’ [1921], in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 3, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), pp. 412- 425 (p. 418).

<sup>166</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 13.

<sup>167</sup> The excerpts are from Hay, ‘Rabindranath Tagore in America’ p. 446. For further study, readers may see, Tagore, ‘Nationalism in the West’, in *Nationalism*, especially p. 49.

<sup>168</sup> Tagore, *Sadhana*, pp. 100-159.

His non-dogmatic defence of Oneness that underscores his vision of freedom in human relationships across borders matches with Gandhi's. Four years after Tagore's death Gandhi revisited Santiniketan and said, "I started with a disposition to detect a conflict between Gurudev and myself but ended with the glorious discovery that there was none."<sup>169</sup> Both, the Poet and the Mahatma believed in freedom, which was based on the warmth of fellowship, which was liberated from prejudices and narrowness. Their deep understanding of the links between the diversity of centre and periphery, between multiple truths of tradition and modernity, the past and the present, the East and West, which underlines plural perspectives of freedom are Indian in character and are also suited to our contemporary dehumanising conditions. However, a question comes to mind. Tagore did not live to see that. Perhaps we will need to revisit them over and over again for Tagore's and Gandhi's ideals of freedoms are powerful and acceptable for our contemporary understanding of civil society and 'to make sense of the trauma of the present' in the larger global context today.<sup>170</sup> As this essay has attempted to present, Tagore's poetic principle of oneness not only underpins the basis of the expansive meanings of creative freedom(s) as perceived by the Poet through his intuition, experience, and knowledge. It also informs his practical works, such as the eradication of social exclusion through diverse educational models, which have contributed to the life of the nation and can continue to do so.

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<sup>169</sup> Bhattacharya, *Mahatma and Poet*, p. 35; Kripalani, *Rabindranath*, p. 339; Datta *Ahimsa*, p. 73.

<sup>170</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 63.

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## **Section II: Creative**

# Prose

## **My grandfather, Atul Chandra Sen: Rabindranath Tagore's 'birputra' (Braveheart)**

*Reba Som*

If Atul Chandra Sen had not been arrested by the police in British India in 1917 and deported as a political detenu without trial, to the remote island of Kutubdia in the Bay of Bengal for three years, would the direction in Rabindranath Tagore's life have changed? This is indeed an impertinent and presumptuous suggestion about the life trajectory of Tagore, a literary colossus of the world. No person is indispensable in the wider scheme of things and Atul Chandra Sen was just a manager for two years in Rabindranath Tagore's zamindari estate of Patisar in east Bengal. Nowhere is there mention of Atul Chandra Sen by Tagore in his voluminous writings. And yet, the chance discovery of several letters written by Tagore to Atul suggests a different story.

I remember Atul Chandra Sen, my maternal grandfather, ensconced in his little unit on the third floor of a sprawling house on Madan Mitra Lane in north Calcutta, which we would visit often during my childhood. I was always in awe of this tall man with fine aquiline features, smoking a cigar, sitting hunched on a bed surrounded by books and notes. He would greet us with a warm embrace and engage us in strange word games. He would scribble the letters of our names on his note pad and then draw around them charts with astrological projections. None of it made sense to me and I would be restless waiting to hear a call from my grandmother downstairs to say that lunch was ready. Grandfather never joined us below. He was served upstairs in his unit. We were told that grandfather now enjoyed the solitude which years of imprisonment had thrust on him. Occasionally my uncles would narrate strange stories that my grandfather had recounted to them – of how he had learnt from the islanders during his internment, to catch large poisonous snakes by grabbing them by the tail, spinning them vigorously in the air before dashing their heads hard knocking them senseless. We listened with rapt attention of how grandfather with his band of young men had undertaken to look after victims of cholera in Tagore's estate, of how he had once carried a dead body for cremation in blinding rain and had been jolted out of his senses when the corpse, revived by the rain had come alive! My youngest uncle would tell us how grandfather had not only been a formidable orator but had also wielded a powerful pen. The rhyming names he gave his four daughters – Atoshi Kaya/Manashi Maya/Kamala Laya/BitopiChhaya - remained in public memory for many years! We were told about the lively exchange of letters he had with famous novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay when he dared critique his

novel 'Datta' or the letters he received from C. F. Andrews, Tagore's close friend and associate. These letters, along with a priceless bundle of eleven letters from Tagore written to my grandfather and one to my grandmother, were in the sole possession of this uncle. We were too young to show much interest in these letters. Even later, when I studied history at Presidency College and visited my grandfather who was then ailing, I regret that it never occurred to me to engage him in conversation about all these luminaries he had known.

I was able to persuade my uncle to part with one letter – the best one he assured me – after I had topped the university and felt I could claim it as a prize! However, I treated it more like a trophy to be proud of, had it laminated in the National Archives and hung on the wall for others to admire under a spotlight from which it faded sadly. Since I had not read the other letters I missed the context of this one and soon with my uncle's death the letters disappeared, much to my regret.

From my mother I would hear sometimes other aspects about my grandfather - of how in his younger years he had joined the famous actor Sisir Kumar Bhaduri in some of his stage performances, of how he was well known as an outstanding mimic! Grandfather's involvement with the revolutionary politics of the day was often mentioned in passing by my mother, of his daredevilry as member of the Anushilan party, of how he had been closely associated with stalwart leaders like C. R. Das. There was more regret than admiration in my mother's recounting of memories of her father. Her sympathies lay with my grandmother as she had to cope with her husband's grand obsessions, with years of financial constraint bringing up her children in his absence, her desperate appeal to Tagore for help and the lukewarm response in his letter. When Atul Sen was released from imprisonment in 1920, he found a changed India, which slowly came to be galvanised into the non-cooperation movement under Mahatma Gandhi. Tagore had withdrawn from his ancestral estate devoting himself exclusively to his Visva Bharati university in Santiniketan.

Tagore did not mention much in his writings, except in passing, about the dream he had fondly cherished of initiating true swaraj in the villages of his ancestral estates. He had taken it as a challenge to prove to city-obsessed politicians that meaningful freedom could only come once the villages, where the major part of India lay, could provide basic literacy to villagers, release them from the vice-grip of moneylenders, encourage them to take agency for themselves by offering their labour to undertake the building of roads and digging of wells, ensure that the communal harmony existing in the Muslim majority villages was

nurtured, become receptive to scientific agricultural methods which would reap golden harvest, resolve their family and land disputes through discussion with a committee of elders instead of going into expensive and time consuming litigation and finally train in various handicrafts which would be potentially money earners.

None of these were utopian dreams arising from the pious platitudes of a romantic poet. These constituted a well-structured plan that Tagore had outlined for his zamindari estates. This aspect of Tagore, as a social theorist of a high order, has been overlooked because of his formidable literary persona and forgotten because of its limited success. However, these were not imagined claims because government records show that outstanding success had been obtained on each of these programmes in Tagore's Patisar estate. The report by O'Malley in 1916 in the Bengal District Gazetteer for Rajshahi declared "It must not be imagined that a powerful landlord is always oppressive and uncharitable. A striking instance to the contrary is given in the Settlement Officer's account of the estate of Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet whom fame is worldwide. It is clear that to poetical genius he adds practical and beneficial ideas of estate management, which should be an example to the local zamindars".<sup>1</sup> Indeed Tagore had sought to make his Patisar experiment an example, which could become a model for development elsewhere. For this work he relied principally on Atul Chandra Sen, who led a group of young inspired men with a revolutionary past, seeking a new mission in life by working for Tagore.

The extent of Tagore's success in his programmes of rural development in Patisar has not found mention in any of Tagore's major biographies and remains largely unknown. Years later while working on my book on Tagore's music.<sup>2</sup> I chanced upon a very flattering reference to the work of Atul Sen on Tagore's estate in a book by Khanolkar.<sup>3</sup> With my curiosity aroused I browsed in bookstores in Calcutta's College Street and made a phenomenal discovery. I found an edition of *Shonibarar Chithi*, (Saturday's Letters), a prestigious journal from Tagore's times edited by Sajani Kanta Das.<sup>4</sup> This special commemorative issue on Tagore was brought out in 1941 after the Poet's death and included unpublished letters by Tagore and little-known anecdotes of his life from contributions made by diverse people in response to the editor's request. In these there was an article by Atul

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<sup>1</sup> Sudhir Sen, *Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction* (Santiniketan, Visva Bharati 1943, rev. ed 1991) Appendix III, p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Reba Som, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and his Song*. Penguin Viking, Delhi, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> G. D. Khanolkar, *The Lute and the Plough: A Life of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1963, The Bombay Centre Private Ltd. Bombay.

<sup>4</sup> *Shonibarar Chithi*, ed. Sajani Kanta Das, 1941 reprinted 1998; pp. 903-925.

Chandra Sen with amusing anecdotes of his association with Tagore and an exclusive section containing eleven letters to him and one to his wife, Kiranbala Sen, which I had presumed lost! Copies of the 1941 edition had been sold off soon after it was published and what I chanced upon now was a reprint made in 1998, after almost sixty years!

In a comprehensive introduction,<sup>5</sup>the editor SajaniKanta Das mentioned clearly that these letters held the key to unlocking an important but forgotten chapter in Tagore’s life, of a cherished dream far in advance of his times but which had to be abandoned after its short-lived success. Das wrote that in the great celebration of work that Tagore initiated as his “*karma yagna*”, in the villages at Patisar, Atul Chandra Sen was his “*hota*”, his high priest. Atul’s unflagging enthusiasm for work was best described in his own words, quoted by Das from an article of his which had appeared the previous year (1347; 1940)<sup>6</sup>in the Baisakh edition of *Shonibarar Chithi*.

*Whatever thoughts about my country I had, and concerns since childhood, which kept my mind perpetually engaged, I could never find expression for these in a structured manner. I had always sought ways to give expression to these thoughts in my work. For this I pledged my all. Not that I had much to pledge but whatever I had I exhausted totally in the experiments I undertook. Nor were sympathy and help from like-minded people lacking. Begging bowl in hand I went on barefoot like a mad man from place to place. Hoping to stir the hearts of my countrymen day after day I have delivered speeches in nameless unknown places. Not a moment did I have to breathe. What was our work? What wasn’t there, I wonder? We had our attention on every aspect of national life. From national universities to national cooperative societies we helped in establishing all. Promotion of craft and literature was there of course, and welfare of villagers, strengthening of villages, scientific education, cottage industry and creation of daily necessities in our carpenter’s shop – what didn’t we do?*

SajaniKanta Das added “this statement would have remained just a claim unless we had proof to authenticate it...Those who believe that Rabindranath was primarily a Poet of words and essentially a Lotus eater, like the world’s poet fraternity, they can be reassured that he did not rest merely writing ‘*Swadeshi Samaj*’. He also attempted to put his thoughts to practice. In this work the person who was his principal associate has supplied documents from which one

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<sup>5</sup> All quoted extracts from Sajani Kanta Das’s essay, Atul Sen’s writings and Tagore’s letters are translated by me

<sup>6</sup> Translation mine, *Shonibarar Chithi*, op cit, p. 904.

can realise the extent and depth of the work undertaken. From his notes and the letters written to him by Rabindranath we are trying to piece together a picture of the mammoth task that had been attempted.” With the arrival of Atul Sen “the worlds of ideas and practice had met...The Poet had met his Worker...Srijukta Atul Sen was the leader of a group of ‘bravehearts’... In his group were Upen Bhadra, BisweswarBasu and others. Along with them was Atul Babu’s band of workers - Karmi Sangha.”

The Tagore zamindari estates acquired by Rabindranath’s grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore, were spread over a triangular expanse in riverine east Bengal covering Birahimpur and Shelidah in Kushtia subdivision; Sajadpur in Pabna and Kaligram, which included Patisar in Rajshahi. Eventually a division of the properties in 1921 among family members left only Patisar with Rabindranath. Unlike Shelidah, where the restored Tagore family property is on the tourist map in Bangladesh, the Patisar property is in ruins with its once imposing gate, crowned by lion and unicorn statues, which tells the tale of better days.

Travel to these estates was quite arduous necessitating first train travel from Sealdah station in Calcutta to the nearest railway stations from where Tagore would embark on his boats to reach his destination by a riverine route. For going to Patisar he alighted at Atrai station where his boat would be anchored and sailed along the meandering Atrai and Nagar rivers, a journey covered in a couple of days. Sometimes he went by palanquin or relied on the estate elephants to transport him. Shelidah and Sajadpur were on the river Padma where the iconic houseboat bearing the same name, commissioned by his grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, was kept in readiness for his travel. He often sailed directly from Shelidah to Patisar by negotiating a veritable maze of interconnecting waterways.

Rabindranath’s days of riverine retreat began in 1890 when he would spend unhurried hours of repose with no structured routine to chase him, on his jolly boat in Shelidah or his Nagar boat in Patisar. The overpowering beauty of rural Bengal inspired his literary creativity and found expression in the many songs that he composed, the plays, and poems that he wrote and the articles he had to contribute to his magazine *Sadhana*. The letters that he wrote to his favourite niece Indira Devi,<sup>7</sup> are replete with languid descriptions of rural Bengal and his observations of village life. Rabindranath poured out his heart to Bob, as he called Indira

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<sup>7</sup> Indira devi was the daughter of his elder brother Satyendranath Tagore. The letters written from 1891 to 1894 are in a collection called *Chhinna Patrabali*, Rabindra Rachanabali, Volume 11, pp. 1-322, Government of West Bengal Tagore centenary edition, 1961,

Devi, and admitted to her that the collection of his letters was a testimony of emotions strongly felt but never expressed before.

The different persona of the rivers in his estates captivated Tagore. The Padma passing by his Kushtia estate was mighty and when his boat laid anchor midstream he sensed a vast emptiness stretching beyond the waters and the sandbanks to the horizon. The homely Atrai and Nagar rivers leading to Patisar instead delighted him as they zigzagged their way past one village, disappearing around the bend to another village, thoughts immortalised in his popular poem for children in his Bengali primer *Sahaj Path*.<sup>8</sup> From the boat's deck Tagore saw village life at close quarters, clusters of thatched huts, stacks of hay, bamboo groves, goats grazing, naked little boys and girls dipping into the water gleefully as women sat on the river bank washing clothes and utensils, often joining them for a dip. He delighted at the sight of green water hyacinth circling the boat while from a distance came the strains of shehnai from some festive celebration afar. Often at night when sleep eluded him, he would lie under the stars washed by the ethereal cascade of full moon light. His thoughts would go out to similar moonlit evenings on the third-floor terrace of his Jorasanko home which he had shared with a beloved presence, now lost forever. Rabindranath found the days alone on his boat healing and wrote to Indira that he would be quite happy to live the rest of his life writing short stories. He admitted to Bob that the sheer beauty of rural scenery was intoxicating as it came with a new look each time he visited and was never repetitive. He sang out aloud<sup>9</sup>— *Come, enter my senses in fresh beauteous form/Come in fragrance and in song/Wherever I turn, you are there before my enchanted eyes!* Tagore's days on the river had a deep spiritual effect on him. They made him introspect, made him conscious of a presence within that he sought to understand and would later describe as his *jeevan devata*, the god within. In one of his letters, he confessed that a deep intuitive process of being and becoming was moulding and shaping him.

However, the real world also beckoned him when the simple villagers overawed by the presence of their zamindar babu would come to him in a stream presenting their woes. Thus began Tagore's dialogue with rural life. Rathindranath wrote how his father would make it a point to meet the tenants. "He talked with them freely... Thus was established a bond of love

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<sup>8</sup> *Amader chhoto nodi chaule aake baake*

<sup>9</sup> Song composed in Patisar 1894, *Tumi nabo nabo roope esho prane/esho gondho borono gaane/*

and respect between the landlord and the tenants, a tradition that lasted in our estates till the end.”<sup>10</sup>

Rabindranath was touched by the simplicity of the villagers, their utter innocence, abject poverty and was pained to see the total belief and reliance reposed on him, their raja babu, whose feet they kissed in respect. Their transparent beauty touched him and the endearing language they used to claim him as their own, lapsing often into the colloquial *tui* from the more formal *tumi* sounded sweet to his ears! He felt ashamed to take their revenue and did not feel equal to the praise they showered on him. They seemed like little children who had to be fed for they knew no better. With considerable humour he narrated to Indira his meetings with some of the village folk who would come with a two-minute request and spend two hours over it, or the school boys who laboured over a simple request for more school benches with a long-winded petition in chaste Bengali learnt by heart, which they would forget and then commence again, much to Tagore’s amusement. The postman at Shelidah who frequently came visiting bringing new tales, was a favourite of the Poet who found in his meetings considerable material for his short stories.<sup>11</sup> Domestic disputes played out in loud voices did not escape the poet who often felt sorry for the look of despair on young women when forced to leave their homes after marriage to an unknown fate. In one of his letters to Indira he pronounced solemnly - *I have a thousand-fold contempt for the male species, it’s hard to find in the world, garbage such as them!*<sup>12</sup> Ironically a few years later, in 1901, he was prevailed upon by his father to marry off two of his daughters at tender ages.

The 19th century had dawned over Bengal as a new age, *nabayuga*, as western education opened up job opportunities and better livelihood. Yet frustration soon crept in when it was realised that imperialist designs were meant to keep Indian aspirations in suppression. Lord Curzon’s move to partition Bengal in 1905, designed principally to break the backbone of a rising national consciousness by separating the agrarian east with a Muslim majority from the bhadralok dominated west, brought about widespread unrest. Rabindranath became actively engaged in the anti-partition movement, joining protest marches, electrifying the atmosphere singing the many songs he composed on the occasion, including the now famous *ekla cholo re*, tying rakhis or strings of friendship with Muslims, generating communal harmony. This signalled the beginning of a self-strengthening swadeshi

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<sup>10</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *On the Edges of Time*, Santiniketan, Visva Bharati, 1943, rev. ed. 1991, p. 73

<sup>11</sup> The Postmaster is one of Tagore’s famous short stories

<sup>12</sup> Shelidah 12 June, 1892 *Purush jaat take aami shauto shahosro dhikkar diyi, prithibite emon jonjaal aar neyi, Chhinna Patrabali, Rabindra Rachanabali*, volume 11, op cit, p. 63.

movement when nationalist ardour sought to set up indigenous industries, entrepreneurial business ventures, national schools and village improvement programmes. Rabindranath too entered into a partnership in 1895 with his nephews Surendranath and Balendranth, registered as Tagore and Co, which set up a store of indigenous or swadeshi goods in Calcutta apart from a jute baling and sugar pressing factory and a few subsidiary concerns at Shelidah. However, he was unable to sustain this initiative because he could not find trusted workers and suffered huge financial losses.

The swadeshi period also saw the growth of a chain of youth organisations in many parts of the country focusing on physical training to create potential soldiers for the impending struggle for the motherland. The Anushilan Samiti was set up originally as a physical culture club in north Calcutta but slowly developed anti-state revolutionary programmes promoting the cult of the bomb when it was joined by many revolutionaries like Aurobindo Ghosh, his brother Barindra, Bhupendranath Dutta, Vivekananda's younger brother and was supported by politicians like C. R. Das. Atul Chandra Sen and members of his group were committed members of the Anushilan Samiti.

By 1907 Tagore began feeling disillusioned by the sporadic acts of terrorism, along with Hindu-Muslim alienation that had set in, as he felt the youth was being misguided. Tagore was convinced that boycott of educational institutions was leading the youth to futile acts of terrorism. Tagore's disillusionment led to his withdrawal from active politics and in his essay *Byadhi O Pratikar*<sup>13</sup> he advocated a change of heart and the acceptance of a radical social programme. Tagore's decision to stay aloof from the burgeoning swadeshi movement was misunderstood by many Congress politicians since it was a marked contrast to his earlier active involvement in the anti-partition movement. Tagore found Congress politics disheartening. Presiding over the Pabna District Congress Committee meeting in 1908, where he spoke in Bengali, departing for the first time from the practice of speaking in English, he called upon young men to dedicate themselves to village work and strive for Hindu-Muslim unity. Tagore was convinced that before self- rule could come, the villages, constituting the majority of India, had to be educated and empowered and made ready for *swaraj*. As Andrews put it, "Rabindranath's soul caught the flame of patriotism, not in Calcutta but among the villagers."<sup>14</sup> Tagore realised soon enough that the response of zamindars, to whom

<sup>13</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Essay *Byadhi O Pratikar*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 13, op cit, p.131 et seq.

<sup>14</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Letters to a Friend, in *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, EWRT (ed) S. K. Das, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, vol. 3, p. 228

he had forcefully pleaded in his essay *Swadeshi Samaj* in 1904, was not forthcoming since landlords were now increasingly city-bound. Villagers had to be trained to take the lead in bringing about change for themselves. These ideas were startlingly novel at that time predating Gandhi's programmes of rural reconstruction initiated in the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> In his novel *Gora*, which Tagore began to serialise at this time for a magazine, many of these ideas found expression.

In 1906 Tagore sent his son Rathindranath Tagore, to study agriculture at the university of Urbana, Illinois in USA, with plans to engage him on his return, in the village development work. After his return Rathindranath, recalled<sup>16</sup> how Tagore had come to focus his rural development work exclusively in his villages in Kaligram, where communal harmony still existed and villagers retained an innocence uncorrupted by city influences. He was<sup>17</sup> struck by the elaborate and practical plans for village work which his father had begun with a representative tiered structure for village work, dividing the Kaligram pargana into three subdivisions. The elected *pradhans* or heads of each subdivision jointly elected a five-member welfare committee for the pargana which also included a representative of the zamindar. Annual meetings of the *Kaligram Hitayishi Sabha* (Kaligram Welfare Committee) discussed details of the work undertaken and proposals were drawn up for the next year. A general fund was created by setting aside three paise over and above each rupee collected as revenue, which yielded six thousand rupees annually. To this Tagore added another two thousand rupees to create a sufficient corpus to undertake important measures such as setting up schools for the very first time and opening dispensaries with qualified doctors. The fund was also used to undertake road construction, reclaim ponds, clear forests and dig wells for drinking water.

Rathindranath<sup>18</sup> sought to make a valuable addition to the work in the villages by introducing scientific methods of agriculture, introduce rotational money crops such as corn, from seeds that he brought back with him from America. Additionally, farmers were taught to cultivate potatoes and tomatoes for the first time. A small organic laboratory was set up to test various plants and explore ways of enriching the soil. Rathindranath mentions how he put to good use the excess catch of fish, normally thrown away, by developing a rich manure out

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<sup>15</sup> In recent years Tagore's ideas have inspired the initiative of Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus in his programmes with the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh.

<sup>16</sup> Rathindranath Tagore, *Pitri Smriti*, Jigyasa publications, Kolkata 1966, p. 211.

<sup>17</sup> Rathindranath Tagore, *Pitri Smriti*, op cit, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> Rathindranath Tagore, *Pitri Smriti*, op cit, chapter Pallir Unnati, pp. 207-220.

of them. The soil in Patisar proved to be hard and difficult to plough. Rabindranath had tried innovative ways to cultivate it and, in a letter, written in 1908 to an estate employee<sup>19</sup> had suggested cultivation of pineapple, bananas and dates while also pointing out how the fibre from the leaves of the pineapple plant could be used to make thread. Rathindranath realised that the answer to ploughing the tough soil efficiently would be to acquire a tractor, which he was able to do with some effort. With no one competent to drive it he took to the wheel himself creating quite a spectacle as thousands of villagers assembled to witness this monster machine. Realising that the farmers sat idle for months in between sowing and harvest Rabindranath had encouraged cottage industry. Since the handloom centre in Kaligram produced only rough cloth towels he sent a weaver to Santiniketan to learn weaving of fine fabric. When he returned having learnt to weave intricate designs on a variety of textiles, Tagore opened a weaving school from the general fund, installing him as a teacher. He also explored silk weaving techniques for which Rajshahi silk was renowned. Rabindranath in a letter to Rathindranath<sup>20</sup> asked how a rice winnowing machine, which was used in Bolpur, could be procured for Patisar, principally a rice growing area. He also explored possibilities of popularising pottery- making as a cottage industry, offering to bring a small furnace which could be set up with the help of villagers. Another suggestion he made was the manufacture of umbrellas provided he found someone to take it on. The one problem that was difficult to resolve, wrote Rathindranath, was rural debt, a scourge of village life, which constantly troubled Rabindranath. The villagers who took loans from moneylenders were hard put to pay off the exorbitant interest and despaired of ever being able to pay off the original loan amount.

Over the next couple of years Rathindranath made his base in Shelidah while overseeing work on the entire Tagore estate and “led the life of a country gentleman.” He wrote “the highest compliment was given to me by Myron Phelps (a visiting lawyer from New York) when he told me that at Shelidah he had discovered a genuinely American farm”.<sup>21</sup> However this pleasant country life existence came to a sudden end when Rathindranath was called by his father to help him with the Ashrama school in Santiniketan opened in 1901, modelled on the concept of Kalidasa’s forest school. He was also asked to accompany Tagore on his impending visit to England which however got postponed due to Tagore’s ill health for which he repaired to Shelidah for recuperation. During convalescence

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Rathindranath Tagore *On the edges of time*, op cit, p. 74.

Tagore felt unequal to the task of serious writing and took up instead as a pastime, the translation into English of a selection of his poems and songs. Seated on the deck of his Padma boat he spent hours in this “juvenile exercise”<sup>22</sup> aware that English was not the language of his preference. Little did he know that these translations, which he continued on the ship in which he sailed with his son to England in May 1912, would cause much excitement among the poet fraternity of England. Eventually a collection of over a hundred of these song-poems was published by Macmillan in a slim volume *Gitanjali* winning him, as the first Asian, the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. When Tagore returned to India, the accolades that he received from erstwhile detractors left him very uncomfortable. He recalled how his attempts at introducing Bengali as a language of deliberation in provincial conferences had been taunted by sections saying that Tagore was perhaps unsure of speaking in English.<sup>23</sup> At the same time despite his efforts to promote Bengali, Calcutta University in its 1913 Literature examination paper set passages from Tagore’s writings, asking to be rewritten in correct Bengali!<sup>24</sup>

A sense of grim foreboding suddenly gripped the sensitive mind of Rabindranath long before news reached India about the imminent World War. He expressed his mental pain and suffering which seemed like “death-pang” in a series of letters<sup>25</sup> to C. F. Andrews from Ramgarh, near Naini Tal where he had gone in May 1914. He wrote to Andrews “I feel that I am on the brink of a breakdown. Therefore, I must take flight to the solitude of the Padma. I need rest and the nursing of Nature.”<sup>26</sup> After wrestling with his phantoms of despair Rabindranath wrote reassuringly to Andrews a month later from Shelidah “I am sane and sound again, and willing to live another hundred years, if critics would spare me.”<sup>27</sup>

Tagore now decided to give fresh attention to the rural development programmes he had initiated in the villages of his estate. He put the major part of his sizeable Nobel prize money into the Agricultural Cooperative Bank he had opened in Patisar in 1905 in the hope that bank loans would release villagers from the clutches of extortionist moneylenders.<sup>28</sup> He realised however that his literary commitments would make it increasingly difficult for him

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<sup>22</sup> Tagore to E. J. Thompson quoted in Reba Som, *Rabindranath Tagore, The Singer and his Song*, op cit, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> quoted in *Patisare Rabindranath* by Dr Saifuddin Chowdhury, op cit, p. xv.

<sup>24</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore: The myriad minded man*, Robinson and Datta, Rupa & Co, Delhi, 1995 p. 183.

<sup>25</sup> Tagore to Andrews Ramgarh, May 21, 1914 in *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, op cit, vol 3, p. 234.

<sup>26</sup> Tagore to Andrews, Calcutta January 29, 1915, Ibid, p. 241.

<sup>27</sup> Tagore to Andrews, February 1, 1915, Ibid, p. 241.

<sup>28</sup> The Bank was in operation until 1925 when it failed after the Government’s Rural Indebtedness Act wrote off all rural debt making it impossible for the bank to recover the loans it had advanced. Tagore suffered huge financial losses.

to visit the villages regularly. Rathindranath too could not be spared since he was needed at Santiniketan and required to accompany him on his visits abroad. He had pinned his hopes on his son-in-law Nagendranath whom he had left in charge of his estate prior to leaving for England. Sadly, Nagendranath displayed serious shortcomings in his character which eventually led the poet to initiate a divorce from his daughter.

Tagore's whole approach to rural reconstruction work in Kaligram rested on two main pillars. One of course was the practical aspect of detailed planning, budgeting and creating the right infrastructure. The other was psychological, trying to understand the mind of the villagers, breaking stereotypes, creating an awareness that they should help themselves and own the agency for change. This was a bold departure from the current system where tenants took for granted whatever the zamindar did for them with no sense of gratitude but rather the feeling that the zamindar was earning merit by helping them. Tagore wanted to break this mindset and earn the trust of villagers so that they could perceive the zamindar as only the facilitator of welfare schemes which they themselves had to run and make successful. An aesthete above all, Tagore sought to introduce a sense of beauty in village life despite its poverty by encouraging villagers to grow fragrant flowers and decorate their courtyards with the traditional alpona design. At a time when ideas of Visva Bharati had not yet absorbed him Tagore wrote,<sup>29</sup> "For long have I struggled to teach the children of bhadrak (bhadrashantan). Now is the time to serve the farmers (*chashas*). Perhaps this will yield more success and with greater ease! For at least ten years I have to silently focus on this work".

Tagore required a team of workers on whom he could fully rely to continue the programmes he had initiated and sustain the work that had started in Kaligram. The need of the hour was to enthuse the youth, left rudderless after the petering out of the Swarajist agitation to join him in his mission. The opportunity arrived when Tagore was invited by *Bangiyo Hitasadhan Mandali* (Bengal Social Service League) to give a series of lectures in Calcutta in early 1915.

In impassioned lectures delivered in 1915 in Calcutta,<sup>30</sup> many disillusioned young men of the Anushilan and Jugantar parties seeking new direction formed the audience. Tagore

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<sup>29</sup> Rabindranath to Santosh Chandra, 1915 quoted in *Rabindra Bhubane Patisar* by Ahmed Rafiq, Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 1998, p 88-89, paraphrase from Bengali mine.

<sup>30</sup> Tagore was invited by the Bengal Social Service League to deliver the following lectures in Calcutta: *Karma Yagna* and *Pallirunnati*, in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Centenary edition, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 1961, volume 13, pp 495-505. Paraphrase from the speeches in Bengali mine.

spoke urgently about the deep despair and despondency prevailing over the countryside.<sup>31</sup> He stated bluntly that villagers had to realise that to rely on begging and pleading was surely a curse. The need of the hour was not to offer help but to engage in awareness. To do so the villagers had to be won over with respect and love. The condescension of the *bhadraloks* had to go. Tagore reminded his young audience that education was of two types – skywards, concerned only with book learning and the other at the grassroots. Today the country's strength lay in its youth, truly the *birputra*(bravehearts). Tagore reflected on his disillusionment with the indifference of society to the distress of others. Lack of social consciousness was leading to ignorance, poverty and death. The youth had to be engaged to save the nation. It seemed as if Mother Earth was imploring them to come to her help. Tagore recalled how he had called upon educated *bhadralok* to adopt a few villages, offering them all help so that villagers could take control of their education, health and finances. However, he had been unsuccessful. The reason was that educated people had contempt for the illiterate masses. Unable to treat the 'lowly' villagers with respect and compassion they harboured the belief that villagers should remain eternally grateful and subservient for what was done for them. But the reality was just the opposite. The villagers did not trust the *bhadralok*. They felt insecure in their presence and suspected their intentions.

Recalling his own early experience Tagore narrated how he had hoped to address the extreme drought in the villages by encouraging villagers to dig deep for water promising a permanent well. Surprisingly villagers flatly refused, preferring to live in distress, making their daughters walk miles daily to bring in fresh water. Tagore thought deeply about the villagers' suspicion that his offer was meant to earn merit (obtain *punya*) as the deliverer of life- giving water rather than help them. In their rustic idiom they explained that his offer was tantamount to frying fish in its own oil!<sup>32</sup>

The time had come to break this convoluted logic. Tagore admitted that he was unable to physically take on the effort since he was torn between commitments at home in Calcutta with writings, family compulsions as well as foreign travel. He realised that it would be difficult to find selfless workers who could work with a sense of sacrifice guiding villagers to self- governance remaining undaunted by their negative attitude. Yet he made a fervent plea for volunteers.

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<sup>31</sup> See Reba Som, 'Swaraj of the Chashas' in *Tagore: The World as His Nest* edited by Sangeeta Datta, Jadavpur University Press, Kolkata, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> *Machher tele machh bhaja.*

Tagore's appeal had its desired effect. A band of young dedicated workers offered their services to Tagore led by Atul Chandra Sen who resigned his job as Headmaster of Bagnan 'High English' School in Howrah in the suburbs of Calcutta to join Tagore. They were all fearless firebrands of the Anushilan Samiti who had already pledged their lives during the Swarajist movement in the service of their motherland.

Atul Sen and his team joined work in Patisar in October 1915 where Rabindranath joined them soon. In February of the following year Rabindranath returned to Patisar to fight the outbreak of cholera in his estate. In detailed briefings Tagore enumerated the five areas of work that had to be addressed— proper medical care; primary education; public works which involved digging of wells, repair and construction of roads, forest conservation etc; debt relief for poor peasants and adjudication of disputes.

Rabindranath was so obsessed with thoughts of village development in Patisar that he felt possessed by a ghost!<sup>33</sup> Most of the letters to Atul written in 1915-1916 conveyed copious instructions on how he should win over the hearts of the villagers, undertake his work with a spiritual resolve while being practical about keeping accounts for audit purposes. In a moving letter he wrote to Atul:<sup>34</sup> *“Devote your heart and mind completely and win over the people, only then will all obstacles begin to clear. Monetary worries will only preoccupy you when your mind is not at peace. Of course, when you embark on work you cannot please all and you cannot only focus on gaining people's approval. However, people over there have to understand clearly that you deserve unqualified respect and it is in their service that you are working with full energy and joy. Only then will small irritants fade away into the distance. Therefore, gird your loins for surely one day you will achieve the fulfilment that you deserve. Be clear about your responsibilities, curb your disappointments, remain as calm and discreet as possible – with humility exercise your strength in a restrained manner. Treating work as part of your spiritual realisation towards freedom, keep your resolve untainted and work towards surrendering to the infinite. Finding the strength to accept setbacks with joy and discovering each day fulfilment within, you will surely find yourself.”*

Conscious that he was unable to keep to his promises to visit more often, Tagore conveyed in his letters messages of encouragement, congratulations and deep satisfaction.

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<sup>33</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Pramatha Chowdhury, February 1916, in *Chithipatro* 5, Visva Bharati publications, 1945, p. 209.

<sup>34</sup> Letter of Tagore to Atul Chandra Sen, dated 21 Phalgun, 1322. Translation into English mine.

Tagore advised,<sup>35</sup> “*Along with work, a happy note should also be sounded. Life in our villages has become bereft of joy. We have to remove bleakness from hearts. Try to convert welfare programmes into festivals. Celebrate briksharopan (tree planting) as an annual festival. Towards the end of Baisakh give the schools a holiday and get the students together for a picnic and tree planting. Programmes of road building should be inaugurated on the first day with a little festival lending it religious gravity. There is another thing to be kept in mind. It would be useful if an interest in growing flowers could be awakened in farmers’ households. If the yard in front of each hut had a couple of mogra or rose bushes, the village would begin to look pretty. It will never do to forget that the country urgently needs to cultivate a sense of beauty.*” He realised well enough that the dream that he had nurtured of village development could be attained only with the help of this dedicated team, which was proving to be indispensable. He wrote to Atul, “*I am confident that ...the success from this will eventually be your triumph. I hope that the work in which you are about to be engaged leads to your self- realisation in which you find freedom and fulfilment of all your duties. Once the picture is complete you will find mirrored in it your life’s dedication. I have merely provided you with the opportunity – that is all - and if you ever need me as your partner, I am always there.*”

.....  
*Victory will be yours....*

*O brave-hearts, O dauntless*

*(Haube joy, haube joy, hobe joy/Ohe Bir, he nirbhoy).’’<sup>36</sup>*

A detailed report of the work that was achieved on each of the programmes outlined by Tagore has been given by SajaniKanta Das in *ShonibararChithi*:<sup>37</sup>

*The first of the tasks began in three centres Patisar, Kamta and Ratowal. Three hospitals and dispensaries with doctors were set up for the distribution of free medicines. A couple of beds were also provided for. Expenses incurred were shared by Rabindranath as zamindar with the tenants by setting up a fund in which Rabindranath contributed an anna per rupee from revenue collection while tenants deposited another anna. There was another method adopted to raise funds. It had been the practice among villagers, Hindu and Muslim alike, to make hefty monetary contribution if found*

<sup>35</sup> Letter no 8 undated

<sup>36</sup> Letter number 10, translation mine in Appendix; undated letter in *Shonibarar Chithi*, op cit, pp. 922-923.

<sup>37</sup> *Shonibarar Chithi*, op cit pp. 909-913; translation from Bengali mine.

*guilty of any social misdemeanour. With this amount a public feast was organised. In Rabindranath's new arrangement, the guilty were made to donate a token amount to the general fund which was used for public work and was thereby spared from incurring a huge expenditure.*

*After setting up more than two hundred free primary schools, the task of eradicating illiteracy began in earnest. Arrangements were made for day and night schools in which both children and adults found a place. The literacy programmes initiated included reading, writing and arithmetic. Once these were underway, lectures on history, geography etc were introduced. The primary focus was on teaching the basics of history and geography in India and partly of the world. Along with this there were discussions on disaster relief, first aid, good farming practices, firefighting, flood relief etc. In the spare time arrangements were made to share world news.*

*For task number three, public works, poor villagers were first made aware of the programmes and then were recruited for participation. These were programmes of high expenditure. Creation of ponds, digging of wells, road repair and construction, clearing forests – each of these required considerable funds which could not be raised from the peasants who were not affluent. Therefore, Atulbabu devised a well thought out scheme which found the Poet's encouraging approval. Subscriptions were raised from tenants in the form of physical labour. Those who were incapable of labour and yet had some resources, were made to pick up the labour costs of one worker each. In this way, within seven or eight months it was possible to carry out work in Kaligram which cost hundreds of rupees. Never in Bengal's history have tenants been engaged collectively in such a manner.*

*The fourth task involved saving tenants from rural indebtedness. This too was possible in Kaligram. This scheme was entirely Rabindranath's. And yet it is widely rumoured in Bengal that Rabindranath was a very exacting and terrorising zamindar who dragged indebted farmers to bring their produce over to his home. There could be no greater shameless calumny than this! There is reason why such a misconception arose. That needs to be explained. Tenants were always penniless. A year's harvest could hardly suffice till next year because the middleman Kabuliwala or money lender exacted the interest each time on loans given while the principal loan remained unpaid. As a result the tenant farmer faced starvation after a few months. In order to redeem*

*the situation Rabindranath devised a solution. He offered from his estate, need- based loans to tenants at 9% interest – need-based because tenants were often misled into taking large loans incurring unnecessary expenditure and landing themselves in huge debts. For instance, as mentioned earlier, peasants were often compelled to make huge contributions for public feasts lest essential services of barbers and laundrymen were withheld from them. Atul Sen and his team of Karmi Sangha were put on the job of calculating what the loan requirements of the tenants should be. They were able to save large amounts, which would have been spent on public feasts, after they had deposited a token amount into the general fund. If this responsibility of assessment was left to the salaried ‘nayeb’ or revenue official there would be every likelihood of harassment. Peasants turned to farming with the loan received. Once harvest was over, the produce was taken to the estate office to calculate the loan repayment that was due. In all cases a relief of 3% of the loan interest was announced which meant the tenant had to pay 6% as interest. This amount was calculated against the produce that was brought in and set aside. The rest of the produce was available to the peasant to take home. If he was particularly needy he would be exempted from all payment. Thereafter, the peasant, free from all debt, could be eligible to apply for fresh loan. In this way they found permanent relief from the dangerous trap of compound interest. This scheme received such success that in Kaligram pargana moneylenders, mahajans and kabuliwalas lost their business. The estate earned such a good name that if perchance any tenant approached a mahajan for loan their immediate response would be ‘goodness if he has not received loan from the estate how could he be trusted with any loan?’ In other words if the estate has refused him a loan he must have a serious problem. As a consequence of this arrangement tenants of Kaligram pargana eventually found relief from years of exorbitant debt burden. The malicious rumour that had been spread about Rabindranath arose because of the practice of depositing the produce first at the zamindar’s estate!*

*The fifth task involved settlement of disputes through arbitration. This had already been in place in the Tagore estate in a small way. Now Atulbabu took on this responsibility. Whenever disputes arose, tenants brought the matter to his attention. He used his judgment and discretion to bring a resolution to the dispute. So satisfied were tenants with his adjudication, which saved them from court expenses, that he was addressed by Hindu tenants as Atulbabumoshayi, representative of Rajababu (Rabindranath) while*

*Muslim tenants referred to him as Maulana Ratulbabu. While this scheme was in place, and even thereafter, for several years not a single case from this pargana was sent to the sadar court. Government reports from 1915-1916 carry evidence of this.*

After assigning work to Atul and his group Tagore spent several months on hectic travel in the United States from May 1916 to March 1917. It thrilled him to see that his ideas were bearing fruit. News of success filled him with joy and he encouraged Atul for his hard work. He wrote to Atul: “*Victory will be yours, O Brave, O Undaunted.... This is what I had wanted – in this way we make a beginning in one place and see how this spreads everywhere... the wind has caught your sail and you will surge forward – you will brook no obstacle...*”<sup>38</sup> Advising caution, he wrote “*It is important to be neither effusive nor diffident. Remember you are merely a witness to what is unfolding. One has to remain unperturbed even if what you created comes crashing down*”.<sup>39</sup> It was a supreme irony that with Atul’s sudden arrest in 1917, Tagore’s pathbreaking initiative for village upliftment, to which he had become so committed, came to a grinding halt! It is tempting to speculate that had it not happened, the whole trajectory of Tagore’s life and career might have taken a different turn. The news of the phenomenal success within such a short time, of Tagore’s cherished dream of village development in his estate, has remained unknown. Tagore had been completely unprepared for the sudden arrest of Atul Sen and his team in 1917. His disappointment was acute. He consoled Atul Sen’s wife Kiran bala Sen, saying that although he had written to the authorities, he did not harbour any hope as he was unaware of the reasons behind the arrests.

Atul Sen had earned the poet’s deep affection and, in his article, ‘Rabindra Prashango’<sup>40</sup> in the commemorative volume of *Shonibarar Chithi*, there are amusing anecdotes that speak of his informal and close interaction with Tagore. He writes that one day in the Kuthibari in Shelidah, Atul Sen and Upen Bhadra had engaged Rabindranath in a lively argument which continued until the early hour of one in the morning. While Atul and his friend were convinced that they had won the argument, Rabindranath probably thought he had clinched the issue since he repaired for the night in a pleasant mood to his bedroom on the third floor of the house while Atul and Upen were on the second floor. After an hour they noticed that the light was on in the third floor. They tiptoed to the poet’s room and found he was engrossed in writing which continued till the early hours of the morning while they kept

<sup>38</sup> Letter number 11, translation mine in Appendix; undated letter in *Shonibarar Chithi*, op cit, pp. 923-924.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Atul Sen, *Rabindra Prashanga* in *Shonibarar Chithi*, op cit, pp. 822-824, Free translation from Bengali mine.

a secret watch. In the morning taking advantage of the poet's absence from his room, they reached the table and found in the papers a story that the poet had written on the previous night's argument featuring himself and them but conclusively defeating their argument! Sadly, this story is lost and was not published!

Atul also recounted that as the writing of the novel *GhareBaire* was continuing at a feverish pace and instalments appearing in the *Sabuj Patra*, there was considerable anxiety in the minds of Atul and his friends about what would be the fate of the hero and heroine. One day they waylaid the poet and asked what he had decided for them. Rabindranath smiled and said 'as if I know myself! I have come to the open road, where it will lead I have no idea. I keep feeling that Bimala is reaching out beyond the prescribed path. Like you I remain as curious about the outcome!'

The arrest of Atul Sen came as a great personal loss to Rabindranath since he had grown very fond of him. He never mentioned Atul Sen in his writings. A few years before his death he recalled with a sense of regret how with little resources and a few workers he had started work in earnest in the villages. However, he lamented that it was not given enough time to be recorded in history in bold letters.<sup>41</sup> When news of Soviet Russia's great successes in rural reconstruction, cooperative farming and mass education reached India, Tagore, the inveterate world traveller, decided to travel to Moscow in 1930 to see for himself what they had achieved.<sup>42</sup> Tagore wrote in his *Russiar Chithi*<sup>43</sup> that he found that many of the programmes introduced in Russia were a vindication of some of his own firm beliefs. He wrote to his daughter-in-law Pratima Debi,<sup>44</sup> "What I had aspired to for long, Russia has realised in practice; that I could not achieve this makes me sad."

Rabindranath withdrew from Patisar shortly after the arrests of Atul Sen and his team, battling with depression. He now focused his energies on his new project - Visva Bharati University, the foundation stone of which was laid in December 1918 and the university established in 1921. Tagore tried to continue the work he had initiated in Patisar in his property in Surul village in Santiniketan, engaging the services of Leonard Elmhirst, an agricultural scientist from USA who worked along with his son Rathindranath and others to

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<sup>41</sup> At inauguration of Sriniketan Shipabhandar, 22 Aग्रहयान, 1345 (1938) in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, volume 13, op cit, p. 533.

<sup>42</sup> Reba Som, Teaching the villagers: 'Tagore's shortlived success in his riverine estates – A Forgotten Story' in *Tagore and Russia*, edited by Reba Som and Sergei Serebriany, ICCR, Har Anand Publications, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> *Letters from Russia*, translated by Sasadhar Sinha, Visva Bharati publications, Calcutta, 1960.

<sup>44</sup> Tagore to Pratima Debi, Appendix V, *Letters from Russia*, Ibid, p. 156.

create in 1923 the Institute of Rural Reconstruction. The Surul project came to be known as ‘Sriniketan’, the twin township of Santiniketan. Tagore realised that work at Surul would be very different from Patisar or Shelidah. For one, Surul was in Birbhum district where the soil was not arable, where there was chronic water shortage and malaria had systematically ravaged the countryside. However, the school opened its doors to the local tribal population with programmes for the revival of traditional handicraft.

Rabindranath came to Patisar on a final visit on July 26, 1937 at the request of his tenants and friends who gave him a tearful farewell. In an emotionally choked address to the villagers the poet said,<sup>45</sup> ‘I have received much from you but I doubt whether I could give anything in return. When I think of this it gives me much pain. But there is no time left – it is time for me to go, my health is failing...you must learn to stand on your own feet for which I bless you.’ As Tagore’s boat sailed on its onward journey, hordes of villagers followed on foot for miles along the river banks to see him off at Atrai station from where he would board the train to Calcutta. The well-known writer Annada Shankar Ray, then magistrate of Rajshahi, was present at the station and wrote how moving it was to see old bearded Muslim tenants of the estate exclaim that though they had not seen God, their *paigambar*, they had been blessed to see their *huzur* for the last time.<sup>46</sup>

It is unlikely that Atul Sen met the poet again. They both lived with their deep sense of remorse and regret for the abrupt ending of their cherished venture. But after the poet’s death in 1941 when there was an appeal by SajaniKanta Das for unpublished memorabilia on the poet, Atul had been instantly forthcoming, placing Tagore’s letters in the public domain. He was now a householder with nine children and kept away from revolutionary politics.

I was naturally curious about the circumstances which had led to my grandfather’s arrest. I had heard many versions in the family but recently while browsing in a library in Kolkata I came across a volume<sup>47</sup> with a detailed description of various people with whom Tagore had been in correspondence. The list included Atul Chandra Sen. According to this well researched report, Atul Sen, was a committed member of the revolutionary Anushilan party and also had close links with its branch organisation, the Jugantar party, headed by Barindra Kumar Ghosh, the younger brother of Aurobindo Ghosh and included prominent revolutionary leaders such as Rash Behari Bose and Jatindranath Mukherjee, known by his

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<sup>45</sup> Dr Saifuddin Chowdhury, *Patisare Rabindranath*, op cit, p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> *Rabindra Patravidhan*, volume 2, edited by Bijan Ghoshal, Patralekha publications, Kolkata, 2013, pp. 300-352.

popular title BaghaJatin, in recognition of his heroic hand-to-hand encounter with a royal Bengal tiger, which he had killed.

With war clouds gathering in Europe, plans had been emerging of a pan-Indian revolution by groups of overseas Indian revolutionaries with German help. A clandestine supply of arms and ammunitions had been assured by the Crown Prince of Germany to revolutionary leaders like BaghaJatin when he visited Calcutta in 1912. In pockets of the city of Calcutta, the Jugantar party began organising the youth through secret training. In the Bagnan area of Howrah, in the suburbs of Calcutta, after the post of Head Master of the 'High English' School fell vacant, Jugantar succeeded in getting the school authorities to appoint Atul Chandra Sen, a "handsome and brave man, with a strong personality and power of organisation"<sup>48</sup> to the post. Apart from attending to work in the school, Atul Sen, in close touch with the Jugantar party, formed a small activist group from the local youth, imparting training in sword play, wrestling and use of weapons.

Desperate for a supply of fire arms to sustain their struggle, Jugantar planned a daring arms heist on 26 August 1914, when they intercepted a shipment of arms imported by British owned Rodda company, an established Calcutta gun dealer, as it travelled from the customs house to the company's godown. A sizeable stock of Mauser pistols and firearms was captured in what the Statesman described as the 'greatest daylight robbery!'<sup>49</sup> Atul Sen and his gang of young men were involved in this incident. BaghaJatin, a key leader in the plot and now a prime accused, was on the run and given refuge in the school by Atul Sen. None of this escaped the notice of the police. Seven months later, on 28 March 1915 when Rabindranath Tagore came to Calcutta at the invitation of the *Bangiyo Hitasadhan Mandali* and delivered the lecture '*Pallir Unnati*', Atul Sen and his close associates were in the audience and as already described, they responded to Tagore's appeal for help in village reconstruction work and offered to become his workers.

In the following years the seized arms from the heist were linked to the majority of revolutionary crimes in Calcutta and Bengal. BaghaJatin was killed after a fierce police encounter in September 1915 brandishing a Mauser pistol. Although in active service in Tagore's estate in Patisar from 1915, Atul Sen could not escape the police for long. I was told

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<sup>48</sup> Translation from Bengali, mine.

<sup>49</sup> *Statesman* 30 August 1914 quoted by Sarbori Sinha, Unique landlord, in *Frontline* 13 January 2012

by my uncle<sup>50</sup>, that in 1917, feeling anxious about his imminent arrest, Atul Sen wrote to Tagore, even at the cost of being misunderstood, that his salary was inadequate to support a growing family. Leaving Patisar abruptly, he took up a gazetted post as superintendent of Posts and Telegraphs, Government of India. But this did not prevent his arrest and within months he was sent without trial to the remote island of Kutubdia in the Bay of Bengal for three years.

As was his stoic nature, Tagore internalised his great disappointment, desisted from speaking about his Patisar success. However, his general disapproval of the cult of the bomb which led young dedicated men astray was expressed in many of his literary works. He repeatedly wrote about the futility of terrorism. In his essay *End and Means (Path O Patheya)* he pointed out how many Bengalis had felt vindicated by the heroism of militant actions and assassinations which disproved the British accusation that they were effeminate cowards. Tagore's plea was that whatever the provocation due to an alien government's actions, 'to commit suicide is not the way to set things right'; people had to be told that the path is 'through the open highway, no shortcut to attain the aim is possible.'<sup>51</sup> In his colourful imagery he wrote 'A spark and a flame are two different things. The spark does not dispel the dark in our home, a flame that lasts is needed. The flame needs a lamp. And thus, long preparation is required to prepare the lamp, its wick and its fuel.'<sup>52</sup> In his novel *Char Adhyay*, Four Chapters, (1934) Tagore described brilliantly how the ruthlessness of political violence could compromise and corrupt human values in misguided youth.

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<sup>50</sup> Late Justice Amarabha Sengupta.

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<sup>51</sup> Tagore, essay *Path O Patheya* in Rabindra Rachanabali, (1961 ed) vol. 12, p. 974 et seq

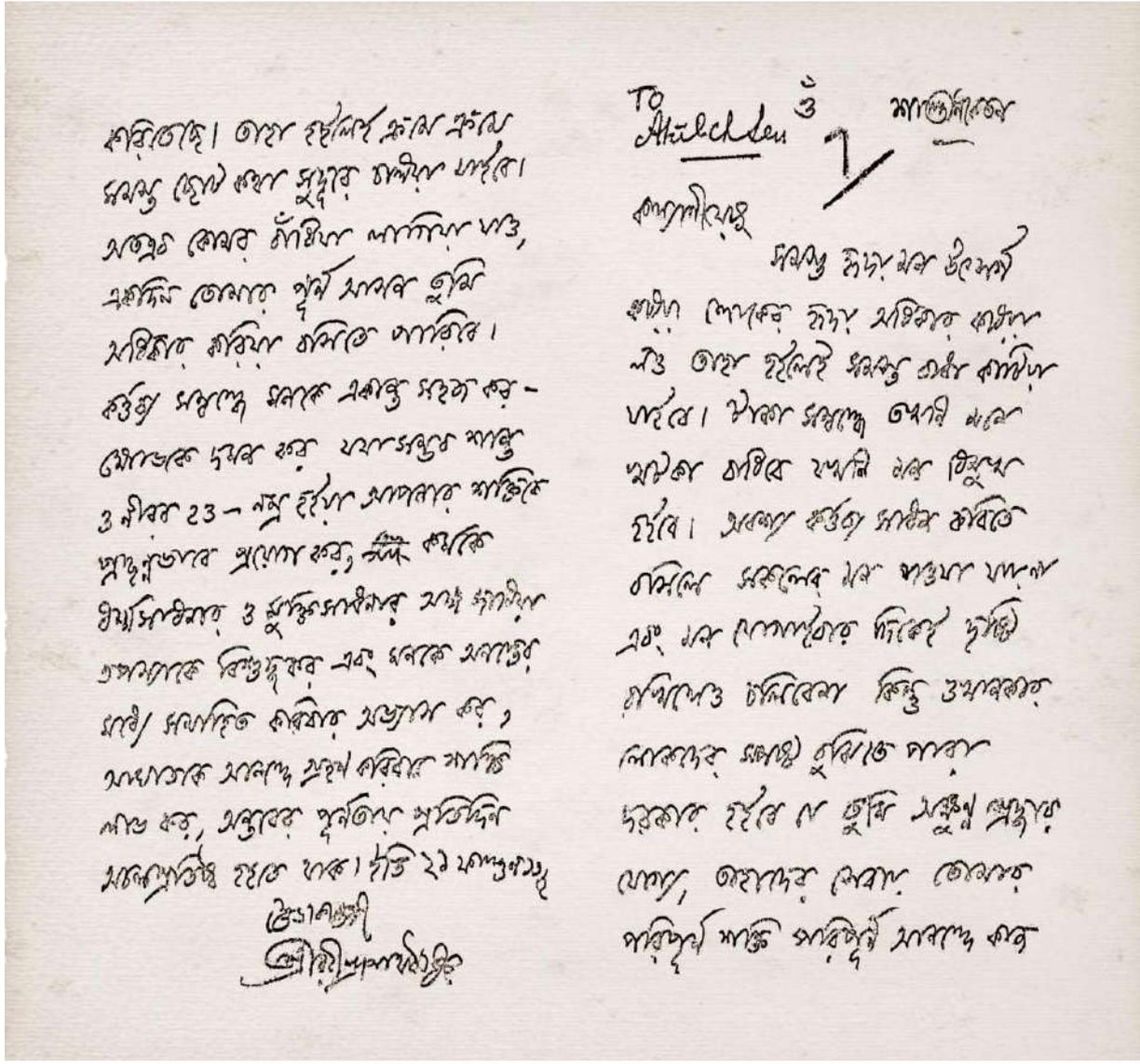
<sup>52</sup> Tagore essay *Byadhi O Pratikar*, Rabindra Rachanabali, (1961 ed) vol. 13 p. 131 et seq



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Atul Chandra Sen and his family

From left: last row: Arunabha, Manashi Maya (my mother), BitopiChhaya (Lily), Kamala Laya, Atoshi Kaya (Bani), Tarunabha  
 middle row: Atul Chandra Sen, Kiran Bala Sen (his wife)  
 bottom row: Amarabha, Hiranabha, Amitabha



Tagore 's letter to Atul Chandra Sen, dated 21 Phalgun 1322 (1915)

(in my possession)

**Reba Som** studied at Presidency College, Kolkata. A university topper and gold medalist she obtained a PhD from Calcutta University. She was the recipient of the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 2000–02. She was the founder director of the Rabindranath Tagore Centre, ICCR, Kolkata (2008-2013). Her publications include *Differences within Consensus: The Left-Right Divide in the Congress* (Orient Longman, 1995), *Subhas Chandra Bose and the Resolution of the Women's Question* (CWDS, 2002), *Gandhi, Bose, Nehru and the Making of the Modern Indian Mind* (Penguin 2004), *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song* (Penguin, 2009) and *Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda* (Penguin Random House, 2017). Reba Som is a trained singer of Rabindrasangeet and Nazrul Geeti; her compact disc albums, *Selected Songs of Rabindranath Tagore* (Saregama, 2005) and *Love Songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam* (Times Music, 2016), which include her English translations of the lyrics, are on Gaana.com, YouTube and timesmusic.com.

## Lucky<sup>1</sup>

*Somnath Batabyal*

The television arrived in the afternoon. No one had been told, and the household was sleeping when the man, pushing a handcart, climbed the narrow lane. Several children followed him. It was their excited voices that brought Lucky to the courtyard.

‘TV, TV! TV has come,’ the children chanted.

Lucky’s heart beat faster as she ran towards the gate, ignoring the rubber sandals that stood by her bedroom door. The ground, like the inside of a clay oven, scorched her feet. She recognised the children. Some of their parents worked in the house as occasional day labourers.

The man crouched beside the cart, his hand resting on a large cardboard box that said Sonodyne Black & White Television. Pulling his grimy vest up, he wiped his face. Lucky, despite her mounting excitement, resisted asking about the box’s contents.

‘Let me get you some water,’ she said to him.

He must have made a mistake. He’s come to the wrong address, she told herself, as she poured the water from a brass tumbler into the man’s cupped palms. She cast another sideways glance at the box. Or, it could be for Sukanta, she thought with a sudden sinking feeling. Yes, that’s it. Her youngest cousin would have asked for the television to be delivered through this part of the house. Just to rub it in.

He drank at length, and then splashed water on his face and neck. Lucky hushed the children who had started their chant again.

‘Is this a TV?’ she asked, pointing at the box. The man nodded.

‘You have come to the wrong address,’ she told him.

‘No, he hasn’t,’ said Kalpana, Lucky’s cousin, and now the eldest of the house. She was smiling at them from the first-floor balcony. ‘Bring it in.’

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from forthcoming novel (Lucky) scheduled for publication in January 2022. Indian Sub-continent: Westland. (Will be in submission in the UK and US in September 2021).

Lucky, usually restrained, squealed in delight, and joined the children in their clapping and jumping.

The news spread and soon a procession of villagers—men, women, children with their parents or on the loose—started to file in, past the river, and into the lane that led to Gopalpur Raj Bari, known locally as Gopalpur House.

The object of their excitement—the television—was placed on the main terrace, next to the courtyard, on top of a wooden cabinet that had been hastily dragged down from Kalpana's bedroom. A sturdy domestic help was employed to ensure that no one touched it.

A chair was placed next to the television for Kalpana. She greeted the guests and failed in her attempts to appear modest. The elders spoke to her of Gopalpur's development—the arrival of this television the final proof.

Kalpana nodded in agreement. Her intention, she said, was simply to ensure that the people of her village could share in the country's pride and watch India in the finals of the cricket World Cup. The match was scheduled for the next day in London, and India were to take on the mighty West Indies. 'Hearing it on the transistor is one thing, seeing it on TV is quite another. It is as if you are there on the playing field.'

Suppressing a smile, Lucky asked her cousin what the guests should be served.

'Tell that useless husband of yours to get mishti for everyone.' Kalpana raised her hand and then her voice. 'Everyone must have dinner here tomorrow. We will all watch the game together.' Claps and shouts greeted the announcement.

Lucky's husband—Amol—was standing with their eight-year-old son, Samar, by his side. Along with some of the younger boys, they were discussing India's chances. Amol waved as Lucky approached.

'Kalpana Didi is astonishing, isn't she? Not a word to us. I mean—'

Lucky cut short her husband's exuberance. 'Get some sweets for everyone. Take the money from the cupboard.'

'You are angry?' Amol looked puzzled.

‘Oh no, I am delighted,’ Lucky snapped. ‘Your Kalpana Didi buys a TV, and I have to arrange dinner for the entire village.’

‘What! Is everyone coming tomorrow? We will watch the game together? That is wonderful news.’

‘Ma, can I go with Baba?’

Though reluctant to allow her son yet another trip to the sweet-meat shop, Lucky did not feel like arguing the point with his indulgent father. ‘Yes, yes, go,’ she said irritably and walked away.

She rushed into the kitchen and started washing the used cups and glasses. Several people had not yet had their tea, and more would arrive in the next hour when they woke from their afternoon nap. A child, stepping into the kitchen, announced breathlessly, ‘The electrician has come. They are calling you.’

The antennae that came with the television needed installing, and the electrician was asking for a pole on which to mount it. Lucky had recently overseen the cutting of several bamboo plants for furniture, and they were now seasoning in the pond. She sent two boys to fetch one, and moments later, unsure of the choice they might make, decided to check for herself.

A cool breeze from the river brought respite, and a festive atmosphere spread across the courtyard. People were waiting for 6 p.m., when the evening broadcast would begin. No one knew what to expect. The local postmaster, who claimed to have seen a television show before, was telling those willing to listen that his wife had foolishly thought actual people hid behind the box. A young girl, smiling sweetly, stopped his flow, ‘And what did you cleverly think, Uncle?’

Despite trepidations about tomorrow’s feast, and the arrangements that would inevitably fall on her shoulders, Lucky felt triumphant. She looked across the courtyard towards Sukanta’s dwellings—the doors and windows now shut—and uttered a silent prayer: thank god the television had not been destined for that half of the house.

A sudden commotion made her hurry through the crowd. Kalpana, having lost her earlier magnanimity, had a boy by the ear. He was the last in a long line of young offenders

who had tried to touch the television. Lucky extricated the child's ear and eased Kalpana to her room with a cup of tea.

The electrician was urged to hurry, and several hands helped him on to the sloping roof, holding him up there. The more knowledgeable ones debated the exact position of the transmission tower and which way the antennae should face, others argued on where best to place the magic box. Wires and advice tempered the electrician's progress.

A few minutes before the clock struck six, he finally asked for Kalpana to be summoned. Lucky requested the excited crowd to move back and settle on the tarpaulin sheets that had been laid out on the courtyard.

Kalpana, wearing a new sari, came back beaming. She stood in front of the television, unsure of what to do. Someone shouted, 'Turn the knob.'

'Which one?' she yelled back irritably. 'There are eight. Lucky, do you know?'

Lucky guided Kalpana's hand. 'Turn it to the right. You will hear a click.'

A loud hissing made Kalpana step back in alarm. The screen came alive with countless black-and-white dots.

'What is going on, re?' she whispered.

'The broadcast is yet to start,' Lucky replied.

Just then the electricity went off and the screen went blank with a swoosh. A general groan of annoyance spread amongst the audience.

'The load shedding is scheduled for 8 p.m,' someone pondered. 'This is very early.'

The school Headmaster who, given his eminence, was sitting on a chair, along with a few of the elders, said loudly, 'I have heard that television consumes a lot of power. Maybe the transformer has blown.'

This elicited a murmur, and several in the crowd started to speak knowledgably on the dangers posed by television. One man, who last summer had been to the capital city where every neighbourhood had a TV set, said that children there all wore spectacles. 'Television weakens your eyes. I have seen this for myself.'

'Throw them out,' Kalpana hissed to her cousin. 'Ungrateful bastards. How much I do for them and this is what I get in return. Feed them green banana curry tomorrow, Lucky.'

It took Amol and his wife a while to calm everyone and usher them out. Amol agreed that TV spoiled eyesight, but only colour television; theirs was black-and-white. Lucky reasoned that, in bigger towns, where there were hundreds of television sets, power failures were less frequent. If one television could blow a transformer, then the capital would be in perpetual blackout.

Yes, and what did the Headmaster know, someone asked. Had he ever seen a television before? There was a second murmur of agreement. He doesn't even have a radio, another yelled, and others, afraid of losing tomorrow's dinner invitation, laughed in accord. Lucky and Amol, urging people towards the gate, reassured everyone that certainly a big feast would be organised.

After all, a television had come to their village and India was playing in the World Cup finals.

As the day's first passenger ferry blared its horn, Lucky ducked out of the mosquito net, carefully tucking the edges back. Running the plastic comb with its serrated ends through her hair a few times, she opened the wooden cupboard—gently, to minimise the creaking noise. She looked back at the bed to check that Amol and Samar were still sleeping. Then, shielded by the cupboard door, she changed into a fresh sari.

Standing at the window facing the river, Lucky rushed her prayers. She asked for the day to go smoothly, the television to work and the guests to be fed—if not well, then adequately. Finally, mentioning that this was for Amol and Samar, she prayed that India would win the World Cup. With eyes still closed, Lucky stood listening to the sounds coming from the river: the varied cries of hawkers, the bells of cycle rickshaws and the voices of daily commuters engaged in their battle to find space on the overcrowded steamer. Above this comforting din rose the first faint notes from a harmonium—Kalpana's adopted daughter, Leela, performing her early morning riyaz. Lucky opened her eyes and sighed.

Before she had taken two steps across the courtyard, the cassette player started at Sukanta's residence. The volume was even higher than usual, and Lucky smiled. Kalpana's youngest brother was jealous and very, very angry.

'Can he not give it a rest,' Amol grumbled from the bed when, a quarter of an hour later, Lucky stepped back into the room. 'I am of the mind to buy Sukanta some decent

music. If you are going to fight with a child doing her morning riyaz, at the very least, be melodic. Poor Leela, and she has such a beautiful voice.'

'Tonight is the match,' Lucky said, untying one end of the mosquito net. 'We're going to hear their anger all day.'

'Do you think they might come to watch?'

'Careful what you wish for,' Lucky admonished her husband. 'Instead of the television, everyone will be watching the epic family battle.'

Careful not to disturb their sleeping son, husband and wife looked at each other and fell into silent, helpless giggles.

'It might just be more entertaining than the cricket. I fear for us tonight.'

'Is the toilet free?' he asked, and then dashed out without waiting for a response. Lucky looked at Samar, oblivious to the heat and the noise, and decided to let him sleep. Whether India won or lost, the boy would be up late.

'Concentrate,' she heard Kalpana chiding Leela whose voice was struggling to rise above the din of the recorded music ... sa re ga, re ga ma ... On some mornings, Kalpana would join in to decisively tilt the scales of the battle. Lucky would then rush to open the windows, or step out into the courtyard to hear better. At times, she crept upstairs and stood by the door humming until she was waved in. How could this pitch perfect, melodious voice—which had been compared to the great Shamshad Begum and which, last year, was awarded the President's Medal for Folk Artists—turn so devastatingly coarse in a fight? The quarrels were increasing in their ferocity, Lucky thought, and her cousin rarely sang at home these days.

The trouble began with the sudden death of Kalpana's father—Lucky's maternal uncle—who slipped on a bar of soap while bathing at the household well three years ago. He fractured his skull and was dead by the time he was discovered.

He did not leave a will. His daughters, Kalpana and Geeta, and their younger brother, Sukanta—whom the sisters now professed to have cleaned and fed through childhood—soon found their minor disagreements turn vindictive. Fights broke out, kitchens were separated and, then, entire lives. The courtyard, arena for childhood's battles, was now the no man's

land across which abuses were hurled, and, at times when either Kalpana or Sukanta were drunk, plates and glasses.

Amol and Lucky aligned with the sisters. The couple's sole source of income was Amol's wages from singing in Kalpana's troupe. Lucky was also devoted to the middle sister, the unpredictable and temperamental Geeta, queen of the elephants. When Lucky arrived here twelve years ago, the residential elephant, Thumri, became her responsibility. Thumri travelled with her mistress, acting as bait, whenever Geeta vanished into the forests. But, at home, it was Lucky who groomed and fed this gentle animal. Two years ago, when Thumri gave birth—and Lucky had worked ceaselessly through a difficult and drawn-out delivery—Geeta gifted her the calf. It was an act of generosity that Lucky could not quite believe. For weeks afterwards, she resisted naming the baby, fearing that he would be snatched from her. Only when Geeta and Thumri left for the jungles did Lucky christen Opu.

To say that Lucky doted on the baby elephant—possibly even obsessed about him above everything else, as Amol had sometimes complained—would be to miss the nature of this love. Through Opu, Lucky connected to a world she had lost, seemingly forever.

Lucky's paternal grandfather, Surendra Mohan Ganguly, had named her Banalakshmi, the wealth of the forest. The Anglicisation came later. Surendra Mohan was a District Collector under the British and a local landlord who detested collecting taxes from a struggling people. Elephants were his preoccupation, and he had written three authoritative volumes on their nutritional requirements. Surendra Mohan's work had found international acclaim. He collaborated with zoologists from Britain, working hurriedly in the last days of the Raj. Gangulysaheb, though he would never admit it, delighted in the Rai Bahadur title that came with the recognition.

Each morning, Lucky and Opu would walk to the river Brahmaputra, which flowed a few hundred yards from the house. If his school was closed, Samar would accompany them, sitting by the banks, watching his mother scrub the animal who squirted her with gushes of water. Opu would let the children from the village ride on his back, delighting them by suddenly rolling in the river.

Lucky was as proud of his looks as she was of his intelligence. On his first visit to the local school, Opu, accompanied by the children's excited shrieks, lifted the schoolmaster off his feet in the middle of a speech and kept him hanging in mid-air. Lucky had to coax Opu to

put the terrified man back on ground. ‘This boy just knows how to get the claps,’ Lucky would say to anyone who would care to listen.

Then, a week after his first birthday, Opu vanished. Days of frantic searching yielded nothing, except the rumour that Sukanta had abducted Opu as dowry to save his daughter’s troubled marriage.

For a month, nothing could distract Lucky. She woke up in the middle of the night worrying that Opu had not been fed. Through the day, she sat listlessly in his stable or walked around the courtyard, muttering his name. The household sympathised, but could not really comprehend Lucky’s trauma. Kalpana, sure of her brother’s treachery, was apoplectic. Amol was concerned about his wife’s health. The three domestic workers were secretly pleased; Opu had not been the most docile of pets.

Then Geeta and Thumri returned, and Lucky found her anguish paled before a mother’s fury. Thumri searched the place for two days, and on the third, smashed the fences and disappeared into the forest. Five days later, in the dead of night, she came back. The old palace could not withstand the assault. The uninhabited southern wing collapsed within minutes. The residents, warned by the elephant’s angry trumpeting, managed to save themselves by running towards the river. It was Geeta who put her best friend down, shooting Thumri several times with her hunting rifle. After the incident, Geeta confined herself to her room where, finally, an en-suite facility, unheard of in these parts, was constructed. Lucky became her principal carer, and her only friend.

Gopalpur House changed irrevocably. Sukanta, acting as both the martyr and the benefactor, rebuilt the damaged portions, and relocated his family to the new quarters. Lucky’s earlier neutrality in the rivalry between the siblings gave way to a vicious, although unexpressed, rage against Sukanta.

‘Lucky Mashi. O Lucky Mashi.’

‘Shhh. Samar is sleeping. Keep your voice down,’ Lucky hushed her niece who had skipped in through the door. ‘What is it?’ she asked, kneeling down to re-tie Leela’s skirt.

‘You are being called to the kitchen,’ the child said and sped away before Lucky could finish. For a while, Lucky stared after her. Leela’s sudden and invisible illness had the household worried, but her usually garrulous mother had made it clear that it was no one else’s business and she would brook no curiosity. Lucky understood Kalpana’s reticence.

Leela was adopted, and the village folk, if given half a chance, would indulge in nasty talk. Now, every three months, Leela was taken to Calcutta for check-ups, and Kalpana spared no expense on her daughter's treatment.

As she walked towards the kitchen, Lucky crossed Amol humming in the courtyard. 'When Samar wakes, bring him to me,' she said. 'I have to see to the shopping and cooking.'

The day was going to be long, and she would have to be inventive with the dinner arrangements: the budget was limited and Kalpana Didi's and the villagers' expectations disproportionate.

Lucky found her son playing a game of cricket by himself in the shade of the bathroom wall. Last week, he had thrown a tantrum about not owning a bat, and she had pointed him to the clothes-washing stick, not an impossible approximation. Leaning against the dead banyan tree, she watched him play: throwing the ball against the wall and hitting it on the rebound. He's putting on weight, she thought. The image that had haunted her these past months reappeared now.

There was no picture, just words in the front page of the newspaper describing what the journalist had seen: amongst the dead lay a child, each limb torn from its body, eyes open, staring at the heavens above. 'Perhaps asking the Almighty for an explanation,' the journalist had added dramatically. No, Lucky had thought, telling god, 'Look, this is the world you are credited with; these humans are your greatest creation.'

It had been a coordinated attack, spread over several villages, not far from Gopalpur. Once the men left for work, the killers had appeared out of the early morning mist, armed with machetes, pick axes, knives and sharpened bamboo sticks that they had stuck into women's vaginas. Two thousand were massacred in just over six hours, mostly women and children. Their sole crime, the journalist wrote, was that their ancestry could be traced back to Bangladesh, today a foreign country.

The thought had come to Lucky almost immediately: those murderers, one of these days, would come here too, and the high walls of Gopalpur House would not deter them. In her nightmares, she now saw her son, spread-eagled in the courtyard, his limbs being pulled in four different directions by faceless neighbours.

As she walked past him into the bathroom, Lucky could hear his muttered commentary. 'Willis to Gavaskar from pavlon end ... and FOUR.' She had frowned when

Amol bought a transistor radio to listen to the cricket matches. Now the money seemed well spent. Samar was learning some English. 'Pavilion,' she corrected him from behind the closed door.

Until yesterday, when the television set arrived, Lucky had hardly taken any interest in the game or her adopted country's fortunes. Amol's enthusiasm both amused and irritated her. He sat out late in their portion of the courtyard. If Kalpana was drunk, she would join him. Her intermittent singing and snatches of cricket commentary on the radio became Samar's lullabies as he dozed off on the charpai. Sometimes, unable to sleep, Lucky would lie beside her son. The still air heavy with the smell of champa, the mysterious shadows cast by the banana leaves and a silver moonlight persuaded her, if only for a while, that perhaps, just perhaps, this was an acceptable way to live.

The last big match had ended in a row with her husband. India, despite all indications, ended up winning the semi-finals against England. And Amol, who throughout the evening had paraded the nerve-wracking zone between euphoria and despair, let out wild shouts of jubilation. Samar woke up, as did Sukanta and his bitter wife, and they exchanged harsh words with Kalpana, who immediately opened another bottle of rum in delight. Lucky had made her displeasure evident to her husband.

Abandoning his make-believe game, Samar now ran towards her.

'Ma, are you going to watch the match with us?'

She smiled at him as she carefully descended the slippery steps. 'If I do that, who will look after the cooking? Do you know how many people are coming?'

'If we win, Baba has promised to buy me a bat,' the boy declared, eyeing his mother.

'We will see about that. But first, come and have your lunch. And sleep in the afternoon if you are to stay up late.'

The mid-day sun was scorching, and Lucky moved briskly past the gaps between trees. In the courtyard, old bed sheets were being spread for the children to sit on. Two earthen water urns had been placed in the shade. The chairs, ordered last night from a tent shop, had just arrived. Amol, entrusted with the task of finding an appropriately high table where the television could be enthroned, was examining various possibilities.

Though Sukanta's cassette player had fallen silent now, Amol was worried that the evening would be ruined if it started again during the match. At lunch, he tentatively asked Kalpana if her brother should be invited, if only so they could watch the game in peace.

'Have you gone absolutely mad, Amol?' Kalpana retorted angrily. 'First, he steals that elephant. Next, he will kidnap your child. I will break his legs if he steps into my part of the house.'

Lucky indicated irritably to her husband to shut up. It was not their place to intervene in a fight between a brother and his sisters, not when they were at the mercy of both in this household.

'I was only trying to ensure we get to watch the game in peace,' Amol mumbled apologetically as he carried the sleeping Samar back to their room after lunch.

'Oh, stop it with you and your game. The match will be over tonight. This fight will continue down the generations. Mark my words.'

'Why do you say that?'

'The quarrel between my mother and my uncle went on for nearly three decades, and all because my mother was not happy with the bed she was given in dowry. Bitterness runs in this family's blood.'

'But your uncle took us in, don't forget that.'

'Only because of the money and jewellery that my parents had been sending. And we never saw any of it, did we?'

'But we have a place to stay.'

'For now,' Lucky replied.

No one really expected the television to work, yet nearly a hundred people were crammed into the courtyard, expecting miracles. The electricity returned ten minutes before the match was to start, and Kalpana insisted that Lucky should switch the set on. From the grey screen emerged hazy figures that slowly clarified into men on a field. For a few moments, there was a total and stunned silence—followed by jubilant cheers.

Kalpna grasped her cousin's arm gleefully 'Arre, see why I told you to turn it on? Not just like that do we call you Lucky. Come, sit with me.' She made space for Lucky between herself and Amol, shooing off the electrician who had been on stand-by.

A man with a transistor approached them. 'Dada,' he asked of Amol, 'the game is yet to start on the radio. But there,' he said, pointing at the screen, 'it has already started.'

'These are the replays from the semi-final game with England,' Amol explained. 'The game will start in five minutes. West Indies has won the toss and will field first.'

The sun was harsh and, one after the other, people sitting or crouching on the sheets began opening their umbrellas. Some objected, saying that they could not see the TV screen, and stood up; others behind them protested and followed suit. As India's batsmen walked out to open the innings at Lords, the villagers of Gopalpur were engaged in a tussle of pushing, shoving and edging forward.

Amol sat with his son in his lap, staring at the screen and oblivious to the chaos around him. 'Watch closely, Samar,' he told his son. 'That is Sunil Gavaskar, the best opening batsman in the world.'

Moments later, Gavaskar was out and Amol looked as though he had been shot. He glanced at Lucky and shook his head. 'I knew it, it's over.'

Even from her vantage position at the front, the sunlight on the screen made viewing difficult and Lucky decided she had seen enough. In his excitement, Amol had persuaded Kalpna to announce that dinner would be served only after midnight, once the game was over. There would be snacks and tea during the innings break, of course. It meant more work for her, but Lucky, seeing Amol's pleading eyes, had not protested. Negotiating her way through the crowd, she headed towards the kitchen. Cigarette and bidi smoke rose intermittently into the hot afternoon and Lucky wished she had a camera. 'The place resembles a refugee colony in Calcutta,' she thought to herself, a trifle disgusted.

Four of the village women, ignoring the joys of cricket, were already in the kitchen, dicing up the aubergines and potatoes for frying. Picking up a bag of unpeeled onions, Lucky joined them.

'Where is the cook?' she asked one of the hired hands who was heating oil over the wood fire.

‘Maharaj went to take his afternoon nap.’

Lucky, hiding her annoyance, left the man to his cauldron.

‘Can I ask you a question, Didi?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Lucky could not immediately place the woman, sitting on her haunches, chopping vegetables.

‘How come the game will take place in the dark?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, Kalpana Didi said that dinner will now be served after midnight when the game finishes?’

‘No, no, it is daylight there.’ Seeing their blank faces, Lucky explained that England was in a different time zone. ‘Their clocks run behind us.’

‘They should get new clocks then. I hear it is a rich country,’ another woman remarked snidely.

‘The clocks are fine,’ Lucky smiled. ‘The sun reaches us first, and then travels to London. So, when we sleep, they are still awake.’

‘How do you know so much? Have you been there?’

‘Yes,’ Lucky nodded. ‘Many years ago.’

‘Ja,’ the woman looked shocked. ‘You are teasing us, Didi.’

‘Na re, I am not. I lived there for a long time.’

‘You lived in London?’

‘No, I was in a town called Cambridge. It is very close to London.’

‘Is it like our Gopalpur?’ one of the women asked.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ another replied. ‘That is bilet. Everything is different there.’

‘Well, people live there too,’ Lucky said as she began chopping the onions. ‘They also eat, shit, sleep. Just like us.’

‘Yes,’ replied one, ‘but they don’t eat like us. They only eat cakes. Not aubergines and onion fries.’

‘Uff, everything with you is about food. Lucky Didi, please tell us more. When did you go to this England?’

‘Many years now.’ Lucky thought for a moment. ‘Nearly sixteen, seventeen years ago. In 1967.’ She smiled at them. ‘Do you know how I reached England?’

No, they shook their heads.

Bending her arm at a right angle to her elbow, Lucky made an upward motion. ‘Plane?’ the women gasped in unison.

She nodded. ‘We were in Dhaka and came first to Calcutta to meet some of our relatives in India. We then went by train to Bombay. From there, my father and I flew to London.’

One of the young boys hired for the day was listening, his mouth agape. ‘Were you not afraid?’ he asked

‘No. My father was with me.’

‘Are you then from Bangladesh, Didi?’

‘There was no Bangladesh in those days, re,’ Lucky said quickly. ‘Bangladesh was created out of Pakistan, which even before that was just undivided India. My mother grew up in this house. I have not come from anywhere.’

‘So you came from Pakistan then?’ the woman responded.

Lucky called out to one of the hands. ‘Take the tea out,’ she said. ‘And tell Amol-da that the fries will be coming out soon.’

‘Didi, have you ever seen a TV before?’ the woman crouching next to her asked.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘You knew how to switch it on.’

‘I have only seen it once, a very long time ago.’

‘Was this, too, in your bilet?’ she sounded sarcastic.

Lucky nodded.

‘And what did you see?’

‘I saw the first man landing on the moon.’

‘You don’t need a TV for that,’ the woman burst out laughing. ‘My husband sees men on the moon every evening after his drink.’ She shook her head. ‘Such stories, Lucky Didi. You must have no trouble putting your Samar to sleep.’

Lucky smiled back. She indicated to the potatoes. ‘Come, put those in the pan. The oil is hot.’

‘Ma,’ her son came in screaming. ‘India has lost.’

‘What! Already?’

‘Yes. Can I have some?’ he asked, pointing at the fries.

‘They are very hot,’ Lucky warned. ‘Come, let us first go and see what has happened.’

The crowd had spread whilst she had been in the kitchen. A few still clustered around the television, Amol at their centre. In the fading light, a group of young boys had initiated their own game of cricket, using the dead banyan tree as wickets. Lucky did not want to disrupt the fun, but was wary of a ball hitting Sukanta’s closed windows. She told them to be careful as she passed. Six men sat in a circle, playing cards, just outside her room. To demonstrate her displeasure, Lucky walked through their midst. They barely looked up.

Another loud groan went up and Lucky saw Amol, holding his head in his hands, walk off towards the toilet. She asked her son to call his father. It was not considered proper for a wife to call her husband by name in public, and she was mindful of the traditions of Gopalpur House.

Amol came towards them. ‘How humiliating. This is a massacre.’

‘Will the game end early now?’

Amol looked at her sheepishly. ‘You think I am overreacting?’

‘I still have to serve the food. Just tell me what to do.’

‘Our innings will be over in less than an hour. Maybe the snacks can come out then?’ he mentioned tentatively.

‘Okay. Now keep Samar with you. I don’t want him wandering into the kitchen again. I will send out some fries for him. Please see that he eats them and no one else.’

The Indian batting, as predicted, folded early and the sun was setting when Lucky, with the help of four women, set out several plates of aubergine and potato fries and three large kettles of tea. The men, angry at their team’s capitulation, devoured the snacks. Gulping down the tea their wives had secured for them, they cursed their country’s lack of fight. From the Mughal invasion to subjugation by the British, a thousand years of Indian history was held up as evidence that led to tonight’s abject performance. Dietary habits were the problem, one opined.

‘We don’t eat beef. Look at the Pakistanis. They are strong because they eat cows.’

‘But we are playing with the West Indies,’ Amol intervened.

‘Dada, they eat everything. Even people.’

After a quick conference, the women asked Lucky if they could have dinner earlier. The children needed their food and sleep. Kalpana overheard this and immediately stepped in. ‘If you want to eat earlier, go home. Food will be served when the match is over.’

Lucky was glad for Kalpana’s intervention. She knew the cook would not be happy with any changes now. Maharaj had been in foul temper since the feast was announced, and Lucky had to bribe him with the promise of a new set of clothes. Kalpana had solved the tricky argument about the menu by agreeing to donate three of the ducks in their pond. This had pleased Maharaj, for his daughter and son -in-law were visiting. Lucky knew that the best pieces had already vanished from the cooking pot. Despite his regular tantrums and gentle thieving, there could be no arguments about Maharaj’s culinary skills. The smell emanating from the kitchen was making everyone hungry.

Two of the hired hands were splitting a mound of banana trunks and fashioning them into rectangular bowls when Lucky re-entered the kitchen. Fresh banana leaves were heaped in the corner, next to the wooden shelves. Lucky instructed the boys to wash each leaf separately. There will be consequences, she warned, if a speck of dirt was to be found when the rice was served. Kalpana had expressly forbidden the use of any family utensils for the

feast tonight. When Samar was born and Lucky had insisted on a lunch for the villagers, some brass plates were said to have gone missing. Kalpana claimed that they were priceless family heirlooms, and frequently reminded Lucky of the loss.

She checked with Maharaj again about food quantities.

‘If they don’t start putting it in their saris and dhotis, there is enough,’ the cook snapped, and Lucky decided to leave him alone.

‘Do you want to taste the meat?’ he asked as she was slipping away.

Picking up a bowl, Lucky returned eagerly.

‘Tell me if it is soft enough?’

With eyes closed, she nodded an appreciative yes.

‘Does it need anything?’ Maharaj persisted.

‘No, Maharaj-da. It is delicious.’

‘You know nothing of cooking. I am asking the wrong person.’

‘But I certainly know about eating. I have been consuming your meals every day for years now. Who can question my taste?’

‘Achcha, achcha,’ the man relented. ‘Now stir in the spices. I have to go to my room.’ Maharaj, scratching his stomach, gestured at the boys. Lucky knew she was being told to guard the food.

‘This government is mad. What is the point of getting a TV?’ Amol charged into the kitchen, his transistor on full volume. ‘They have interrupted the broadcast with the evening news. Fifteen minutes of the match gone.’

‘Please turn the volume down, Amol. I cannot hear you,’ Lucky said impatiently. ‘You will go deaf, and so will I.’

‘Yes. But look at this. Vivian Richards is batting. I mean *the* Viv Richards. And what is our response? Cut off the live broadcast and put in the evening news. He is the greatest ... Wait.’

Amol rushed to a corner of the kitchen, a finger in one ear and the transistor stuck in the other. Moments later, he turned towards Lucky with a slightly embarrassed grin.

‘Richards is out,’ he said in a barely audible voice. ‘Three down for fifty-seven. Tonight might be extraordinary.’

As he walked out in a daze, Lucky called after him, ‘Does this mean India will win?’

Amol, afraid of jinxing things, for once, ignored his beloved wife.

For the next hour, as Lucky tended to the meat, ensured the rice was boiled and dry, and cooked a separate, less spicy dal for Samar, she also kept an ear out for the shouts that erupted from the courtyard frequently. She was amused at herself; her heart, too, was beating faster.

Finally, she called for Maharaj. If history was truly being made, she did not want to recall it as the moment she was watching the rice boil over.

The courtyard was poorly lit, yet the change in mood was palpable. Gone were the dispirited and defeated villagers who, a just a couple of hours earlier, was cursing their country’s lack of fight. The group that surrounded the television set now oohed and aahed at each ball, advice was being freely directed at the players on screen, and grown men clung to each other, acting out in Gopalpur a solidarity felt across the nation.

Lucky pushed through to the front where Amol was sitting with Samar on his lap. Every single chair was taken, sometimes with two and even three men sitting on one. Several low bamboo stools had been procured, and Lucky spotted a couple that had emerged from her bedroom. Seeing her, three young men sitting next to Amol looked at each other, and then, abused by an elder, reluctantly gave up their seat.

At the end of the over, Amol told Lucky that just one wicket remained between India and World Cup victory. It should all be over soon, he said, eyes flashing.

Ten minutes later, India still hadn’t won. After each ball, Samar would ask, ‘Baba, when will we win?’ until Amol snapped, ‘You will know if we do. Now watch the game.’

Three more overs were bowled, and yet the last West Indian pair hung on obdurately. Jubilant cries turned to anguished prayers, the gods were invoked and curses hurled again. One of the young men displaced by Lucky crouched next to Amol and whispered in his ear. Her husband, Lucky observed, looked distressed.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

Amol stared at the youth, and then back at Lucky.

‘We have a superstition, it’s kind of a silly thing really.’

‘What?’ she insisted.

‘Well, just that nobody should change their seats while the game is on,’ Amol stammered.

‘Meaning?’

And then she understood. ‘Oh, I have upset your seating plan, have I? Please, be my guest,’ she said, looking at the displaced youngsters.

Amol refused to meet her eye as she walked away. Three balls later, as Lucky was still pushing her way through, a scream went up. ‘Out,’ the crowd shouted in one voice. ‘Out, out,’ they kept screaming. Chairs fell as men scrambled to their feet, kids were flung in the air, people rushed towards each other, arms outstretched. Lucky sidestepped the frenzy and walked towards the television screen. The hordes had descended on the Lord’s cricket field, and she saw the players, running back towards the pavilion, being mobbed. For a moment, the camera zoomed in on the anguished face of a West Indian fan. He sat alone, the seats beside him empty, tears streaming down his face. Then the jubilant Indian fans were back on screen, running through the haloed greens. This was the winners’ moment.

Amol emerged from the crowd and walked towards Lucky.

‘The nation thanks you for giving up your seat.’

‘Have they left?’ Geeta asked Lucky, peering from her bedroom on the first floor.

‘A few are still hanging around. Come and sit with me.’ Lucky patted the empty space on the wooden bench beside her. ‘I am sorry I was so late bringing your dinner. It is just that there were so many people and India winning and—’

‘You were busy,’ Geeta hushed Lucky. ‘You look after me very well, sister.’

Resting their chins on the balcony railing, the two women observed the revellers in the moonlight that filtered through the leaves of the tall coconut trees. Dinner was over and the village women had left. The men, however, enticed by Kalpana’s generous distribution of rum, showed no signs of letting up. Some were trying to set off firecrackers, probably last Diwali’s leftovers. Damp had set in and the rockets refused to fly, and the rather

optimistically termed atom bombs went out with scarcely a whimper. India's unexpected victory was not being well expressed.

'Opu would have liked the crowds today, no?' Geeta said to Lucky.

'Yes, he would. He hated being alone.'

'His mother loved the jungles. Thumri and I could get by for weeks without seeing another human being. She even avoided other elephants.'

After shooting Thumri, a guilt-stricken Geeta could not bear the mention of elephants. She had banned Lucky from her room. Every night for a month, Lucky had stood outside the door. When she was finally allowed to re-enter, so did the stories of their beloved friends. On one such evening, Lucky had asked her cousin, 'Didi, do you think Thumri will be reborn?'

'I don't think of rebirth the way most people do, sister.'

'Then?'

'I think my mother is reborn through me, in my actions. You are reborn in your son's. Much after you are gone, he will continue to evoke you. His children will learn and remember from him. Rebirth is nothing but tradition, Lucky; rebirth is our stories. In our words, Thumri is always alive.'

'Didi, please, tonight you must sing,' someone was pleading with Kalpana.

'Why? Am I your father's concubine?'

From her vantage position on the balcony, Lucky giggled. Kalpana was in a good mood. She would sing.

'But, Didi, India has won the World Cup,' the man continued bravely.

'And, in celebration, you have demolished half a mound of my rice and your wife has taken home the other half. Now you want me to be your baiji too? Your requirements keep growing.'

'Come, Didi, one song at least,' the others joined in. The harmonium had already been brought out to the courtyard, Lucky noticed. That must have been Amol's doing.

With an immense display of reluctance, Kalpana dragged the instrument towards her. ‘Ufff, you lot are impossible. Ei, someone get me some cold water. Now, listen, just one song. And then I am going to kick you all out.’

‘Saaa ... sa re ... Saaa ... re ga ...’

She was a meticulous performer. Even in an informal setting such as this, Kalpana took her time, warming her voice and the instrument. She drank a sip from the pitcher that had been placed beside her. Clearing her throat a few times, she smiled at her audience, closed her eyes and began to sing one of Lucky’s favourite Goalpuria songs.

*Tomragele ki ashibe mor mahout bondhu re?*

Amol added his sonorous baritone to Kalpana’s voice. Lucky’s fingers kept beat on the balustrade. Geeta stood up, startling her.

‘Are you leaving, Didi?’

‘I will go and read a while.’

Lucky did not join the others. Most in the audience were inebriated, and even Amol had not been shy of the rum. It reflected in his singing. He was challenging Kalpana, and their vocal flirtation inspired a few of the men to start dancing. Lucky closed her eyes, and her thoughts flitted from Opu to Samar to the conversations with the women this afternoon.

She watched Amol get up now and cross the courtyard to go to the toilet. Her husband would have to be persuaded, but she had made up her mind—they would leave Gopalpur. Her parents had made the mistake of ignoring the signs until it was too late. That Lucky was alive tonight was due to an Indian army officer. She soon found herself smiling.

‘Where are you tonight, Kabir Singh Chowdhury?’ she asked, almost aloud, pushing back a few strands of hair from her forehead.

Joi Aai Asom. Hail Mother Assam.

The slogan pierced through the raucous celebrations and interrupted Lucky’s reminiscences. A shocked silence descended. The gates, at a distance, creaked harshly. Several young men emerged from the darkness onto the courtyard. Lucky checked the clock on the balcony wall as she rushed down the stairs. It was nearly 3 a.m.

Amol was standing next to Kalpana. A thick-set, bespectacled young man was speaking. As Lucky approached, he paused briefly. ‘What are you all celebrating?’ he asked, looking around. ‘This is not India. This is Assam. There is nothing to celebrate.’

Kalpana, for once, seemed lost for words. ‘Not India? Then who are we?’

‘You are Assamese. Or you are a foreigner and must leave our motherland.’

‘But, son, we have lived here all our lives. My great grandfather—’

‘We know your family history, Didi. And talking of family history, you are harbouring foreigners.’

Next to her, Lucky felt Amol tense. The young man was smiling, enjoying their discomfiture.

‘We have no one but family here, son,’ Kalpana replied.

‘Then who are these?’ He pointed to Lucky and Amol.

‘My aunt’s daughter and her husband.’

‘They are from Bangladesh. Is that not true, sister?’ He was staring at Lucky.

‘I have never lived in Bangladesh,’ Lucky replied.

‘But your family is from Dhaka. You grew up there?’

‘My mother was born in this very house.’ Lucky could feel the anger rising in her. ‘And now, may we ask who you are?’

‘We are sons of our motherland. We have taken an oath to free her from the foreigners who have subdued her for centuries. You and your family must leave. Consider this an ultimatum.’

‘Come here, young man. Let me see your face.’

Geeta was standing on the balcony, outside her room. The moon had moved behind the clouds, and Lucky could barely see her cousin. ‘Here,’ Geeta waved. ‘Come here.’

Without a moment’s hesitation, the young man left the group. He walked up to stand directly below Geeta.

‘Didi, nomoskar.’ He joined his palms in greeting.

‘Do you see this rifle, boy?’

‘Yes, I see it.’

‘I have killed my elephant with this. Do you know?’

‘Yes, Didi.’

‘Then you also know that I will not think twice before shooting you.’

‘Didi,’ the youth held a hand up. ‘How many of us will you shoot? You will run out of bullets and patience. There are thousands like me. Look at these boys. They are all ready to die to your bullets.’

He stood there looking up at Geeta until she brought the gun down. ‘We too have guns, Didi. But out of respect for your family, we want this to be peaceful.’

The young man turned around, as if daring Geeta to shoot him in the back. Even in the darkness, Lucky noticed the confident smile that played on his lips as he walked with slow, deliberate steps towards them.

‘Let us go,’ he said to rest of his group. He placed a hand fraternally on Amol’s shoulder. ‘Seven days, brother.’

**Somnath Batabyal** is the author of two books, *The Price You Pay*, a political thriller set in Delhi and *Making News in India*, an ethnography of television news practices in Rupert Murdoch's ventures in the country. Prior to this Somnath was an investigative reporter working in both print and television in India. He now lives in London where he teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies. This chapter is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Lucky*.

## **I Believe # Art Matters**

*Sanjoy K. Roy*

Even as the pandemic rolled out across the world and the first cases of Covid-19, were detected in India, the Prime Minister in his wisdom declared a countrywide lockdown and ordered that no one should cross the 'Lakshman Rekha' or threshold of their homes. One of the many street performers, (Beharupia) families asked, what this meant for them? Was the Lakshman Rekha a 'line not to be crossed', measured around the space on the pavement they inhabited, or the cart which contained their worldly possession, or in some cases the 12X12-foot shanty, assembled with plastic and tin that they called home?!

As factories, construction sites, restaurants, roadside eateries locked down, a perplexed daily-wage workforce wondered how they would survive, resulting in the great exodus, that has never been witnessed in the world during peace time, as millions began the arduous trudge home, pulling carts, carrying children, carting old people on makeshift beds, they travelled thousands of kilometers to their villages spread far and wide across the length and breadth of India. Transportation having ceased to ply, meant that every single person walked or occasionally cycled back and with no access to food or medicines; hundreds perished on the way! The government caught on the wrong foot, first stopped them crossing borders, then fumigated them by hosing them down with sanitizing fluid or just locked them up in halfway quarantine houses, stadiums, sheds and public spaces spread across state and city borders. Every village, city, gated community and condominium declared themselves independent and set in place stringent rules that disallowed wage earners and service providers including domestic workers, restaurant help, kitchen staff to access their places of work or sometimes even their homes if they had been working in hospitals or as front line workers. The resulting catastrophe impacted the economy and everyone dependent on it, even as resources and supply chains ceased and basic food and medicine became scarce and finally vanished from store shelves.

In all of this, artistes and artisans numbered in millions lost all their livelihoods. What everyone forgot was that if an artiste didn't perform or an artisan didn't sell their wares, they didn't eat. In India the cultural sector is governed by over 11 government ministries, mostly at odds with each other and with little coordination nor focused policy to help the sector. Very few have access to finance, insurance, savings or any real beneficial scheme. Grants provided to eminent dance and theatre companies, music academies and Gurus are disbursed

not in the beginning of the year, but at the end of the financial cycle ensuring an aspect of financial insecurity and hardship.

In the very first Covid 19 task force meetings, I was asked by a bureaucrat, 'why do artistes need money', assuming he was yanking my chain, I smiled wanly and then realized to my horror, that it was a genuine question. For him an artiste was a super star from the world of film or music with enough resources to contribute to the governments many relief funds and schemes.

I attempted to explained that the Creative Sector included everyone, 'from the Raagi in the Gurdwara, to the Baul singer in Bengal, from the traditional Bhangra performers from Punjab to the Bharatanatyam dancers, from workers who create stunning sets and backdrops for weddings and stage shows, to the lighting, sound and costume designers, and from the idol makers of Kumartuli to the sandstone carvers in Osian – Rajasthan. India's creative and cultural sector is dynamic with over 100 million people earning a primary of secondary income from a wide range of value-added services.

It was then that we realized the need of the hour was to educate and make policy-makers aware of how beneficial intangible heritage has been in building community, creating jobs, contributing to the local economy and therefore the vital need for an advocacy programme, committed to the cause of promoting and preserving art and craft through which we could highlight different aspects of the lives of artisans, the high level of skills required to create the humblest of clay diyas or the most intricately woven silk fabric. This gave rise to the ArtMatters initiative, in partnership with UNESCO, FICCI and ICCR.

Even as we began the ArtMatters campaign, to have artistes and artisans talk about their work, its value, the time and skill set taken to achieve excellence, and the million times you needed to perform the same action in order to create muscle memory to produce the finest weaves and the most intricate of designs, we realized that there was devastation in the sector and the need of the hour was first and foremost to secure food and financial resources for raw material and to create online platforms to market their products and showcase their work. We began the first fundraising campaign by creating a virtual 3D gallery for traditional arts including Worli, Gond, Madhubani and Bheel, bringing together some of the finest artists to create work with a contemporary theme, highlighting their art and providing them financial support through the sale of their work.

Teamwork Arts worked with multiple partners to produce a fundraising gala by artistes, for artistes - I Believe Art Matters, bringing together a diverse range of performers across music, theatre, dance, and cinema showcasing India's cultural diversity and its syncretic traditions, which was broadcast across social media platforms to an engaged viewership of over 1,90,000 viewers plus TV audiences who viewed this on the India Ahead news channel. The gala helped provide much-needed support to artistes and artisans, as well as celebrated their craft and tradition by highlighting their stories and their world.

Eight months post the staging of I Believe Art Matters, we seem to be back in unenviable position of the second wave which has ravaged India. The last few weeks has been spent coordinating oxygen cylinders, ICU beds, admissions and spots in mortuaries and crematorium. Each day was a challenge trying to cope with the sheer volume of requests and inevitably not being able to help most of them. We stood by helplessly as people from across the economic and power spectrum gasped for oxygen outside hospitals and a few who did get a bed still died as the oxygen cylinders ran dry! Even as Pandit Ranjan Mishra lay in wait for an ICU bed, Pandit Debu Chaudhuri passed away followed by his son and disciple Prateek Chaudhuri, countless writers, actors, artists and musicians have died and with them their art, learning, wisdom and experience.

Sadly 15 months into this ever-evolving tragedy, there has been little or no support provided to the sector in any form. Theatres continue to be darkened, artistes suffer the ignominy of begging for food and money, the larger art sector infrastructure has collapsed with backstage helpers, production staff, front of house, sweepers, cleaners, light and sound operators and designers, stenographers and constructors, costume and makeup artistes all falling by the wayside, selling fruits on the roadside, taking to daily labour or staying one step ahead of their next meal through food camps in the city. A few states have offered up a one-time token support, but barring Assam, Rajasthan, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, it appears that while every politician and person in influence pays lip service to India's glorious cultural tradition, they have little interest nor enthusiasm in supporting the sector.

As hunger and desperation takes over, artistes are facing unprecedented and heartbreaking challenges due to the utter collapse of the healthcare system in our country. Many remote areas do not even have access to RT-PCR tests, medicines and doctors for consultation. These artistes are in dire need of support as they are distraught with fear and anxiety without access to basic resources to tackle the pandemic. The need of the hour is to

combat the outbreak and help our artists and artisan communities survive the tsunami of rising infections. We have launched an emergency fund to provide them with a range of resources from food and rations to healthcare and medicines. We are doing everything in our power to ensure that they have a fighting chance for a sustainable livelihood and future and build on the progress achieved in 2020. We have launched a second series on I Believe – Art Matters, whereby Teamwork Arts will commission 10 inter-disciplinary collaborations to be performed, recorded and broadcast in July/ August 2021.

I Believe #ArtMatters

Facts & Figures

Number of Persons Supported: 5,554

Number of Families Supported: 1,386

Total Amount raised: INR 75,00,000

Number of Partner NGO's: 11

The 6.54-hour show brought together over 450 artists from across the country in an effort to leverage the digital medium, work in collaboration across time and space, and video record performances, often staged against the backdrop of the artists' bedroom, living area, terrace or neighbourhood park.

Performers included musicians across the classical, traditional and contemporary spectrum, 3G - 3 Generations of Percussion with Grammy award-winning Pt. Vikku Vinayakram and V. Selvaganesh.

Academy and Emmy award-winning composer, A.R. Rahman with his Sunshine Orchestra.

Aabha Hanjura – a Kashmiri folk singer.

Advaita, Ankur Tewari, Amit Trivedi who use traditional and classical music set to contemporary beats.

Singers Bhai Baldeep Singh, Bipul Chettri, Chugge Khan & Rajasthan Josh, a world music group from Rajasthan.

Harpreet, Harshdeep Kaur, Indian Ocean, Kailash Kher, the Raghu Dixit Project, V. Selvaganesh & Sivamani on the percussion, Shantanu Moitra & Swanand Kirkire, representing India's popular genre of indie rock, fusion and film music.

Karan Khosla & Co, Jazz musicians and the celebrated Usha Uthup, Trayam (B.C. Manjunath, Praveen D. Rao, Varijashree Venugopal) Ft. Pramath Kiran, showcasing contemporary Indian voices.

Neeraj Arya's Kabir Café and Shabnam Virmani, celebrating the essence of the Poet-Saint Kabir and his philosophy.

Rehmat-e-Nusrat, Salim-Sulaiman, Shekhar Ravjiani, Shillong Chamber Choir & lyricist AnvitaDutt, Shilpa Rao, Javed Ali, showcasing the best of contemporary and Bollywood music.

Violin Maestro & Composer Dr. L. Subramaniam & Kavita Krishnamurthi, Pandit Shubhendra& Saskia Rao on the sitar and cello, Ishaan & Pranshu Chaturlal, Soumik Datta, Vidya Shah, T. M. Krishna, representing India's classical traditions.

Sonam Kalra & the Sufi Gospel project,

The Kutle Khan Project showcasing the best of Rajasthani folk music and Nathu Lal Solanki and family who are the 13<sup>th</sup> generation of Nagara players from Pushkar, Rajasthan.

Theatre was represented through excerpts of award-winning plays from the annual META festival showcasing productions across languages and genres fro, across the country including;

Agarbatti - Directed by Swati Dubey, Amara Nritya Kala Hansa (ANKH), based on the story of the widows of Behmai whose husbands were shot dead by Phoolan Devi, the Bandit Queen.

Akshayambara in the Yakshagan Style, weighing in on the balance of power in any relationship. Written and Directed by SharanyaRamprakash

AndhaYug from the North East and the retelling of the Mahabharata saga - Directed by Joy Maisnam

C Sharp C Blunt by Sophia Stef and MD Pallavi, looking at how the digital world and gaming apps objectified women.

Elephant in the Room - Directed & written by Yuki Ellias, highlighting the angst of Lord Ganesha who having been beheaded by his father Lord Shiva and then been gifted an Elephant's head leaves home in search of his own truth.

Hamlet: The Clown Prince – a retelling of the classic in the tradition of clowns and Directed by Rajat Kapoor.

A multimedia puppet drama based on the Mahabharata using shadow puppets, actors, life-sized puppets. Directed by Anurupa Roy

Shikhandi - Directed by Faezeh Jalali.

PiyaBehrupiya - Directed by Atul Kumar

Nona - Directed by Jino Joseph, created out of a workshop with an entire village, set against the ongoing effort to drive a deep schism between communities and target those in the minority.

Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust's Transposition - Directed by Dadi Pudumjee based on the story of the Transposed Heads!

There was standup comedy filmed specially for the show and interwoven throughout with brilliant pieces by Papa CJ, Radhika Vaz & Abish Matthew.

The richness of Indian classical, traditional and contemporary dance was showcased with specially recorded performances by choreographer and Kathak dancer Aditi Mangaldas, ANKH, India's leading choreographer and dance school Ashley Lobo, Attakkalari Centre for Movement Arts, Bertwin D'Souza, Kucchipudi dancers Dr. Raja & Radha Reddy. A focus on the tradition of handlooms in a beautiful piece designed and choreographed by Malavika Sarukkai was performed along with Manjari Chaturvedi's Sufi Kathak.

The world renowned Nrityagram Dance company performed Oddissi; Shilpika Bordoloi from the North East, Rukmini Vijayakumar & Vijayalakshmi in the Mohiniattam dance tradition also participated.

A slew of presenters from the world of Film, Business, Arts and Politics came together to pay tribute; Ashvin Kumar - Writer, Director and Producer, Sharmila Tagore - Actor and Former Member of the Rajya Sabha, Actor Manisha Koirala, Director and Actor Deepa Sahi, Emmy Nominee Arjun Mathur, Actor-Director Nandita Das, Directors and Actors Ketan Mehta, Shekhar Kapoor and Lillete Dubey; Kumud Mishra & Ayesha Raza, Theatre and Film Actors.

Artistes and writers including Dr. Sonal Mansingh, Doyenne of Classical Indian Dance, Guru, Choreographer, Scholar, Author, and MP, Rajya Sabha; Novelist Shobhaa De and Shashi Tharoor, Author, Politician, and Diplomat.

From the world of business: Ashok Wadhwa - Group Chief Executive Officer, Ambit & Reena Wadhwa, Sangeetha Reddy - President and Dilip Chenoy - Secretary-General, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industries (FICCI), and Anand Mahindra-Chairman, Mahindra Group asked for support.

#### Beneficiaries Included:

1. A. R. Rahman Foundation - Mumbai: The foundation aims to unite the society and empower opportunities, provide sustained intervention in life-skill development through music education, and support research, documenting and archiving projects in the arts.
2. Ananda Shankar Center for Performing Arts: A non-profit organisation based in Kolkata which presents aesthetic arts and provides a platform to dynamic and talented youngsters to showcase their talents.
3. Amarrass Society for Performing Arts: ASPA travels into the remote regions of the country to conduct research, archive, promote, and create market and trade opportunities for the musicians, instrument makers and other indigenous craftspeople.
4. Artists 2 Artists - Mumbai: The vision of this foundation is to support young theatre artists who have been suffering due to the pandemic.
5. Brahmaputra Cultural Foundation: A not-for-profit organisation founded in 2013 (under the Societies Act) by ShilpikaBordoloi to preserve and promote cultural traditions of North-east India and showcase performing and visual arts practices from around the globe.
6. Jaipur Rugs: The foundation works to engage with artisans in 600 villages of 5 states namely Rajasthan, UP, Bihar, Gujarat and Jharkhand to develop their creative capacities and sustain them as a part of an entire movement of empowerment. (Location: Jaipur, Rajasthan. Number of families helped through I Believe: 80).
7. Sufi Kathak Foundation in New Delhi and Lucknow: provides medical support, pensions and annual scholarships to retired artists, wives of deceased artists and keen

students who do not possess the finances, for pursuing courses in music and dance under various schemes.

8. Sutradhaar Social Ventures – Behrupiya Community: Sutradhaar works closely with indigenous communities on protection and revival of cultural ethnicity of the respective regions, and building pride amongst the young to carry forward the traditions at risk of becoming extinct.
9. Rajasthan Josh Sidhar Vikas Sansthan: The institute is focused on identifying a few select master craftsmen from the Manganiyar communities in Jaisalmer, Jodhpur and Barmer districts in Rajasthan and supporting them by providing rations and basic necessities.
10. Zariya Foundation - Mumbai: We aim to alleviate the suffering of the poor, abandoned, sick and dying and to uplift the standards of health and education for the youth around the world.
11. Independent artists and the vast range of artists who performed for the show also benefitted.

It was an extraordinary celebration of the arts in the most difficult times where celebrated artistes come together with emerging names and groups, across genre and collaborated and connected with each other across the digital divide to create this spectacle.

A.R. Rahman said: `Covid 19 has had a devastating impact on so many of India’s folk and traditional artistes, musicians, painters, dancers & weavers. I Believe Art Matters, a fundraising showcase by artistes for artistes aim to support them, and they need our support’.

Manoj Bajpayee asked viewers to “Support the artistes of India, and support our world of beauty and creativity.”

Shabana Azmi stated, “I believe artistes are central, not peripheral, to our lives and we must support artistes and artisans in their time of need.

And the graceful Sharmila Tagore said, “We are all surrounded by art and I Believe #ArtMatters, even more so in these difficult times!

Anand Mahindra, a firm believer in the power of the arts, said,

“I believe, as a businessman and an art connoisseur, that ART DOES MATTER.”

Dr Shashi Tharoor said; “Art has been the lodestar, showing us the way to progress and enlightenment and it is imperative that we support the artistes and artisans who have little access to banking or relief schemes.

The over 700-minute mega show was anchored by actors Shabana Azmi and Manoj Bajpayee and were intercut with appeals and endorsements for the arts and the artisans.

The resources raised from the show have gone on to benefit a number of NGOs and foundations working with artistes and artisans in an effort to promote the arts, sustain them and in these difficult times, provide much-needed financial sustenance, food and medical aid.

Much needs to be done to sustain the sector; most importantly there needs to be the will and intent to acknowledge the value of the arts which will bind us as a people, anchor us to our rich tradition and help us cross these difficult times.

**Sanjoy K. Roy**, an entrepreneur of the arts, is the Managing Director of Teamwork Arts, which produces over 33 highly acclaimed performing arts, visual arts and literary festivals across 40 cities in countries such as Australia, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UK and USA, including the world's largest free literary gathering — the annual Jaipur Literature Festival. Roy has received the National Award for Excellence and Best Director for the film *Shahjahanabad: The Twilight Years*. He is a founder trustee of Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT) working to provide support services for street and working children in the inner city of Delhi where over 55,000 children have benefited from education, training and residential services. In 2011, the White House presented SBT the US President's Committee of Arts and Humanities Award for an International Organisation. Roy works closely with various industry bodies and Government on policy issues within the Creative Industries and Cultural Sector in India and is a senior office bearer on several committees working on policy infrastructure for the creative industries - he is Co-chair of the Art and Culture Committee of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and former President of Event and Entertainment Management Association (EEMA) and an advisor to the Arts Council of England Diversity board for theatre. He is on the advisory council of various International Agencies, Federations and Universities. Roy has lectured and works in collaboration with Universities including those of Western Australia, DUT, Brisbane, Monash, University of Chicago, Harvard, MIT Media lab, Admas, Symbiosis, University of Houston, Columbia College, London School of Economics, University of York, Swansea.

## The Red and the Black: America's 'Despised Races'

*Tom Hubbard*

1

Thanks to long-mobilised political foot-soldiers, Georgia rejected Trump and his acolytes at the recent presidential and senatorial contests. Kamala Harris is now the first of South Asian and African American heritage, as well as the first woman, to be elected Vice-President. It remains to be seen if these developments mark a permanent and effective trend in the USA.

The phrase 'despised races' is Robert Louis Stevenson's; it heads a chapter of his *The Amateur Emigrant* (1895). Then – and since then – it would cover a multiplicity of peoples of non-European origin, but for present purposes let's concentrate on two of those despised: Native American, formerly 'Red Indians' and who now tend to be cited as First Nations; and blacks, now designated as Afro- or African Americans.

Conventional historiography recorded these peoples as sidelines at best, footnotes at worst, and mainly in relation to the whites; more innovative scholarship, in recent decades, has made them more difficult to ignore. During the nineteenth century, any focus was on slaves and 'savages'. The Civil War, of course, was fought on states 'rights' and the prevalence of slavery; as regards the 'Indians', the military engagements were spread over a far longer period with temporally distant flashpoints such as Little Big Horn / 'Custer's Last Stand' (1876) and the genocide at Wounded Knee (1890), let alone the continuous process of How the West Was 'Won'. That has been called 'the Other Civil War'.

The nature of white oppression of these 'despised races' differed as to those who were targeted. In the novel *Iola Leroy* (1892) by the African American writer Frances Harper, a character remarks that whites wanted the African Americans' labour and the First Nations' land. Given that distinction, these questions face us: what relations, if any, existed between the 'red' and the 'black'? Was there any possibility of solidarity between them? Is there evidence of any cross-over between their cultures, such as might challenge the dominant narratives of, say, *literary* history?

Any answers, at first light and even beyond, don't seem promising. The histories of First Nations and African Americans just don't gel. Inevitably, this has much to do with the perceptions of the dominant whites. In his short and sparkling biography of Abraham Lincoln (2003), Thomas Keneally offers a stark expression of just that: 'A boy raised with the tale of his grandfather's slaughter at the hands of Indian marauders in Kentucky, Lincoln never seemed to think it a national sin that Indians were forced off their land to make way for the settlers – the way he did when black men and women were kept in bondage to enhance the wealth of Southern property owners.' Mark Twain, in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), presents the escaping slave Jim in an entirely positive light, but the book's prequel, *Tom Sawyer* (1876) has as its murderous villain the 'half-breed' Injun Joe. In other writings Twain was capable of vicious racist remarks on the indigenous peoples.

Yet scholars have demonstrated that in both cases, Lincoln's and Twain's, the situation is a great deal more complex, nuanced, ambivalent. In December 1862 a band of 303 Sioux launched an attack on white settlements. They were caught and sentenced to death. Lincoln as President spared all but 38 who were hanged on the 26<sup>th</sup> 'in what was, and remains, simultaneously the largest mass execution and largest act of executive clemency in American history. A mere five years later Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.' (Christopher W. Anders, 'Native Americans and the Origin of Abraham Lincoln's Views on Race', *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 37:1, 2016). The famous Emancipation Proclamation, of course, applied only to African Americans.

In due course, and in his policies, Lincoln would demonstrate greater and practical respect for First Nations peoples, but his commitment to markedly paternalistic reforms was interrupted by his assassination in 1865. On the level of their members as individuals, and as far back as 1832 when he enlisted in the war against Black Hawk, his compassion was not altogether absent: Captain Lincoln saved the life of an Indian peace envoy whom his men unjustly suspected of being a spy and whom they threatened to kill.

Mark Twain's later utterances contain robust condemnation of the whites' depredations against Native Americans. Even in *Tom Sawyer*, and towards the end of the story, the eponymous young hero feels empathy on learning of Injun Joe's death from starvation in the locked-up cave – the same sinister labyrinth where Tom and Becky Thatcher had huddled in fear of capture by Joe. The ambivalence is clear: 'Tom was touched, for he knew by his own experience how this wretch had suffered. His pity was moved, but nevertheless he felt an

abounding sense of relief and security, now, which revealed to him in a degree which he had not fully appreciated before, how vast a weight of dread had been lying upon him since the day he lifted his voice against this bloody-minded outcast.’

In *Iola Leroy*, the African American novel already cited above, a character remarks that “‘Someone [...] has said that the Indian belongs to an old race and looks gloomily back to the past, and that the negro belongs to a young race and looks hopefully towards the future.’” Moreover, in the course of his autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), the African American educationist Booker T. Washington recalls sharing a residence with some seventy-five Native American youths: ‘I was the only person in the building who was not a member of their race. At first I had a good deal of doubt about my ability to succeed. I knew that the average Indian felt himself above the white man, and, of course, he felt himself far above the Negro, largely on account of the fact of the Negro having submitted to slavery – a thing which the Indian would never do.’

Given such observations, it may not altogether surprise us when we learn about certain strange – at first apparently strange – allegiances during the Civil War. In his history of the war, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), James McPherson cites three regiments of Native Americans who took the side of those opposed to the interests of the African Americans: those regiments ‘mostly Cherokee, served under chiefs who had made treaties of alliance with the Confederacy in the hope of achieving greater independence within a southern nation than they enjoyed in the United States – an ironic hope, since it was mostly southerners who had driven them from their ancestral homeland a generation earlier.’

Of the Cherokee, more later ...

## 2

Two white Southern writers are claimed to have pioneered the phonetic (more or less) transcription of African American speech. Thomas Nelson Page’s short story ‘Marse Chan’ (1884) – ‘Mars’ meaning ‘master’ – idealised the master-slave relationship and played down the brutal realities of slavery. Here we have the chivalrous old-world Virginian aristocrats, the gorgeous Southern Belles, the loyal and loving ‘darkies’. Suchlike ingredients would be reheated in the movie *Gone with the Wind*. ‘Marse Chan’ is nostalgic for the pre-war South with its gallantry, glamour, codes of honour, duelling, and the lesser breed knowing its place.

Joel Chandler Harris is the collector-author of the *Uncle Remus* stories, first published in 1879 and continuing into the early years of the twentieth century. Many people who know the stories might not be able to name Harris himself. He was a friend of Mark Twain, whose small daughters were disappointed when they met the unassuming Georgian from Atlanta. They expected someone as charismatic as the old black servant Remus who frames and narrates the tales to a young white kid. Twain's kids had assumed that Harris himself would be old and black.

Indeed, Harris has been subject to accusations of cultural appropriation in his versions of African American oral tradition, of 'fakelore'. It must be said that Harris, like Page, accepted comforting myths of master-slave relationships, but again we're faced with nuance and ambivalence. Harris was no white supremacist thug intent on storming the Capitol. The shy, gentle Atlantan 'opposed both miscegenation *and* the idea of genetic superiority' (Mark Schone, 'Uncle Remus is Dead, Long Live Uncle Remus', *Oxford American*, January / February 2003). In a letter to Andrew Carnegie, Harris declared that he desired 'the obliteration of prejudice'.

In 'Free Joe and the Rest of the World', one of Harris's non-Remus stories, we read the tragedy of a slave who has been freed, but his wife remains in bondage. For Joe, freedom is accompanied by the cruelties of a post-Civil War society still given over, in essence, to the old system. Joe has his 'freedom' of sorts but not what we'd call civic and human rights.

In the Uncle Remus stories the captured Brer Rabbit tricks Brer Fox by calling on him to mutilate him terribly rather than fling him into the brier-patch like the one where, unknown to Brer Fox, he was 'bred and bawn'. Like Brer Rabbit, black slaves were up against the strong; they had to hope that the strong were also stupid. They had to resort to cunning. As far back as 1861, the first year of the Civil War and the publication of her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the escaped slave Harriet Jacobs (aka 'Linda Brent') records this example of an African American 'trickster' in the Brer Rabbit mode: "So I tought [thought] dis nigger had a right to money nuff to bring him to de Free States. Massa Henry he lib till ebery body vish him dead; anven he die, I knowed de debbil would have him, and wouldn'tvant him to bring his money'long too. So, I tuk some of his bills, and put 'em in de pocket of his ole trousers. Anven he was buried, dis nigger ask fur dem ole trousers, and dey gub 'em to me." With a low, chuckling laugh, he added, "You see I didn't *steal* it; dey *gub* it to me."

There is a puzzle concerning the origins of the plantation tales on which Harris based the *Uncle Remus* books. It has been claimed that they derive ultimately not from African America but from Africa itself.

Yet when we turn to a lesser-known book by Harris, *On the Plantation* (1892), we encounter Injun Bill, who is of mixed African American and First Nation parentage – “my daddy [...] he wuz Cher’kee Injun” – and matters become somewhat complicated. “Mix Injun wi’ nigger,” continues Bill, “an’ they hain’t no kind er rigmarole they won’t git up.” Bill and his fellow blacks are discussing a Brer Rabbit story, and he maintains “Datain’t no nigger tale. My daddy tell that tale, an’ he wa’nt no nigger. I wish I could tell it like I hear him tell it.”

Indeed, on turning to James Mooney’s *Myths of the Cherokee* (1900), we find in this collection much that’s familiar from the Remus corpus. Mooney records two versions of what would become the most celebrated of Harris’s pieces, here titled ‘The Rabbit and the Tar Wolf’. Here is the conclusion of the second Cherokee version:

‘When the fox and wolf got hold of [the Hare, rather than a rabbit, here] they consulted what it was best to do with her. One proposed cutting her head off. This the hare protested would be useless, as it had often been tried without hurting her. Other methods were proposed for dispatching her, all of which she said would be useless. At last it was proposed to let her loose to perish in a thicket. Upon this the hare affected great uneasiness and pleaded hard for life. Her enemies, however, refused to listen and she was accordingly let loose. As soon, however, as she was out of reach of her enemies she gave a whoop, and bounding away she exclaimed: “This is where I live.”’

Mooney cites his printed source of the story as the *Cherokee Advertiser* of December 18, 1845, a date that precedes Harris’s birth by three years.

Does this, then, disprove the African origin of these stories? Not necessarily, if we are to acknowledge that the question of how folk tales ‘travel’ between apparently disparate cultures is the foundation of much debate by anthropologists. Could there be any conduits by which such lore is traceable, ultimately, to both Cherokee and African American traditions? Can the likes of Injun Bill’s mixed parentage give us a clue? Otherwise, that first question, surely, sounds bizarre.

When I worked in North Carolina I was in the company of a group of students sitting in the sun outside the library café. One of them told us that she'd been approached by a recruiter for the Ku Klux Klan. When the student asked why she should join she received the answer, 'Cause us white folks has gotta stick togethuh.' The student retorted, 'What makes ya think I'm white? I'm more 'n half Cherokee.'

**Tom Hubbard** is a novelist, poet and literary/cultural historian. His most recent book is *The Devil and Michael Scot: a Gallimaufry of Fife and Beyond* (Grace Note Publications, 2020).

***My Father's Face: Kaushik Goswami in Conversation with Chandra Gurung***

*Kaushik Goswami*

Born and brought up in a remote village in the district of Gorkha in Nepal, Chandra Gurung is an emerging poet who is currently located and in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Earlier, he worked as a teacher in a private boarding school in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal.

Gurung usually writes poems in the Nepali language. His first anthology of Nepali poetry was published in 2007. His second poetry collection entitled *My Father's Face* has recently been published in 2020 by Rubric Publishing, New Delhi. This is a collection of 47 poems in English translation. Besides, Gurung actively works as a translator of poems from English, Arabic and Hindi into Nepali. His works have been published in several online and print publishing houses. For his contributions to Nepali poetry, he was awarded Asvikrit Bichar Sahitya Samman in 2016.

This interview is mainly based on his book *My Father's Face*. It is the result of a three-month-long (8<sup>th</sup> August to 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2020) email interaction between Chandra Gurung and the interviewer.

**Koushik Goswami (KG):** What prompts you to write about Nepalese life and culture?

**Chandra Gurung (CG):** I firmly consider that writers should nurture the lifeblood of their societies and convey that lifeblood to others. They must capture its essence in their own unique way, and reflect on it, so that others may understand. Accordingly, I am obliged to hold up a mirror to my society, and reveal its true face. I look upon this as being my responsibility as a writer. There shouldn't be any reason to prevent me from writing about Nepalese life and culture. Everyday life in all its manifestations is present in my poems. The natural beauty of Nepal, its people who are from different ethnic groups living in peace and harmony, and the social and political tribulations that they face, constitute the main themes that I address in my work. Wherever I go, my poems must carry the essence of my homeland and its culture.

**KG:** Why did you title your book *My Father's Face*?

**CG:** We humans need names as a means of identification in the same way that books need titles. An aesthetically appealing title is a great advantage. My poems are my offspring. I have given birth to them. Finding an attractive book title is like finding a good name for a house where my poems can live. The poem "My Father's Face" is very close to my heart. I

sought to show my delight at being my father's son and ended this poem with the verification, 'You look exactly like your father.' I am pleased to take the name for my book from this poem.

**KG:** This is your translated book. Do you think that in the process of translation the emotions and feelings of a writer are lost? How close do you work with your translator? To what extent does this translated book do justice to your original work?

**CG:** Robert Frost famously stated that poetry is what gets lost in translation. Many have stated that poetry is untranslatable. But poetry has been and continues to be translated. The flowers of poetry thrive on translation. It is impossible to imagine the completeness of poetry without it. Translation opens up a world of new language. It broadens us in the way travel does, it gives us new experiences and takes our imagination to new places.

Unquestionably, any work of translation can't do justice to the original. Poetry has an essential inner rhythm. The translator of poetry needs to go beyond the literal meaning, below the surface of the words to find the true implied meaning. Poetry that has been translated needs to retain many of the characteristics and qualities of the original as far as possible. Only the best translators can get near this. To catch the essence of a poem, close work between the translator and the poet is essential.

**KG:** You write from a diasporic space. Do you feel any conflict between homeland and hostland?

**CG:** The diasporic space endows a huge platform of opportunities for writers. It exposes them to new experiences that lead to an imaginative access to the lives of people from different backgrounds and cultures. Being a part of a diasporic community enables me to explore issues such as migration, belonging and self-identity. Uncertainty in the process of settlement in the new location and the pain of leaving behind one's homeland offer opportunities for the writer to engage in frequent dialogue between the homeland and the hostland. Attachments to the country of one's birth and attraction toward the host country are simultaneous but contradictory journeys moving along together.

**KG:** Why have you described Nepal as a beautiful garden in your poems? And what are the causes of its destruction?

**CG:** A country that has eight of the highest mountains in the world is no doubt beautiful. It is full of snow-covered plateaus in the north and the centre and vast plains in the south. Nature

is at its best in Nepal. Various seasons come and go and show their magic. It is the country of Lord Buddha, the world-famous brave Gurkha soldiers and a peace-loving people. The bi-culturally diverse society and the natural environment make Nepal a beautiful country. These natural and societal images are to be found in abundance in my work.

Despite rich natural resources the country is lagging behind in the developmental activities. We overthrew the 104-year-old autocratic Rana regime in 1951. In 2006 Nepalese people agitated against the undemocratic rule of the King and established a People's Republic. But nothing has changed even after that. Bribery, corruption and racketeering are rampant. Nepal faces an economic crisis despite the fact that a large number of Nepalese work abroad and support the economy of the country. Dirty politics and incompetent leaders are to be blamed for the destruction. Readers can learn all about these things from my poems.

**KG:** You have spoken about the impact of riots and Maoist insurgency on the people of Nepal. Do you think that the political uprisings have had profound impact on Nepalese life as well as on Nepalese literature and culture? Will you kindly elaborate?

**CG:** The 1990 People's movement brought an end to absolute monarchy and the beginning of constitutional monarchy. The Maoist Insurgency was a civil war in Nepal fought from 1996 to 2006. The rebellion was launched with the stated purpose of overthrowing the monarchy.

These political uprisings have had a profound impact on Nepalese life. Civil War forced many people to flee their homes. The young preferred to go to the Gulf countries and Malaysia to seek job opportunities and a brighter future. Thus, the agricultural country changed to a remittance-oriented country, remittances earned by its people living abroad. Literary works produced during this period depict the transitional phase of Nepalese society and politics. These changes and the dilemmas that the country has faced in recent years have found expression in succeeding literary genres.

**KG:** You have talked about poverty, unemployment, corruption and also criticized political leaders, Government and the Establishment in your poems. Why?

**CG:** Shelley has said that poets can influence public aspirations because they are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. There is a larger role for poets and poetry in society. By addressing the issues of their time, poets can make significant contributions to campaigns for social justice. It is poetry's ability to relay awareness of experience that cements its role in the society at large.

In the context of Nepal, corrupt politicians and a lack of political vision have ruined the new democracy right from the start. The sufferings of the people have not diminished. Political parties have failed to give voice to their concerns. In such a time, writing poetry has become my way of fighting against these predicaments. I want my poetry to inspire people to oppose all forms of evil, bring about societal awareness and make us think critically about the present political-social quandary.

**KG:** Your poem “Nation, Bones and the Dogs” contains the lines: “Nation is seen as hanging piece of bone / In the tattered map on the wall” – How will you interpret these lines? Does Nepal as a nation suffer from an identity crisis?

**CG:** I have exposed the condition of my country through various metaphors and similes. I have compared it with an old lamp post brooding with a fused bulb at the corner of the street to show its devastating present; in another poem it appears as a warring soldier injured in the eye, and in the poem “Nation, Bones and the Dogs” the nation is shown as a piece of bone. If you look closely at the shape of Nepal on a map, it resembles a hanging piece of bone. This simile clicked in my mind as a theme for this particular poem.

I have shared this poem a couple of times on Facebook. It has appeared in magazines as well. A friend of mine has recited and uploaded it on to YouTube too. Readers have interpreted this poem in different ways. Nepal is pictured as a piece of bone and the term ‘dogs’ refers to the political leaders. I wanted to state that the leaders have torn, bitten and chewed the country in much the same way that a dog would chew the meat off a bone.

**KG:** In your poems you have repeatedly referred to the word ‘war.’ What kind of war do you mean? Do you mean civil war?

**CG:** ... Ha HaHa. Actually, it is not the civil war. It is a made-up war involving many different evil factions. A poet must be an acute observer of society and paint a portrait of it in words in the best way possible. A poet is in a constant state of flux dealing with a mixture of internal emotions including all joy, sadness, fear and hope as well as any other feeling evoked by external affairs.

A poet is always at war with these tribulations. He uses the pen as a weapon with which to fight evil. My pen battles with those who have contributed to corruption, disorder, bribery, inflation and anarchy in the country. My war is with those leaders who promised us dreams but never bothered to fulfill them. I am at war with those who have robbed the lustre from the eyes of my country. I am fighting with our impotent Government who is unable to give birth

to developments. This war is with many other evils destroying the peace, humanity and brotherhood of my society.

**KG:** You have used many natural images and interpreted them from both positive and negative angles like the image of the sun, the moon, evening, morning, trees, stars, thunderbolt, buds, desert, rain, clouds and the like. Why have you used such images?

**CG:** I am from a hilly village in the mid-western part of Nepal. My village is surrounded by green hills laden with deep forests and the snow-capped Himalayas. One of the biggest rivers of Nepal – Budhi Gandaki – can be seen flowing from the south of my village. Many small rivers touch my village. The forest above my village is a great source of grass and wood. Thus, my village life is close to nature.

Writers record what they see, feel and experience. These various natural images have had an impact on my way of thinking and perception. I grew up seeing them and became familiar with them. This is probably the reason why they are present in my writing in the form of images.

**KG:** You have started your book with the poem “My Father’s Face” and ended with “Mother.” Is there any reason for this?

**CG:** I have grouped my poems in different categories depending on their themes and subjects. Arranging the poems this way makes it easy for critics and readers. So it happened that the poem about father became the opening poem. Since, I had a short and sweet poem on mother too; I found it symmetrically satisfying to place it at the end of the collection. There was no other reason behind this. It just happened that way.

**KG:** What are your future plans in terms of creative writings?

**CG:** I plan to publish more collections of my own poems and to continue to translate poems from other languages. Apart from poetry, I am also writing essays about the Nepalese migrants in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) countries. Their routines and hectic lives stimulate me.

**Koushik Goswami** is currently pursuing PhD at the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Earlier he completed his M.Phil in English from the University of Burdwan. He received JU-RUSA doctoral fellowship and was a Humanities Visiting Scholar, Exeter University, United Kingdom. He was invited by the College of Humanities, Exeter University, and University of East Anglia, England, to deliver talks on his PhD topic and for academic discussion. Some of his recently published articles are: “Rewriting Tibet in *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* (2019) by Tsering Namgyal Khortsa” (a review article, published by *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*), “Cool Texts, Cold Wars: Singapore and Tibet in Historical Fiction of Small States” (*The Calcutta Journal of Global Affairs*), “The Politics of Fencing and Exchanges of Enclaves: A Study of the Indo-Bangladesh Border” (*Border, Globalization and Identity*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing), “Violence as Spectacle: Manjula Padmanabhan’s Treatment of Ethical Responsibility in *Lights Out*” (*Apperception*, Visva-Bharati) and “Nation and Diaspora in Manjushree Thapa’s Select Stories” (*Borders and Border Crossing: Reading Partition, Reading Diaspora*, University of Burdwan Press). His areas of interest include South Asian Literature, Diaspora Studies, and Postcolonial Literature.

**Chandra Gurung** is a Nepali poet/translator. He has two poetry collections in his credit. His works have been featured in many international anthologies including: More of My Beautiful Bahrain, Snow Jewel, The Collections of Poetry and Prose series, Warscapes.com, and many others. He was selected as one of the 41 contributing poets in *Translating Migration: Multilingual Poems of Movement*. Two of his poems were selected for “The Best Asian Poetry-2021” anthology published by Kitaab, Singapore. He was long listed for “Medieval Poetry Contest 2021”.

## **Sing of Life: Revisioning Tagore's *Gitanjali***

*Priya Sarukkai Chabria*

In conversation with

*Malashri Lal*

Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Sing of Life: Revisioning Tagore's Gitanjali* was published by Westland in 2021. In a candid conversation with academic and critic Malashri Lal, Priya Chabria explores her profound bond with "Gurudev" and the creative emergence of this book. Poet, translator and novelist, Priya Chabria has eleven books to her credit. She was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize and she has twice been awarded for her Outstanding Contribution to Literature by the Indian Government. She is Founding Editor of Poetry at Sangam <http://poetry.sangamhouse.org/> and curates poetry festivals. [www.priyasarukkaichabria.com](http://www.priyasarukkaichabria.com). Malashri Lal, Professor in the English Department (retd), and Former Director of Women's Studies and Development Centre at the University of Delhi, has a specialization in literature, women and gender studies about which she has sixteen books. Malashri Lal is currently Member, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi, Govt of India.

**ML.** *Revisioning Tagore's Gitanjali* is an act of courage. I know that you revel in innovations and keep faith in intuition. Some years ago, you had said at a conference, "As a practitioner I question the given in the present, turn up the soil of the past and peer into the starlit darkness of what may be." In the context of your new book, you are either a rebel or an acolyte since *Gitanjali* is a much-revered text and only an utterly confident person would dare to play with it. What was your inspiration?

**PC.** Thank you! In truth, I have never begun a writing project with less preparation. Like many Indians, I learnt Song 35, "Where the mind is without fear" in school; it remained like an underground stream in my consciousness. However, the *Gitanjali* suddenly thrust its full splendour into my life two years ago when my husband and I were holidaying in the Himalayan resort of Bir. While we waited for our coffee, he selected the book from a café bookshelf. When we left the café, we took the book to a photocopier's for I was completely in its thrall. As I read, or rather fell into it, certain words from each of the *Songs* lifted like swans into my mind. Back in the hotel room, I noted these risen phrases in a notebook.

In hindsight, I think as my eyes scanned the lines, Tagore's *Song Offerings* seemed to open up and grant me a *darshan* of its living presence. The mutuality implicit in the idea of *darshan* – of seeing and being seen -- is how I now understand this experience.

Rapture made me reckless. I didn't pause to think how my experiment with a revered text would be received. The reason perhaps rests in this beautiful verse from the *Mundaka Upanishad*, translated by Tagore: "From joy does spring all this creation, by joy is it maintained, towards joy does it progress, and into joy does it enter."

**ML.** Priya, your work on Bhakti poets is well known, especially your book *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess*. The address to the deity is friendly and intimate as though in human form. Tagore belonged to the reformist Brahmo Samaj and believed in a formless divinity. Where do you find the romance of Bhakti in him though you do evoke his passion in your introductory essay?

**PC.** Tagore possessed an esemplastic imagination which is intuitive and unitive; he saw the Whole behind the parts, the One within the many. We also know how he was deeply shaped by the Upanishads and the poetry of Baul singers who tread the pathless path towards the sacred.

As you mentioned, the Bhakti *marg* can be approached by conceiving the divine as embodying a specific form which is the *saguna* paradigm. Andal gloriously follows this path as she passionately envisions the sacred as her Beloved, Krishna. However, bhakti also upholds the *nirgunamode* which draws from the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad's* identification of Brahman as *neti-neti*, or "not only this, not only that either". The *Gitanjali* is awash with the immanence of grace even in its darkest moments. I perceive Tagore as a 20<sup>th</sup> century *nirguna* bhakti poet for the *Gitanjali* overflows with *samadarshan* or the levelling equity of the loving gaze. Take, for instance,

### Song 69

The same stream of life that runs  
through my veins runs through the world

The same life that shoots  
through dust in blades of grass and  
breaks into leaves and flowers

The same life is rocked  
 in the ocean-cradle  
       of birth and death

My limbs are made glorious  
 by its touch  
 My pride is the life-throb  
 dancing

~

the same life

the same life

the same life

in my blood

- ML.** Let me turn to the craft or writing. The famous opening lines of *Gitanjali* are “Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure/This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life”. You have described Tagore’s lines as “prose” while many readers would modify that as “prose poetry”, specially because the original Bengali poems were written as lyrics. In Tagore’s address to the divine, there is a formality as well as the recognition of a hierarchy. You have changed this around. How and why?
- PC.** I believe I’ve used both ‘prose’ and ‘prose-poems’ as mentioned in my book’s jacket. The celebrated sonorous musicality of the Bengali original doesn’t always come through in his translation, though the beauty of his thoughts and imagination takes our breath away!

The *Gitanjali*'s luminous relevance and living presence is, I think, best conveyed to contemporary readers through the directness of 'you' than the archaic 'Thou/ Thee'. Ideally, my preference would be to use, were it available in the English, an endearing synonym of intimacy such as 'tu' in the Hindi against the formal 'aap' and the everyday 'tum'. Also, since I translate sacred verse, 'you' channels the skin-wrapping, transformative ardour of bhakti. In short, *Sing of Life* is a leap of faith where one hopes one has hit the right note.

**ML.** Your abiding interest lies in gendered narratives and I completely agree with you that Rabindranath broke past the stereotypes of man and woman, and he cherished the idea of a companionate relationship. You mention "an osmosis of gendering, in which male and female identities pass through the membrane of the imagination." In *Gitanjali* how did you organise the gendered differentials that do appear occasionally in the text?

**PC.** Malashri, I don't remember pondering over this issue. Numerous references from the enchanted worlds of *nayika-nayaka bedha* of Sanskrit literature, alongside bhakti and Tamil Sangam poetics where male poets often adopted women's voices perhaps guided my intuitive choices.

In Song 52 Tagore sings, "You depart. I find /on the bed a petal / I find / your sword heavy as a bolt /of thunder," This points us to the concept of the wandering *abhisarika nayika* of Sanskrit poetics who plunges through the stormy night, physical and metaphorical, to meet her Beloved. Or this heartrending image, from Song 41, "Raise me / a beggar girl / like a creeper in a summer breeze." We also know Tagore's encompassing vision shoots beyond the human, as he sings in Song 69. "The same stream of life that runs/ through my veins runs through the world." His humility and tenderness move one deeply.

**ML.** Rabindranath's humanism was never far from a practical philosophy of living. According to him, religion and spirituality were deeply linked to an empathy for people. Educationist and a social reformer, Tagore used poetry as a means to elevate the ordinary to the planes of extraordinary sensitivity. Does this reflect in your transcreations of *Gitanjali*?

**PC.** I agree with your position but it's finally up to readers to decide! Part of the allure of the *Gitanjali / Song Offerings* is his abiding faith in the power of art as a means of spiritual revival. "Art is the response of man's creative soul to the call of the Real", Tagore declares. Time and again, he writes about the act of writing, and of making

music. Take Song 75, in my second stepped transcreation, “from the words / of a poet/men take/ meanings/ their last/ meaning / points/ to you”. All I can honestly say is the time I spent with the *Gitanjali* was transformative.

**ML.** Your version of *Gitanjali* is endearingly modern in its imagistic layout and crisp word play. Though different from the original there is a distinct reflection peering through the stirred-up waters. How conscious were your choices in vocabulary and cadence?

**PC.** For me, ‘revision’ suggests two verbs at the same time. ‘Revise’ in order to strike a chord in the language of today; and, ‘re-look /re-present’ which is more radical and indicates a deeper exploration of the text. Thus, both meanings come into play.

*Sing of Life* is a tribute, therefore rigour and minimal intervention was my mantra. I did not add a single word of mine nor change the order of Tagore’s words though his prose embroidery fell away. In a sense, *Sing of Life* is an excavation. As mentioned earlier, archaic pronouns, valid in Tagore’s time, were substituted with the colloquial. I also employ the present tense throughout.

The lack of punctuation in my revisioning is an attempt to render Tagore’s fullness of experience. Complete sentences suggest I’ve ‘got’ it all; that would be hubristic. Also, pauses and silences invite the readers’ reflection into the *Gitanjali*’s meditative and mysterious spiritual energy.

**ML.** I get the impression of you writing as though in a trance, a poet’s mind possessed by a strange and alluring visitation. How else can one explain the transference, so meaningful yet so startling? But, let me offer the possibility of a larger context since you are deeply embedded in Sanskrit aesthetics and traditions of retelling. In such a format, “revisioning” is an act of tribute to a “guru”, an intellectual predecessor. *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, the *GeetGovinda* and many other great literary texts have inspired fresh writing linked to the old. Your tryst with Tagore—was there such a transition?

**PC.** You are absolutely right! I situate the *Gitanjali* as a 20<sup>th</sup> century extension of wisdom literature which sings of aligning itself with cosmic harmonies; it sings of the same landscapes of love, loss and longing, despair, beauty and transcendence.

I agree that in the subcontinent we are used to multiple versions of sacred texts in simultaneous circulation. *Sing of Life* is an offering in this tradition. Besides, every twenty years or so, new translations and interpretations of the classics can be written to enrich a new generation's understanding and appreciation. Other than hymns used in sacred rituals, most world classics continue their journey through time in this manner. This also prevents great works from being obscured by gatekeeping tendencies. They need to avatar over and over again, even as the original remains the source of inspiration.

**ML.** It is believed that W.B. Yeats's "Introduction" and endorsement firmly planted *Gitanjali* in the West, leading to the Nobel Prize and its attendant fame. According to the citation the Nobel Prize in Literature 1913 was awarded to Rabindranath Tagore "because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West." In reading *Gitanjali* as a modern poet, post-colonial and non- Bengali, do you think the poem can stand without the approval of the west?

**PC.** Yes! The phrase in the citation, "expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West" underlines its colonial underpinnings and tendency towards Orientalism. The *Gitanjali* is a part of world literature.

Today Tagore is an institution and, I believe, a Rs. 200 crore industry --which would surely have made him flinch! His words remain significant to us in multiple ways, and the *Gitanjali* is a glistening gem that revolves in our consciousness, emitting light.

**ML.** Translated material is, I think, written for those who cannot read the original language. Bengalis consider Tagore sacrosanct. Until a few years ago, translations were disallowed or discouraged. In 2011 with Rabindranath Tagore's 150th birth year turning into a global celebration, translations started appearing in plenty. Yours is not a translation but an innovative rendering of the original English version of the *Gitanjali*. So, it is several steps removed from the primary source. Who is your target audience?

**PC.** In truth, everyone. I say this because of a conversation I overheard years ago, when in my mid-twenties. This was in Delhi after a show of an experimental film during a festival. The person was in front of me, I never saw his face and his clothes were

shabby. He said, in Hindi, “I never knew a film could be such a profound meditation”. Hearing that statement demolished my youthful snobbery once and for all.

However, perhaps the *Gitanjali* resounds today with an added resonance and urgency. It rings like a gong struck on a mountain peak which travels through the smoke of pyres and our enormous and unnecessary suffering. It awakens hope, however remote that may currently seem, by presenting to us the parallel and porous universe of enchantment and sanctity. All of us want to alleviate the surrounding darkness and pain.

Sant Tukaram sang, “Words are the only treasures I possess, Words are the only jewels I share”. Strangers and friends have messaged me about how this book has helped them heal. What more can a writer ask for?

**ML.** I greatly admire your works of speculative fiction, especially *Clone*. Is it too audacious if I suggest that some cloning has happened in *Sing of Life*? The genetic code remains of the *Gitanjali* but some power within has manifested as a dominant force and it can change the future. With you being the first person to “revision” Tagore in this fashion, do you perceive an altered future for *Gitanjali*?

**PC.** Thank you for your very kind words! As I wrote in the Introduction to *Sing of Life*, “I believe a great poem is one that often serves as a draft or raft for someone else’s poem. Or that is how it should be: A spark or shift in another’s consciousness.” The *Gitanjali* has much to offer; classics stand the test of time, each age needs new translations, interpretations and revisionings. But let’s end with Tagore’s words, from a letter he wrote to his niece, Indira Devi Chaudhurani from Bolpur on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 1894. “We know people only in dotted outline, that is to say, with gaps in our knowledge which we have to fill in ourselves, as best we can. Thus, even those we know well are largely made up of our imagination...But perhaps it is these very loopholes, allowing entrance to each other's imagination, which make for intimacy; otherwise, each one, secure in his inviolate individuality, would have been unapproachable to all but the Dweller within.” Similarly, a text as rich and mystical as the *Gitanjali* gifts each reader gaps and silences to fill in as they make it their own.

**Priya Sarukkai Chabria** is an award-winning poet, writer, translator and curator. Her books include four poetry collections, most recently, *Sing of Life: Revisioning Tagore's Gitanjali*; speculative fiction novels *Clone*, selected as Best Reads by Feminist Press and *Generation 14*; literary non-fiction *Bombay/Mumbai: Immersions* and translations from Classical Tamil *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess*, winner, Muse India Translation Prize. Her story *Slo-Glo* won the Kitaab Experimental Story Award; she's recognised for her Outstanding Contribution to Literature by the Indian Government. She channels Sanskrit *rasa* aesthetics and Tamil Sangam (2-4BCE) poetics into her work and has collaborated with dancers, filmmakers and photographers. Founding Editor, *Poetry at Sangam*. <http://poetry.sangamhouse.org/>.

**Malashri Lal**, Professor in the Department of English (retd.), University of Delhi, has authored and edited sixteen books including *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translation* (Sage 2015) and the most recent, co-authored with Namita Gokhale, *Betrayed by Hope: A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (Harper Collins, 2020). She continues to serve on juries for book awards. Malashri Lal is currently Member, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi.

# Poetry

*Richard 'Spike' Munro***Thistle**

Oh flower of Scotland  
"What is your name?"  
Thistle you replied  
the name is not important  
the shape  
is your identity  
and the world knows  
where you live

O flower of Scotland  
What is your language?  
I speak the language of  
Jock Tomson's bairns  
and the language of Gaels

O flower of Scotland  
Where can I find you?  
In Mountains and glens  
in button holes at weddings  
in book shops and bars  
you smiled

Dear old flower of Scotland  
I must go now  
Will you forget me?

Of course not  
you will remember me from time to time  
when the bag pipes play

at the Burns Supper  
and on the road to Mandalay  
to Calcutta or Istanbul  
and in your dreams.

## Geeta Devi

By the deep Bagmati River in a village in Nepal  
 there were those that had some fish to eat and others none at all  
 Mr Devi was a carpenter who lived a simple life  
 with three children, his mother and his kind, devoted wife

Gita, eldest child, was poorly, her father gave her pills  
 she hardly ever went to school because of all her ills  
 She married, struck it lucky, but her life changed very quick  
 the husband left; her father died, and her mother was so sick

She strove to feed her children, but they starved near every day  
 She took the bus to Kathmandu, then further still away  
 ashamed to tell her family of the job she had to do  
 – it was ageing her so rapidly, and sadly no one knew

Our hero, Geeta Devi, took to mining in Bengal  
 her hands soon rough and blistered, hair matted in a ball  
 cuts and bruises daily, her face pock-marked and scarred,  
 shared a dorm with twenty women with all the windows barred

She tore and hacked and picked away in a mine so far from home  
 gruel not enough to feed her – she was wasted, skin and bone  
 A life of pain and suffering, expected to endure  
 Geeta was a slave there, only destined to be poor

One day an entrail on the mine face our Geeta did espy  
 nuggets gleaming in the light had caught her eagle eye  
 the old story about alchemy was something that she knew –  
 this could change her life forever – so she stashed them in her shoe

From dawn to dusk she toiled all day tho' grafting made her ill

she hobbled with her little cache to a cave high on the hill  
In those dark days only one thing figured in her mind –  
the journey home to Kathmandu, and the mine left far behind

Her dreams will soon be realised as now it seems so clear  
she'll change her life forever, nothing more to lose or fear  
The goldsmith by the river was a family friend of old –  
he weighed her precious nuggets and melted down to gold

Her children once abandoned in the slums of Kathmandu  
were united with the mother that they hardly even knew  
now the owner of a big house in a leafy tree-lined street  
our Geeta now is blissful with her babies at her feet.

**Richard ‘Spike’ Munro** is a former Drama teacher from Edinburgh, He left teaching to live and work in Istanbul for three years and on returning he has become a popular figure on the spoken word circuit. He has performed in bars, clubs, outdoor events, parties, festivals throughout Scotland and even in the Scottish Parliament. He is well known for his distinct Scottish vernacular with an ability to charm an audience with his engaging personality flitting between humour and pathos with the occasional dash of ribaldry and double entendre. During lockdown he began to work on his first collection of poems which were published by Scottish publisher Rymour books in December 2020. He enjoys playing his piano and recently has been learning the Anglo German concertina.

*Beth Junor*

**On the Day Kabul Fell**

On the day Kabul fell back five hundred  
years, I, womanhood, went outdoors, drove, stepped  
onto a train, walked unaccompanied  
    through a capital's main streets to our world  
    festival of words. There, I, a woman  
    alone, browsed a bookshop, bought a novel,  
met a male friend. I should also declare  
there was talk of music, of being bathed  
in voice and instrument. *The Soldier's Tale*  
was mentioned, a violin virtuosa,  
poetry. What else could I do from my safe  
distance, but preserve in actions' amber  
each art's truth, while doors of dreams departing  
slammed shut and our sisters searched in markets  
for burqas on that August day when Kabul fell.

**Beth Junor** is Director of the Junor Gallery, <https://junorgallery.scot>. Here she is editing a series of pamphlets, *Artists and their Work*. She worked in the NHS and education as a speech and language therapist for 25 years, latterly specialising in childhood autism spectrum disorders. She translated *I Am Special: A Workbook to Help Children, Teens and Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders to Understand their Diagnosis, Gain Confidence and Thrive* by Peter Vermeulen, London: Jessica Kingsley, 2013) from French. She edited and introduced the letters of Valda Grieve (*Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts*, Edinburgh: WordPower Books, 2007). She is co-editor with Angus Calder of an anthology of poems from wars (*The Souls of the Dead are Taking the Best Seats*, Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2004). She wrote a history of women's resistance to the stationing of first-strike nuclear weapons at Greenham Common, where she lived in a tent for three and a half years (*Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp: A History of Non-Violent Resistance*, London: Working Press, 1995). Beth is also a poet and is currently learning how to make short films.

*A C Clarke***To Lou Strauss-Ernst aka Rosa Bonheur<sup>1</sup>**

Hostage to fortune the name you took.  
The century was young, its biggest stumble  
surely outgrown, though it must ever after  
walk with a limp. You were young too.

Europe was letting her hair down. Your son  
would not be beaten by dogma. Max  
could paint outside the lines. And you?  
You'd be a New Woman. Then  
the doorbell rang.

She stepped over the threshold, your ill-luck  
with her needle-sharp eyes and Russian accent.  
Smaller even than you, fine-boned,  
anything but fragile.  
Had you nailed the horseshoe  
upside down?

That was Max done for.  
He played the ace of hearts,  
for high stakes.  
And where were you  
in the gamble?

Rosa, your flowers died back to thorns.  
It wasn't dawn glowed pink at the sky's edge  
as gloomy clouds rolled in.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa Bonheur was the nickname adopted by Lou Strauss-Ernst, the first wife of the surrealist painter Max-Ernst. She was murdered in Auschwitz in 1943.

You who had walked away  
from all the pettiness of race and class  
the pointless rituals  
were chained to the tattoo  
on your prisoned arm.  
*Arbeit Macht Frei* and all your work  
went up in smoke with  
a million others.

**A. C. Clarke** has published five full collections and six pamphlets, two of the latter, *Owersettin* and *Drochaid*, in collaboration with Maggie Rabatski and Sheila Templeton. Her fifth full collection, *A Troubling Woman* came out in 2017. She was one of four winners in the Cinnamon Press 2017 pamphlet competition with *War Baby*. She has been working on an extensive series of poems about Paul and Gala Éluard, later Gala Dalí, and the Surrealist circles in which they moved. The first set of these was published as a pamphlet by Tapsalteerie last year (2021). This year she has been involved with other writers and artists in a project inspired by Gartnavel Royal Hospital and initiated by Gillean McDougall.

*Simon Fletcher***Ring***For Natasha Kaur*

While washing dishes after tea  
your ring slipped off my soapy finger.

It happened once before.

We laughed.

So, what goes on when those we love,  
quite unaccountably,

depart

for stations not on any guide?

Your disappearance knocked me side-  
ways,

breathless,

through a fiery hoop

and left me grieving,

dumb,

bereft.

It's hard to name it,

fix the pain,

I know my empty hands miss yours,  
my damaged heart now nurses hurt.

You battled with poor health for years,

then angels came,

to lead you off.

I dry the ring,

it slips back on.

**Simon Fletcher** is a widely-published poet and writer who lives in Shropshire, England. He's manager of the ACE - supported Offa's Press: [www.offaspres.co.uk](http://www.offaspres.co.uk). He's won various prizes and awards and read his poetry on BBC Radio Shropshire and the BBC Asian Network. He MCs the monthly online literature event *Virtual Voices*. Simon's read his poetry in Britain and abroad, including in Pakistan, Norway and Germany. Since 1994 four full collections of poetry have been published. He's also collaborated with Debjani Chatterjee and Basir Sultan Kazmi, as *Mini Mushaira*, on two joint anthologies. He was a literature development officer from 2001-2013, in Wolverhampton Libraries, and set up Offa's Press in 2010 to promote and publish poetry in the West Midlands. His most recent collection, *Close to Home*, Headland, 2015, was described as "beautiful, poignant, joyful poetry." He's recently been a 'poet on loan' in West Midland libraries.

*Stewart Sanderson*

**Unicorn**

*IACOBUS:DEI:GRACIA:REX:SCOTORUM*

The Latin ripples out, a golden ring  
around the legendary animal  
depicted on the coin: a little planet  
whorled by dust clouds in the shape of letters.

*James, King of Scotland by the grace of God –*  
as much a myth as there being a creature  
in the world somewhere, much like a horse  
but magical and with the one horn poking  
from its forehead.

One horn like the narwhal's  
tusk I saw once, which people believed  
came from a unicorn, got almost no one  
quite knew how, but it involved a virgin  
didn't it?

Or voyaging far beyond  
the known world's rim into the polar darkness  
where in the cold, unmoneyed depths they swam.

## The Old Couple

The end of one of Ovid's transformations  
they stand together on their island hilltop,  
stony bodies not quite worn away  
but purged of every human feature.

Except, perhaps, their nearness to each other –  
innumerable nights they've shared in silence  
neither stirring as the seasons swept  
the stars like grains of sand across the sky.

Two summers past, an hour before the ferry  
carried us back to where the mainland and its  
pressures waited, we clambered towards  
the pair of them on their small eminence.

Then stood there a little while, sharing the view –  
Cara to the south, Kintyre off to the east,  
Jura to the north and to the west  
just waves between us and America.

If ever I hear a knocking at the door  
and open it to find a hooded stranger  
with a god's eyes, I'll welcome them in  
praying these stones are what becomes of us.

**Stewart Sanderson** is a poet based in Glasgow. Three times shortlisted for the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award (2014, 2016, 2020), he has also received an Eric Gregory Award (2015), as well as Robert Louis Stevenson (2016) and Jessie Kesson Fellowships (2019). Widely published in magazines and anthologies, he has performed internationally and participated in translation exchange projects involving writers from Friesland, North Africa and Russia. Following two pamphlets - *Fios* (2015) and *An Offering* (2018) - his first full-length collection, *The Sleep Road*, was published by Tapsalteerie in 2021.

*John Eliot***The Angel of St Clémentin**

Drifting away as  
Sunday sun rose higher.  
Over my shoulder slung  
my canvas bag,  
bread and Evian bottled.  
Spring water from the baptism well  
long gone since a dog fell  
and mothers say, *It could have been a child.*  
Along lanes, through the sweet village deserted  
I walked deeper away and away, kilometres away  
along rutted track, grass fingerprinted tractor tyres.  
Satisfied my hunger.  
Swigged my thirst; stood  
leaning against bark and listened.  
Still, the music of quiescence.  
Rooted onto a branch  
red footed falcon,  
wings spread, orange stare, telling me,  
*This is my solitude,*  
*it is another you look for.*  
I went on and on, my throat as dry as my bottle.  
Sitting on a stump of the oldest tree,  
vesper tine across the wheat field,  
as Easter sun began to fade  
swallows circled,  
three white feathers fell,  
as darkness set,  
to the pathway where I sat.  
Down on my knees I prayed,  
*At the end of silence,*

*paint me an angel if you can.*

Some years ago, **John Eliot** submitted the poem *Friday Night Song* for an anthology. The publisher turned it down but said it ought to be published. Encouraged, John wrote with new energy and purpose and within a couple of years had enough for a collection. As luck would have it, he met a small publisher, a 'boutique bibliophile' imprint called Mosaïque Press, who decided on the strength of his work to start a series of poetry 'chapbooks'. Since then he's published four collections with Mosaïque: *Ssh!*, *Don't Go, Turn on the Dark*, and *Canzoni del Venerdì Sera*, a translation of his work into Italian. John was born in England, but he has always considered himself Welsh as Wales was where his family came from. After traditional education at a grammar school, he then taught Religious Studies for too many years in Devon. In his fifties he moved to France where he lives full time. He has and will never retire from working, writing, and reading being his fulltime occupation.

*Stuart Paterson***Fash**

The nicht the warl hirples on as aye –  
 the girns o yowes an peeps o whaups ootby,  
 a wheen o keech distractkins on a screen,  
 an owre-early morn pu'in at ma een.

Ah daurna watch the news for fear Ah'll tent  
 the hail warlsterttaebirl an low ansklent  
 antuim us aa richt doon the sheugh o it –  
 no yet. Ah haena seen eneuch o it,  
 nor leevd eneuch nor luvd eneuch nor tellt  
 nor spiered nor kent nor grat nor flew nor felt  
 eneuch, nor duinwigirnin in ma dwyne,  
 nor tellt her whaeAh'd tell it ane last time.

This isnae Syria nor fremit fields  
 whaurcoupitbiggansgie nae kinnabiield,  
 whaur weans are deid an stervin, bombed an burnt  
 ilk day an nicht in cities whummelt, kirnt  
 an blootered in the names owhae kens whit.  
 Ah'm no fae there, hae nae idea o it.  
 Ah'mcooried in a quaithoose safe an baukit  
 in launs untouched bi missile, tank an rocket,  
 the morn anither day o dootsumness,  
 bills peyed, lights on, the denner in the press,  
 nae fash but whit Ah bring tae it, nae fash  
 ayont the ilkaday o stour an snash.

Nae bombs nor missiles bleeze the strand alicht,  
 nor will the morn nor ony other nicht

but coogled in ma bed wien shut ticht

Ah'mfashin that

they micht

they micht

they micht

\* ربماأنها سوف \*

\* *perhaps they will*

## Worry

*Tonight, the world staggers on like always,  
the cries of ewes and peeps of lapwings outside,  
lots of awful distractions on a screen,  
a too-early morning drawing down my eyes.*

*I dare not watch the news afraid I'll notice  
the whole world begins to swirl and burn and swerve  
and flush us all right down the sewer of it –  
not yet. I've not seen enough of it,  
or lived enough or loved enough or told  
or asked or known or cried or flew or felt  
enough, or done with complaining in my last years,  
or told she to whom I'd tell it one last time.*

*This isn't Syria or foreign fields  
where collapsed buildings give no shelter,  
where children are dead and starving, bombed and burnt  
each day and night in cities upturned, churned  
and thrashed in the names of who-knows-what.  
I don't come from there, have no idea of it.  
I'm snuggled into a quiet house, safe and comfortable  
in lands untouched by missile, tank and rocket,  
tomorrow one more day of doubtfulness,  
bills payed, lights on, meals in the cupboard,  
no worry except what I bring to it, no worry  
beyond the everyday of insult and dust.*

*No bombs or missiles set the beach alight  
or will tomorrow or any other night  
but cosy in my bed with eyes shut tight  
I'm worrying that  
they might*

*they might*

*they might*

\* ريمأنها سوف \*

\* aiblins they will

**Stuart Paterson** is an award-winning poet and performer in his native Scots & English. His poems have been performed on & in BBC2, BBC Radio 4, BBC Ulster, Scottish Parliament and HMP Barlinnie. In 2017-18 he was BBC Scotland Poet in Residence & 2020/2021 saw him write nationally commissioned poems for Lidl UK, Scottish Water, Golazo Cycling UK and The Nevis Ensemble ('Scotland's Street Orchestra'). His poem 'Advent' was the graphically illustrated page for December on the official 'Age Scotland' 2021 Calendar. He's one of 10 national 'Artists in Care' for Scotland's Creative Ageing Agency, 'Luminate', as well as an External Verifier in schools for the Scottish Qualifications Authority. In 2020 he was nationally voted 'Scots Language Writer of the Year'. Author of many collections, his 'Wheen: Collected Scots Poems' received one of the first ever Scots Publication Grants from the Scottish Government in 2020 & will be published in June.

*Hugh McMillan***Long View**

The train draws  
out of Fort William  
and slowly passes  
the Primary  
and a wee fellow  
with an overlong

jumper and bright  
red cheeks has jumped  
on a stump to wave  
and has been  
doing this  
since 1895

when the railway  
came and  
before that  
the mail coach  
and before that  
the greylag goose.

No-one is  
on my train  
cos the world is  
in a dazzle of fear  
and stasis but that  
wee boy's waving  
  
and waving

and all his mates  
are shaking their heads  
as though he's daft  
but he's got  
the long view.

**Hugh McMillan**'s poetry has been published widely and he has won various prizes. In 2021 Luath published two collections: 'Haphazardly in the Starless Night' and 'Whit If' poems in about Scottish history. In 2021 he was chosen as the editor of the SPL's anthology 'Best Scottish Poems'. He edits for Drunk Muse Press.

*Utpal Mitra***A Dream**

One day I dreamt of Robi wandering, playing on the verge of the  
Endless horizon of Khoai, the almost unending zigzag land of  
Bhubandanga. I found him busy in picking up pebbles of different  
Sizes in the open red soil land. His eyes dazzled as he piled up  
All his assets in front of his Father Debendranath. Maharishi's mind  
Intensified with omen and observed a halo encircling Robi. I woke up  
With a kind of hallucination and tried to visualize the scene I dreamt of.  
I came out of the room and beheld nature with no horizon where  
I had dived deep a few moments back. What I ruminate is the difference  
Between the two natures with almost opposite habitation. Now is the  
Time to behold the endless sky in lieu of endless horizon. Crowds of  
People overshadow the intense silence of that tranquil habitation.  
Yet I contemplate that piled-up pebbles have been transformed into a  
Mountain where nature only keeps her held high and soothes our eyes.  
The mountain, the day dream and the living monument of Tagore  
Binds all people around the world to seek the presence of Tagore  
That makes the abode of peace justly unique and symbolic.

**Utpal Mitra** is the superintendent of the Archives at Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. At present he is looking after the museum at Bangladesh Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. He feels intense love for writing poems, especially for children. His poems have been published in different magazines. His book *Muchki Hasi* is attractive to children. His love for writing articles on Rabindranath is reflected in magazines.

*Lakshmi Arya Thathachar***Unfinished Poem**

Somewhere between the office and our homes  
yours, mine  
Lights turning on and off  
In square windows, lit, unlit  
Day-night, night-day  
The endless traffic like a line of ants in between  
The rain  
braiding drops on glass panes  
like a long-haired woman.  
Above, clouds freeze in the Bangalore sky  
Their grey shadows all day  
Their misty breath in the air  
in amber trees, exhaust fumes  
Cat on my window-sill  
Your early morning voice  
Thick with dreams, with the years  
somewhere in the gray city  
Our homes on the weekend  
Yours, mine  
All night the rain drums on windows  
Like a secret  
Briefly, in between

we touch

graze past each other

sometimes muse, sometimes reader

sometimes unfinished poem.

**Lakshmi Arya Thathachar** is an Associate Professor and Associate Dean-Research at R.V. University, Bangalore. She teaches and researches in the areas of Modern Indian History and Philosophy. She regularly engages in creative writing. Her poems and short stories have previously appeared in *Eclectica Magazine*, *Pratlipi*, *Mojave Heart Review*, and other journals.

*John Purser***Maccowan**

It was a brutal night, an east wind cutting through the trees,  
hail tearing the grass. All through the dark  
you struggled to give birth, your muscles chilled  
your calf reluctant to be born.

But we knew none of this, only you had not come  
for hay at the first light. We found you down the hill,  
standing beside your male calf lying limp on cold wet ground,  
and you, unable to arouse him, no longer knowing what to do,  
what could be done, experienced as you were.

I held the calf standing but he could not suck  
and fell without my help to hold him up.

An hour to the surgery and back to fetch volostrum  
and then I and my good neighbour, Katie,  
pushed down the hill into the wind, and there you were  
still standing, waiting, instinct alone holding you faithfully  
to the bundle of wet bedraggled hide that lay  
unmoving, waiting for its death.

And so we lifted him. I gripped his shoulders with my knees,  
and held his muzzle high and pulled his cold-clenched teeth  
open – but still he could not drink, not even when my neighbour  
placed the teat between his lips to touch his tongue.

My head was bent touching his head; Katie bent too  
as she dribbled the bottled milk into his mouth –  
but even swallowing was beyond him, so weak he was with cold  
and starved of oxygen from that long birth.

That's when you joined us, your rough tongue  
licking the spilt volostrum from his cheek  
while Katie massaged your calf's cold throat;  
and, with our four heads, each touching each,  
the cow, the calf, my neighbour and myself  
became one thing, one life, determined.  
Your long shapely horns never touched us;  
only your coarse hair and the soft hair of the calf,  
Katie's dark hair and my own. That's how it was.

That calf survived, as did you, dearest of all our cows;  
patient and good; wise in your ways; a gentle leader, loyal.

Came the day when our dear Government decreed  
that since you had been born before the outbreak of the BSE -  
enabled by their own decisions - you must be slaughtered  
and buried according to their book.

And so we took you to the Portree pens, my last sight of you  
in the corner of a pen where you stood bewildered,  
at a total loss, not knowing any longer where you were  
or why I left you there. Your eyes haunt me.

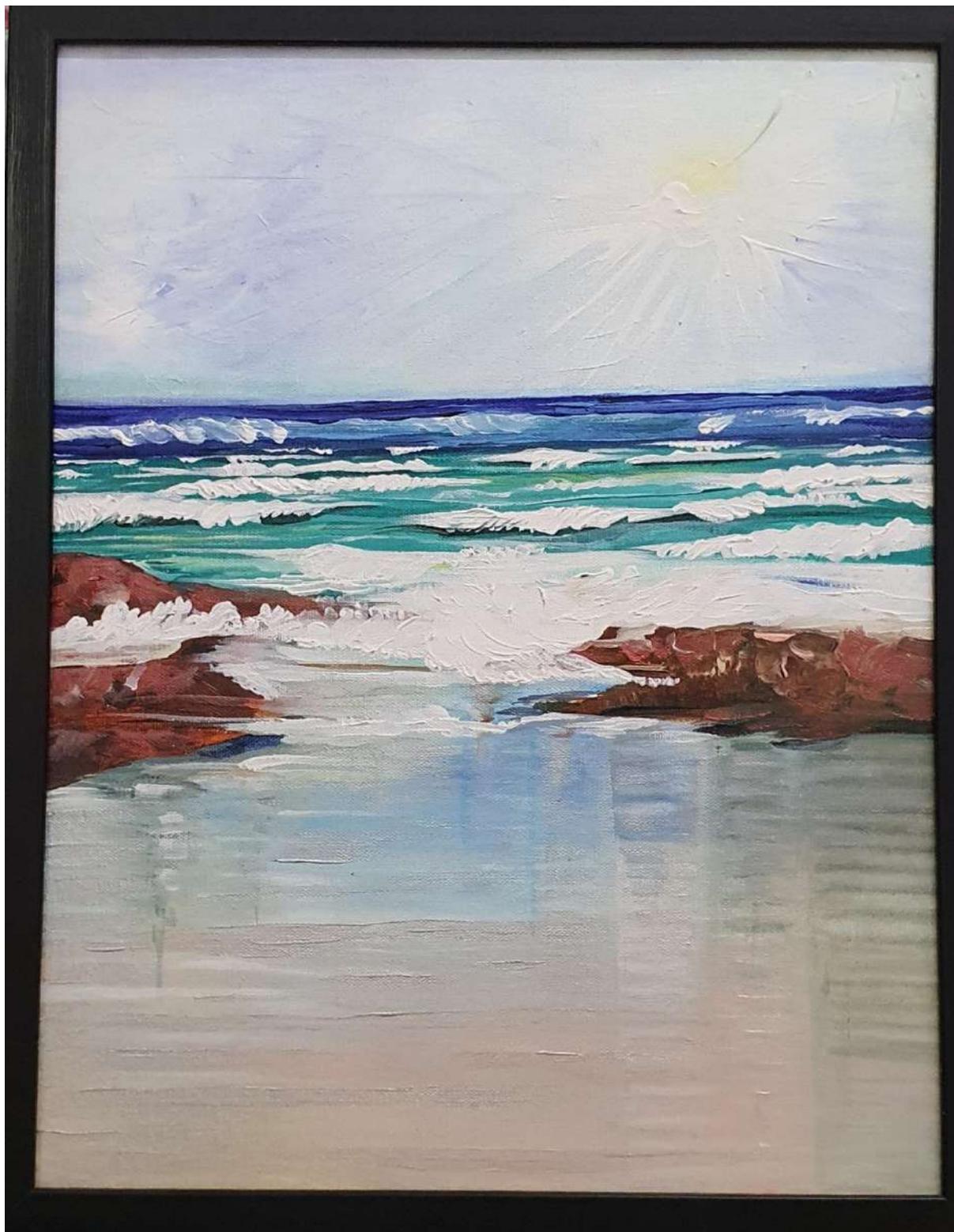
I cannot cure this. I cannot make it good.  
All I can offer to your memory,  
this silly penance in a poem.

**John Purser** is known as a composer, writer, and musicologist. His five books of poetry include *There Is No Night* published by Kennedy & Boyd in 2014, and *This Much Endures* by the same publishers in 2020. Of his six radio plays commissioned by the BBC, *Carver* (published by Methuen) won a Giles Cooper Award and a New York International Radio Festival Gold Medal in 1991. In 1992 his *Scotland's Music* won him the McVitie Scottish Writer of the Year Award. An expanded edition was published by Mainstream in 2007 to accompany his second eponymous radio series for BBC Scotland. With Dr. Meg Bateman, Purser co-authored *Window to the West – Culture and Environment in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd*, published by ClòOstaig in December 2020. Purser is a Researcher and Lecturer at Sabhal MòrOstaig, the Gaelic College on the Island of Skye, where he lives and crofts with his American wife, Barbara.

**Art**

*Anupa Lewis*

**Late Summer Sands**



**Anupa Lewis** holds the position Assistant Professor – Senior Scale at Manipal Institute of Communication. She is the coordinator of the Tagore Centre – MAHE, Manipal. Moreover, considering communication as the broad spectrum, she has about a decade of experience in engaging lectures, being the resource person for workshops, as also organizing international conferences in various spheres of academia. Her current areas of research interest include cultural studies, comparative literature, literary anthropology, speculative fiction, ecocriticism, feminist rhetoric and narratology. On the creative front her flash fiction is published in volume one of the Bath Flash Fiction anthology titled – *To Carry Her Home*, printed by Ad Hoc Fiction (2018).

*Praseed Nair*

**Distant Houses**



Spark



**Praseed Nair** is an Assistant Professor (Selection Grade), Department of Animation Art and Design at Manipal Institute of Communication, MAHE. A passionate artist by vocation, he ascribes his creative acumen to his sustained training in the Applied Arts at Gujarat University. On the professional front, Mr. Nair harbors a diverse portfolio of expertise in Graphic Design, Multimedia and 3D Computer Animation. He has operated as a Senior Character Animator for films, functioned as a Visual Content Developer in the advertising industry, apart from closely working with several leading animation studios in India. That said Mr. Nair nourishes a special love for abstract pastiche landscapes in the oil and acrylic medium, to which he returns time and again.

*Dattatreya Paul*

**Untitled**



**The Fire Song**

Spring



**Dattatreya Paul** is a seven-year-old first grader who loves to experiment with colours. He also loves to play with lego. He wants to grow up to become an architect and a train driver simultaneously. Dattatreya lives in Graz, Austria with his parents.

## **Section III: Book Reviews**

## Review of translations by Somdatta Mandal of Bengali Women's Travel Texts

*Jayati Gupta*

The stereotyping of Indian women confined within the *ghar*, or home was often described by using the trope of caged-birds. Nineteenth century social reform in many parts of India and especially in Bengal was inextricably linked with female education. The ability to read and write opened up wider vistas of the world outside, the *bahir*, that could be experienced by crossing the threshold of the *antahpur* or inner quarters. Travel encapsulated this freedom that was defined by women's desire to refashion their identity.

For Indian women who learnt to read and write, curiosity about the outside world sometimes translated into the activity of writing, a transgressive act. Several of these vernacular writings by Bengali women were published in contemporary journals or as cheap, printed books by the local press. Popularly read in its own times, these women's travelogues were outnumbered by those by men who also wrote in English. Inevitably, the voices of women travellers became muffled and irretrievably lost.

Absence of texts can lead to warped perceptions: retrieving travel texts penned by middle-class Bengali women and translating these into English has broadened Anglophone perspectives about homogenising Indian women. Somdatta Mandal's publication of several of these translations has attempted to reveal how these 'narratives crossed boundaries of genre and purpose— personal documents by ordinary women who organised their texts and mapped the self according to the journey, geographic movement providing the root metaphor by which they made sense of their lives' (Mandal 2010, xvi).

The earliest full-length, published (though anonymously) Bengali travelogue of a journey to England was written by Krishnabhabini Das in 1885. There were other women who had accompanied their husbands or fathers before this, to travel to imperial Britain and Europe. It needed great courage and confidence on the part of a home-educated, orthodox, middle-class Bengali woman to throw away the veil, adopt western clothes, interact with foreigners, participate in public debates and discourses, engage with and record experiences outside the home. The translation adequately poses the unconscious dilemmas of the feminine mind where the mimetic/descriptive deepens into metaphysical questioning of the self in the formation of identity. The translator points out in the introduction that it is 'interesting to see how Krishnabhabini, in trying to negotiate with her subjectivity, went even far as questioning the dominant ideology that produced her and that she often reproduced' (Mandal 2015, xvii).

The passage across the *kalapani* opened up glimpses of 'modernity' for these women who like their male counterparts were 'crossing many seas' to encounter different lands and

cultures that invariably intensified ‘their connection to the mores of their own cultures’ (Mandal 2010, xvii). This individualistic negotiation of reticence, conservatism and conventionality in the context of new knowledge/experience acquired about the ‘other’, moulded the new found ‘freedom’ of these women. The translation of Durgabati Ghose’s *Paschimjatriki* (1935/36) as *The Westward Traveller* (2010) focuses on the problematics of silence and articulation. The pertinent issue is whether by reading this English translation the Western reader is enabled to sense what AshisNandy defines as ‘inarticulate, defiant silences’ that are embedded in the “interstices of a vernacular text as the fading memory of a generation that had the gift to fight but not the authoritative language of dissent’ (Foreword 2010, xvii).

Chitrita Devi’s travelogue *Anek Sagar Periye* translated as *Crossing Many Seas* (2018) is a collection of travel notes that narrate experiences of the author’s sea voyage to England in 1947. Her stay in Bristol and in the English countryside is complemented with observations about London, the metropolis. Driving through England, Scotland and Wales, they finally take the ferry boat to Europe, visiting Paris, Switzerland, the beautiful Swiss valleys and mountain regions, a path followed by several colonial tourists from the subcontinent. The last sections of the text recount her 1955 visit to Vienna representing India at an International Writer’s Meet and her Egyptian sojourn.

It is interesting to observe the transitions in women’s travel to the West, spanning almost sixty decades covered by these translations. From a serious engagement with social emancipation of Indian women to curiosity about the coloniser’s society, to sheer pleasure in tourism — the sights and sounds of other locales, these travelogues complement from a feminine perspective what men record in their own travel journals. Diversity marks the narratives as the exploration of alien cultures simultaneously led to inscription of the self, thereby juxtaposing the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, the *ghar* and the *bahir*.

How a travelogue opens up relatively closed cultures is apparent in the translation of an early twentieth century text of Hariprabha Takeda who follows the traditional custom of going to her husband’s family home. Only that it was a journey from Dhaka to Shimamiya in Kochino town on the outskirts of Tokyo in 1912. Takeda did not have much to say about the political ambition of Japan exploring the idea of a pan-Asian alternative to western imperialism. Her ambivalent positioning as an insider-outsider gives a unique dimension to the text where Hariprabha travels to a ‘home’, not perceiving the act of journeying as a form of displacement. Value is added to the publication by including translations of Takeda’s further visit to Japan when as Japanese subjects were repatriated from British India in 1941.

She offers vignettes of war-ravaged Tokyo and refers to the Bangla broadcasts she did for the Indian National Army (INA).

*Wanderlust*, is a collection of short travel texts written by members of the Tagore family. Jnanadanandini, wife of Satyendranath had ventured out unchaperoned, to England in 1877, to be joined later by her husband and Rabindranath. She did not write a travelogue, but reminiscing to her daughter she narrated some of her experiences of the visit. Other ladies in the family described shorter visits setting in motion the idea of intra-country travel to pilgrim locations or historic sites, or scenic destinations like Darjeeling and Srinagar.

This potpourri of Somdatta Mandal's translations of women's travel writings from Bengal turns the focus on women's history and nineteenth century social and educational reform in the country. In terms of gender history these women represented the middle class — literate, informed, aspiring for political freedom and social liberty. Adopting the typical Anglo-American perception of the divide between 'authoring' and 'translating', being faithful to the basic text 'to remove any disparity between the original and the translation as far as possible' (2015, xv) has been the primary focus of the translator. The 'invisibility' of the translator involves a complex psychological engagement where the style and voice of the narrator is retained even while the essence of the thoughts are communicated. The discourse on the art of translation generally veers around to the idea of transparency, and fluency in the target language making it difficult to retain 'several colloquial idioms and culture specific descriptions' (2018, 16). The translator's dilemma persists but the retrieval of archival material in the context of cultural decolonisation opens up a treasure trove for a pan-Indian and global readership.

#### References to Translations:

- Das, Krishnabhabini. *A Bengali Lady in England (EnglandeBangamahila)*, trans. by Somdatta Mandal (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2015).
- Devi, Chitrita. *Crossing Many Seas (Onek Sagar Periye)*, trans. by Somdatta Mandal (Bolpur: Birutjatiyo Sahitya Sammiloni, 2018).
- Ghose, Durgabati. *The Westward Traveller (Paschimjatriki)*, trans. by Somdatta Mandal (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2010).
- Takeda, Hariprabha. *The Journey of a Bengali Woman to Japan (Bangamohilar Japan Jatra)*, trans. by Somdatta Mandal (Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2019).
- Wanderlust: Travels of the Tagore Family*, trans. by Somdatta Mandal (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati-Bharati, 2014).

**Jayati Gupta** is an academic from Kolkata, India. She retired as Professor of English from West Bengal State University and is currently Visiting Faculty at Adamas University, Kolkata. Her area of specialisation and doctoral degree from Jadavpur University covered eighteenth-century British literature and the European Enlightenment. Her passion however is researching and writing on travel literature which she finds fascinating as it straddles diverse cultures and ethnicities. She was Tagore National Fellow for Cultural Research (2015-17) of Ministry of Culture, Government of India at the National Library of India, Kolkata. Part of her research has been published in a book entitled *Travel Culture, Travel Writing and Bengali Women, 1870–1940* in July 2020 by Routledge U.K. The South Asia edition was published in 2021. She translates from Bengali into English and pursues her academic interests in the literature of the marginalised, Dalits and environmental studies.

Title of the Book: *Across and Beyond*

Edited by Nishi Pulugurtha. Kolkata: Avenel Press, 2020. PB. Rs 375/-. ISBN: 978-81-946404-9-3

and

Title of the Book: *A Bengali Lady in England by Krishnabhabini Das.*

Translated by Nabanita Sengupta. Kolkata and New Delhi: ShambhabiThe Third Eye Imprint, 2020. PB. Rs 500/USD 17.99. ISBN: 9788194421207.

### *Averi Saha*

An outstanding compendium, Nishi Pulugurtha's edited volume, *Across and Beyond* has redefined the word 'travel'. The heterogeneity of the compilation earns it a positive z-score with regards to other books in the same genre. The essays encompass travel to foreign lands, travelling to the past, travelling into the psyche and travelling through literature, making it a compelling read both for the amateur and the initiated.

The book opens with its foundation firmly set in the fundamentals of life – 'Music, Food and Textile' – the name that the first section bears. The essays in this segment recreate the essence of an unknown country by attempting to capture the soul of the places visited. Vienna and Mozart, Lyon and its history of weaver's struggle, Roorkee and its many appellative confusions, Santa Barbara with its serene Pacific shores and its Danish associations – all evince the spirit of the region. Vienna and Santa Barbara, with their diverse songs, are balanced by Usha Banerjee's humour and Ilakshee Bhuyan Nath's engrossing account of the weavers' community in Lyon, France. Nath laments for the amnesia of history in her native land foiled by the celebration of history in the murals of Mur Des Canuts.

The second section, intense and uninhibitedly personal, deals with the travails of a solo female traveller. The pestering sense of insecurity, the furtive precautionary measures, the preoccupation with safety are dealt in detail to convey the claustrophobia that women travellers, however progressive or privileged, have to cope with. As Sohini remarks in her essay, "Whenever I travel, I am aware that every adventure has the potential of turning into a misadventure, without my having to expend effort towards it." The essays in this segment cease to be mere travel essays and are studies in cultural paranoia. With more and more women travelling alone for business or pleasure, the essays bring to the fore the vulnerability of solo women travellers that has always been there but rarely addressed. Pulugurtha's volume

leaves the beaten track with this second unit and in the third segment, 'Literature and Travel', she aims higher.

An academic herself, Pulugurtha's weakness for literary essays is understandable. The insightful essays by Nishat Haider and Arundhati Sethi deal with other aspects of travel like migration and the tourist gaze of the narrator in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*. Nishi Pulugurtha rightly notes in her 'Introduction' when she says, "Nishat Haider's essay emphasizes the trope of travel in Quarratulian Hyder's *River of Fire* and examines how individuals and ideas travel between different spatio-temporal chronotypes, producing new cultural matrices and political contexts." Mathew Flinder's fascination with voyages as recounted by Gillian Dooley and Nabanita Sengupta's account of places in and around London are a complete break from the foregoing essays. The last essay in this section by SayanAich is a delightful psychological journey where he brilliantly traces the origins of a Bengali's penchant for travel.

The fourth and the last section, I feel, is the unique value proposition of this volume. Constantly moving back and forth into the past and to the present, 'History and Travel' looks at history through multiple gazes. This segment weaves a complex tapestry of history, perspectives and reality as it surveys the past from the viewpoints of young students visiting Scotland, of British women and painters in colonial India and of an independent citizen looking at Dutch and French settlements in Bengal. I agree with Sheila T. Cavanagh that cultural artefacts like folksongs and paintings "contribute to [the] visitor's divergent experiences of location, even when the places themselves largely remain the same." This holds true for Cavanagh's account of Loch Lomond as well as for the Daniell duo's aquatints of colonized India. Ankita Das's narration of the private lives of memsahibs is poignant and leads to the anecdote of Susanna Anna Maria, a Dutch memsahib in Pulugurtha's account of Chinsurah in Hooghly, Bengal. The last chapter, by Pulugurtha herself, reads like an addendum to her previous monograph, *Out in the Open*, an engaging collection of travel essays recounting Pulugurtha's travels to far and near.

The best part about an edited volume of travel essays is its variegated pattern. It reads like excerpts from multiple autobiographies and draws readers into a lived experience as they vicariously soak in the sights and sounds of the travel. The structure of the volume arguably places it a notch above the rest. The chapters are strategically arranged to keep boredom at bay while maintaining the flow and intensity of the narrations. The photographs in the book

add to the reader's delight. This book remains a significant contribution to the genre of travel narratives, enclosing within its ambit the various components of travel.

A travelogue engendering another travel narrative is what has happened with Nabanita Sengupta's essay in *Across and Beyond*. 'A Bibliophile's Sauntering' was inspired by her solo travel to England to visit the land where Krishnabhabini Das had penned a daring critique of English life, *Englandey Bongomohila*. Translated by Sengupta as *A Bengali Lady in England*, it is an extremely analytical and realistic account of a sixteen-year-old Indian lady in the 1880s. But what prompts a nineteenth century middle class Hindu Bengali woman to cross the seas, along with it all proscriptions, land in a foreign country and write a travelogue? What persuades the translator to pick up this particular travelogue as the springboard for her doctoral thesis? In a recent interview to *The Hindu Business Line*, Sengupta sums up –

This book is an excellent ethnographic study of England and India, particularly Bengal...this book is actually a sharp social and cultural commentary on all aspects of the British life, both virtues and vices...What we have here is the author's attempt to adequately understand a [progressive] society...and how the author's native society in India might replicate and imbibe that progress.<sup>1</sup>

What strikes the reader, within the first few pages of the book, is the keen, knowledgeable and reasonable mind of a young girl. Nothing that happens throughout her journey alarms or baffles her. She is well informed and continues to blend sensitive description with necessary details to present an authentic report to her less fortunate sisters back home. All through the book, it is her mission to convey her experiences, as honestly as possible, to the confined women of her native land. She has penned down her book in an endeavour to throw open the windows to a wide outer world where women are free and confident. She constantly draws comparisons between an orthodox Indian society where women are leashed and the liberated British society where women undertake tasks unthinkable in her native clime. This is not to say she blindly follows the English. She is ruthlessly critical of their drinking habits, foppery and mercenary nature.

Krishnabhabini's detailing of the sea voyage from Bombay to Dover is enthralling. She has forced me to open maps and track her route lest I miss the nuances. Accustomed to

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<sup>1</sup> Swati Sanyal Tarafdar, 'A Bengali Lady's Stark Account of Colonial England'. *The Hindu Business Line*. August 22 2021.

landing at airports, it is a rare treat to trace her journey from Bombay to Venice via sea and from Venice to Calais by train, interspersed with her characteristic informative details. The technicalities about the Suez Canal that the Bengali lady spells out is jaw-dropping. Surely her hours in the British Library have been utilised to the fullest.

Another aspect of this travelogue that I, as a student of literature, could not have missed, is the nineteenth century milieu that she conjures with her words. Her descriptions of Eastern London, of the people in that part of the city, of the dark winter smog, the disparity in class structures - read like pages out of Dickens' novels. Her representation of London's aristocratic neighbourhood, the parks, the fashionably dressed women, the obsession with marriage, class consciousness, the drinking houses, the theatres – everything reconstructs the form of the Victorian age. It felt like revisiting *Vanity Fair*.

It would be an understatement to term Krishnabhabini's *A Bengali Lady in England* as a mere travelogue. It is a treatise, a document of historical and ethnographic significance. It devotes separate chapters to British politics, government, religious life and cultural life. British men and women are described independently in two different chapters. Thus, it is not surprising that the scathing realism of the book caused it to be almost immediately banned by the British government in India.

Sengupta's translation has maintained the lucidity of the original work which is not easy to achieve. Her appropriate choices for some difficult to translate native words have accorded crispness to her language. She has not only bridged the gap between two languages but also between two centuries. Krishnabhabini's sanskritised Bengali might not have been easy to translate to twentieth century English, given the widely different syntax. This book remains a legacy to future scholars.

#### Reference:

Tarafdar, Swati Sanyal. 'A Bengali Lady's Stark Account of Colonial England'. *The Hindu Business Line*. 22 August 2021. <[www.thehindubusinessonline.com/blink/read/a-bengali-ladys-stark-account-of-colonial-england/article36040915.ece](http://www.thehindubusinessonline.com/blink/read/a-bengali-ladys-stark-account-of-colonial-england/article36040915.ece)> [Accessed 30 August 2021].

**Averi Saha** is an Assistant Professor in English at Kanchrapara College, West Bengal, India. She is a translator and critic. Her areas of specialisation include the study of performance and the study of non-canonical literature. She is specifically interested in the study folk cultures. She completed her M. Phil. from the University of Calcutta and her thesis was on Bengali Pnachalis - their origin and influence. Collecting folk songs from village fairs and festivals is her passion. Her publications include translations and critical essays. Presently she is working on the translation of Pnachalis and Lalon songs and collaborating with All India Radio on a translation project to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> year of India's independence.

Title of the Book: *Dundee Street Songs, Rhymes and Games. The William Montgomerie Collection, 1952*

Margaret Bennett and Illustrated by Les McConnell. Ochtertyre: Grace Note Publications. £12. ISBN 978-1-913162-14-6

*Olga Wojtas*

Three wee wifes an three wee wifes,

An three wee wifesmak nine;

Said ae wee wife to t'ither wee wife,

“Will ye lend me yerwashin line?”

This is one of the street songs sung by Dundee children seventy years ago, and their joy and exuberance is again with us today, thanks to the tenacity of Margaret Bennett, Scotland's pre-eminent folklorist.

The heart of this publication is a CD of children singing and playing in Dundee's Hilltown, originally captured in 1952 on a reel-to-reel tape recorder by William “Bill” Montgomerie, who with his wife Norah shared a passion for Scottish language and folklore. The books they wrote have been reprinted many times across the English-speaking world, but this is the first time any of the recordings have been published.

Margaret Bennett was a close friend of the Montgomeries, whom she first met in the 1980s through her work in the University of Edinburgh's School of Scottish Studies. Bill Montgomerie himself gave her a cassette copy of the tape he made in that Dundee playground. Now, with digitisation by the School of Scottish Studies and the support of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, the authentic version is at last available, displaying the rich variety of singing games and action songs, with skipping rhymes, ball bouncing games, hand-clapping, and singing for fun.

Bennett's excellent book highlights the importance of folklorists, and her friendship with the Montgomeries gives us insightful biographical sketches, and transcripts of conversations with them.

She provides helpful descriptions of the games, such as the courtship song, “All The Boys In Our Town,” which involves a boy standing in the centre while everyone circles round him, singing, with the girls choosing a partner on his behalf. She offers fascinating insights into the genesis and development of the songs. Some have come directly from traditional songs and ballads, and she points out that the children in the Hilltown are a testimony to oral transmission. There are specific local references, for example “Twenty lassies on the Laa,” meaning Dundee Law, the volcanic plug which is the city’s most distinctive landmark. And there are influences from popular culture. Bennett’s own research revealed that within a decade of Bill Montgomerie recording the songs, there was a new version of “There Came Three Dukes A-riding,” clearly inspired by the 1959 Disney film of *Sleeping Beauty*.

Bennett notes: “Playground games have an enormous contribution to make to the performing arts: among their peers children are free to express themselves without inhibition, sing at the tops of their voices, prance, jump, twirl, pull faces, collapse in laughter or act silly. Outside the humdrum of daily life, there’s also the chance to enjoy being a Duke or a Princess and to be celebrated by everyone.”

The songs were also crucial in allowing the children to use their “mither tongue,” particularly at a time when the then Scottish Education Department promoted standard English as the medium of schooling. Under “War Poetry,” for example, pupils would study Wilfred Owen and Rupert Brooks, says Bennett, “yet there would be no poems in Scots, such as ‘Epitaph’ by William Montgomerie or any by his fellow-folklorist, Hamish Henderson.” Since 2015, however, there has been a Scots Language Policy which gives the school curriculum the aim of promoting “the acquisition, use and development of Scots.”

In conversation with Bennett, Norah Montgomerie confided that the headmaster in Hilltown had little interest in Bill’s recording. “So many people thought that nursery rhymes and these children’s songs were just a lot of nonsense.”

This absorbing book with its valuable CD proves those people wrong.

A journalist for more than thirty years, **Olga Wojtas** has been Scottish editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* before she began adding creative writing to her portfolio. She lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, where she attended the school immortalised in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as the Marcia Blaine School for Girls. This inspired her postmodern crime novels, *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar*, and *Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Vampire Menace*, published by Contraband. She is the recipient of a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award, and has had more than forty short stories published in literary anthologies and magazines.

Title of the Book: *Walter Perrie in Conversation with Scottish Writers*,

Grange of Locherlour, Ochertyre: Grace Note Publications, 2021, 315 pp, £12.99, ISBN: 9 78193 182177.

**Scottish Writers: ‘standing on their own ground’**

*Mario Relich*

This collected series of conversations with Scottish writers, which were first published separately as Fraspamphlets by the editor of that periodical, Walter Perrie, himself also a poet, between June 2006 and March 2020, and with the novelist and literary scholar John Herdman also interviewing, covers eight distinguished ‘post MacDiarmid’ writers who began publishing mainly in the seventies. Four of the interviewees have since died, Duncan Glen in 2008, Tessa Ransford in 2015, Donald Campbell in March 2019, and Alasdair Gray at the end of December 2019.

The first interview, with poet and playwright Donald Campbell, at his home in Edinburgh on June 20<sup>th</sup> 2006, includes an exchange which is applicable to all eight of the interviewees. With John Herdman, as well as Walter Perrie present, Campbell declared ‘John is on his own ground, simply because he writes out of his own impulses...independent because he has an independent mind’ (p. 75).

The same can be said of Donald Campbell himself. Unlike Herdman, he had no academic background at all, but by sheer force of will (and of course writing talent) after some years as an accountant, he published poetry collections mainly in Scots, wrote theatre histories, and became renowned as a playwright.

It was his first play *The Jesuit*, performed at the Traverse Theatre in 1976, when Chris Parr was its artistic director, that made the greatest impact. It was about the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Catholic martyr John Ogilvie, canonized as a saint the very same year as Campbell’s drama. Dramatically, the conflict was between Ogilvie, and Protestant Archbishop John Spottiswoode. The guards and torturers assigned to him all speak in different registers of Scots, with the aristocratic Ogilvie, perhaps ironically, having the most anglicized accent. The play alluded to sectarianism in Scotland, which was still quite strong in the seventies, and aggravated by civil strife in Northern Ireland. It was also by no means a defence of Ogilvie, but a tragic depiction of religious conflict, and arguably an illustration of Jean Renoir’s dictum ‘everyone has his reasons’.

Campbell, who grew up in Caithness, lived most of his life in Edinburgh, but the interview reveals much about his Highland legacy as well. His cutting sense of humour, moreover, spiced up his conversation with Perrie and Herdman.

Duncan Glen, editor of the long-running periodical *Akros* literary periodical and Akros Publications, also wrote poetry mainly in Scots, and grew up in Cambuslang. He was interviewed at his home in Kirkcaldy on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2006, by which time he had retired from lecturing in Design at Nottingham Trent University. He was a great admirer of Hugh MacDiarmid and wrote about him, but his poetry was particularly influenced by American poets like William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara and Robert Creeley, all poets, broadly speaking, in favour of demotic language. The interview discusses both MacDiarmid and American poets in some detail, but Glen's most striking observation was the following about the 'current generation' of poets in the first decade of our century: 'They do not look back to someone as I looked back to MacDiarmid or William Carlos Williams and that means they do not aim to contribute to the culture, only to their own position' (p. 64). It's a harsh judgment, but possibly one all too applicable even in our current literary climate. Glen himself has rightly been called by Perrie 'a great enabler of other writers'.

Tessa Ransford was a poet, founder and first Director of the Scottish Poetry Library, and the final and longest lasting editor of another influential literary periodical, *Lines Review*. She was interviewed at her flat in Edinburgh. Although the interviewers neglect to mention this, it had a fine view of Arthur's Seat. In a way she herself was a Parnassian in the sense that a lofty approach to life defined much of her poetry.

She also had a strong connection with India, in that she was born in Mumbai (Bombay at the time), and her father was Master of the Mint there. Tagore, whom she discovered at an early age, was one of her influences, and she told the interviewers that 'his poems put me in touch with what I now call "my Indian self", which had been suppressed by the trauma of returning from India and the boarding school in St Andrews' (p. 86).

Her first husband was a missionary, with whom she had children, his helpmate in Pakistan for eight years. Her second husband was Callum MacDonald, who produced and printed *Lines Review* from its inception in the fifties.

Apart from John Herdman, Ransford was the most philosophically sophisticated of the writers interviewed. Martin Heidegger on poetry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer on 'religionless Christianity', and Teilhard de Chardin are among the philosophers/theologians she discussed

most eloquently. Above all, she regarded poetry ‘as a way of thinking’, and agreed with Heidegger ‘that the nature of thought is poetic’ (p. 88).

She was also (and this tends to be downplayed in the interview) a phenomenal organizer and networker, one who knew how ‘to get things done’. Not least, she knew how to delegate. Tom Hubbard was her Chief Librarian, and both made the Scottish Poetry Library, with its fine collection of works by both Scottish and international poets, an essential part of the literary firmament in Scotland. About the ‘business model’ approach to literary funding, however, Ransford acutely observed: ‘It is a readership we need, not a market’. Among other positions, she was President of Scottish PEN for a few years.

Trevor Royle, historian and former Literary Director of the Scottish Arts Council, was interviewed at his home in Portobello, Edinburgh on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2007. Like Tessa Ransford, he has family connections with India. He was born in India as his father was a military engineer in the Army. Part of his childhood was also spent in Malaya, because his family moved to Malaya (now Malaysia) after Indian independence in 1947, and later to Britain. He went to school in Madras College, St Andrews, and vividly recalled that he exaggerated his English identity, ‘and indeed on several occasions got punched in the face for it’ (p. 112). As an adult, however, he developed a cultural allegiance to Scotland, and his degree studies were at Aberdeen University, where his introduction to Buchan and Kipling, he said, ‘had a profound effect on me because it taught me the value of story-telling’ (p. 113).

One consequence of his time in India was that he wrote a very successful book *The Last Days of the Raj*, ‘a history of the end of empire in India’ (p. 145). Much of it is based on interviews with British veterans and subjects of the Raj. As he put it, ‘I began with my mother...and eventually found myself interviewing a large number of people who had lived through that experience in Britain’, adding that ‘it wasn’t just a British experience, it was also an Indian experience. So, I wanted to include people in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and that was done by a researcher called Gillian Wright’ (p. 145).

Royle’s stint as Literature Director of the Scottish Arts Council in the seventies was a very creative and supportive one in his dealing with writers. He felt that the SAC at the time was much more in tune with ‘that sense of artistic community which had been strong in the seventies and eighties’, emphasizing that at the time ‘there was a terrific burgeoning of self-confidence’ allied to the feeling that Scotland was becoming an independent country’ (p. 133). He was also for a time editor of *Lines Review*, and paid this tribute to its publisher,

Callum MacDonald: ‘... this was a man who had put his money where his mouth was. He believed it was necessary to promote and publish Scottish writing at a time when it was unfashionable to do so’ (p. 140). Indeed, MacDonald published key poets like Iain Crichton Smith and Robert Garioch in his *Lines Review* editions.

Royle is now particularly well known for his military histories, including ones which highlight Scotland’s role in both world wars. Near the end of the interview, he talked about his ‘exasperated love of Scotland’, to which Perrie replied ‘Well, in Scotland if it’s not exasperated, it’s probably not love, it’s probably sentiment’ (p. 148).

John Herdman displayed a similar exasperation in his interview (the last one in the book) with Walter Perrie and Richie McCaffery, poet and critic of a younger generation, as he’s in his thirties, while Herdman became widely known as a novelist and satirical short story writer in the seventies. The interview was conducted at his Edinburgh home on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. He is very much an Edinburgh man, and from a mercantile family. His father was ‘a grain importer in Leith’, and his mother’s family were tea merchants (p. 259).

Regarding his education, Perrie observed that both Herdman and Trevor Royle ‘left school and university with an almost complete ignorance of the Scottish tradition’ (p. 271), to which Herdman replied that the Scottish tradition was totally ignored at school, and that ‘(i)t was actually, ironically, at Cambridge that I discovered my own Scottishness, became aware of myself as a Scot’ (pp. 271-72), adding that ‘I suppose my embracing of Scottish nationalism was partly an identity thing, partly a desire to do something more active, something that wasn’t internalised’ (p. 272). His writing tends to be exploratory, sardonic and darkly enigmatic.

At Cambridge, he gained a double first in English, but he was more attracted to European writers: ‘I’ve been quite influenced by people like Hoffmann, Kafka and Beckett’. (p. 270). He is fascinated by the concept of the ‘double’, or ‘doppelganger’, hence to a large extent his admiration for writers like Hogg, Stevenson and Dostoevsky, whose works he explored in *The Double in Nineteenth Century Fiction* (1990).

A fascinating discussion of absurdist literature began with McCaffery’s praise of his most recent novel *The Sinister Cabaret*: ‘Walter and I are in agreement that it’s one of your strongest works’ (p. 286). Herdman replied that he was ‘very strongly attracted to absurdism in the 1960s, very strongly’, adding that ‘Beckett was the greatest one I think but surrealist

absurdism has always been a strong factor in my writing and certainly come into its own in *The Sinister Cabaret*' (p. 286).

The tenor of the interview suggests that Herdman is at his most Scottish, and closest to the Scottish literary tradition, when he is at his most modern and European. McCaffey regards his absurdism as paradoxically 'the voice of utter reason and sanity', particularly on the 'cultural erosion' brought about by 'the worship of money and economics above everything else' (p. 286).

Herdman is an admirer of the Border ballads. The poet and folk-singer William Hershaw, who was interviewed at his home in Lochgelly on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2009, called them 'the DNA of Scottish literature' (p. 169) and declared without equivocation: 'I write in Scots because I'm Scottish' (p. 163). But he also warned against what he calls 'polemical poetry' in Scots, observing with great candour that 'I am very conscious that there is an awful lot of very turgid poetry in Scots, including my own' (p. 168).

John Herdman did, nevertheless, rightly describe him as 'one of the most prominent of the younger generation of poets' (p. 155). He regards himself as a 'hybrid' Scots poet rather than a 'native' one, and therefore flexible in his deployment of language; indeed one of the modern poets he admires most is George Mackay Brown, 'a really fantastic poet' (p. 115), who 'links in with the ballads' (p. 169). Hershaw's poems in *Postcards fae Woodwick Mill: Orkney Poems in Scots* (2015), which includes a CD of poems and songs, are no doubt partly inspired by the Orkney poet.

His schooling was at St. Andrews High School in Kirkcaldy in the early seventies, and that's when he became interest in becoming a singer-songwriter, influenced by Bob Dylan and Neil Young, often writing about the now largely-vanished mining culture in Fife, as in *The Cowdenbeath Man* (1997). Herdman described it as 'an elegy for the mining community in Cowdenbeath' (p. 162). A more recent work, *The Sair Road* (218) uses traditional imagery from 'the Stations of the Cross' for a poem sequence about mining strikes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The interview made it clear that he's happy in his role as a teacher of Scottish and English literature, and in his family life, which means, as he put it, 'that when I decide to write a poem, I can write about whatever the hell I like' (p. 179). In short, he is no careerist.

Margaret Bennett was interviewed by both William Hershaw and Walter Perrie at her home in Locherlour, near Crieff, on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2013. Her interview displayed a very wide range of interests, which are in tune with a writer whom Perrie describes as a ‘folklorist, historian, singer and storyteller’ (p. 219). It reads very much like a master-class about the significance of the Gaeltacht or Gaeldom in Scottish culture.

Her mother was from Skye and her father, a civil engineer, Glasgow/Irish. He was also a piper. Music and singing, with impromptu ceilidhs at their home, very much influenced her later career as a folklorist. She observed about her parents that ‘poverty is something that other people label, not the people who live there. They thought they were rich beyond measure’ (p. 220).

Bennett qualified as a teacher in Jordanhill, but she mentioned that she learned far more when she followed her father, who emigrated to Newfoundland in Canada. The Folklore Department at St. John’s Campus of Memorial University in Newfoundland fascinated her, and led to her lifelong interest in contributing to and teaching Folklore Studies. At Jordanhill, she did a course on folklore with Herbert Halper, who had been ‘in the forties, along with Alan Lomax, named as one of the two greatest folklorists of their time’ (p. 230).

Hamish Henderson was a great folklorist himself, as well as poet and ballad-maker, whom she knew very well. She learned from him that to derive the greatest benefit from culture and tradition, ‘it’s not about personality, not about you’, and it’s ‘about forgetting self’, adding that Henderson ‘knew the tradition intimately but he never name dropped or referred to anything to impress you, or that he knew this or that’ (p. 233).

Like many of the other interviewees, Bennett was deeply critical of what is taught in Scottish schools, and made this observation about teachers even today: ‘In many cases young teachers lack a confidence in their own culture and that deeply saddens me. It’s much easier for many people to collapse into a chair and watch game shows’ (p. 247). Her parting shot, which both Walter Perrie and William Hershaw certainly endorsed throughout the interview, was as follows: ‘... if we lose our languages, Gaelic or Scots, we lose our identity’ (p. 258).

Alasdair Gray, one of the most distinctive and unmistakably Scottish writers of the recent past, revealed himself as also very British, in that he strongly believed in the post-war settlement which brought about greater social equality and the politics of consensus. This conviction was largely abandoned in Britain during the years of the Thatcher government.

For Gray, the primacy of social conscience in the governance of a nation still survived in Scotland, and as an important element of its political/social identity. He was interviewed at his home in Glasgow on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

He was by far the most internationally famous of the eight interviewees, and yet there was no dilution whatsoever of his Scottish literary sensibility, one that is enlightened rather than ideologically rigid, starting with the novel which made him famous, *Lanark*. Its seeds were in his early reaction to Walter Scott, who was taught in Scottish schools. He argued that Scott's novel was in the secondary school curriculum because it gloried in the fusion between the conquering Normans and the 'crude' Anglo-Saxons, the result being 'to form the English language!', and added, to laughter from the interviewers: 'What a good thing for the Scots to learn about!' (p. 198). This 'lesson' from *Ivanhoe* is what determined him 'that my *Lanark* novel was going to be more about politics, the politics of the modern world and particularly Scotland' (p. 198). In fact, *Lanark* is not quite so politically blatant. One of its undercurrents. However, is certainly political disillusionment, comparable to that of Joyce with Irish politics in *Ulysses*. Neither novel, however, is generally considered to be primarily political.

The nugget of information about the genesis of *Lanark* is only one of the many jewels to be found in the interview. It displays Gray's phenomenal erudition not only when discussing Scottish writers like MacDiarmid and Walter Scott, but also the likes of Dante, Camoens, Milton, Gibbon, Goethe, Balzac, H.G. Wells and D.H. Lawrence.

All the writers interviewed in *Conversations with Scottish Writers* illuminate aspects of Scottish writing and culture which, as Perrie put it in an interview with Margaret Bennett at the launch of the book, 'tend to be sidelined in official accounts'. Perrie and Herdman realized in the early 2000s that the voices of these writers, all of whom they knew well, needed to be recorded for the benefit of subsequent generations. The interviews, moreover, dwell on important cultural issues rather than the kind of commercial self-promotion which occurs too often in journalistic interviews, and these days online. Above all, what these writers have in common, otherwise so diverse in their interests, is a principled rejection of fashionable shibboleths in British literary culture.

**Mario Relich** is a poet and critic, and on the Board of Scottish PEN. He is based in Edinburgh, and is a regular contributor to *Scottish Affairs*, which is published both in hard-copy and online. His Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh was on philosophical dialogue by David Hume and others during the Enlightenment. His second collection of poems *Owl at Twilight* was published by Kennedy & Boyd in 2021. His essay on ‘John Herdman and his Vignettes of Scottish Poets’ appeared in *Not Dark Yet: A Celebration of John Herdman* (Leamington Books, 2021). He also interviewed Iain Chrichton Smith at his home in Taynuilt, published in *Edinburgh Review*, no. 99, (Spring 1998), pp. 108 – 121.

Title of the Book: *Letting Go*

By Gerda Stevenson. Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2021; ISBN: 978-1-910022-91-7

*Jameela Muneer*

It is not an easy trick, to make the complex, deceptively simple. Yet Gerda Stevenson successfully grasps the opportunity in *Letting Go* (Luath Press). Her collection of short stories, is a kaleidoscope of ‘time spots’, sudden realisations, and wry acceptances; instances which encompass love, life, death and regeneration.

The stories, twelve in number, symbolise a calendar year. They are a chronology, or time line, which sweeps from nineteenth century Scotland, through World War II, present environmental/ political issues, and into the future. Homage to Scotland, with references to songs, and echoes of literary figures, abounds. A love of, and for, Scotland imbues the collection, but it is not a localised limiting Scotland. In some stories, love is a form of escape, to a wider world. In others, the world brings love to Scotland, in the form of Travellers, Italians, Poles and Africans. Every day incidents, of everyday folk, and their speech, are reflected; Stevenson moves with ease between English and Scots. There is no great action, but life as it happens—at times reminiscent of Grassie Gibbon.

Multi-faceted love is the unifying force; but themes of diversity, disability, alienation and migration, criss-cross the narrative. In each story, someone let’s go of something, or someone else. The past evokes bitter sweet memories, yet needs to be let go – not forgotten, but let go. In the first story, the creative Sarah, surrounded by graves, chooses life and adventure. Letting go of her middle-class background, she opts to run away with the stranger, the “other”. The Traveller in turn, lets go his need for vengeance, in his love for her.

All her married life, Lily of the title story regrets the rift with her sister. In old age, she is able to let go of her grief. Her much younger sister died alone and unloved, whereas Lilly’s decision to leave home all those years ago was the right one. Her choice of an ostracised conscientious objector for a husband, gave her access to the world of work, a family, and now grandchildren.

Exhaustion, tears of anger and frustration, in caring for the elderly or a child with disability can all be let go. Having an extra chromosome is not insurmountable. In *Chromosome and Chocolate*, the focus is on the love and joy, a living disabled child provides.

Layers of irony surface in the letting go of expatriate dreams, in apartheid South Africa. After two years in the country, the child narrator is bewildered. Where is home, and where does she belong? Upon her return to Scotland, homesick for the land left behind, she sees the only black child in the playground. He is “new” like herself. She asks if he is from South Africa.

“No, I’m not. I’m Scottish,” he said. “Where are you from? You talk different.”

Indeed. Where are any of us from? And how long does it take to be “Scottish”, or no longer Scottish? Who belongs, and who does not? Race, colour, language, accent, class, religion, culture...where is the defining line?

Stevenson’s answer is, we all belong, without borders.

Other stories touching on issues of migration, love and xenophobia, mingle with humour, linking the past with the present. The anthology is quietly feminist. Most of the stories focus on women; their freedom, rebellion and tenacity. This includes the skeleton woman of the last story. Set in the future, she too is a survivor; lover and beloved, far from home, but home in the Arctic. Stevenson is fair. There are two sides to each story as presented in the chicken factory and Merryland Street. Poverty breeds xenophobia and conflict. Life is a series of concentric circles inhabited by the unfortunate, not necessarily the bad.

There is passion and complexity in Gerda Stevenson’s short story collection. What stays with me is the self-belief of the girl with the extra chromosome. She is certain she *will* marry and she *will* learn to swim. It is exhilarating. We need to let go of our preconceptions. She will achieve, because as she says “I’m alive”.

And that is what lies at the heart of *Letting Go*. We let go, not to give up, but to go on. There’s hope and resilience, and love and life.

**Jameela Muneer** was born in Hyderabad, India, went to school in Monmouth and studied at the Universities of London, Cardiff and Edinburgh. The daughter and grand-daughter of Urdu writers and poets, she has a special interest in Urdu and Scottish literature, although her chosen medium is English. She has been a journalist, teacher and solicitor. She has been anthologised and published in literary magazines as a poet. Jameela enjoys performance poetry and has recorded her work in collaboration with musicians. She has read at poetry events and literary festivals. Currently working on a collection of haiku and short stories, she spends her time reading, writing, trying to play the ukulele, and vainly hoping to gain wisdom with age. She lives in Edinburgh.

Title of the Book: *Patient Dignity*.

Poems by Bashabi Fraser, paintings by Vibha Pankaj. Edinburgh: Scotland Street Press, 2021, ISBN 978 1 910895 542, £9.99.

### **The Meadows and the Maidan**

*Tom Hubbard*

A mother and her son are arguing. ‘We’re not pleasant in India,’ declares the son, Ronny Heaslop, Chief Magistrate of Chandrapore, ‘and we don’t intend to be pleasant. We’ve something more important to do.’ His mother, the mystical Mrs Moore, holds that ‘The English *are* out here to be pleasant [...] Because India is part of the earth. And God has put us on the earth to be pleasant to each other. God ... is ... love.’ The exchange takes place in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924). Forster’s earlier novel, *Howards End* (1910), features another cultural clash, this time within England but not dissimilar to contrasting attitudes to colonialism – between the idealism of art-lovers / intellectuals and the practicality of complacently philistine business people. Here, Margaret Schlegel, representative of the cultured, ponders how to reach out to the other camp: ‘Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.’

Bashabi Fraser’s work is predicated on connection.

The western reader’s map of India has been redrawn since the days of the sympathetic liberal Forster (and, farther back, of the tortuously ambivalent Kipling). Indians themselves have communicated an alternative cartography, and a key figure here is Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), cited in *The Penguin Companion to Literature*, vol. 1 (1971) as ‘poet, playwright, novelist, painter, educator and musician’ and who is prolifically championed by Professor Fraser, not least as regards the remit of *Gitanjali and Beyond*.

*Patient Dignity* ‘connects’ India with Scotland, poetry with painting, idealism with practicality in a tribute to ‘the dedicated staff working on the frontline, risking their lives to save ours at NHS and in Care Homes’, to quote the book’s dedication. A counter leitmotif is to be found in the challenge to us to ‘live in fragments no longer’ (E. M. Forster, above), to make whole ‘this chasmed world’ (*Patient Dignity*, p. 13), to heed ‘An alarm call from earth’s mantle and streams’ (p. 17). In all, the words and images of this collection assert

potential over complacency in response to the twin omens of pandemic and climate change (themselves not unconnected ...).

Many of these poems have a vatic, incantatory quality which co-exists, touchingly, with a certain homeliness. ‘Love Today’ has each stanza beginning with ‘Love is ...’, by way of theme with variations. The last lines of all stanzas rhyme with each other.

Love is to hear your children serenade you  
On your lawn as you wave through a window  
On Mother’s Day.

Love is your grandchild calling and kissing  
Virtually on FaceTime as he takes his first steps  
And points your way. [...]

In similar vein we have ‘Remember’ where the same line introduces each stanza – ‘Remember this time will pass’ – where the poet is able to sound optimistic notes despite the prevailing gloom. ‘Moments of Truth and Hope’ has its first lines introducing ‘That moment when ...’, except for the last stanza where the word ‘is’, subtly and almost imperceptibly, is inserted, i.e. ‘This is the moment’ modulating the musicality of the poem. ‘Moments of Truth and Hope’ celebrates those phenomena of nature which, pre-pandemic, we may have taken for granted, but not now:

That moment when butterflies dance  
When petals shimmer with summer’s glamour  
When birds fly home before moths flit in  
And the night is alive with the crickets’ clamour.

The poem’s dedicatee is Bashabi Fraser’s friend and fellow poet Mario Relich, whose own poetry evokes those all too easily missed delights in the small details of the natural world – for example, ‘Chaffinch’ in another poetry collection from this fraught year of 2021, Dr Relich’s *Owl at Twilight* (Kennedy & Boyd).

Such insight is shared by the book’s artist Dr Vibha Pankaj. Like Drs Fraser and Relich she lives in Edinburgh and the cityscape informs her work. In her prose contribution she writes: ‘While COVID and the resulting lockdown was a source of anguish I observed a new zeal in the hills and woods – kids flying kites, bikers whizzing past, families walking,

jogging and enjoying picnics – a pleasant escape from isolation.’ To our often-grey Scotland she presents such rich, sensuous colours as we would associate with India. Even her more subdued tones are, to borrow a phrase of Hugh MacDiarmid’s, ‘austerely intoxicating’.

Of the many discoveries in this book, I would mention in particular ‘In Verona’, a poem dedicated to her friend Professor Carla Sassi, who teaches Scottish literature at that city’s university. Northern Italy was one of the European regions worst affected by the pandemic but which was determined to assert human creativity, solidarity and love in its own way – ‘musicians on balconies / Gathered to serenade / Their saviours’ – and there’s more than a hint (balconies?) of successors to Verona’s famous lovers, Romeo and Juliet, here resolved not to be star-crossed: ‘There was laughter and applause / As two pairs of eyes met and paused.’

Edinburgh and Kolkata are linked by what they have in common, a ‘vast city green,’ where ‘The Meadows and the Maidan know the pulse of the populace’; and I was arrested by the image of the ‘Pragmatic migrant / carrying his house on his back / braving all weather’ in the title poem of the collection (‘Patient Dignity: a Snail’).

In her previous books, Bashabi Fraser has been concerned to effect a sharing of cultures, of her Indian and Scottish milieux. Take, for example, her epic poem *From the Ganga to the Tay* (2009), her collaboration with the photographer and sculptor Kenny Munro; *Thai Katori: An Anthology of Scottish & South Asian Poetry* (2017), which she co-edited with the poet and literary scholar Alan Riach. An earlier project, *The Geddes-Tagore Correspondence* (2002), compiled, edited and introduced by Professor Fraser, documented the personal and professional friendship of two polymaths, one Indian, the other Scottish (Patrick Geddes, 1854-1932). Professor Fraser includes this praise of Geddes by Tagore: ‘He has the precision of the scientist and the vision of the prophet, at the same time, the power of an artist to make his ideas visible through the language of symbols. His love of Man has given him the insight to see the truth of Man, and his imagination to realise in the world the infinite mystery of life and not merely its mechanical aspect.’ Both men knew the inter-relatedness of academic disciplines, as indeed of all human and natural phenomena. The spirit of Geddes and Tagore pervades *Patient Dignity* and indeed a stanza from ‘On Bengali New Year’ is significantly printed twice, once as part of the whole poem in the body of the book, and by itself on the back cover: it could be said to sum up so much of the collection:

This was the day when in the early hours  
Tagore’s songs resounded  
From households and street corners

When the conch shell was sounded  
And dancers knew the power  
Of hope uncompounded.

**Tom Hubbard** is a novelist, poet and literary/cultural historian. His most recent book is *The Devil and Michael Scot: a Gallimaufry of Fife and Beyond* (Grace Note Publications, 2020).

Title of the Book: *The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line*

By Ruth Thomas. Inverness, Scotland: Sandstone Press, 2021; ISBN: 978-1-913207-36-6

*Sue Pepper*

Like the Royal Institute for Prehistorical Studies, Ruth Thomas's novel works on several levels. It's about the breakdown of a relationship. It's about loss and death. It's about the importance of family and friends. It's about the destructive power of overweening ambition and it's about love and hate and how we deal with those two powerful emotions. Ruth Thomas weaves these threads with subtlety and skill, and the whole is illuminated with shafts of humour.

The structure of the novel relates to the title. The first thirty-three pages are subtitled "Snow" which is seen as malign "...too much snow weighs down a too-thin branch." Helen re-enters Sybil's life, popping up like a bad smell at the ice rink and the British Museum. These are warning flurries and Helen eventually smothers Sybil in a blizzard, an avalanche. She steals Sybil's lover, and becomes ubiquitous in her life as she also steals her ideas and invades the Institute where Sybil works. The second part of the novel is "The Works" which shows the slow repair of the damage as Sybil comes to terms with her losses. The third part is "The Northern Line" which is now repaired and able to function again as we see Sybil recovered emotionally and physically. It's interesting that the Northern Line is unique in that it offers several branches so you can choose your destination while travelling on the same line.

A major theme of the novel is loss. Death is an *eminence grise*, the death of Sybil's grandfather and the death of Peter Edwards. Sybil loses her lover in an act of betrayal by Helen. We see Raglan Beverage deal with the loss of his lover Peter Edwards as he seeks comfort in poetry while coping with Helen's machinations. We see Sybil grieving for her grandfather and wonder at Simon's refusal to attend the funeral. "He'd hardly known the guy". We see Sybil as she tries to get on with her life, attending appointments and dinners and parties and visits to the cinema whilst coping with the blurred vision, headaches and dizzy spells consequent to her accident at the ice rink. We see her trying to improve her situation by going to poetry classes. We know that she and Raglan are mended when they are both able to see the "...wonder of the world..." at the end of the book.

Ruth Thomas writes with a lyrical poetic language rich in imagery, whilst also grounding her work firmly in detailed observation of very ordinary things. We have the image of the cup she finds, chipped and cheerful and ordinary in contrast to Helen's wretched beakers. Raglan quotes John Donne's love poetry and Blake's "The Poison Tree" which resonate with Sybil's situation. The kitchenette at the Institute is strongly evoked with its plastic air freshener, its Nice Day calendar, its cactus with the pink flower and packet of lilac Post-it notes. There are half-lemons and cucumbers on the hospital curtains. We are with Sybil in the exact stations she uses, the exact streets she walks, and Greenwich is clearly evoked with its Meridian Line, its High Street, its tunnel and the Cutty Sark.

People are also described in rich detail such as the girl she sees from her window with her black velvet coat, black gloves and big black bovver boots. There is a wonderful description of Helen when she is scared for her future and loses her perfect hair and makeup with smudged lipstick and necklace askew. The whole novel is allegorical with its image of snow and work on the Northern Line.

The novel explores the importance of friends and family. Sybil's mum and dad are on her side and offer advice and support and rush to her hospital bed cutting short their holiday in Madeira. Elspeth, her flatmate, is a good friend and Jane Beauchamp is instrumental in Sybil's revenge on Helen. Bill helps her at the library and is possibly her new love interest.

Humour makes the novel a delight to read. Sybil has a slantwise view on life which is ironic and not always appreciated by those she deals with. She gives us two possible names for an optician, "Four Eyes" or "Blind as a Bat." She writes of "...a dress made out of sofa fabric" and thinks the name Raglan Beverage "...a cross between a Guernsey sweater and a drink from a vending machine." Her description of the poetry class is hilarious.

The novel is written entirely from Sybil's viewpoint in the first person which means that we enter into her world and are very close to her. But we only know what she knows and we have to pick up clues as she does from half heard conversations and what is not said. We must work with her to find a path through the thicket of information.

I so enjoyed the novel and have it by my bed to read again.

**Sue Pepper** is now retired, having taught English and Drama in London comprehensive schools for many years. She was a Teacher Trainer and worked overseas with V.S.O. (Voluntary Service Overseas). She is involved in several voluntary schemes including the Poetry Association of Scotland and Nomadic Survival. She has lived in Edinburgh for sixteen years and enjoys all the cultural facilities that the city has to offer. She has four children and eight grandchildren and is an avid reader of literature.

Title of the Book: *In Memoriam: Smaran and Palataka*.

English translation by Sanjukta Dasgupta of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry in Bengali, *Smaran* (1902) and *Palataka* (1918). Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2020. Rs 125/-. ISBN: 978-93-90310-27-2.

### ***Tania Chakraverty***

The collection titled *In Memoriam: Smaran and Palataka*, (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2020), Rabindranath Tagore's *Smaran* (1902) and *Palataka* (1918), translated by Sanjukta Dasgupta, an accomplished poet herself, has a pleasant combination of the creative and the critical.

I wish to draw the readers' attention to Dasgupta's focus on the woman/women featuring in the collections and attempt a feminist critiquing of the same.

*Smaran* is a collection of reminiscences and tributes, written in the memory of Tagore's wife Mrinalini Devi. A twenty-two-year-old Tagore married child bride, ten-year-old Mrinalini on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1883. The shy and quiet Mrinalini Devi fitted in perfectly with Ruskin's ideology that says, "the wife shall be subject but will "guide" or even "rule" her lord by serving as his conscience...prudently reserving the world for the male, leaving the female an ancillary circle of housewifely and philanthropic activity".<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Laws of Manu dictate that an ideal wife, "must always be cheerful, clever in (the management of her) household affairs, careful in cleaning her utensils, and economical in expenditure" [The Laws of Manu, Chapter V, Verse 150].<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the incipient period of formal education for women, in the Occident as well as the Orient, educationists and social thinkers, even pioneers who championed the necessities of educating women did so with such ideology barring a few exceptions. Naturally Mrinalini's lifelong virtues remained those of an ideal wife. After almost two decades of their marriage, Mrinalini Devi passed away, on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1902 aged only twenty-eight.

Rabindranath Tagore, somewhat philosophically wrote in 1917 in a letter to his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi, that both life and death had to be accepted as integral parts of the universe. Yet, he had been devastated after his mother's death in 1876 which he

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<sup>1</sup> Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Manu, translated by George Bühler, "*The Laws of Manu: Sacred Books of the East*", Vol. 25. <<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm>> [accessed 3 July 2021]

witnessed at the tender age of fourteen; and after the suicide of Kadambari Devi, his sister-in-law (the wife of his elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore), childhood playmate and muse, in April 1884. In *In Memoriam*, Dasgupta challenges the assertion of critics and biographers, including Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, that Tagore's relationship with his wife Mrinalini was not deep. This misconstrued notion, asserts Dasgupta, comes from the flawed acclamation that the poet's muse being Kadambari, he could not betray her memory and have much of an attachment towards his wife who bore him five children. Dasgupta's views mirror those of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who, in *Atmaghati Rabindranath* [The Suicidal Rabindranath], mentioning the more than two thousand songs Tagore wrote in his lifetime, opines that these are not compositions of literature or songs unconnected with his life. Rather he specifically says that one may compose a mental biography by arranging his songs date-wise. To him, the songs may be divided into five groups, chronologically. These divisions, he says, are in accordance with his mental condition. N. C. Chaudhuri writes:

Firstly, let us deal with the death of his wife. Nobody dies, by law of nature, at the age, Mrinalini Devi died; nobody becomes a widower, usually, at the age Rabindranath became a widower. This once again brought him face to face with death. The way he expressed this new pain of bereavement is different from the kind expressed in the death story published in *Jeebansmriti*. That story had to be written at least twenty-six years after the event and is different from the pains he received from the deaths that occurred between 1902 to 1907, and those agonies were also old ones, received a few years back. The mourning expressed in *Jeebansmriti* can be referred to as 'Emotion recollected in tranquility'. But the poems he wrote about his wife's death just days after her demise bore the effects of a fresh agony. I have never read such sensitive poems about the death of a loved one. I request all those who read this book to read the poems in *Smaran*.<sup>3</sup> (Translation mine)

A re-reading of the twenty-seven poems in *Smaran* and Dasgupta's translations, will probably shatter the romantic myth built over years around the possibility of an intimate love affair with his sister-in-law. Tagore's love for Mrinalini was indeed profound. Should we forget that Tagore himself in his novel *Shesher Kabita* [The Last Poem] draws a line between romantic love and marital love that, he says, binds personal relationships within duties, societal norms and practices! Yet, each elegy in *Smaran* manifests acute mourning and sometimes a tinge of guilt for not having paid enough attention and not having shown enough

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<sup>3</sup> Chaudhuri, Nirad Chandra, *Atmaghati Rabindranath* [The Suicidal Rabindranath], *Atmaghati Bangali* [The Suicidal Bengali] Volume 2, (Kolkata, Mitra & Ghosh, 1993 Second Reprint), p. 95

affection to his wife when she was alive. Tagore longs for a spiritual reunion with Mrinalini after her death and manifests in his verse intense love and longing for his docile, obedient, and gentle companion - the angel of the house, the perfect *grihalakshmi*. In *Smaran*, with Mrinalini dead, Tagore sometimes sheds the facade, carefully set up as was customary in tradition-bound colonial Bengal, and shows her as a romantic lover - caring and undemanding nonetheless - more as a duty-bound wife.

Death remains at an arm's length in some of the poems in *Palataka* too. Having witnessed the death of his daughter, Madhurilata, lovingly nicknamed Bela, he wrote quite a few poems, not overtly dealing with death but with an acute longing for a lost one. "Chirodiner Daga" [Permanent Scribble] can be cited as a good example. The reader would be attracted most to the realistic and faithful portrayal of gender issues in many of the poems in the collection. The poem "Mukti" [Freedom] deals with a woman, an ideal wife in the eyes of society, who reveals through her yearning for death, the lies and pretences in her loveless marriage of twenty-two years. As Eros has failed her, she is left to choose Thanatos, hence the death wish. "Phanki" [Trick] reveals the helplessness of a philanthropic woman who in a dire situation tries to help a low-caste woman albeit with the help of her loving husband. The sorority bonding between the two women, though momentary, affects the reader just as much as the husband's deceit, hence such a title. "Nishkriti" [Release] reveals the double standard in morality that makes people accept the marriage of a middle-aged widower but frown at the prospects of a romantic union between two young lovers because of caste-barriers. It is a delightful poem of protest, manifested by the young lover, an educated and liberal doctor, and by the soon-to-be-bold woman, daughter of a conservative man, and the doctor's beloved and later wife. "Chhinna Patra" [The Torn Letter] is a poem dealing with sheer neglect meted out towards a girl who once loved the narrator, but had to agree to marriage to a man chosen by her father. "Kalo Meye" [The Dark Girl] deals with an issue which, unfortunately, is still very pertinent in contemporary India and Bengal - the demand of the bridegroom and his family for fair-skinned brides. The dark girl, confined as a caged bird, ages at home, as her father fails to marry her off, admired however by a poor sensitive youth.

Keeping in mind the generic division of languages into masculine and feminine by philologists, one may say, Tagore's language in the poems in *Smaran* and *Palataka* bears the mellifluous sound that is so distinct to the 'feminine' Bengali tongue. To translate Tagore's Bengali poems to stressed 'masculine' English is no mean feat. Added to the sheer delight of the sweetness and the cadence of Tagore's language that she manages to retain, I am sure,

Sanjukta Dasgupta's translations of the poems of *Smaran* and *Palataka* will supplement our understanding of Rabindranath Tagore, both as a poet and as a husband and parent.

**Tania Chakraverty** is currently the Dean of Students' Welfare, Diamond Harbour Women's University, Sarisha, West Bengal. Educated at Presidency College, Calcutta and the University of Calcutta, Chakraverty has done her Ph.D. from the University of Calcutta under the supervision of Professor Dr. Sanjukta Dasgupta. She has formerly taught Full-time at Shri Shikshayatan College, Kolkata and concurrently as Guest Faculty in the Post-Graduate Department of English, University of Calcutta. Chakraverty visited the U.S. to participate in an academic group project, "Strengthening and Widening the Scope of American Studies: The U.S. Experience" in 2010 as part of the prestigious International Visitor Leadership Program, (IVLP). She has authored *Rhapsodies and Musings*; her essays have appeared in national and international journals. Her areas of academic interest include Gender Studies, American Literature and Literature of the Diaspora. Chakraverty is the Assistant Secretary, Executive Council, of the Inter-Cultural Poetry and Performance Library (IPPL), Kolkata.

Title of the Book: *Transient*

By Tapati Gupta. Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, Bolpur, 2021. Rs 275/- ISBN: 9788195306732.

### **A Lasting Transience**

*Debapriti Sengupta*

Rituals that follow the Hindu mode of thinking always worship Lord Ganesh before the worship of any other deity. This is a fascinating ritual because Lord Ganesh is one of the smallest members of the deity families- the youngest son of Devi Parvati and Lord Shiva. The myth says that one day there was an argument going on between Ganesh and his elder brother, Kartick on the factor that who was the fastest between them. Therefore, they decided to embark on a journey around the world to decide the matter. Therefore, they both set out; when Kartick returned after travelling the world, he found that Ganesh was still there. So, when Kartick asked Ganesh why he was still here he said that he had already travelled the world, not once but seven times, by revolving around his parents because his parents are his world- in a literal and metaphorical point of understanding.

This childhood memory was the first thought that came to my mind when I read the first poem of this collection, 'Mother. One can argue that this myth is carefully generated propaganda in order to control your child/children – a dominating trait found among parents of Indian origin. While this is not untrue, it is also not an absolute truth either. This story manifests itself in different ways to different people. However, we cannot deny the fact that for most of us, (not me), biological mothers constitute a whole new milky way within them. However, it is not necessary that only biological mothers can fulfil this role, mother(s) can be other people too- your father, your sister, brother, a tree, poetry, a place, and, for me it is my maasi (aunt) and books- and this book is the latest addition to my mother(s) clan because *Transient* has successfully and effortlessly transferred me into many realms of my consciousness, dug out my deepest memories and has literally made me spin around my world which is me-

Spring in the air,

spring everywhere

but winter nests in her body.

White.

The farmer sows his seeds

In the furrows of his fields

but the furrows in her forehead

would remain uncropped.<sup>1</sup>

The author has dealt with multiple issues and themes which are extremely personal, yet they transcend into the universal. The poems deal with her childhood - her mother, her father and to some extent, it also equates all the people of this earth to the archetypal Mother figure. Anybody who gives birth to someone/ something is a mother and people who have created all these stories and gave birth to these theories are the mother(s) who are continuing their legacy through the present mother(s).

The author in many of her poems clearly states that a woman can be a mother, but, that does not mean that she can not be a lover, or, have desires. In the following quoted lines we get an idea of how the poet is yearning for her lost love-

Down the mountain, she came

Towards the Aegean shore

where her lover had walked into the sea

long long ago.

She came to give him the bread

she had baked long ago.

It was now hard as the rocks

on which they had slept

before he left her side

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<sup>1</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 13.

after digging deep into her groin.<sup>2</sup>

The poet is also saddened by the passing away of her beloved younger cousin and a veteran actor and she conceives death as a portal into a world where one can only get in but never come out. These lines, therefore, seals the idea that death is definite and irreversible-

Where is the key to that other room?

I want to lock it but cannot find the key.

But why do you want to lock it?

Why? Don't you see, those who are going in are not coming out?<sup>3</sup>

The pandemic brought out many shades of our world which were previously hidden. It made us value the privileges of our life that we often take for granted. The Covid-19 pandemic firmly established the idea that nothing else matters as much as the health and well being of our beloved. Everything else can be replaced except them. It brought out the true colour of our surroundings hidden under sparkly covers-

Let the plants grow

peacefully from crevices and dark holes.

There is no need to pluck them out for the building is already crumbled.<sup>4</sup>

The collection serves as a capsule that has recorded our time. The heartbreaking scenes that we have witnessed in the burning ghats and burial grounds during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic has left their footprints in the poem titled 'Bodies Everywhere' -

Bodies everywhere,

the road cannot be seen,...

Dead by his own deeds

he gropes for the path to Heaven

instead of melodies and flowers

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<sup>2</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 137.

he finds blood stench everywhere.<sup>5</sup>

The poet bridges the distance between distant creative worlds by harmoniously celebrating similarities and differences. The remarkable nuance is that the poet creates this harmony, this commonality not only between the human world but also between the natural world and the human world. In her poem, ‘Condor in the Andes’, she conceives the world of ‘mother’ nature as a macrocosm that is inhabited by the ‘civilized’ microcosm. The poem, which describes a condor couple, brilliantly documents the narratives and the interactions of these world(s)-

The ecstasy of meeting you  
 you royal couple  
 royal and loyal in domesticity and beauty  
 not beguiled by thoughts of separation, strife or hatred  
 maybe you saw us as denizens of a fierce  
 sharp-edged cruel world  
 to which we climbed down and you climbed on upwards  
 into the enveloping sky.

Only a trail of wonder separated us.<sup>6</sup>

The poet carries out the work of deconstruction and construction simultaneously as she goes on exploring the ideas of home, roots, displacement, identity within this chronotope. She constantly paces and dances in a multiverse of ideas by assimilating and diffusing nostalgia and tries to celebrate human existence.

The world of materiality is undeniably and intricately related to our emotional world. Certain structures, patterns, or items can invocable raise emotions among us. The kinesthetic memory stored within our body acts up when triggered by sounds, sights, smells or even colours. ‘My Pink Room’ is a beautiful conglomeration of this idea-

“Do you notice me?”

How is it that the untidy heap of books

the stacks of newspapers

two pairs of specs and the

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<sup>5</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 25.

death's head Buddha

appeared as concrete

as materiality could ever appear.

So touchable. Fusion of hardness and softness successes and failures

wrapped in an amiable jumble

a jungle impenetrable

suddenly appeared lucid

habitable...<sup>7</sup>

Our bodies are a three-dimensional entity that documents our memories, the events that shape us in their own unique way. Every freckle that we carry, every teardrop that falls, every wrinkle on our hands are the important dates marked on our calendar made of flesh, blood and bones. So, each human being surrounding us or inhabiting this world are unique history books that cannot be replicated; we can only hear them, or, read them, or, paint them, or, make songs about them-

Hands that brought memories of the sea,

of lands of coral and white shells,

of fans that cooled north Calcutta afternoons

folded her husband's shirt while thinking of a childhood heartthrob.

Hands that could not hold on to bus rods

nor tap on the computer keyboard

but could only hold tight onto the balcony railings made warm by the pressure of her breasts.

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<sup>7</sup>Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 31.

Strange, strange hands, covered by sweet, sweet flesh, reddish-brown with the blood  
of Cleopatra

smelling like Helen of Troy

sad as Cressida

worshipped as Sita, Savitri and Behula supine on her unempowered thighs.<sup>8</sup>

These lines remind me of how patriarchy has ‘worshipped’ women, has turned women into ‘divine’ beings as a form of control. Women have not been conceived as human, rather as someone who cannot commit any faults, sins, or have any desire. They are supposed to be nurturing and forgiving. The entire ‘moral standard’ of families has been placed between her thighs which have consciously been ‘unempowered’; her thighs can only spread ‘respectfully’ in two situations- to conceive a baby and to deliver a baby. Her breasts are not pleasuring organs; they exist for the sole purpose of nourishing a baby. If she refuses or defers from this construct she will be termed as a prostitute, a woman who is ‘easily available, a woman who must have asked to be ‘raped’.

And yet, we embrace the pain because we belong to the community of ‘mothers’-

There is just one pain I would not share, one pain I would not lose,

one pain that makes me endure

all other pains in the world

and that is the pain of missing you in my arms, my daughter.<sup>9</sup>

‘My daughter’ here, according to my opinion, can refer to any living being whom we conceive. It can be a human, or, a cat, a dog, a plant, and it can also be my creative self and my creative work. My daughter can be the new poem that I have delivered after hours of labour, or, the song that helps me climb out of a hole and dance to its tunes. We have the full agency of choosing whom we want to accept as our daughters because the pain of giving birth to a human being is the same as giving birth to a story, a narrative-

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<sup>8</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatiao Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Tapati Gupta, *Transient*. (Bolpur: Birutjatiao Sahitya Sammiloni, 2021), p. 51.

Please turn them into flowers of fulfilment

real flowers that survive dreams

do not be tyrannized into morbid inactivity

by that horrid sentinel

who guards my sleep

and will not even let me scream into enlightenment. Let us sail through the ebb tide of life

clutching at our flowers

shielding them from moaning winds

and envious gaze.

*Transient* spoke to me as a collection of poems that once again encouraged me to take the agency over my life, to pen down thoughts, or, to buy myself a little appreciation. It reminded me, once again, that I am enough. I conceived the book, and the words on the pages as a road- a road that will always help me to transform my dreams into actions and my thoughts into paper.

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Title of the Book: *Hooghly: The Global History of a River*

By Robert Ivermee. London, England: C Hurst, 2020. Rs 599/- ISBN (Paperback) 978-93-5422-314-3

### **Quietly flows the Hooghly: A Review**

*Swarnava Chaudhuri*

The Ganges, that seemingly sacred river now contaminated by sludge and municipal garbage, comes to mind when we think of Indian rivers. It also has half-burned bodies of devoted Hindus floating down it on their last travels, as well as people bathing in it to cleanse themselves. The Ganges, like other rivers, was a river of life and death, which is why people settled along its banks and nourished themselves with its flowing waters. The Ganges has long captivated the West; in the late 1640s, poet Andrew Marvell envisioned his "coy mistress" squandering her time, which he imagines they have for an eternity, in India rather than responding to his overtures: 'Thou by Indian Ganges's side/Shouldst rubies find;'<sup>1</sup> he whinges, while he is left in England 'by the tide of Humber', to lament about his forced celibacy. But who had heard of the Hooghly, a very small Ganges distributary that finally flows south to the Bay of Bengal, in 1645? Not even Andrew Marvell, who was born a year after the English landed in Bengal and wrote a hundred years or so after the Portuguese trader Pedro Tavares first set foot on its bank-

I have heard it said again and again that we are guided altogether by history, and I have energetically nodded, so to say, in my mind whenever I heard it. I have settled this debate in my own heart where I am nothing but a poet. I am there in the role of a creator all alone and free. There's little to enmesh me there in the net of external events. I find it difficult to put up with the pedantic historian when he tries to force me out of the center of my creativity...<sup>2</sup>

For modern readers, however, Robert Ivermee, a professor at SOAS University of London and the Catholic University of Paris, has produced a fascinating, erudite, and entertaining description of the Hooghly that more than makes up for our lack of acquaintance with Indian rivers other than the Ganges. Although the Hooghly does not contain any rubies, its banks have seen significant events involving worldwide commerce as well as the interactions of

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew, Marvell. 2005. *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Donno (London, England: Penguin Classics), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Ranajit, Guha. 2003. *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 96.

several foreign settlements (Mughals, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danish, and English) with each other and the local people. Ivermee does not ignore the historical backdrop, detailing the history of the Bengal nawabs in Murshidabad and concluding this comprehensive yet concise research with a chapter on “The Hooghly's Global Future”, bringing the Hooghly's globalisation full circle.

According to Heraclitus, you can never put your foot twice into the same river, using the flowing water as a metaphor for the passage of time, and the Hooghly appears to fit this description. The river altered throughout time when European ships came, but it had always changed; archaeological evidence of rice-farming villages on the Hooghly dates back 3000 years, and bigger settlements had been built by the 11th century. Ivermee shows us that

The earliest migrants into Bengal were probably Mongolian people from Burma and the Himalayas.<sup>3</sup>

By the 5th century BCE, they had been joined by Aryans, who brought with them Sanskrit language and literature, as well as the ‘hierarchical Brahmanical society’<sup>4</sup> that quickly took root. Around 320 BCE, the Hooghly region was annexed by the Mauryan Empire, whose greatest ruler, Ashoka (reigned 268-232 BCE), brought Buddhism to his vast empire, which included Bengal. The worship of the Hooghly, on the other hand, had been around far longer than the Aryans, and the Brahmanical tradition absorbed previous mythological systems, folklore, and stories into itself. All of this history would be waiting for the Europeans when they came, as relative latecomers riding the wave and certainly not able to control it entirely, despite their best efforts, as Ivermee reminds us

Once after school I saw a most amazing spectacle from our western verandah. A donkey — not one of those donkeys manufactured by British imperial policy but the animal that had always belonged to our own society and has not changed in its ways since the beginning of time — one such donkey had come up from the washermen's quarters and was grazing on the grass while a cow fondly licked its body.<sup>5</sup>

Ivermee leads readers on a fascinating voyage down the Hooghly from Murshidabad to Sagar Island, stopping along the way at Plassey, Chandernagore, Serampore, and Calcutta, after establishing the river's historical and cultural-religious settings. This permits the author to

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<sup>3</sup> Robert, Ivermee. 2020. *Hooghly: The Global History of a River* (London, England: C Hurst), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ranajit, Guha. 2003. *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 97.

concentrate on a collection of interconnected topics that are crucial to comprehending a period when events on the Hooghly were of global importance. Each location visited is linked to numerous groups of people who arrived from far away to establish business operations along the river, bringing with them their varied beliefs, religions, values, and cultures, which all blended into the existing local culture and civilisation. These are places that represent the kingdom of Bengal, the rise of the Dutch, Danish, French, and British East India Companies, and, in the case of Calcutta, the ‘unfinished conquest of nature’<sup>6</sup> via railways, sewers, and methods of transporting drinking water, transforming it into a “imperial mega-city” connected by rail to the vast subcontinent. The last destination, Sagar Island, depicts ‘the Hooghly's global future.’ The objective of this book, according to Ivermee, is to demonstrate that global history is about the process of global integration, not merely about contacts between various people or business. He writes

borders have been traversed; the interaction and exchange of different peoples and cultures has created new identities and rendered others less meaningful.<sup>7</sup>

In Ivermee’s book, Hooghly is represented

... [as] not the image of a feudal order nor indeed any political order at all, but that history of the weal and woe of human life which, with its everyday contentment and misery, has always been there in the peasants’ fields and village festivals, manifesting their simple and abiding humanity across all of history — sometimes under Mughal rule, sometimes under British rule.<sup>8</sup>

One significant contribution that this book makes, in my opinion, is that it shifts the focus away from the British East India Company, whose narrative is well-known, to the fact that other equally important foreign commercial ventures operated in Bengal, not to mention the fact that the region had its own well-established political and religious structures throughout the period covered in this book. Many English-speaking readers, I suspect, are unfamiliar with Portuguese traders, Dutch, French, or Danish companies, and perhaps even fewer with Bengal's nawabs, let alone how they all fit together to tell a gripping storey based on the history of a relatively minor river, at least in comparison to the mighty Ganges. In fact, not only the microcosmic Hooghly, but the entire Bengal Delta region comes to be regarded as a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> Robert, Ivermee. 2020. *Hooghly: The Global History of a River* (London, England: C Hurst), p. 215.

<sup>8</sup> Ranajit, Guha. 2003. *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 99.

type of worldwide “melting pot” in this novel, with the river serving as a kind of magical cauldron into which all the various components are tossed and mixed together in a seething mass. As the Hooghly meanders blissfully along, ignorant to the frenetic human activity taking place on its banks, battles are fought, money is earned and lost, ideas are shared, literature and art is created, ambitions are realised and disappointed, politics, religion, and power are all mixed.

Beginning with the port of Hooghly, Ivermee examines each of the settlements that sprang up along the river's banks, and how some of them, particularly the British East India Company, rose to power, beginning in the purely mercantile and gradually moving into political spheres, influencing India's development. The legal sanction (Firman of Farrukhsiyar) provided the East India Company with the final chance to increase not just its economic dominance, but also to gain political authority. Plassey, for example, was the scene of the famous battle when Robert Clive beat the armies of the nawab Siraj-ud-Dowlah, whom English historians “portrayed as a drunken dictator who terrorised his subjects,” an image that persisted until I was in school. After all, didn't the nawab despise the English and imprison many of them in Calcutta's Black Hole, where they were fed, denied water, and left to suffocate in a claustrophobic room? Siraj-ud-Dowlah had genuine concerns with the East India Company, not least their choice to develop Fort William without his consent, which Ivermee settles. The nawab regarded this as just another attempt by the English to usurp his sovereignty. When he urged them to halt, they refused, using the war with France as a reason, despite the fact that the Compagnie des Indes had already established itself in Chandernagore, another city on our Hooghly trip, by that time (1755). These spectacular occurrences, however, are only half of the narrative.

Ivermee introduces readers to a variety of intriguing individuals linked with the cities along the route to Sagar Island, the final destination, throughout the course of the voyage. Few of these names will be recognisable to English-speaking readers; they are more likely to be familiar with the more renowned (and typically British) personalities linked with the East India Company, such as Clive or Warren Hastings. There's also William Carey (1761-1834), a Serampore missionary with a passion for Sanskrit literature and language who, among other things, made a fortune in indigo, learned Bengali, translated portions of the Bible into Bengali, introduced printing, and established Serampore University, India's first degree-awarding university. Carey's Hindu equivalent, the famous religious philosopher and social reformer Raja Rammohun Roy, is one of the Indians we may name (1772-1833). We also

come across a large number of British surveyors and engineers who researched the river and sought to acquire its jurisdiction.

Ivermee blends historical knowledge and erudition with a belief that history is shaped not just by great individuals and significant events, but by hordes of lesser human beings and little occurrences that, when added together, alter the course of history. The Hooghly stays in the centre of it all. It is the cement that maintains the many nations connected to one another while they are ‘in the sea of life enisled’<sup>9</sup> in their numerous towns, as Matthew Arnold phrased it.

Ivermee does not exaggerate the significance of the Hooghly: he shows, via a fascinating tale, that even a little tributary river may be a significant source of global connection. The idea of the book can be summed up through the lines of EP Thompson-

The diverse historic cultures, arts, religions, philosophemes, codes, race-consciousness, are not partial phases or aspects of Humanity, or of the Absolute Ideal; they are the developing whole, and express, more or less fully, more or less accurately, the Idea of Universal Humanity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The line is taken from the poem *To Marguerite: Continued* which was published in the book *Poetry by Matthew Arnold: Dover Beach, the Scholar Gipsy, to Marguerite: Continued*. Books, L. L. C. 2010. *Poetry by Matthew Arnold: Dover Beach, the Scholar Gipsy, to Marguerite: Continued*, ed. by L. L. C. Books

<sup>10</sup> E. P. Thompson quotes from Brajendranath Seal's eloquent and polymathic *New Essays in Criticism* (1903), which is a Hegelian essay on the theme so germane to Tagore's idea of universal humanity – in his 'Introduction' to Tagore's *Nationalism*, New Delhi: Rupa and Co, 1917, 1991, p. 5.

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Title of the Book: *A Poet's Experiment in Rebuilding Samaj And Nation: Sriniketan's Rural Reconstruction Work, 1922-1960.*

By Dikshit Sinha. Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, Bolpur, 2019. Rs 1000/- (HB), Rs 800/- (PB). ISBN:

***Anasua Bagchi***

Dikshit Sinha, the former professor of the Social Work department of Visva Bharati, has worked on Tagore's rural reconstruction all his life. A Social Anthropologist by training, he has published extensively, both in Bengali and in English, including Rabindranather Pallipunargathan Prayash, (Rabindranath's Rural Development Effort, 2008). In the present book, Professor Sinha has traced the history of Sriniketan, at a greater span, from its birth in 1922 upto the 1960, almost two decades after the death of the visionary poet. This book has about 500 pages and eleven chapters. For almost every chapter the author has used authentic tables, maps and some rare pictures.

After the arrival of the British in India, due to the expansion of trade and commerce the importance of the city of Calcutta began to increase. On the other hand, the permanent settlement of Bengal (an agreement between the British East India Company and Bengali Landlords to fix revenues) inflicted deep wounds on the rural agricultural economy and peasant society. Food production in the villages was adversely affected by a succession of famines and epidemics like malaria, influenza, cholera and small pox which caused a lot of deaths and devastation. Those families which survived this carnage had to suffer under the colonial exploitation and subsequently lost their land and were often seen literally taking shelter under the trees, and some people took refuge in the city of Calcutta in the hope of earning a living. After receiving Western education and taking up various occupations under the English Company, the native families established themselves in the city of Calcutta. But the condition of the people in the villages became more deplorable and diseased. In the early days of colonial rule in Bengal, the urban educated people were engrossed in the thriving socio-cultural life that Calcutta had to offer as the centre of a British colony and were mostly unaware of the rampage that went on in the far-flung villages of Bengal. But the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, the imperialistic-exploitative approach of the colonial rule began to become clear to the native educated people. A number of educated intellectuals observed the collapse of the domestic agricultural economy and the outflow of wealth (drain

of wealth) as a result of the gradual colonial exploitation, and these intellectuals also made other people aware of this situation.

Rabindranath Tagore belonged to a family that was immersed in the age of transformation that nineteenth century brought in its wake following a number of reforms in both religious and social spheres. Tagore had the opportunity to witness first hand the manifold activities his father, brothers and other relatives were engaged in towards emancipating the society from the shackles of primitivity. However, when he was given partial charge of overseeing the family zamindari estate in Patisar and Shajadpur in 1891 in Eastern Bengal (modern day Bangladesh), came his first sustained encounter with the life of rural Bengal. It would provide him with inexhaustible source for his literature and also shape his idea of a nation in more ways than one. It is during his stay at various locations of Eastern Bengal, did he come to realize the centrality of the village and its people in building an organic *samaj* as opposed to a mechanical nation. Sinha pertinently points out it is in this context that we must see Rabindranath Tagore's idea of *deshitaisikata* (ideology of welfare of the country). He also says that Tagore realized that if the villages were to emerge from the darkness of manifold exploitation imposed by both the colonial rulers and the local elites, it will have to be healed socially not merely economically. Thus, the novelty in Tagore's approach to rural reconstruction is this notion of holistic development, which was later carried forward in Srininiketan, where the development endeavors stretched over decades of patient effort to re-build every aspect of rural life.

Sinha's search begins from 1908 when Tagore undertook the mammoth task of rural reconstruction in his ancestral estates in response to the famine prevailing in the region. He also suggests that three principal approaches of development put forward by Tagore — self-reliance, cooperation and endogenous development- were formulated during this time. To quote Sinha, 'He (Tagore) realised that the human miseries and maladies suffered during colonial period could not be eradicated by attaining mere political freedom, unless society becomes strong and people come together to build it and their own future, *swaraj* (self rule) will never be permanent' (p.II).

It needs to be mentioned here that some authors have dealt with Tagore's rural reconstruction programme in some detail. To name a few — Sudhir Sen's *Rabindranath Tagore On Rural Reconstruction and Community Development in India* (1943, rev. 1991); Sugata Dasgupta's *A Poet and a Plan: Tagore's experiment on rural development* (1962);

Uma Dasgupta's 'Rabindranath Tagore on Rural Reconstruction: The Sriniketan Experiment', *The Historical Review*, Vol. 4(2), 1978.

*A Poet's Experiment in Rebuilding Samaj and Nation: Sriniketan's Rural Reconstruction Work, 1922-1960* is perhaps the most comprehensive narrative of Rabindranath's Rural Reconstruction programme in English. It stands out in its detailed discussion of the Social and Economic Context of Rural Reconstruction Work, the Institutional Framework of Sriniketan, problems of implementation, spread of *loka shiksha*, developments of agriculture, cooperatives and health cooperatives. Professor Sinha has also added a chapter on the post-Rabindranath phase of Sriniketan. It was a great delight reading this chapter, a feeling, I hope, will *also* be shared by fellow readers. Professor Sinha's simple, lucid language enhances his presentation of the details without losing the rhythm of the story.

Sinha's meticulous attention to detail sets the work apart. For example, he has been able to trace the history of *bratidal* (the boyscout group) and its involvement in the rural reconstruction programme. He has mentioned details that have often been overlooked by other scholars such as the existence of two Kuthibaris in Sriniketan. Another significant contribution of Sinha is his ability to analyse the contribution of associates of Tagore to bring this project to fruition. Therefore, the likes of Kalimohan Ghosh, L. K. Elmhirst, Rathindranath Tagore, Santoshchandra Mazumder, Hashim Amir Ali, Gretchen Green and others become prominent in Sinha's narrative. He also explores the problem areas of such a novel task, the apprehension on the villagers' end and the complex relationship the villages shared with Sriniketan and further complications brought forth by the initiation of the Panchayet system.

Although this book is a sincere attempt, it is not without its flaws. The book does not have a separate bibliography section. Though the footnotes are extensive and reader-friendly, a full bibliography is warranted in a publication of this magnitude. In spite of the quality of the overall production certain images may have been reproduced better. The bit of pixelation does not go well with the otherwise neat quality of printing, binding and design. For those interested in Tagore and rural reconstruction this book is a must read.

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Title of the Book: *This Life at Play: Memoirs*

Translated from the Kannada by Girish Karnad and Srinath Perur. New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2021, Rs. 799/- (HB), P-ISBN: 978-93-9032-780-5, E-ISBN: 978-93-9032-781-2.

### **Frames of Memory**

*Jolly Das*

The ordeal of taking the trouble to create a collage out of the scattered documents related to Girish Karnad's (1938-2019) life and creativity is no longer necessary, at least, for the period from his childhood in Sirsi up to 1980. With the publication of *Aadadta Aayushya* in 2011 those who could read Kannada had access to the memoirs written by this towering cultural icon of modern India, who brought together all about himself during this period which he wished to share with the reader. *This Life at Play* (2021), "A sparkling, unputdownable memoir by a towering literary and theatrical genius" (Amitav Ghosh, back cover), brought the translation of the memoir in English to the global readers. Karnad's sharing of his memories with the reader is a much-needed guided journey towards an understanding of the making of his mind.

Like he did for some of his creative writings, he let the Kannada memoir rest before translating it to English by taking up different chapters separately for translation. Karnad had begun work on the translation with *Prak*, the first chapter of the original memoir. Subsequently, he translated the second and third chapters and parts of chapters four and ten, before he passed away on 10 June 2019. In fact, the memoir is only the first part of a two-volume project which shall remain incomplete. The rest of *Aadadta Aayushya* has been translated by Srinath Perur, an author in his own right, whom Karnad had authorised, owing to his failing health.

*This Life at Play* is, thus, the result of the work of two translators, the memoirist himself and his appointee. Karnad has translated his major plays from Kannada to English or vice versa. He has also written and spoken in various forums about translation. The present book adds yet another dimension to this discourse on translation by virtue of its unique nature in accommodating a pair of translators. It is not easy to discern the difference in the tone of the narrative owing to the efforts of Perur to maintain Karnad's unique conversational idiom in his share of the translation, for which he resorted to listening to Karnad's available interviews and lectures, as he admits in an online discussion titled "The Man with a Story and a Song: The Life and Times of Girish Karnad" (Bangalore International Centre, 13 August

2021). And the engrossing narrative in Karnad's typical conversational tone ends abruptly with the suggestion in the Epilogue, titled *Ardhakathanaka, or Half the Tale*, of another narrative in continuation. A promise made in 2011 remained unfulfilled in 2019, possibly because he prioritised his long-cherished dream-project of writing a play on the last days of the Vijayanagara Empire and fulfilled it by writing *Raakshasa Tangadi* (2018) in Kannada and *Crossing to Talikota* (published posthumously in 2019) in English, which is a valuable compensation for lovers of his exceptionally sharp theatrical sensibility.

Much of what Karnad has recorded in this memoir has already been either referred to or discussed in some detail in other platforms, like interviews, essays and lectures. But the coherence and depth of this narrative was missing in those scattered documentations. Some earlier references made in passing have been given substantial space here, offering fresh information about them in detailed discussions; sometimes by resorting to the mode of dialogue, which adds immediacy to the narration.

The constant focus of the memoir remains on the making of Karnad's mind and the growth of his creative sensibility. It begins in medias res, an ancient theatrical technique which is powerfully effective in drawing the immediate attention of the intended auditor of the narrative (the reader in this case). A retrospective micro-narrative leads to the person to whom the memoir is dedicated: Dr Madhumalati Gune. The rationale is interesting: it is because of the failure of the doctor to turn up at her clinic to facilitate Krishnabai's decision of "not having him" which made all the difference. This is also referred to humorously by Karnad in the documentary on him made by K. M. Chaitanya, which may be considered as being complementary to this memoir. However, while leading to Dr Gune in this off-beat dedication, Karnad cautiously introduces the central influence upon the formation of his mind: his mother Krishnabai Karnad.

Karnad, therefore, sets off in the first chapter, *Prak*, by writing about his mother's determination to empower herself in spite of and against all social odds, when she became a young widow with a son. Her attitude has gone a long way in shaping Karnad's approach to life: his life at play. The mental strength and psychological freedom he enjoyed during his growing up enabled him to take all the decisions in life which made him the person the world knows today. Karnad has remained fondly attached to his family. This chapter is significantly spent in documenting his memories about his parents and siblings along with other members of his family whose roles had a meaningful impact, direct and indirect, on his growing sensibility. Much of what is there in "Prak" comprises the staple of his play, *Wedding Album*.

“Sirsi”, the second chapter, is literally a jump to the time when he was six years old. So, beginning with the brief period of the stay of the Karnad family in Bombay, when he attended his first school, Tarabai Morak School, where he studied in Marathi, then in Poona, where he attended Modern School, remains outside his consideration in this memoir, and which he has spoken about elsewhere, in an interview.<sup>1</sup> So, Karnad’s multilingual ease reflects yet another aspect of his childhood and youth. Interestingly, he writes about one of his regrets in life — not to have been able to learn Tamil in spite of his stay in Madras.

As his world begins to expand towards the national and global scenarios from his college days and beyond, documentation of memories related to his family decreases proportionately, beyond Chapter 3, “Dharwad: Fifty-One Houses”. Friends and associates, as well as his detractors, have been remembered with a lot of respectful attention and critical observation in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 4, titled “Dharwad: Karnataka College” introduces the reader to the significance of Dharwad as the cultural capital of North Karnataka and his initial interest in poetry. It was during this phase that he met the most important intellectual influence on him, his Guru, A. K. Ramanujan, besides other great minds like D. R. Bendre (from whose poem Karnad borrows the title of the Kannada memoir, *Aadaadta Aayushya*; the poem was translated by Srinath Perur, whose coincidental engagement with this English translation facilitated the decision upon the present title of the memoir, which is taken from the same phrase in the original which Karnad borrowed). Karnad acknowledges his debt to the study of mathematics as a discipline that shaped his sensibility as a creative artist. He records the influence of Krishna Basrur, Aurora Figueredo and Kirtinath Kurtkoti on him during this time and beyond.

His stint in “Bombay” before he left for Oxford, had a significant contribution towards his becoming a playwright. The events leading to the acquirement of the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship are one of the surprises for the reader since Karnad has not described them in such detail before, just as he has never described in engrossing detail the experience culled from the days spent at Magdalen College in Oxford, which makes the chapter very important for researchers on Karnad. It is from Chapter 6, “Oxford”, onwards that sectional headings begin to appear, expressing a more organized approach to life as Karnad begins to be more objective in his observation of the world around him. It is from this chapter onwards that the reader finds the memoirist recalling his encounters with women, as friends and

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<sup>1</sup> Interview on 16 July 2009 with Jolly Das. *Tracing Karnad’s Theatrical Trajectory* (New Delhi: Paragon, 2015. 193-96)

lovers, in a manner different from the friendship with Aurora Figueredo. Karnad has been unabashed and frank about his relationships with women.

“Madras” reveals two important experiences in his life, that of his employment as Manager in the Madras office of OUP and that of acting with the Madras Players. Added to these was the influential circle of friends and associates which he developed during this time. Much of what follows in the memoir grows out of the adult days spent in Dharwad, Bombay, Oxford and Madras. *Samskara* has been an indelible landmark both in the history of Indian literature (specially Kannada literature) and in Indian cinema. Acknowledgements have been professed as has been due to each. It is from the time of the making of the film *Samskara* that Karnad had remained an intrinsic part of the film unit, never seeking privileges which were not affordable for the rest of the crew. Whereas other commentators have spoken about his humility in this matter, he writes in his memoir about the necessity to strike a bond which would permit continual discussion about the shooting of the film, which ultimately mattered. For *Samskara*, the professional approach towards the making of the film enabled it to emerge as a success in spite of the fact that Karnad, playing Praneshacharya, was not on speaking terms with Sneha Reddy, who played Chandri.

By this time *Yayati*, *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* were very successful in Kannada. Performances of translations of these plays to other Indian languages had been made. Parallel to this was his tryst with cinema, in *Vamsha Vriksha* and *Kaadu*, which would be followed by *Nishaanth*, *Ondanondu Kaladalli*, *Manthan* and others.

On 1 January 1974 Karnad took charge as the third Director of the Film and Television Institute of India. In trying to waken up the drowsy Institute, he made many innovative administrative additions to its operation, the first being scraping the screen test expected to be taken by fresh applicants for the acting course. An interesting narrative in this memoir is about one of the many strikes in the FTII. Karnad claims here that he is possibly the only Director who had broken a strike and goes on to recall how he went ahead with it in spite of sympathizing on the personal level with the students on strike. One of the duo who were leading the strike, Naseeruddin Shah, later wrote about the same incident in his memoirs, *And Then One Day*<sup>2</sup> (2014) and it is fascinating to read how two persons who have made meaningful contributions in their own spheres of creativity look at the same incident from different perspectives. The detached assessment in the memoirs is clearly indicative of

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<sup>2</sup> pp. 161-177.

how the two men, who have worked together subsequently in a number of classic films, recollect the incident in their memoirs adding their observations about it after so many years over which both have gained in experience, fame and comradeship.

The personal memories have been reconstructed on the foundation of yet another reconstruction: that of the changing socio-cultural milieu on two levels. One, rural and semi-urban, stretching from the backwoods in Sirsi, in North Karnataka, till Dharwad. The other, from Bombay, then Oxford, back to Bombay, then onward to Madras and Bangalore. In the backdrop was the nation whose Independence he had witnessed, just as he had borne witness to the Emergency declared on 5 June 1975 by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

The imperative first-person narrative unravels the construction of identity through recollections from memory which gives access to reconstructions of the past resulting in a complex shifting between the past and the present, showing how Karnad and the cultural milieu around him gradually got wound into a complex ball. Karnad's memoir unwinds this ball, proceeding beyond being merely a bildungsroman, to bring to the reader a micro-history, spanning the time from his days in Sirsi, when he was about six years old in 1945 in the pre-Independence period, till 1980, when he married Dr Saraswathy Ganapathy. The memoir is not merely a document of Karnad's re-visit to the past which he reinterprets at the age of seventy-three in *Aadaadta Aayushya*, it also is an example of micro-historiography from about 1944 to 1980. It is not the pastness of the past but its presence that is conveyed in his memoir by Karnad, an earnest admirer of T. S. Eliot, whom he emulated in his youth and whose autograph he obtained on a sketch of the Nobel Laureate which Karnad had drawn. Memory plays the pivotal role of contextualising the cultural web into which the micro-history is embedded — how the past is built into the present. The awareness of the relevance of the past, be it myth, legend, history or social ethos, for the present, has been the keystone of the plays he has written, making them some of the best in the oeuvre of modern Indian theatre. The same method of contextualising the past in the present is adopted for the memoir. The Dedication begins with "Dharwad, 1973" like in his plays based on historiography. *This Life at Play* ends on the soft note of his eventual marriage in 1980. The structure of the narrative which goes back to the early 1940s and proceeds up to 1973, bringing in the relevance of the Dedication, which mentions that he had just become the Director of the FTII, and goes beyond to stop at 1980 is unique. The Dedication and the final chapter on the FTII serve as objective correlatives in the narrative strategy.

An added gain for the reader is the Afterword by Karnad's children: his daughter, Shalmali Radha, now a doctor, and whom he refers to in the documentary on him made by K.

M. Chaitanya, and his son Raghu Amay. Dr Shalmali has been named after the River Shalmali which flows calmly by Dharwad and has been the subject of a poem by Bendre, as though expressing his deep attachment with the place. The Afterword succinctly traces Karnad's career and activity in a manner befitting the perspective of his children. They echo the thoughts of the readers of the memoir who have also remained his admirers.

*This Life at Play* has thirty-three images in offset print in black and white, some of which are not there in *Aadaadta Aayushya*. The intended readership of the two versions, regional and global, becomes evident in this other narrative embedded in the memoirs — narrative photography.<sup>3</sup> Monographs on different facets of Girish Karnad's personality as an actor, playwright, director and social activist, could somewhat compensate the irreparable loss of the possible sequel to *This Life At Play* — where the Padmabhushan and Gyanpith awardee as well as the World Theatre Ambassador would be also be represented, as an Indian concerned about the future of his country.

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<sup>3</sup> The published versions of the Kannada and English texts are themselves signifiers of the cultural milieu Karnad has depicted in his memoirs. The overall get-up of *Aadaadta Aayushya*, published by Manohara Granthamala, Dharwad, which, being synonymous with the name of G.B. Joshi, represents a fast-disappearing Kannadiga culture from the pre-Independence times to the present—it is hand-sewn, intended for a limited readership. The typical bonding among like-minded men which the Granthamala endorsed emerges in the layout of the Kannada memoir with inserted plates carrying sixty-eight photographs, some of them coloured-prints, besides images of bills and covers of Karnad's plays, representing his preference for the traditional. Karnad's cinematographic acumen played a role there. *This Life at Play*, on the other hand, represents modern commercial publishing of the best quality. Its overall get-up matches the requirements of a global readership. Thus the memoir in two languages bears testimony to the fact that Girish Karnad was local and global at the same time.

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Title of the Book: *Rabindranath Tagore's Śāntiniketan Essays: Religion, Spirituality and Philosophy*

By Medha Bhattacharya. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2020.

*Anindya Raychaudhuri*

Medha Bhattacharya's new book provides a critical introduction to, and an annotated translation of a selection of the *Śāntiniketan* essays that Rabindranath Tagore wrote between 1908 and 1914. As a body of work, these essays provide an invaluable insight into Tagore's philosophy as it applies to religion, life, nature, the self and the world. Bhattacharya's book will play an important role in introducing new readers to Tagore's important religious philosophy.

The central and largest part of the book is taken up by the translated essays. Bhattacharya has included fifty short essays, which together span about seventy-five pages. There is also a fifty-page introduction, in which Bhattacharya provides a general introduction to Tagore's life and thought, contextual background to the *Śāntiniketan* essays, and the methodology that she adopted in her translation. After the essays, there follow about thirty pages of notes, glossary, works cited, further reading, and index. Collectively, the translated primary text and the scholarly secondary material that Bhattacharya has provided represents a significant addition to the critical appreciation of Tagore's religious philosophy. Having said that, Bhattacharya's writing is accessible so that the book will also be of interest to a general readership.

The essays have been selected with great care. As Bhattacharya puts it, the fifty essays are connected in the form of a journey which together reveal the way to *Śāntiniketan*, the abode of peace. They represent the great well of knowledge and influence that Tagore was able to draw on when developing and outlining his own distinctive, pan-national and pluralistic worldview.

As an academic in translation studies, Bhattacharya is not just able to provide a literal translation, but is also able, in her introduction, to provide a useful commentary on the challenges of translating from Bengali to English in general, and on translating Tagore's spiritual writings in particular. Citing a range of sources from Basil Hatim and Jeremy Munday to Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Bhattacharya makes a powerful case for the importance of generating an 'alienness' as a postcolonial translator. Using several different

examples from the essays that follow, Bhattacharya makes a strong and convincing case for a literal, as opposed to an idiomatic translation so that ‘this particular translation maintains fidelity to their original as much as possible in terms of form, meaning and essence.’ As someone who enjoys reading both Bengali and English, it was a particular pleasure to see various idiomatic uses of Bengali being represented so vividly in English, losing neither its original force nor its comprehensibility. Thus, Bhattacharya renders Tagore’s evocation of the infinite in the essay titled “The Unique”: ‘The very joy and sorry, union and separation, immortality and death are Your right and left arms’ (p. 73).

For readers who do not know Bengali, Bhattacharya’s generous annotations and glossary goes a long way towards explaining concepts that are difficult to translate, such as *amrita*, *namaskar*, or *uttariya*. Combined with the detailed notes, the glossary goes a long way towards overcoming the inevitable gaps that exist between the original and the translation.

At times, the relationship between the notes and the glossary isn’t clear. In her introduction, Bhattacharya says ‘culture-specific words’ are ‘explained in the glossary apart from being explained in the endnotes on their first appearance’ (p. 48). Unfortunately, this does not always seem to be the case. The first essay “Lack” is annotated as *abhāb*, but the word itself does not appear in the glossary. There are some similar moments when the reasons behind the translator’s decisions aren’t clear. The word ‘mela’ is used untranslated in the essay “Dispersed Fair” but has been translated in the title. ‘Mela’ does not appear in the glossary, however. I don’t mean to suggest that these decisions are unsupportable – it is just that without an adequate explanation they can appear inconsistent to the reader.

While Bhattacharya’s introduction provides vital contextual information, for me, the introduction was trying to do too much. Part of the introduction was originally published as a stand-alone article examining the role of love in Tagore’s works. Appended to the introduction here, it sits slightly oddly, as its purpose isn’t clear. It is not long or detailed enough to do justice to Tagore’s philosophy across all of his works, but it is much more than is needed to appreciate the selection of writing in this volume. The section titled ‘The Aspect of Love in Śāntiniketan and some other Tagorean texts’ attempts to cover not just love, but also other similarly vast concepts such as the infinite, harmony, and bliss across Tagore’s work and in connection to other figures such as Vivekananda and Ramakrishna. The effect is one of slight breathlessness as the reader tries to keep up. This feeling of disorientation isn’t

helped by the inconsistency when it comes to referencing. It took me a while to realise that the author has not provided page numbers when they are quoting from the essays in this collection. As the author does not reference a standard edition, such as the complete works, it becomes harder to follow the various references through the introduction.

The confusion generated by the introduction is heightened by the fact that it isn't clear what kind of reader is being addressed. The level of detail suggests that the author has in mind a specialist reader in Tagore Studies. If so, however, a lot of biographical detail that takes up the first half of the introduction seems a little unnecessary. It feels that the author perhaps attempted to do too many things in the span of fifty or so pages.

Having said that, and these minor issues notwithstanding, this remains an important contribution to the scholarly appreciation of Tagore's religious philosophy, and one which will be appreciated by Tagore scholars and new readers alike.

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Title of the Book: *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People*

Translated by Jolly Das et al. Centre of Excellence (CoE), Department of Odia, Visva Bharati, Santinekatan, 2019. Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Rs 165/-

### **People Fall Apart: A Review**

*Debapriti Sengupta*

The South-Western part of West Bengal including a major part of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia District is now literally marked as ‘Jangalmahal’. The name says that the major part of this region is covered by forest or jungle and it is one of the socio-economically backward regions of West Bengal. Ethnical variation of the region is also remarkable. Almost 25-30% of the total population of the aforesaid districts is tribes (Sultan 59).<sup>4</sup>

My sojourn in March 2020 ‘Jangalmahal’ or the ‘romantically’ infused ‘laal-matirdesh’ helped me to realise that the place has now become a hub of modernised urban villages where people of the city go to spend their weekends and take pleasure in the artificial flavour of Tribal life by ‘enjoying’ the indigenous form of dancing while sipping beer and taking photographs for their social media profiles dressed like Adivasis. The luxurious resorts to which they flock are decorated with Adivasi handicrafts to give the ‘feel’ of living in a Tribal village but are compulsorily equipped with an air conditioning systems. The glaring shallowness of this showcasing propels one to become curious about Adivasi life per se.

This inquisitiveness may be fulfilled by the collection of English translations of Bengali short stories, *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People*, which comprises an assortment of narratives which offer various glimpses into Adivasi life and its interface with the rest of the world.

The lustful and foolish nature of the city ‘gentleman’ who thinks that money speaks the first and last word in this world has been exposed in the short story ‘Coming Back’ by Ramapada Chowdhury:

Abinash had turned insane. He said, “Better than that dear, acquaint us with a good Santhal girl, we’ll become your slaves”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This article is an interesting read which gives us a dynamic socio-political view of the concerned area and the link has been provided in the ‘References’.

<sup>5</sup> Ramapada Chowdhury (1922-2018) started writing during the Second World War. His stories generally focuses on the woes of the common man and particularly on the struggles faced by the marginalised, especially the indigenous tribes. Ramapada Chowdhury, ‘Coming Back’, in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on*

The limitation of the city-dweller regarding the world of the Adivasis is suddenly thrown into focus with the line:

Making a nasal sound Abinash abruptly switched on the headlight. And we all fell silent in terror (Das 70).<sup>6</sup>

The process of being ‘uprooted’ from their traditional ethnic culture and way of life had begun during the Raj but and has continued unabated even seven decades after independence. Today the Adivasi lifestyle is a curiosity for the tourist with the tribal way of life being turned into a tourist attraction. The fact that this way of life has been systematically erased in order to build a factory as has been powerfully depicted in ShaktipadaRajguru’s Bengali short story ‘Chinamul’ translated by Jolly Das under the title ‘Uprooted’.<sup>7</sup>

Industrial revolution and its resulting urbanisation had been one of the primary reasons that gave rise to the slogan ‘back to nature’. It even rendered the famous Wye valley of Tintern Abbey barren.

In 1798, the Wye Valley, though still affording prospects of great natural beauty, presented less delightful scenes as well. The region showed prominent signs of industrial and commercial activity: coal mines, transport barges noisily plying the river, miners' hovels. The town of Tintern, a half mile from the Abbey, was an ironworking village of some note, and in 1798 with the war at full tilt, the works were usually active. The forests around Tintern—town and Abbey—were peopled with vagrants, the casualties of England’s tottering economy and of wartime displacement. Many of these people lived by charcoal burning, obviously a marginal livelihood. The charcoal was used in the furnaces along the river banks (Levinson 29).<sup>8</sup>

The same has been the case with ‘Jangalmahal’. The forests that had been the setting of numerous short stories and novels have changed into urban and semi-urban habitations full of

*Indigenous People*, trans. By Dr Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati Santinekatan: Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> The quoted line(s) in this particular context is a part of the story ‘Coming Back’ by Ramapada Chowdhury- the story is a fascinating and terrifying account of how the lives of the tribal people are disrupted and taken advantage of by the city dwellers. Ramapada Chowdhury, ‘Coming Back’, in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People*, trans. By Dr Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati Santinekatan: Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Saktipada Rajguru (1922-2014) mainly narrated accounts that revolved around the tide of the industrial booming that uprooted, in the very sense of the term, the younger tribal people from their indigenous lifestyle while the elder generation stood helpless. Saktipada Rajguru, ‘Uprooted’, in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People*, trans. By Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati, Santineketan: Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> The quoted lines have been taken from an article by Professor Vijay Kumar Datta titled ‘Trauma and Modernity in Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey’ published in 2018 in *The International Journal of English and Social Sciences*.

uprooted people who have been dragged away from their ancestral land and natural habitat only to be exploited by the cruel claws of industrial civilisation. They have been desperately exploited as coal mine workers with minimum wages, without a care for their safety and many have died in this process as heart-wrenchingly described in the short story ‘Reging Report’<sup>9</sup> by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, which is one of the earliest Bengali stories dealing with Adivasi life. This theme of exploitation of the simple tribal people and their lands is the setting of most of the short stories which have been translated and anthologised in the book. This particular forest belt has been the host of a number of Communist and Naxalite movements but they have been of little or no use due to the unorganised nature of the movements which have only resulted in a few temporary victories over the bourgeoisie class or the landowners. The words and ideologies of the Communists came like a ray of hope for the tribal people who sought this to be their only chance to come out of the cruel claws of the moneylenders (‘Mahajan) landowners (‘zamindars’). However, there was also an opposite current of fear and age-old ‘values’ that were bogging the tribals down. This conflict has been brilliantly represented in the story ‘Agantuk’ by Nani Bhowmik.<sup>10</sup> However, this particular story also highlights the loyal and innocent nature of the Adivasis who will lay down their lives but not diverge from their words.

Thereafter, as he fell down with a bullet-shot, how he had said- “Tell the Thakur, when I gave a word, then why should I take it back? I’ll give up my life, but why should I give the paddy? (Das 57)<sup>11</sup>

The translators have been fully successful in maintaining the essence of the region during the process of translation and while striding through the pages of the book we can breathe in the rustic smell of the red soil of the jungle belt. One is made to curiously wonder whether there is anything left of the jungle belt. If we go by the story ‘Arjun’ documented by Mahasweta

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<sup>9</sup> Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay (1901-1976) was the earliest author who portrayed the lives of the indigenous coal workers, especially of the Santhal women who were exploited in every sense of the term by the factory management. Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, ‘Reging Report’ in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People* trans. Dr Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati: Santinekatan, Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Noni Bhowmik (1921-1996) was a journalist by profession and he used this knowledge and experience to write about the various farmer(s) revolutions. Nani Bhowmick, ‘Agantuk’ in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People* trans. Dr Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati: Santinekatan, Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> These lines have been quoted from the story ‘Stranger’ by Noni Bhowmick- this particular narrative revolves around the Tebhaga agitation. Nani Bhowmick, ‘Agantuk’ in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People* trans. Dr Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati: Santinekatan, Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

Devi<sup>12</sup> we will see that greedy human beings have already deforested miles and miles of forests and the few trees which have managed to escape had to be turned into religious symbols in order to save them from the axe- ‘The *Gram* made it a tree-god’ (Das 95).<sup>13</sup>

The research fellow who has selected the short stories has done a praiseworthy job. None of the stories is repetitive in nature. Every one of them is distinct and brings out the hypocrisy of the city ‘bhadrals’ and the different measures taken by them to exploit the Adivasis, as has been pointed out in the Translator’s Note

The stories selected for this anthology offer different (but not all) dimensions of the landscape of tribal life which shall enable the reader to have an understanding of the region that has nurtured them...(Das 13).<sup>14</sup>

The book traces the chronology of this exploitation from pre-independence to post-independence times in India and makes it clear that the very base of city-oriented civilisation is completely dependent on nature and the hard labour of the tribal people. For electric supply, they need coal mined out from the coal mines by the indigenous people, for furniture they need wood produced by the forests, for recreation and to fulfil their perverted lust they need to exploit the Adivasi women as have been brilliantly depicted in the story ‘Nausea’ by Tapan Bandyopadhyay.<sup>15</sup> The ending of this story is a perfect example of the phrase- ‘As you sow, so shall you reap’.

The book offers an altogether different perspective to postcolonial and subaltern studies as:

These stories narrate the way in which the tribal individuals encounter the postcolonial situation- adding an interesting dimension to subaltern studies. ... The translator, serving the function of the arboriculturalist, must take great care while transplanting the tree into a different soil, with different properties (Das 13).

The stories of this collection have been selected by Arindam Roy and the remarkable editorial endeavour and effort put forward by Saptarshi Mallick has made it a thoughtful and engaging

<sup>12</sup> Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) is a towering figure who had made significant contributions through her narratives by upholding the plights of the marginalised class, especially the Shabars of Bengal.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Arjun’ is a famous epic character and is also the name of a plant found mainly in the Tribal belt of West Bengal. This story portrays how the tribal people converted a particular tree into a Pagan God to save it from the greedy industries. Mahasweta Devi ‘Arjun’ in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People* trans. Dr Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati: Santinekatan, Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People*, translated mainly by Jolly Das and other(s) is a collection of Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People, published by the Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, Visva Bharati, Santinekatan in the year 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Tapan Bandyopadhyay (born 1947) was an Administrator by profession and his endeavours facilitated him to minutely observe and represent, in his narratives, the social, political and cultural life of the indigenous people in this changing and challenging times. Tapan Bandyopadhyay ‘Nausea’ in *Ethnic Tapestry: Bengali Short Stories on Indigenous People* trans. Dr Jolly Das et al. (Visva Bharati, Santinekatan: Centre of Excellence, Department of Odia, 2019).

read. Das, in her Translator's Note effectively pens down the importance and role that the process of translation plays in providing a certain extent of agency to the indigenous people. We can therefore conclude by safely assuming that this anthology is the first of many translated or original anthologies about indigenous people.

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