

## Rabindranath, Islam and The Ashram: Tagore's Quest for An Inclusive India

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### Abstract

It is a well-known fact that Rabindranath Tagore was deeply concerned about the relationship between India's two largest religious communities and throughout his life wrote extensively on the subject. The paper focuses on how Tagore's university at Santiniketan, which has been seen as radical reworking of the concept of the 'self' and 'other' became a space for mutual understanding of communities through education. The paper traces the early difficulties of integrating Muslims into the Asrama and how the divisions was gradually overcome. It also looks at how Tagore used Islamic studies as a tool to enhance mutual respect between communities.

**Keywords:** Hindu-Muslim Relationship, Islamic Studies, Self-Other,

In 1901 Rabindranath Tagore started an alternative school about a hundred miles away from the city of his birth — Calcutta. The school that began with a handful of students transformed into a full-fledged University within two decades. The motto of Tagore's university — to cradle the world into a nest stands for an inclusive world and was antithetical to some of the prevalent political and cultural ideas of that time many of which centred around the formation of rigid imagined identities predicated on the self-other binary. Therefore, the idea of creating an inclusive refuge can be seen as the logical continuation of Tagore's radical take on Nationalism which he perceived as a divisive force and "menace" to civilisation. Swati Ganguly in her book *Tagore's University: A History of Visva Bharati 1921-1961* has pointed out:

Thought of as haven for the best minds across the world during the First World War, Visva-Bharati represented a radical rethinking of the relationship between "self" and "other"— the notion that the self can only be conceptualised and enriched by co-operation with the "other". Implicitly, it was a rebuttal of hostility — of its manifestation both in the First World War and imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Swati Ganguly, *Tagore's University: A History of Visva Bharati 1921-1961* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2022), p. 4.

Ganguly also explains that Visva-Bharati was indeed a swim against the tide as many other contemporary educational institutions were based on religious and cultural identity catering to the sectarian nature of anti-colonial nationalism. This particular tendency is visible from the late nineteenth century with the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College set up in 1875 which became the Aligarh Muslim University by 1916. Annie Besant founded the Central Hindu College in 1898 which was later absorbed into Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya's Benaras Hindu University founded in 1916.<sup>2</sup> Tagore responded to Malviya's idea of a Hindu university in the essay titled "Hindu Visvavidyalaya" (1911):

Therefore, who fear the establishment of separate Hindu or Muslim Universities, their fear cannot be dismissed as unfounded. Yet, it has to be mentioned that the education system that has accommodated both eastern and western knowledge cannot forever be indulgent in excess of anything. When diverse peoples find their places next to one another they dispel their profligacy, and their eternal truth becomes immanent. One can always prepare a mighty seat for oneself within the confines of one's home but one's stature can only be determined in presence of others. If the "world" finds its place in the Hindu or Muslim university then there is nothing to fear in the expression of their distinctness. It is only by this means that the distinctness will receive just evaluation.<sup>3</sup>

This essay is often considered as the first articulation of his own philosophy of founding a university<sup>4</sup> and university as an open and inclusive forum. Rabindranath Tagore began his journey as an ideologue at a time which was rife with various political tensions. The ever-growing mistrust between the two major religious communities of the subcontinent was the chief among these. Suranjan Das in his book *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (1993) illustrates that to the census of 1872 showed that more than half of the population of Bengal was Muslim, however this demographic predominance was not reflected in socio-economic privileges. On the contrary a large portion of this population resided in the low-lying areas of Mymensingh, Pabna and Noakhali

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<sup>2</sup> Swati Ganguly, 2022, pp. 13-16.

<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali* (Collected Works of Rabindra Nath Tagore) (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1986), volume 9, p. 605. The quotations from *Rabindra Rachanabali* used in this essay are translated by me.

<sup>4</sup> Swati Ganguly, 2022, p. 13.

mostly earned a living as agricultural labourers or tenant farmers.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand the working-class grievances often expressed themselves through communal turmoil rather than class-based agendas. Das notes that in the last decade of the nineteenth century there were at least three major communal unrests in and around Calcutta.<sup>6</sup> This unrest was not merely a political one. The cultural otherization of the Muslim often reared its ugly head in the public domain. When Rabindranath Tagore referred to Akbar as a sympathetic ruler in a essay called “Ingrej o Bharatbashi” (British and Indians) read at a public meeting, he was fiercely challenged by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay who perceived Akbar and other Muslim rulers as usurpers and perpetrators of heinous acts against Hindus. Vidyasagar’s biographer Chandicharan Banerjee<sup>7</sup> referred to this very public disagreement and Tagore himself confirmed this in a 1911 letter.<sup>8</sup> Tagore’s 1891 essay “Muslim Mahila” (Muslim Women) was perhaps his first foray into understanding the position of Muslims. Tagore’s more public exhibition of his intention to support Hindu Muslim unity came at the wake of the proposed Bengal partition of 1905 when he staged a march and organized a Rakhi Bandhan ceremony and tied Rakhi on the wrists of Maulvis at Nakhoda Masjid along with other members of the Tagore family.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Tagore used a primarily Hindu festivity, turning it into a potent political symbol for unity when the demands for two-state policy and separate electorate was threatening to tear the country apart along religious lines. With the growing distance between Muslims and Hindu elites and the establishment of All India Muslim League in 1906, and growing support for divided Bengal from Khwaja Salimullah and his associates the political discord between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal became more complex than ever.<sup>10</sup> In this light Tagore’s untiring effort to arrive at a respectable solution for this growing debate becomes all the more poignant. His concern for the political future of the country becomes eloquent when he writes,

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<sup>5</sup> Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Oxford: New Delhi, 1993 rpt. 2005) p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Suranjan Das, 1993, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Prasanta Pal, *Rabijibani* (Ananda Publishers: Kolkata, 1978 rpt. 2005) vol. 3 p. 278

<sup>8</sup> Prasanta Pal, 1978, p. 277

<sup>9</sup> Abanindranath Tagore, *Ghoroa*, in pp. 29 - 31

<sup>10</sup> Farzana Shaikh. “Muslims and Political Representation in Colonial India: The Making of Pakistan.” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, pp. 539–57. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312536>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2023.p. 542.

It has now been decided that India will become a federal state instead of having a unitary model of governance. In other words, it has been accepted that our country has enough divisions, which prevents a complete merger without any traces or marks of joining. Let us assume that this is a practical solution to our problems as a nation-state. However, a difficult knot is the division between Hindu and Muslim. This difference has been internalised due to various reasons. It cannot be fixed by applying a political adhesive from the outside. In times of rising temperature, the fissure will reappear.<sup>11</sup>

Tagore witnessed firsthand the discriminatory measures Hindus often took against the Muslim people and how that became instrumental in widening the cultural gap. In a letter<sup>12</sup> to Kalidas Nag in 1922 he talks about this discrimination:

Customs are the bridge between people, but this is where the Hindus have confined themselves. When I first took over the Zamindari estates, I saw that if a Muslims subject needed to be offered seats, the Hindus would lift up a side of the mattress and ask the Muslims to sit on the ground. To consider the followers of different customs as impure is the biggest hindrance in forming a human bond. It is India's ill luck that India has two communities like the Hindus and Muslims. For Hindus the barriers of religion are minimal, but the barriers of custom are insurmountable. For the Muslim religion provides the barrier and not the customs.<sup>13</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore did not merely confine himself to writing on Hindu-Muslim unity but wanted to create an ideal space for Muslim students within the Ashram, an effort which proved a more complex task than he had originally imagined. Rabindranath Tagore saw Visva Bharati as an ideal space for implementing the pedagogical exploration of India's diverse cultural history. He believed Visva Bharati could potentially pave the path towards initiating a cultural dialogue between the two major communities. However, his ideas of unity did not easily transfer onto others in Santiniketan.

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<sup>11</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 12, p. 668.

<sup>12</sup>Bhuiyan Iqbal. *Rabindranath O Musalman Somaj* (Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashon, 2010), p. 424

<sup>13</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 14, p. 251.

It was in 1911 that a palpable tension around admitting the first Muslim student arose within the *asrama* community.<sup>14</sup> One Muslim gentleman wanted his son to be part of the ashram school, but objections came from within. Some Teachers, Students and most significantly the trustee Dwipendranath Tagore expressed their dissent to this decision. Tagore wrote twice to Nepal Chandra Ray, explaining that the student will be accompanied by a domestic help and this student can stay with teachers who have not objected to his admission. He suggested that the student could lodge with Nagendranath Aich, the drawing teacher and some students. Expressing his concern, he wrote:

In the Ancient *tapovanas* the tiger and deer drank from the same water source, if we cannot make the Hindu and Muslim drink together in our modern *tapovana* then our whole endeavor is a failure. Please reconsider your position and do not turn away that person who has come to the gate of your *asrama*. In the name of the one and only god accept him without fear or prejudice.<sup>15</sup>

But as history suggests Tagore's appeals fell on deaf ears and the student could not be inducted. Yet the letter made Tagore's intention of imparting education in a non-divisive set up abundantly clear. After this initial setback, it took a few more years to materialise his ideal of creating a refuge of non-divisive inclusivity in the face of rampant sectarian politics.

In 1919 an East African student Jafar Ali had come to *asrama* temporarily and his reference is found in C. F. Andrews' letter to Rabindranath dated 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1920. The large group of Gujrati students in the *asrama* were fairly conservative. There were about twenty students from Gujrat at the *asrama* at the time. Andrews writes "by slow degrees, The Gujerati prejudices are breaking down... We are not making any hasty changes. Jafer Ali, our new Mohammadan some day will come and dine with the rest, but one must go step by step".<sup>16</sup> The first permanent Muslim student of the *asrama* was Sayed Mujtaba Ali. It was reported in the *Santiniketan* journal.<sup>17</sup> The year after

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<sup>14</sup> Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar. *Kabir Pathshala* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2015), p. 87

<sup>15</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Letter to Nepal Chandra Ray, qtd. In Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar, 2015, p. 87

<sup>16</sup> Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar, 2015, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Swati Ghosh and Ashok Sarkar, 2015, p. 86.

Syed Mujtaba Ali was enrolled in the university, in September 1921, Mujtaba Ali spoke on Eid at the meeting of the Visva-Bharati Council while Rabindranath presided over it.

Rabindranath Tagore found it important to reaffirm his beliefs on India's shared heritage in his various addresses within the ashram which were later collected, Visva-Bharati essays. In his message to students published in the "Santiniketan" published on 20 Falgun 1328 BE, (This later became known as Visva-Bharti Essay No 4)<sup>18</sup> he states:

We must not merely know about the Hindu soul in India. Indian literature, the arts and architecture are a fine combination of Hindu-Muslim creativity. To know this is to know the actual India. We have no appropriate institution that gives us this education, which is why our education is inadequate.<sup>19</sup>

This intention was further consolidated through the setting up of a chair of Islamic Studies at Visva-Bharati, which was funded by the Nizam of Hyderabad with a generous donation of one lakh rupees. The first incumbent of this post was the Hungarian Scholar Julius Germanus (Later known as Abdul Karim Germanous, after he converted to Islam). Germanous was a polyglot and a man of immense scholarship. He arrived at Santiniketan on January 7, 1929. His essay "Islamic Studies", published in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* of July, 1929 also reveals what the programme of Islamic Studies entailed. Germanous went about trying to dispel what he believed were certain myths and negative stereo types of Islam. His essay starts off with a discussion of the history of Islam and the teachings of the Prophet and why it is important to learn this history. He goes on to talk about the spread of Islam and argues that "...Islam does not in any way imply a uniform culture. On the contrary it resembles a magnificent river with many tributaries".<sup>20</sup> The essay ends with an appeal which reveals a great deal about the project.

Through the generosity of H. H. The Nizam-ul-Mulk of Hyderabad it has become possible to establish a chair for Islamic Studies at Santiniketan, where, under the beautiful Sal-trees, a new foundation for the synthesis of world culture is being firmly laid under the guiding

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<sup>18</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 14, p. 267.

<sup>19</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. 14, p. 251.

<sup>20</sup> Julius Germanus, "Islamic Studies", *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* July (1929): pp. 46 – 50 (p. 46).

influence of Rabindranath Tagore. And we now appeal to all who have the cause of Islamic studies at heart for books and manuscripts, and also for further benefactions for the maintenance of advanced students and research workers. We have every confidence that our appeal will not be in vain, and that it will be possible to create at Santiniketan, “the Abode of Peace”, a living centre for the study of the history and culture of Islam — “the Religion of Peace.”<sup>21</sup>

Apart from Germanus, there were other efforts of documenting India’s diversified cultural heritage under the aegis of Visva Bharati. In 1929, Kshitimohan Sen, who had been one of the longest serving members of the asrama, and scholar per excellence, delivered the Adharchand lecture on “Bhartabarshe Madhyajuger Sadhana” (Spiritual Practices of Medieval India) at Calcutta University which was published as a book soon after with an introduction by Rabindranath Tagore. In this book Sen analyses the Bhakti tradition and the Sufi tradition. A major portion of Sen’s work is devoted to understanding the fluid religious identities and the intermingling of religions in medieval India that produced and uniquely amalgamated Hindu-Muslim culture of the non-mainstream, non-organized religious movements. Stressing on the centuries of peaceful co-existence and hybrid identities of alternative religious sect Sen tried to show how the people of freely intermingled demolishing the perceived rigidities posed by the customs of either of the communities. Sen uses the example of Hossaini Brahmins and the Immam Shahi community to illustrate his point.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the next decade there was a concerted effort to consolidate and expand the production of knowledge on India’s composite culture. A few notable examples are to be found in the pages of the newly inaugurated periodical *Visva Bharati News*. Hashem Amir Ali’s essay “The Tenth of Muharram” was published in the first volume of *Visva Bharati News* (1932-33) which celebrated coincidence of Muharram and Buddha’s birth anniversary as a good omen.<sup>23</sup> Apart from Ali’s romantic account of unity, the volume also published Krishna Kripalani’s essay on Sufism

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<sup>21</sup>Julius Germanus, “Islamic Studies”, *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, July (1929): pp. 46 – 50 (p. 50).

<sup>22</sup> Kshitimohan Sen. *Bhartabarshe Madhyajuger Sadhana* (Spiritual Practices of Medieval India). (University of Calcutta: Calcutta, 1930), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>Hashem Amir Ali. “The Tenth of Muharram”, *Visva Bharati News* (1932): pp. 104-106, (p. 104).

and poetry.<sup>24</sup> and Rabindranath Tagore's welcome address to Aga Pouré Davoud, who came to occupy a chair of the professor of Persian endorsed by Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran.

The academic and Extra-academic work on Islam produced in Santiniketan would be even more diverse and dynamic in the following years. In March 1935, Rabindranath invited Kazi Abdul Wadud to deliver the Nizam Lecture. Wadud's lectures titled "Hindu Musalmaner Birodh" or the conflict of Hindu and Muslim attempt to analyse the reasons for the conflict and refute the idea that Hindu-Muslim conflict is a relatively new conflict. Wadud was also looking at the impact of British imperialism and ended with the possibility of unity, which he, like Rabindranath, deemed to be an essential component of any future Indian nation. Rabindranath attended the lectures spread over three days and Visva-Bharati published it the next year with an introduction by the founder himself.<sup>25</sup>

In August of the same year, Tagore was requested to contribute a foreword to Maulvi Abdul Karim's book *Islam's Contribution to Science and Civilization*. Interestingly, Tagore used this opportunity to discuss the necessity of Islamic Studies:

One of the most potent sources of Hindu-Moslem conflict in India is that we know so little of each other. We live side by side and yet very often our worlds are entirely different. Such mental aloofness has created immense mischiefs in the past and forebodes an evil future. It is only through a sympathetic understanding of each other's culture and social customs and conventions that we can create an atmosphere of peace and goodwill. With this end in view I started a few years ago a department of Islamic Culture in Visva-Bharati with the generous financial support of His Exalted Highness the Nizam. I am glad to say the experiment has been successful.<sup>26</sup>

It is evident that Rabindranath Tagore saw this pedagogical exercise as a viable method to bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims. Visva-Bharati, therefore continued to provide impetus to more works in the broad field of Islamic Studies. In 1935, Visva-Bharati published a translation

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<sup>24</sup> Krishna Kripalani "Sufism and Poetry", *Visva Bharati News* (1932): p. 93.

<sup>25</sup> Bhuyian Iqbal, 2010, pp. 56-62.

<sup>26</sup> Rabindranath Tagore. "Introduction" *Islam's Contribution to Science and Civilisation* by Abdul Karim. Qtd in Iqbal p. 142.



by M. Ziauddin of the *Grammar of Braj Bhakha* by the 17<sup>th</sup> century literary figure Mirza Khan. The book is foreworded by the great Suniti Kumar Chatterji.<sup>27</sup> This was followed by Ziauddin's work on Muslim Calligraphy, being first serialized in the quarterly and then coming out as a book. It shows the diversity of the knowledge being produced and disseminated at this time. Unfortunately, Ziauddin died an untimely death in 1937 and Rabindranath, of course breathed his last in 1941, however, by this time much had changed from the early setback of 1911. In spite of the early roadblocks Rabindranath's efforts of integrating students and scholars from the Muslim community within the Ashram was now relatively successful. By the time Amitabha Chaudhury, who later became a noted journalist, joined Visva-Bharati as student there were a sizable number of Muslim students at this time, Mofazzal Haidar Chowdhury, Ashraf Siddique, Muntakim Choudhuri and others who lived in the same hostel and had access to the same kitchen and it did not make news anymore.<sup>28</sup>

While it may be true, that Tagore's literary representations of Muslim life, or Muslim or even India's Muslim past can be questioned for its scarcity, in his non-fictional writings, Tagore was consistent about Hindu-Muslims unity as a fundamental requirement for India to prosper as an inclusive society. This in turn reflected on what Tagore himself claimed to be his most significant creation, – Visva-Bharati – the vessel that carried the “cargo” of his life. Under Rabindranath Tagore's guidance, Visva-Bharati had produced some first-rate academic articles and books either on Islam or larger Islamic culture. What kind of influence this wielded on society at large is a difficult measure, but we cannot deny that the ashram had taken large strides in initiating and maintaining the atmosphere suitable for a cultural dialogue between two communities who were at odds fueled by cultural and political tension.

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<sup>27</sup> Mirza Khan. *A Grammar Of The Braj Bhakha* (1676 A.D.) Translated by M. Ziauddin (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati: 1935).

<sup>28</sup> Amitabha Chaudhuri. *Islam o Rabindranath Islam: Anya Prosongo* (Islam Rabindranath and More) (Mitra-Ghosh: Kolkata, 1998).

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