

Rabindranath Tagore : A Profile Of His Eventful Life

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to situate Rabindranath Tagore in the context of a larger discussion involving his family and its colonial transactions. This paper focuses on Tagore's childhood, his youth, his international exposure, interactions, his journey from nationalism to universalism. His rich cultural lineage which played a great role in shaping his thoughts and planting in him the everlasting passion for art and literature is also emphasized.

Keywords: Tagore, Cultural Heritage, Nationalism, Universalism.

It is in the context of the dexterous identities of humanity that we should like to delve deep into the ancestral history of Tagore, for according to Chidananda Dasgupta : “ The formidable Tagore clan had a strong international awareness... . Despite the restrictions of foreign rule and the slowness of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century communications the Tagores treated the world as their very own oyster .” (cited in Dasgupta , Chakravarti ,Mathew ,16) .

The spring which unmoors the blossoming of the Tagores' world-embracing liberalism, is eerily shrouded in a web of myths and legends, both controversial and enchanting. Tagore's biographers curiously differ with one another in mentioning the details of Tagore's precursors. Legends have it that early ancestors of Tagore had, by an inhospitable whimsy of fate, been denounced from the orthodox Hindu brahmnical fold to which they belonged. If legend is to be relied upon, they had sustained this unjust penalty because of their social association with some Muslim, supposed to have been named Pir Ali Khan. Ever since their fall “ in the hierarchy of caste, they” came to be “referred to derogatively as Piral Brahmins” (Kripalani, 2). According to The legend, Jagannath Kushari, a liberal man married a girl of the clan. An heir to this man, is mythically supposed to have founded the Tagore family. Waves of struggles against odds carried them as far as the village of Govindpur on the bank of the Ganges, inhabited by the socially marginalised people. Panchanan, a bold, struggling and enterprising member of the family, used to be respectfully called ‘Thakur’ by the villagers. This Panchanan somehow managed to forge a commercial nexus with the British and other foreigners, and rather dramatically raise his family from rags to riches. Krishna Kripalani writes in his text, *Tagore A Life* : “the descendants of Panchanan Thakur became merchant princes and landed aristocrats.” Curiously, the family title ‘Thakur’ had by then been transformed into “Tagore” by the anglicised appellation.

The wealth and accomplishments of Tagore's ancestry ascended the peak of grandeur under the pilotship of Prince Dwarakanath Tagore, the grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore. The family mansion at Jorasanko, Kolkata became a huge opulence of enviable magnificence, not just because of Dwarakanath's grand regal lifestyle but mainly because of his generous charities and his active contribution for the foundation of The National library, The Hindu College (now Presidency University) and Calcutta Medical College etc. Krishna Kripalani writes in his text *Tagore : A Life* that on the eve of Dwarakanath's departure for England, a contemporary English journal published in Calcutta, wrote : “To describe Dwarakanath's public charities would be to enumerate every charitable institution in Calcutta, for from which has he withheld his most liberal donations?” (cited in Kripalani, 5).

A bosom friend and firm supporter of Rammohan Roy, Dwarakanath sided with him in all his religious and social reforms and shared his vision of modern industrial India. In fact, the prince himself founded the first indigenous bank and many concerns, operated through his firm, Carr Tagore and Co. His rather premature death in England in 1846, certainly created a vacuum in his family and in his empire which consisted of the aforesaid industrial enterprises as well as substantial landed estates in the then north bengal (Shilai Doho and Orissa).

A deep crisis in consequence of the crumbling of Dwarakanath's commercial enterprises would have surely over-shadowed the Tagore family were it not for Debendranath having astutely liquidated family debts and restored the family to its former affluence. Debendranath was popularly called ‘Maharshi’ for his spiritual

affiliation to the contemplation of God and his untiring strivings for the foundation of human life on uninhibited religious faith and lofty moral principles . The Maharshi indulged not in the trite pursuit of asceticism in disjunction with the welter of temporal commitments; instead, he sought the nectar of divinity in the midst of worldly activities. In an uninstincted rejection of monism , idolatry and the vague concept of incarnation, he devotionally pursued the Upanishadic tenets and reposed complete faith in the one invisible God , who he believed to have unleashed the spontaneous outpourings of creative energy. Thus he disowned the Vedantic Shankaracharya's static philosophy of the Advaitavada (Monism) , Avataravada (Incarnation) and Mayavada (Illusion). The Maharshi in his book on Brahmha Dharma categorically pointed out the separate entities of the individual and God , as well as their innate affinity. It was on this liberated spiritual philosophy on which, he consolidated the Brahmha Samaj founded by Rammohan Roy, into a drive for the enshrinement of Monotheism and liberal reforms on the social front. In 1843 Debendranath , brought out the *Tattabodhini Patrika* ,which soon became a mouthpiece of diverse philosophic , religious and social topics. There is least doubt that Rabindranath derived a living inspiration from his father's lifelong contemplation of the great philosophy of the universal always contiguous with the palpitation of the personal , the intrinsic relation between the spiritual and the temporal , and he mirrored it most ardently in his thoughts and works.

The grandeur of such great-souled as the Maharshi is often threatened with the predicament of being overshadowed by blatant panegyric that mars the quintessence of the mission and message of their lives and idolize them into waxen or marble statues. On the contrary , whatever contributions are rendered by such resourceful women of a low profile as Sarada Devi , Tagore's mother , are so often relegated into shadows languishing against the dazzling effulgence of their beloveds' mettlesomeness. A subversive feminist glimpse of the story of Sarada Devi , born of a caste Hindu family, provokes one to surmise her awkward and uncomfortable position not only as the wife of a great religious reformer , unfettered of malaises of the Hindu stringency , but also as one , who underwent the ordeals of recurrent pregnancy . That she happened to be the mother of a galaxy of celebrities including the towering Rabindranath , is merely fortuitous. What is hard reality is the drainage of her strength and energy which might have disabled her to look after her youngest son Rabi. Tagore's *My Reminiscences* and his biographies tell us about Sarada Devi's "open-air gatherings in the roof-terrace in the evenings" . Did such small respite neutralize the "Sisyphian drudge" she had to bear with " tact and patience to keep ...household together and in harmony?"(Kripalani, 12). Thereby hangs a tale that remains veiled.

Together with his brothers and cousins , Rabindranath was placed under servocracy("Bhrityarajtantra"). In this Servant Regime , there had been occasional replacement of one ruler by another , but the tyrannical pattern of the regime hardly ever changed. In *My Reminiscences* , Tagore described how a servant named Shyam would keep him confined within a chalk circle and warned him of the perils of transgressing this circle . Tagore refers to some other servants named Brojo and Ishwar with a curious account of how they bullied them , dispossessed them of their due amount of meal and left them in derelict to their own advantages. What is remarkable in such accounts is complete absence of repugnance and a beautiful presence of crunchy wit and humour and keen power of observation as well as sensitivity , which Rabindranath mustered almost prodigiously even in that blooming hour of his life. In *My Reminiscences* , he shows us his unfailing observation of orthodoxy and caste-prejudices that made Ishwar ridiculous . It would not be an exaggeration if one comments that ever since the blossoming of his consciousness , the magnanimous Tagore developed a just shagrin against the malice of casteism , which he later denounced relentlessly in many of his works , like " Nationalism in India".

Negligence in servocracy and seclusion from the big world of the elders , blessed Tagore and his counterparts with a joy of autonomy and independence. As for himself , the child Tagore exploited this advantage by feasting his wonder-thirsty eyes and mind on whatever sights he glimpsed around him . He stored them all away in his mind to weave them into a spectacular tapestry of poems and stories in his literary career. The bathing pool with a large banyan tree on one bank and a clump of coconut trees on the other that he absorbingly sighted through an open window in his childhood . He relived them later in the form of a fine reminiscent poem in *My Reminiscences* : "Day and night you stand like an ascetic with/matted hair./Do you ever think of the boy whose fancy/played with your shadows?" (Tagore 1917, 13).

The perennially enchanting magic-box of poetry let the child Rabi have an inquisitive peep into it when he read through the first nursery rhyme : "The rain patters ,/the leaf quivers". (Kripalani, 16). The sweet lilt of the simple jingle cast a deep impression in the child's mind as it revealed to him the mystery of poetry . Much later in *My Reminiscences* , Tagore , marking the vital importance of rhyme in poetry , observes : " ... because of it, the words come to an end , and yet do not ; the utterance is over , but not its ring ; and the ear and the mind can go on and on with their game of tossing the rhyme to each other. Thus did the rain patter and the leaves quiver again and again, the live-long day in my consciousness." (cited in Kripalani, 16).

Tagore's schooling that began in the very prime of his life in Oriental Seminary was altogether a bitter disappointment . Besides, Oriental Seminary , he read in Calcutta Normal School , in Bengal Academy, at St. Xavier's, at Brighton school in Torquoy and in London University for a brief spell of time. The sarcastic note on which he describes in his autobiography the school building of Bengal Academy , may be taken for his over all pungent impression of school : "the house was more like a pigeon – hold box than a human habitation ...the fact that likes and dislikes form a large part of the child mind was completely ignored." (Tagore 1917, 59). Regardless of the importance of inspiring in the young pupils a questioning mind, inquisitiveness and zeal of creativity , almost all the teachers followed a banal , soulless teaching method in complete seclusion from their young disciples . The entire mechanism of schooling impeded the mental , cerebral , moral and spiritual

amelioration of children . It simply discouraged the natural mobility of their minds which Tagore compares to a running stream , and frightened them away into stagnation. This mind-numbing schooling mechanism is indeed designed by all sorts of autocratic schooling mechanisms , evilly intending young minds into unquestioning obeisance to the authority. The only teacher , whom Tagore found inspiringly liberal and adorable was Professor Henry Morley of London University. No doubt that it was his acrid , disappointing experience of the utterly faulty system of education that fostered in Tagore's mind a sublime idea of setting up a perfectly ideal system of education , that would be inclusive , interactive and lively in harmony with the peace and serenity of Nature , as it had been in the Tapabana hermitage in the days of yore.

The parental efforts to "educate" Rabindranath either as a barrister or an I.C.S virtually ended in a fiasco with the incidental postponement of his second journey for England (1881).

In the midst of the aforesaid efforts and experiments to raise Rabindranath to an academic status , his pen had begun exuding his ingrained creative genius in the form of exuberantly fanciful and rather tentative poetry . It is worth mentioning in this context that , very interestingly , in february 1876 , the fourteen -year- old Rabindranath virtually made a demo in the public domion by reciting at the annual session of the Hindu Mela , a poem suffused with nationalistic rapture which he later denounced as one of the most dangerous hindrances to the development of larger human reciprocity and harmony . It was in a literary monthly named "Bharati" , a joint venture of Jyotirindranath and Dwijendranath , and later in "Sadhana Patrika" , that the fount of the poet's creative fervour found a free outlet . Within a brief time- frame, he wrote his first short story " Bhikharini" (The beggar maid) , "Karuna"(Pity) and a long narrative poem in blank verse "Kobikahini" (A poet's story). In *My Reminiscences*, Tagore commented on the early effusions of his poetic ardour on a self-deprecating note : " My mind had nothing in it but hot vapour , No forms were evolved , there was only the distraction of movement, a bubbling up, a bursting back into forth ." (cited in Kripalani, 30)

Apart from being influenced by the eminent English Romantic poets and classical Sanskrit literature , Rabindranath derived copious inspiration from medieval Vaishnava poetry which manifestly expressed itself in his composition of an anthology of Padabali , rich in romance , wonderfully picturesque and vibrant with superb musical appeal . We are intimated by Tagore's *My Reminiscences* that, it was the line composed by him , "Gahana Kusuma Kunja majhe..." in the imitation of a Maithili poem that gave birth to the celebrated *Bhanusingher Padabali* (Tagore, 131) which was later published in "Bharati". It is *Balmiki Pratibha* (*The genius of Balmiki*), Tagore's first musical play which speaks volume of Tagore's robust talent for synthesising the classical and the folk musical ethos into the music of humanity , soft , sobre and capable of catching the sensitive heart . It attained a stage success , and it was followed by another musical drama –*Kalmrigaya* (*The fateful hunt*).

While in his *Sandhya Sangeet* (*Evening Song*) . Rabindranath is found to have been weighed down with sadness and depression , In *Prabhat Sangeet* (*Morning Song*) (1884) , which begins with the remarkable "Nirjharer Swapnabhanga" ("The fountain awakes"), the poet is seem to have overcome his desolation and risen to a jubilant mood and wonder at his re-discovery of the joy of living , the perennial flow of life, and its regeneration in defiance of death . In "Letters to a friend", Tagore wrote to C.F. Andrews : "I have felt ever since that this was my goal : to express the fullness of life , in its beauty , as perfection – if only the veils were withdrawn." (Sengupta, 11). Contextually can I refer to Tagore's first important drama in verse , "Prakritir Pratisodh"(Nature's revenge) , later translated into English as "Sanyasi". To be laconic , the drama tells the story of an ascetic's realisation "that the great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form , and the eternal freedom of the soul in love"(cited in Kripalani, 54). In the words of S.C. Sengupta in *The Great Sentinel* : "The defeat of the Sanyasi symbolises the final emergence of the poet into the open world of rain and sunshine , of human joys and cares." (Sengupta, 13).

Here is a digression to mention in brief two incidents forming a significant part of Rabindranath's life . The first one is the twenty-two year old Tagore's marriage to an eleven year old , unlettered , uncharismatic girl named Bhabotarini (she was later rechristened Mrinalini by Tagore) , selected by the Maharshi from within their own sect of Purali Brahmins (December ,1883)However , the girl proved herself equal to the role of a wife . In sunshine and shade , she always stood by her husband with unalloyed love and devotion . The second incident is that, Kadambari Devi committed suicide in April , 1884. The reason for her self-annihilation remains an unexplored mystery . This very sprightly, accomplished lady treated Tagore with motherly affection in his motherless childhood , bound herself together with him in a sweet tie of bonhomie, deeply inspired the budding poet , put to restrain his youthful trend towards self-adulation and got him in an intimate touch with Biharilal Chakraborty's romantic lyrics, much to his poetic benefit . Therefore, her unimaginable disappearance into eternity left in the poet's heart a permanent void, but simultaneously, her death taught Tagore to see life and world in their wholeness with a coolness of a philosophic detachment .

Of his several books of poetry, *kori o komol* (*Sharps and Flats*) , giving vent to the poet's intense desire " to live as a man among men" "in this beautiful world" (cited in Kripalani, 62), *Sonar Tori* (*The Golden Boat*) containing a moving poem entitled "I will not let you go" , *Manasi* , displaying Tagore's extensive imaginativeness , command of lyric and intellectual depth , *Chitrangada* , a dance drama on which much light shall be focussed later , a drama in blank verse *Raja o Rani*(*The king and the Queen*) , dealing with a conflict between the vain infatuation of a man , and the fine pride and humanity of a woman , a lyrical drama *Viday Abhishap*, a drama in verse *Malini*, bearing testimony to Tagore's great admiration for Buddhism and novels like *Bou thakuranir haat* (The young queen's market) , *Rajarshi*, *Chokher Bali*, *Noukadubi* , *Gora*, *Char*

Adhyay, Ghare Baire, Yogayog, Malancha, Seshar Kabita are worth mentioning. His contributions to epistolary literature and his effortless adroitness in weaving his living experience of the ebb and tide in rural Bengal, simple yet touching human emotions, pity and irony of nature and life in its various manifestations into gems of short stories, ushered in literature new form and techniques, suggestive and impressionist, coupled with the light and shadow of comedy and tragedy. Of his many short stories, *The Postmaster, The kabuliwala, Chuti (The homecoming), Atithi (The guest), Guptadhan (The hidden treasure)* etc are worth mentioning for their great popularity.

The poet's profound work *Gitanjali*, which won him the Nobel Prize in 1913, claims to be discussed in a separate space. Earlier to this discussion, let us refer to a phenomenal constructive mission that Tagore accomplished through the foundation of Bolpur Brahmacharyashram (1901) at a place in Birbhum, which his father had purchased and named Shantiniketan. The Ashram flourished vigorously into the world famous Viswa Bharati (1920) and soon came to become an international seat of learning and cultural pursuits.

Tagore's subconscious identification with the mystic unconventionality of the Bauls of rural Bengal culminated to deep mysticism and spirituality and international humanity, which indeed occasioned the efflorescence of *Gitanjali*, mostly translated by Tagore into English in his quite solitude at Silaidoho. How he presented the eminent painter Rothenstein with a sheaf of this translated poems from *Gitanjali* on his 1912 visit to England, and how then the painter, enchanted by the lofty poetic mastery and mysticism of the poems, got them read by Yeats, is an eventful story. Yeats wrote an introduction to the 1st edition to the *Gitanjali*, published by Indian society of London. In his great admiration for the poetry, Yeats wrote "... These lyrics... display in their thought a world I have ever dreamed of all my lifelong. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes." (cited in Dasgupta, Chakravarti, Mathew, 9). In 1913 Tagore was awarded Nobel Prize for *Gitanjali* by Swedish Nobel Academy. As in many of the crowning hours of his life, so in that momentous hour too, this 'breathing saint' was not left unpelted with stones of malivolence. Interestingly wrote "The Globe of Toronto", Canada: "It is the first time that the Nobel prize has gone to anyone who is not what we call 'white'." (cited in Kripalani, 129).

A year after Tagore's victory of the nobel prize, Europe as well as a larger part of the world floundered in the juggernaut of the highly catastrophic first world war as a result of an aggressive Nationalism, which Tagore condemned as the most dangerous enemy to civilization. Tagore had an uncanny premonition of it. The anguish of his soul at such a demoniac prospect came alive in what he wrote to Andrews: "God knows it is the death pang that is tearing open my heart." (cited in Kripalani, 140). While on the other side of this antepode, advocates of imperialism like Kipling exalted over the menacing drumbeat of war, our sage poet deeply bemoaned the huge waste of humanity over "the flood of agony" (Kripalani, 140) that proliferated "in a sea of pain." (Kripalani, 140). That no material accolade could lure him away from his commitment to the great cause of humanity, can be vindicated by the example of his renunciation of the 'Knighthood', in his solemn disdain for the imperial barbarity at Jaliwanwalabag (April 13, 1919). Two years before Tagore's demise, the Second world war broke out. The world was in flames again. Civilization faced crisis. This time more intensely excruciating. Yet Tagore's unbeatable optimism about the resurrection of the world humanity was firmly expressed in the prophetic lines: "Today's roar of the cannons herald...new creation." (cited in Kripalani, 241). The greatness of a man consists in the grandeur of his encounter with the severest litmus test to which Destiny puts him. Tagore stood this test again and again. He sustained a bolt from the blue that came in the form of his beloved sister-in-law's most arcane self-destruction. It came in the form of his truly beautiful wife's untimely demise, soon followed by the premature death of his darling daughter Renuka at the age of thirteen only and the death of his youngest son Soumendra (1907). Blows of character assassination and vulgar tirades were dealt upon him from his detractors from outside. In such a gloomy hour, the ever awakened sentinel of larger humanity stood unruffled and never let personal grief stagnate the flow of his creativity. This is where Rabindranath Tagore towers high above all the contemplators of the religion of Universal humanity. Even in the fast approaching hour of his demise, Tagore's unassailable faith in the victory of life (Jeevan Devata) over all malignity firmly resonates: "Death, like Rahu, / only casts its shadow on life, / the squeeze of inertness / cannot drain life of its heavenly nectar - / this I know for certain." (cited in Kripalani, 259).

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