Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)*
A Biographical Sketch

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Family

Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861. He belonged to a remarkable family. They traced their connection as far back to the end of the seventeenth century with the area now occupied by Calcutta, India. Their ancestors migrated from the district of Jessore in Eastern Bengal to the village of Gobindapore on the River Hooghly where Fort William of Calcutta was later built.[1] In Rabindranath's words, his ancestors came with the 'earliest tide of the fluctuating fortune of the East India Company'.[2] They left their inherited priestly duties as high Brahmins to become *banians* or brokers to the Europeans. The villagers of Gobindapore addressed their Brahmin guests as *thakur* or 'holy sir' which was anglicised into 'Tagore' as the family's title. In Bengali their title is still Thakur. According to Blair B. Kling, a historian of the 'age of enterprise' in Eastern India, these 'descendants' of 'humble priests' became 'aristocrats' or 'the "Medici" of Calcutta'.[3]

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Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), who was Rabindranath's grandfather, added spectacularly to the family estates. His meteoric career took him from Bengal to Europe. He turned himself into an independent merchant at a time when wealthy Indians in the mercantile professions worked only as *banians* to European firms. In 1834 Dwarkanath chose to retire from his high post as *diwan* of the Board of Customs, Salt, and Opium and launched the firm of Carr, Tagore & Co. He was congratulated by the governor-general, Lord William Bentinck, for being the first Indian to start an Indo-British commercial enterprise. The firm supplied indigo and silk, and did business in coalmining, shipping, insurance, and banking. He had many successes on his tour of Europe in 1842, when he dined with Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace, and had audiences with the Pope in Rome and with King Louis-Philippe in Paris. In his own country he was a dedicated partner to Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) in founding the monotheistic Brahmo Samaj, in abolishing the rite of *suttee* or widow burning, in sponsoring the Landholders' Society for monitoring the government's land legislation, and in championing freedom of the press.[4]

Being the leading Indian merchant of his generation Dwarkanath was a fabulously rich man. He was popularly known as 'Prince Dwarkanath', both for his great generosity and for his high style of living. A cosmopolitan and a bon vivant, he was proficient in Persian, Arabic and English, and was said to have had close contacts among many classes of people in England, France and Italy – from 'royalty to radicals'.[5] He entertained his European guests lavishly, and acquired a suburban house called Belgachia Villa for the purpose, in deference to his wife, who was religiously and socially orthodox. He also had a *baithak-khana*, or living room, built for himself in the courtyard of Jorasanko House also for the purpose of entertaining his foreign guests. He was sensitive towards his family's way of life and saw to it that he did not impose upon them. In his own personal faith he remained a Vaishnava Hindu throughout but, again, his way of worship was his own. He was remarkable in combining his love of his country and heritage with his radical thinking. After his death *The Times* of London wrote in their obituary that 'his name will be proudly associated with all the noble institutions flourishing in Calcutta'.[6]

Dwarkanath's eldest son, Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), who was Rabindranath's father, was the first Tagore to become an initiated brahmo. He led the Brahmo Samaj movement following Ram Mohan Roy's

passing. With his uncompromising austerity Debendranath paid off his father's debtors instantly, thus effecting a reversal in the economic status of his family. He was popularly called Maharshi, or great sage. Like his father he did not interrupt the family's orthodox religious practices but he dissociated himself from them after he became a brahmo. He married Sarada Devi (1826?–1875). Among their progeny were Dwijendranath Tagore (1840–1926), a freethinking philosopher whom Mahatma Gandhi revered; Satyendranath Tagore (1842–1923), the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service, who emancipated the women of his family from the purdah or veil; Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849–1925), a painter and patriot who courted bankruptcy for *swadeshi* (the promotion of Indian economic self-sufficiency); Swarnakumari Tagore (1856–1932) who was an early woman novelist, and Rabindranath who was a world-renowned poet and educationist.[7]

As reformers and patriots the Tagore family found themselves drawn into the heated debates of those times on religion and politics. But they never closed their window to the world which they gained mainly from their love of English literature. The air that young Rabindranath breathed in Jorasanko was described by him as follows:

> There was something remarkable about our family. It was as if we lived close to the age of pre-Puranic India through our commitment to the *Upanishads*…
>
> Along with that there was a genuinely deep love of English literature among my elders. Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott had a strong influence over our family...[8]

Education

Rabindranath played truant at school and the family moved him from one school to another , from the Oriental Seminary at the age of four to the Calcutta Training Academy and the Normal School in quick succession at seven, followed by the Bengal Academy and the St.Xavier’s School when thirteen. After his mother’s death in 1874, when Rabindranath was thirteen, he rebelled hard and his elders finally set him free from going to school. However, as he himself wrote, Rabindranath felt a real urge to teach himself while enjoying his freedom from the confines of the classroom. He poured

over all books that came his way and filled up the gaps by using his imagination. Life at the Jorasanko family house was in itself an all-rounded education. At any given time there were a hundred people living in the house as was typical of a traditional establishment. The family was also drawn to patriotic activity. They patronized the nationalist Hindu Mela. Rabindranath's fifth brother Jyotiridranath established a revolutionary 'secret society' in the model of Mazzini's Carbonari and made Rabindranath a junior member of this outfit. Acting in cosmopolitan plays was another favourite activity of the Tagore family. In 1877 Rabindranath made his first stage appearance in a comedy written by Jyotirindranath that was adapted from Moliere's *The Bourgeois Gentilhomme.* [9]

On leaving school behind Rabindranath's home education became the charge of his third brother, Hemendranath, who saw to it that the boy was taught everything under the sun. Everything was taught in Bengali – arithmetic, algebra, geometry and natural science. There were lessons in anatomy. A Medical College student came to teach all about bones. Apparently, a whole skeleton hung from the walls of the boys' bedroom, "and the bones swayed in the wind and rattled together". His English education was delayed till the age of twelve though the English teacher, Master Aghor, came every evening.

There was no gas then in the city, and no electric light. In the evening the house-servant lit castor oil lamps in every room. The one in their study-room had two wicks in a glass bowl. By this dim light the English master taught him from Peary Sarkar's *First Book*. After Peary Sarkar's first and second English readers there was McCulloch's *Course of Reading*. Children's books were not full of pictures then as they are now. As Rabindranath wrote,

The black-covered reader is lying in wait for me on the table. The cover is loose; the pages are stained and a little torn; I have tried my hand at writing my name in English in it, in the wrong places, and all in capital letters. As I read I nod , then jerk myself awake again with start, but miss far more than I read. When finally I tumble into bed I have at last a little time to call my own. And there I listen to endless stories of the king's son travelling over an endless, trackless plain. [10]

Growing Up

He was merely sixteen when he was included on the editorial board of the literary journal *Bharati* by his brother Jyotirindranath who edited the *Bharati*. In its first issue Rabindranath contributed an "impudent" review of Michael Madhusudan Datta's epic *Meghnadbadh Kabya*. With Jyotirindranath's encouragement he wrote other articles for *Bharati* such as "The Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Saxon literature", "The Normans and Anglo-Norman literature", "Petrarch and Laura", "Dante and his Poetry", "Goethe" and "Chatterton". These came out on the eve of his first visit to England in the year 1878.

Rabindranath repeatedly acknowledged how much he owed in his early education to the personality and activities of Jyotirindranath whom he called *Jyotidada*. Though twelve years older Jyotirindranath treated his younger brother as an equal, and was one of the chief helpers in his "literary and emotional training". His wife Kadambari, whom Rabindranath called *Bouthakrun*, was almost the same age as Rabindranath. She was nine when he was seven. *Bouthakrun* was a lover of literature and quickly became his favourite companion. He expressed his deep-down debt to her affections when he wrote,

In infancy the loving care of woman is to be had without the asking, and, being as much a necessity as light and air, is as simply accepted without any conscious response; rather does the growing child often display an eagerness to free itself from the encircling web of women's solicitude. But the unfortunate creature who is deprived of this in its proper season is beggared indeed. This had been my plight. So, after being brought up in the servants' quarters, when I suddenly came in for a profusion of womanly affection I could hardly remain unconscious of it. [11]

As we know Rabindranath was only thirteen when his mother died. She had been ailing. She used all along to sleep on a separate bed in the same room with the children. But a time came when she was moved to a separate room on the third storey of the inner apartments away from the children. On the night she died the children were fast asleep in their room downstairs. They were woken up by the nurse entering the room and crying: 'Oh my little ones, you have lost your all!' He described the end of that night thus,

Half awakened by her words, I felt my heart sink within me, but could not make out what had happened. When in the morning we were told of her death, I could not realize all that it meant for me.

As we came out into the verandah we saw my mother laid on a bedstead in the courtyard. There was nothing in her appearance which showed death to be terrible. The aspect which death wore in that morning light was as lovely as a calm and peaceful sleep, and the gulf between life and its absence was not brought home to us. [12]

When Rabindranath was seventeen it was decided he would go to England. But before sailing he was sent to stay with his second brother Satyendranath, or *Mejodada*, the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service who was posted at the time as a judge in Ahmedabad. Satyendranath was expecting to go on furlough to England where his wife and children were staying at the time. It was decided that Rabindranath should accompany him. From his own admission Rabindranath felt a bit 'torn up by the roots' to leave the editorial board of *Bharati* and move to Ahmedabad. But he took his marching orders alright and went to Ahmedabad in March 1878. Satyendranath had a wonderful library where young Rabindranath could satisfy many a curiosity. Those *Bharati* essays on European literature that he contributed were the outcome of his explorations in *Mejodada*'s library.

The two brothers sailed for England on 20 September 1878. Rabindranath went to the University of London for a few months and took classes in English Literature. In London he stayed with an English family about whom he has written fully in his *Reminiscences*. The letters he wrote from England are his diary of that visit. They were published as *Europe Prabasir Patra* in 1881. But he regretted the attitude with which he wrote those letters and his early brash comments in them. Indeed, he paid tribute to that visit when he wrote,

I received no shock calculated to shatter the original framework of my life – rather East and West met in friendship in my person. [13]

Turning into a Writer

On returning home Rabindranath became immersed in writing. While in England he began to write his first verse-drama, *Bhagna Hriday* (The

Broken Heart), on the theme of a tormented poet disappointed in love as in the earlier *Kabikahini* (The Poet's Story) which he wrote when he was sixteen. It was from a time in his young life when he harboured an exaggerated image of himself. There was a great parade of universal love in those writings befitting that of a budding poet.

Jyotirindranath had moved from the family house at Jorasanko to an independent house on Sudder Street off Chowringhee in Calcutta. Rabindranath went to stay with them. It was in the Sudder Street house that he chanced upon a special poetic experience which heightened his sense of a beautiful and happy world. He wrote his famous poem, *Nirjharer Swapnabhanga* (Awakening of the Waterfall) on that day. This became the key poem in a series that expressed his new poetic experience which he published as *Prabhat Sangit* (Morning Songs) in the year 1883. He now began to write for pleasure even if those early poetic compositions were of no great poetic value to him later on.[14]

He continued in this state of bliss for some time. While this lasted he and *Jyotidada* went to the Darjeeling hills when Rabindranath hoped that the Himalayas would lend itself to his gift of a 'new vision'. But he found that did not happen. While there he wrote a poem titled "The Echo" and added it to his *Prabhat Sangit* collection. "The Echo" however was such an abstruse piece of writing that even his friends began to cast bets over what it could possibly mean! As a result Rabindranath began to interrogate himself, does one write poetry to explain something? Is it not something felt in the heart that is given expression in the utterance of a poem? He concluded that a poem was a mirror image of something that was taking place within.

In 1887 he began composing the *Manasi* group of poems and himself translated one of them into English. At the time there was a surge of Hindu revivalism in public life. Rabindranath himself was initially touched by the revivalism but turned away from it in distaste. He and the leading Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee engaged in a heated exchange on the subject of religion. Rabindranath wrote some biting satires against religious fanaticism and was not at the time in a happy frame of mind. He wrote.

I hate all the demands of good manners. Nowadays I keep repeating that line: Much rather would I be an Arab Bedouin! Oh for a healthy, strong, unfettered barbarity![15]

His first chance of finding 'himself' came in the decade that he spent in rural East Bengal from 1889-1890 where his father sent him to manage the family's agricultural estates. There he came into intimate contact with the common man's miseries and struggle for survival. The letters he wrote stand out most prominently among the creations from that period, as do his short stories. The letters were published in 1912 in Bengali as *Chhinnapatra* (Fragments). They are full of vivid details of everyday village life and of his encounters with stark nature.

His Religion of Humanity

We also know from the *Chhinnapatra* letters that the turning point in Rabindranath's compassion for humanity came out of this first hand rural experience of seeing how the majority of his countrymen lived. Born into aristocracy himself he was shaken by this revelation. He became restless to do something about it. He wrote,

> I began to feel ashamed of spending my days simply as a landlord, concerned only with my own profit and loss. So I began to think about what could be done. I did not think helping from outside would help. I began to try and open their minds towards self-reliance.[16]

He wrote some powerful essays at the time for his country's social reform. His drama *Achalayatan* (The Immovable) addressed the obduracy of Hindu orthodoxy, while his novels *Gharey Baire* (*Home and the World*), and *Gora* attacked the corrupting Hindu influence on swadeshi politics. In 1904-1905 he himself joined the Swadeshi Movement but withdrew from it when it broke out into sectarian riots among Hindus and Muslims. Rabindranath's nationalist critics accused him of 'desertion'.

It is remarkable that Rabindranath's writings of a hundred years ago had alerted us to the social injustices that continue to hurt our lives to this day, the injustices of caste and creed. He was characteristically candid in self-criticism when he wrote explaining his own change of heart thus:

> There had been a time when I too tried to love and call by sweet names this prison covering our whole country, but my inner soul had remained discontented…Oh, how

impenetrable the walls, how solid its foundation! An achievement certainly, but does it deserve to be admired? [17]

During this period when he was so completely absorbed by the stark reality of the life of the common people, his poetry expressed a certain inner mysticism which was later to become an essential part of his writing. This found expression in several of his poems during 1894 to 1900. One such central poem was *Jiban-debata* (God of life). He came to realize that the divine was to be found in humanity just as humanity was forever in search of the divine. He explained his concept of *Jiban-debata* when he wrote,

[It is]…the idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal….[18]

Deaths in his family

When his mother died Rabindranath was a very young boy. But when his sister in law and companion Kadambari Devi died he was utterly distraught. At the time he was writing a prose-drama called *Nalini* which was going to be acted by the Jorasanko family when she committed suicide. Recalling his shock in his *Reminiscences* Rabindranath referred to it as his first 'permanent' acquaintance with Death. Yet, he also experienced some flashes of joy in the midst of this unbearable grief. A realisation that life was not a stable permanent fixture helped to lighten his mind. He wrote,

With the loosening allure of the world, the beauty of nature took on a deeper meaning. [19]

This forced insight into life and death was of no little significance when we recall that he had to face many deaths in his close family starting with the death of his wife in 1902 followed by the deaths of three out of five of their children. A few months after his wife's death their second daughter Renuka fell ill. His renowned collection of poems for children titled *Sisu* (Child) was written at this time while he was attending to Renuka's illness and also looking after the two younger children bereft of their mother. The poems are so full of innocent delight that nobody would imagine how anxious and grief stricken he must have been at the time. In 1903 Renuka died**,** nine months after her mother's death. There was more sorrow to come with the deaths of his father in 1905, and of his youngest son Samindranath who died of cholera in 1907 when the boy was only eleven.

In those years his verse was becoming increasingly an offering to God, of finding in Divinity 'the medium of a higher love, shorn of all superficial ornaments'. Coming from an inner surrender, after much personal pain, the language of these poems became simple and direct.

The Place of Music in His Life

Music was an important part of Rabindranath's education. The family music teacher, Vishnu Chakraborty, taught youngsters the common Bengali folk songs. He has described how he loved them.

> The modern custom is first to practice scales – sa-re-gama, etc., on the harmonium, and then to teach some simple Hindustani songs. But the wise supervisor who was then in charge of our studies understood that boyhood has its own childish needs., and that these simple Bengali words would come much more easily to Beengali children than Hindi speech. Besides this the rhythm of this folk music defied all accompaniment by tabla. It danced itself into our very pulses. The experiment thus made showed that as a child learns his first enjoyment of literature from his mother's nursery rhymes, he learns his first enjoyment of music also from the same source.
>
> The harmonium, that bane of Indian music, was then not in vogue. I practiced my songs with my tambura resting on my shoulder and did not subject myself to the slavery of the keyboard. [20]

For him personally Rabindranath's song was unloosed from a young age by his brother Jyotirindranath. *Jyotidada* played the piano while composing tunes in various new styles, keeping his younger brother by his side as he did so. Rabindranath was given the task to match the tunes by setting words to them, right there! At the end of the day a mat and a pillow would be spread on the terrace for *Bouthakrun* and *Jyotidada* to come and sit. *Jyotidada* would draw the bow across his violin and Rabindranath would sing. [21]

We could take that as the beginning of his phenomenal 'career' as a composer and writer of well over a thousand songs. The one thing from his legacy that has enjoyed the most popularity in Bengal are his songs. His songs are known also across India and abroad. He himself wrote that his songs would outlive him longest. This genre is known as *Rabindrasangit* or

Rabindra-songs. His songs were also integral to the 'life' of his Santiniketan school and to his ideas of a creative and joyful education. It was a liberating force to him. In his conversation with Einstein he said,

There is in human affairs an element of elasticity – some freedom within a small range, which is for the expression of our personality. It is like the musical system in India, which is not so rigidly fixed as in western music. [22]

In composing the melodies for his songs he was influenced by all the forms of the Indian musical tradition, folk and the classical. These were baul, kirtan, Shyamasangit, kheyal, thumri, dhrupad. He was drawn to Carnatic music and also music from the other regions of India. He used the classical ragas freely but he did also accept some conventions. He loved some Western music to which he was exposed in his early years in England, and used them in his melodies. The best explanation of what he was intending is there in his autobiographical notes on his musical drama *Valmiki Pratibha* (The Genius of Valmiki). He wrote,

When I came back home [from England] I sang the Irish melodies I had learnt to my family. 'What is the matter with Rabi's voice?' they exclaimed. 'How funny and foreign it sounds!' They even felt I spoke differently.

From this mixed cultivation of foreign and native melody was born *Valmiki Pratibha* (The Genius of Valmiki). The tunes in this musical drama are mostly Indian, but they have been dragged out of their classic dignity; that which soared in the sky has been taught to run on the earth. Those who have seen and heard it performed will, I trust, bear witness that the harnessing of Indian melodic tunes in the service of the drama has proved neither demeaning nor futile. This conjunction is the only special feature of *Valmiki Pratibha*. The pleasing task of loosening the chains on melodic forms and making them adaptable to a variety of treatment completely engrossed me.

Several of the songs of *Valmiki Pratibha* were set to tunes originally severely classical in mode; some of the tunes were composed by my brother Jyotirindra; a few were adapted from European sources. The telena style of Indian modes specially lends to dramatic purposes, and has been frequently utilized in this work. Two English tunes served form the drinking songs of the robber band, and an Irish melody for the lament of the wood-nymphs.

Valmiki Pratibha is not a composition which will bear being read. Its significance is lost if it not sung and acted. It is not what Europeans call an opera, but a small drama set to music. That is to say, it is not primarily a musical composition. Very few of the songs are important or attractive in themselves; they serve merely as the musical text of the play.

Before I went to England we occasionally had gatherings of literary men in our house at which music, recitations were accompanied with light refreshments. After my return one more such gathering in our house at which music, recitations were accompanied with light refreshments. After my return one more such gathering was held, which happened to be the last of its kind. It was for this that *Valmiki Pratibha* was composed. [23]

The Santiniketan School

There were various stages in the development of Rabindranath's humanism. His deepening experience in relating to man and nature gave him his two most persistent drives in life: to bring joy and creativity and alternative values for a sustainable future to urban education, and to bring scientific education and self-reliance to the rural people. It was in Santiniketan in rural southern Bengal that he first began to integrate those strands. Santiniketan was discovered by his father as a serene spot during the Maharshi's travels in that region. In 1861 Maharshi Debendranath bought some land from his friend the Sinhas of Raipur and built a garden house on it in 1863. He named the house 'Santiniketan', an abode of peace. In 1887 he established a Trust Deed for Santiniketan which provided for a hall of prayer, an annual village fair and a school.

This was the school Rabindranath founded in 1901. His Santiniketan school was to be a dynamic experiment to build up a living connection between city and village. The students who came to the Santiniketan school were from urban families while the school itself was surrounded by villages. The early angst Rabindranath felt for an ignorant and helpless humanity in rural East Bengal became an inspiration and a spiritual force in serving his country by creating a holistic education at the most basic level.

He was greatly concerned with the cultural domination that was increasingly becoming a divisive force between city and village in early modern India. The newly emerging professional middle class of Indian society were taking their leave of their village homes and settling in the city. Caste hierarchy was being strengthened by the hegemony of a colonial English education. To Rabindranath that was a more urgent problem than the lack of political freedom. He railed against the injustice of the common man's subservience to the prevailing social system and the indifference of the Indian National Congress in this regard. He wrote,

Whenever I realize the hypnotic hold which this gigantic system of cold-blooded repression has taken on the minds of our people whose social body it has so completely entwined in its endless coils that the free expression of manhood even under the direst necessity has become almost an impossibility. The only remedy that suggests itself to me and which even at the risk of uttering a truism I cannot but repeat, is – to educate them out of their trance.[24]

Rabindranath did not take the route of accusing foreign rule for our social malaise even though he blamed the colonial English education for enhancing the malaise. He argued that foreign rule was a symptom and not a cause. He even hoped that the new ideas of humanism from the West would rejuvenate us to look inwards and reverse the process by examining the radical and reform movements in our own history. At Santiniketan the anniversaries of great men of thought and action, who belonged to India's multiple cultures, and to the world, were celebrated through prayer and discourses. Anniversaries of the Buddha, the Christ, of Prophet Mohammad, of Chaitanya and Rammohun Roy were built into the school calendar. He believed that such an education would enable us to find 'our own true place in the world'.[25]

Nationalism and his India

Rabindranath turned his full attention to the Santiniketan school after withdrawing from the Swadeshi Movement of 1904-1905 which he had joined with great patriotic fervour. Till then he held his faith in the traditional Hindu Samaj but came in for a rude shock when he realized that, true to orthodoxy, the Hindu Samaj would not take the Muslims into its fold. He gave powerful expression to his disillusionment in the novel *Gora* while writing and serializing it during the years 1907-1909.

The novel's hero 'Gora' was an orphan boy of Irish parents brought up by a Brahmin family as their own child. The boy grew up to be a fiercely patriotic young man and a defender of orthodox Hinduism. But when Gora finally discovered his foreign origins he also realised he would be rejected by orthodox Hindu society where he had invested his trust and his social commitment. That became his wake up call about the need to be an Indian without caste or creed. At the end of the novel we have 'Gora' saying,

Today I am really an Indian! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussulman, and Christian. Today every caste is my caste, the food of all is my food! [26]

Rabindranath hit out against national chauvinism with that novel. Amid growing perplexities of the social, educational and political problems in his times, his mind had been turning to the past to discover in the history of India a central ideal for regulating our life and work. He expressed his inclusive humanism in a song with these words,

Day and night, thy voice goes out from land to land,
Calling Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains
Round thy throne
And Parsees, Mussulmans and Christians.
Offerings are brought to thy shrine by
the East and the West
to be woven in a garland of love.
Thou bringest the hearts of all peoples
Into the harmony of one life,
Thou Dispenser of India's destiny,
Victory, Victory, Victory to thee. [27]

His Visva-Bharati International University

In 1918 Rabindranath began preparations to add 'A Centre of Indian Culture' to the Santiniketan school for the coordinated study of the various religious cultures that flowed into India's history: Vedic, Puranic, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, Zoroastrian and Christian. Arrangements were made to study these contributions through the disciplines of philosophy, literature, art, music and dance. The name Visva-Bharati dates from that time and also its Sanskrit motto, *yatra visvam bhavati eka nidam*, taken from a Vedic text meaning 'the-world-in-one-nest'. Officially, Visva-Bharati international university was inaugurated at Santiniketan in 1921.

He kept the model simple even though an 'international' university is a complex idea. He explained that he used the word for the sake of convenience. He wrote what was uppermost in his mind in the following words,

I have taken courage to invite Europe to the fields of Bolpur. There will be a meeting of truths here.

I feel confident that they shall accept our invitation. What we have to ensure is that their hearts are not starved when they are with us. [28]

The idea of Visva-Bharati was to create a space for the meeting of the races through scholarly exchange and study of each other's histories and cultures without opposing interests. It was to be a 'pilgrimage' to 'behold the universe' away from 'narrow domestic walls'. It was hoped that these alternative values would help to build a new Indian personality free from the conflict of communities and capable of appreciating the many currents of the Indian cultural tradition along with the humanistic and liberal ideals of the West. The new Indian personality would belong neither to the East nor to the West, but be a reconciler of both. Rabindranath argued that Indians must understand themselves in this connected way to realize the nation's unity within its diversity. He wrote,

The India of modern days comprised not only the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain, whose common culture had its origin in India itself, but also the Mohammadan with his wonderful religious democracy of semitic origin and the Christian with his political democracy nurtured in Europe. There was also in India the Parsi from whom we had parted long ago outside the boundaries of India but who had come back to us again ...

If Santiniketan was to become truly the guest house of India it had to be so comprehensive as to find room for each and all of these in its ripest scholarship ...The treasures which these different religious cultures contained should be brought into practical use in relation to the modern world, not held apart and miserly hoarded. [29]

The final experiments at Visva-Bharati took form in 1922 with the establishment of an institute of rural reconstruction named Sriniketan, abode of prosperity. Rabindranath insisted from the outset that an Indian education would be incomplete without a relationship with the village as the majority of Indians lived in the villages, and without inculcating a moral responsibility for their survival among the educated classes in India. The villages were kept out of the mainstream of Indian life and cut off from the advancement of knowledge where they needed it most. One such need was in the application of scientific agriculture which became one of Visva-Bharati's goals for the Sriniketan programme of rural reconstruction.

Rabindranath argued forcefully that the poverty problem was not the most important, the problem of unhappiness was. Men can make ruthless use

of wealth for the production and collection of things, he added, but happiness was beyond all competition and had to be the ultimate goal. He called upon everyone to collaborate in this effort, scholars and poets and musicians and artists. He warned that the urban populace would otherwise live like parasites, sucking life from the rural people and giving back nothing to them. Such exploitation, he emphasized, would gradually exhaust the 'soil of life' which needed constant replenishing through the cycle of receiving and giving back.

For a brief period Sriniketan blossomed into an inspiring environment with idealists and specialists from all over the world joining hands with the village people in bringing action and hope to their lives. Just what the founder of Visva-Bharati worked for. [30]

An Indefatigable Traveller

Rabindranath travelled almost incessantly. He went several times to England, to Continental Europe, to the United States of America, to Japan, to Ceylon, to Egypt, to China, to Burma, to Argentina, to Russia, and to the countries of South East Asia. Explaining his migratory instinct he wrote to his younger daughter Mira,

> Having examined myself from within I know for certain that God did not create me for the life of a householder. That is perhaps why I am a constant traveller, and not able to set up home anywhere. The world has received me in its arms, I shall do the same with the world.[31]

Of course there were many practical and pressing reasons for him to travel as much as he did besides the wanderlust. The reasons were, first, his family's interventions; second, his own individual longing to break out of the isolation of being a mere provincial of British India; third, his great respect for Western literature; fourth, his admiration for the West's humanism and for the liberal secular values of the West; fifth, his longing to reach out to a larger humanity with his poetry which led to his Nobel Prize and his transformation into a global citizen; sixth, his intensifying concern over war and conflict; seventh, his inner need to condemn the destructive nature of territorial and militant nationalism; finally, his deep-seated conviction in the spiritual and cultural meeting of the races at a centre which

would be a gateway to the world's learning that led to his founding of Visva-Bharati. He carried the message of Visva-Bharati's universal ideals wherever he travelled.

His close association with world literature had widened his horizons from early on in life. In his family Goethe was read in German, Maupassant in French, *Sakuntala* in Sanskrit, *Macbeth* in English. Rabindranath absorbed every bit of that cosmopolitan air. At sixteen he wrote an analytical essay in Bengali on the possibility of material prosperity in Bengal with the title "Bangali-r asha o noirashyo" (Hope and Despair of Bengalis) where he argued for the need to build up a new civilisation through the meeting of East and West.

His inclination to embrace the world came from the confidence of his own solid education in his mother tongue and his grounding in the Indian cultural tradition both of which were also family gifts. It was indeed poetic justice that of all the Tagore family, Rabindranath was most in need of that confidence as he worked his way to find a delicate balance between his commitments to his country and to the world. This was particularly so after his award of the Nobel prize for literature in 1913 when he felt more and more at home in the world. He wrote,

I have felt the meeting of the East and the West in my own individual life... It was the same feeling which I had when I listened to those in my family who recited verses from English literature and from the great poets of those days. Then also I felt as if a new prophet of the human world had been revealed to my mind.[32]

A Painter

Rabindranath learned mostly by instinct. He never liked to learn conventionally, by practice. This was even more apparent in the last years of his life when he became a painter. He once fell very ill in 1937 and slipped into a coma. At the time his passion for painting was such that the first thing he did on regaining consciousness was to paint a landscape. He himself explained why painting was important to him as an altogether separate language of articulation. He wrote,

A large part of man can never find its expression in the mere language of words. It must, therefore, seek for its expression other languages – lines and colours, sounds and movements. Through our mastery of these we not only make our whole nature articulate but also understand man in all his attempts to reveal his innermost being in every age and clime … It is the duty of every human being to master, at least to some extent, not only the language of the intellect, but also the language of the personality which is the language of Art.[33]

What also pleased him about his activity as a painter was that he could overcome the barrier of language through his paintings. When he travelled to different parts of the world and his 'words' needed the help of interpreters. But his art could speak without the medium of an interpreter. That did not mean questions were not asked about the 'meaning' of his paintings. Many asked if these pictures had a 'mystic' meaning. He did not himself want to see meaning in them nor did he want others to do so. He asserted that everything of this earth outside the human world was silent. The stars did not utter words, the planets and clouds and trees did not, nor the green grass and flowers. Why therefore should we tie meaning to art, he asked. When there was a Revivalist movement in art to link art with nationalism and some of his contemporaries were attempting to glorify the past through their art, Rabindranath spoke out against the idea and likened it to a 'smothering of the soul'. He wrote,

It is the element of unpredictability in art which seems to fascinate me strongly. The subject matter of a poem can be traced back to some dim thought in the mind. Once it leaves the matted crown of Siva, the stream of poetry flows along its measured course – well-defined by its two banks. While painting, the process adopted by me is quite the reverse. First there is the hint of a line, then the line becomes a form. The more pronounced the form becomes the clearer becomes the picture to my conception. This creation of form is a source of wonder. If I were a finished artist I would probably have a preconceived idea to be made into a picture. This is not doubt a rewarding experience. But it is greater fund when the mind is seized upon by something outside of it, some surprise element which gradually evolves into an understandable shape.[34] .

Last Years and Legacy

The idea and endeavour of Visva-Bharati thrived in its first two decades, the 1920s and the 1930s. Santiniketan became a hive of diverse communities.

Rabindranath's English biographer Edward Thompson, who had been visiting Santiniketan from 1913, wrote

If any foreigner desires to know how lovely is the heritage that India has received from her rishis and forest teachers, let him go to Santiniketan and be gathered into the arms of that friendliness which knows no distinction of creed or nationality. [35]

But Visva-Bharati's future was uncertain. Rabindranath entrusted its preservation to Mahatma Gandhi. In his last letter to Gandhi on 2 February 1940 he wrote,

Visva-Bharati is like a vessel carrying the cargo of my life's best treasure and I hope it may claim special care from my countrymen for its preservation. Though national in its immediate aspect, it is international in its spirit offering to the best of its means India's hospitality of culture to the rest of the world. [36]

Rabindranath died on 6 August 1941. To his utter shock the second world war broke out in his last years. That hurt the peace of even his far away rural hamlet.

His legacy is vast, from a great variety of the written form to song and music, to art, to pioneering work in the fields of education and rural reconstruction, to discourses on the nation-state, politics of power, militarism, war and decay of civilization. An intuitive historian and a humanist to boot he believed that India's history grew out of a social civilization where every attempt was made to evolve a human adjustment of peoples and races. He viewed education holistically as a way to build a person's values from childhood for the creation of a better world.

He saw the less welcome change that had come over his society in his lifetime. His own social class had undergone complete reorientation. They who had patronized *jatra, kathakata, kirtan* and other aids to folk education and folk entertainment had either left the village or lost their sense of brotherhood. The village folk were not able to benefit from what knowledge the city folk had acquired in the scientific age. Their life was no longer enlivened with music and ballads and tales. Torn by guilt over their misery he wrote,

The moment came when I had to pull myself away from preoccupation with literature. For, the sight of the terrible poverty of the Indian masses grew inescapable. I realized that

perhaps in no other modern state was there such a complete denial of the basic needs of living: food and clothing, education and health.[37]

The younger generation of modernist Bengali poets criticized his poetry for its omission of the consciousness of evil. They compared his work with Baudelaire and found him wanting. It is fair to suggest that Rabindranath held firm to his faith in the beauty and sublimity of life. He did not lose faith in man. But that is not to say there was no anguish in his poetry. He felt guilty that millions of his countrymen were so weighed down by their daily miseries to feel any beauty whatsoever from life. He felt circumscribed by the fact that he was not able to really reach out to them wholly, that he could not bridge the inherent distance. The aristocracy of his birth stood in the way. His poem 'How little I know of this world' is a self-examination of that tragedy.

Come poet of the multitudes,
sing songs of obscure man,
reveal his unspoken soul,
soothe his humiliated heart,
restore life and song
to this dry land.
Resuscitate the failing hearts
of hidden men.
May your voice reflect
those standing bowed.
Let the one-stringed minstrel, also,
add his tune
to the great court anthem of the muse.
Come, poet of the new age,
lead me to those hearts
so far away, those hearts so near.
May they know themselves through you
whom I salute.[38]

A keen sense of his own failing perhaps made him utterly sympathetic and sensitive to Gandhi's cause. He was full of hope and encouragement for

Gandhi as a leader of the Indian masses. In *Prayaschitta*, an early play written in 1909, Rabindranath portrayed a saintly rebel called 'Dhananjaya' who argues for the need for *chittasuddhi* or atonement by means of moral reparation and the removal of untouchability.

It is not easy to measure his legacy because it would mean different things to different people. There was not a great deal he or any one individual could do to bring change to an unequal and unjust world. But he was never indifferent to the need, nor was he indifferent to the task. He tried hard to make a difference with as much constructive work as was possible for him. Can we hope to make that his legacy in our individual lives?

NOTES

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Images

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