

Rabindranath Tagore

A MAN FOR ALL TIMES



Achala Moulik

Rabindranath Tagore

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

1. *Silhouettes of Russian Literature*, 1976
2. *Immortals of Italian Literature*, 1988
3. *El Dorado Revisited—A Cultural History of Spain*, 1982
4. *Pageant of Karnataka*, 1983
5. *World Heritage Monuments of India*, 1994
6. *India—Monuments and Sites*, 1996
7. *Our Bengal*, 1979
8. *Kings, Queens and Lovers*, 1978 and 1996
9. *Camellias for Caroline* (Novel), 1985, translated into French, 1986; Swedish, 1987; and Finnish, 1988
10. *Seasons in Paradise* (Short Stories), 1980
11. *The Conquerors* (Novel), 1996
12. *Earth is But a Star* (Novel), 1997
13. *Literary Titans of the Millennium*, 1999
14. *Captors of Time: Monuments of the Millennium*, 2000
15. *Dream Journey* (Novel), 2003
16. *Once Upon a Time* (Poems), 2006
17. *Script for Sound and Light of Hampi*, 2004
18. *Monuments of India*, 2008
19. *Pushkin's Last Poem* (A Play), 2008
20. *A Stranger in Paradise—Story of an Extraordinary Civil Servant*, 2008
21. *Dialogue of Civilizations—William Jones and the Orientalists* (Jointly with Mohandas Moses), 2009
22. *A Hundred Years of Lev Tolstoy*, 2010
23. Edited '*India's Contribution to Conservation of Angkor Vat*', 1995
24. Translated *Seemabaddho* from Bengali to English as 'Company Limited', 1977.
25. Has written nearly 100 articles on history, literature, art and current affairs. Given radio talks and television interviews also on these subjects.

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To
*My parents Leela and Moni Moulik
who cherished Rabindranath Tagore and his ideals*

To
*My husband Mohandas Moses
with whom I rediscovered Rabindranath and Shantiniketan*

To
*My nephew Arup Chatterjee
denizen of Shantiniketan*

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Preface

To write about one of the greatest men of our age is a daunting task and requires a sort of recklessness. The hesitation is mitigated however by the fact that Rabindranath Tagore is not a remote and formidable figure but a beloved and familiar one who touches every Indian heart when they salute their country with Gurudev's song *Jana-gana-mana-adhinayaka jaya he, Bharata bhagya vidhata*.

I consider myself fortunate to have had parents who had met the great poet in Shantinketan in late 1939. My young father, Moni Moulik, who had just returned from Europe after obtaining his Ph.D and an exciting career as foreign correspondent for several Indian newspapers, wanted to tell Gurudev about the grim European scene. He took with him his beautiful eighteen-year-old bride, Leela, to seek Gurudev's blessings as they began their new life. For them, as for millions of others in India and abroad, Rabindranath Tagore was a grand universal man and also a father figure.

The great poet listened intently and in silence as my father described the European scene that he had written about for the newspapers. Then they listened mesmerized as Gurudev spoke prophetically, philosophically and poetically of the world that he loved and had embraced as his very own. He was deeply disturbed and grieved by the outbreak of what would become the second world war. He had foreseen its advent and had repeatedly warned nations about it and had written a sad poem the day war broke out. Thinking of those who were caught in the calamity, the fervent humanist lapsed into silence.

Then Rabindranath Tagore, so deeply interested in any person who came his way, asked the young man about his plans. Father was considering continuing journalism. Gurudev suggested that Father should teach Economics, Political Science, World History, European languages at

Vishwa-Bharati. “Settle here, wayfarer,” he said with a gentle smile, magnificent eyes twinkling. “We need more people like you here – a bridge between different worlds.”

By then Gurudev was frail, his cheeks were hollow, his broad shoulders stooped. The flowing silver beard was slightly tangled. But his eyes mirrored the universe. My parents realized he was tired and bent down to do *pranam* before leaving. He touched their heads in benediction. As mother raised her head he looked at her and asked, “Where are your parents, child?” Mother, shy and timid, replied “my mother lives in Dhaka and my father is no more.” Gurudev rejoined: “your father is here, watching over you.” He paused and smiled. “And if you need another father, I am here.” Mother could not halt her tears.

They obeyed Gurudev and bought a plot of barren land in Shantiniketan where they built their home. Through all their years abroad, they returned to this home, made beautiful and verdant through their efforts.

Rabindranath Tagore’s home Uttarayan was a meeting place of the world. His voice echoed across villages, cities, and battlefields, brave and comforting. And when he left this world, millions of his words were read and cherished.

Father’s destiny took him back to the West – as an Indian diplomat, as an international civil servant and author. Mother was his anchor, the one who kept India near. Notwithstanding her home duties and that of a diplomat’s wife it is Mother who taught us Bengali literature and language when we grew up in the West. It is she who read to us children the poems of Rabindranath.

In 1961 when the first centenary celebrations were being observed all over the world my sister Aloka and I took our university friends to every film, concert and recital of Tagore’s poetry that took place in London theatres and concert halls. University College of London University, where Rabindranath briefly studied (and where I was then studying economics) put up a plaque commemorating the advent of the poet.

Returning to India Shantiniketan was our home, until we had homes of our own. Later we came with our husbands, our sons, our friends to enjoy the perennial hospitality of our parents. My husband, Mohandas

Moses, who was something of a wayfarer, liked visiting Shantiniketan where he took our son Arjun and nephew Arup exploring Gurudev's house and university campus. Walking under the spreading trees of the campus on winter mornings we discussed Rabindranath Tagore.

While Rabindranath Tagore translated into English his own poems from *Gitanjali*, his other poems, novels and letters have been translated by several scholars and men of letters. I have however attempted to translate the poems that I have quoted and his letters from Russia, because of what the original words convey to me.

Seventy years after his passing away and almost a hundred years since he won the Nobel Prize for literature, Rabindranath Tagore's message of humanism remains as relevant now as then, and he continues to be cherished for his universality.

There have been discussions on "demystifying Tagore." There appears to be no need for this. Rabindranath Tagore is neither mysterious nor was he ever on the road to canonization. He was a man deeply engaged in life in all its splendour and struggles, and with people from different countries, cultures, and occupations. He is no stranger to those who are acquainted with his life and creative genius. Rabindranath Tagore is universally recognized as one of the greatest men of our age. Despite formidable advances in numerous fields, there is a scarcity of great people in our age. Greatness however carries a few burdens. One of them is to pass from history and into legend. Another is to be a beacon light. Why not let great men and women become pole stars and guide us to the legions of splendour?

ACHALA MOULIK

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Chapter 1

Prelude to the Indian Renaissance

*The great poet Rabindranath Tagore was the culmination
of the Indian Renaissance*

Indian civilization has many instances of how in times of invasions, chaos, decadence and misery there is the advent of a *Mahapurush* or great man who comes to revive the peoples' bruised souls with their strength, compassion, and the beauty of their own spirit; Lord Buddha: the Emperors Asoka and Akbar: the mystics Kabir, Chaitanya, and Ramakrishna Paramahansa: the leaders, Vivekananda and Gandhi, and the great poet Rabindranath Tagore who "added to the stature of civilization and to the sweetness of life."

As the Italian Renaissance was presaged by the great Italian medieval poet Dante Alighieri and blossomed into splendour after a century and half, the Indian *rinascita* commenced a hundred years before the birth of Tagore.

"Each age is dying and is being born anew" said the Irish philosopher Sean O'Casey. It is a curious but well recorded phenomenon that the decline of a civilization and a period of chaos is followed by the burst of a new and vigorous culture, sometimes the product of an inner regeneration or through an external stimulus. In Italy the Renaissance came through a cumulative process over four centuries when the Spanish Moors and the Byzantine scholars initiated a revival of classical learning that reached the numerous Italian city states by the early fifteenth century. The prosperous wool trade, development of banking, the rise of merchants' guilds and the resultant prosperity of Florence and Central Italy provided both the wealth and the patronage to finance the Renaissance.

In India it was the darkest hour before dawn. By the end of the seventeenth century the powerful and prosperous Moghul Empire fell into rapid decline. The order imposed by the Grand Moghuls disintegrated and the protection given to the people ceased. Numerous powerful kingdoms challenged the writ of the later phantom Moghul emperors. Men like Shivaji could have halted the disintegration but he had too many rivals to contend with. Invaders came from India's northwest frontiers; they plundered, pillaged and retreated to their homelands with their fabulous booty, leaving behind scenes of carnage and desolation.

"The condition of India in the eighteenth century was perhaps the unhappiest in the chequered history of the country. The break-up of the Moghul Empire caused widespread misery and disorder. The craftsmen who depended on the imperial court lost their livelihood; painting, architecture and other arts declined. Indian products accounted for one seventh of world trade under Emperor Shah Jahan. Now that stream trickled down to export of calico and silks to Europe. The insecurity of the roads and property in general made trade a precarious matter." The Marathas who were a dominant power were not able to unite the country. "Other Indian rulers took a pride in settling the country they conquered, building roads, rest houses and temples and digging wells.... After the defeat of the Peshwa Central India was filled with a number of masterless men known as the Pindaris.... Contemporary accounts are full of the terror with which they inspired the peasantry." (*India: A Short Cultural History* by H.G. Rawlinson. Cresset Press, London).

Into this scene stepped buccaneers of the East India Company who saw a great land torn by fratricidal wars and ruinous campaigns. They were eager to trade and grasp the wealth of a wounded empire. These men from across the seven seas waited patiently, building their clay forts, haggling with local merchants and cringing before the imperial court for firmans and concessions. The spheres of their activity increased and their territorial hunger grew. Hindustan was a perpetual lure for expansion and enrichment. With veiled eyes they watched the intrigues, local wars and invasions that left Hindustan bloodstained and shattered. They watched the country fall apart, once more inviting the invader's embrace.

The first fifty years of British rule were ruinous for India. The plunder was as thorough as Taimur's and Nadir Shah's. But the plunder did not cease with one invasion. They came in shiploads to procure cotton, silk, saltpeter, and gold. They cut off thumbs of cotton weavers, especially the Dhaka muslin weavers, so that there would be no competition to the finished cloth from the Lancashire mills. Indians were compelled to purchase the cloth from the cotton that India grew. They imposed taxes that ruined landlord and peasantry alike. Rice fields were converted to grow indigo. Devastating famines swept through territories occupied by the East India Company. Uneducated and ruthless soldiers of fortune from Britain became 'Nabobs' with fabulous wealth.

India "was abandoned as lawful prey to every species of speculators; in so much that many servants of the Company after exhibiting such scenes of barbarity as can scarcely be paralleled in the history of any country, returned to England, loaded with wealth: where entrenching themselves in borough or East India Company stock influence, they set justice at defiance..." (*Considerations on Indian Affairs* by W. Bolts. London, 1772.)

But this was not all. Added to the penury of the population was the constant and relentless assault on their pride and self-respect. Indians were treated like trespassers in their own country. Like Afro-Americans in southern USA before the Civil Rights movement, they were segregated into 'native areas.' They could not enter British homes except as servants or vendors. As Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras Presidency and one of the greatest Englishmen in India said: "many invaders have treated the natives of India with cruelty but none have treated them with our scorn."

So, how amidst this tragic and degrading scene did the Indian Renaissance take place?

This reawakening began, paradoxically, in the early days of British rule. The phenomenon was entirely unintended; the East India Company that ruled parts of the Indian subcontinent from 1757 was not interested in either modernizing or educating Indians. What unleashed the forces of Enlightenment was the brilliance and dedication of British scholars such as Sir William Jones, Nathaniel Halhed, Charles Wilkins, and Henry Colebrooke who brought the spirit of eighteenth century Enlightenment and inclination for classical learning to the boisterous atmosphere of

Calcutta. These scholars studied Sanskrit, Persian and Bengali grammar, translated metaphysical treatises and literary works, codified Hindu and Muslim laws. This process was systemized with the establishment of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784.

“William Jones was fascinated by the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa and extolled his works - *Meghaduta*, *Ritu Samhita*, *Raghuvamsa* etc. In his treatise *Transformation* William Jones observed: ‘those who watch India most impartially see a vast transformation goes on there but sometimes it produces a painful impression on them. They see much destruction and sometimes they doubt whether they see many good things called into existence. But they did not see any enormous improvement under which we may fairly hope that all other improvements are potentially included. They see anarchy and plunder brought to an end and something like the immense majestas Romanae pacis established among two hundred and fifty millions of human beings.’

“British policy was however formulated by ideas determined in Europe; the transformation of the Englishmen in India from Nabob to Sahib was caused by economic forces and political power.”

“As Professor Eric Stokes has observed ‘it has become fashionable among a group of scholars to neglect the role of ideas in history which has been suggested that the ideas have no validity of their own. They are merely a rationalization of human activities, which are motivated by a thirst for power... It is not for me to say whether all politicians in the eighteenth century went to the House of Commons only to make a figure but it is certainly true that ideas played a significant part in the history of modern India. Men went to India for a variety of reasons; to make money, for adventure, and as help up the social ladder in Britain. But there were many men who had a genuine desire and zeal to shape the future of the country on modern lines.’”

“Sir William Jones was a key figure in development of both Oriental studies as well as British policies of the eighteenth century. He founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal which for the first time made an organized effort to study history, society and culture of India. His works on Indian civilization captured the post-revolutionary European mind and stimulated further research on the subject. In England there was ardent

support of America and movement for Parliamentary reforms. In India there developed a definite theory of law and government for the British Raj in Bengal. William Jones was constantly in touch with men in power and was often consulted by them. His digest of Indian laws was considered as complementary to Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement. In fact Jones occupies a large place in the history of British attitude to Indian than has hitherto been acknowledged. He is one of the most interesting figures in the history of British India not because that he was an erudite scholar who knew twenty eight languages and made numerous great discoveries in Indian languages nor because he was a pious man who treated Indians kindly. Some of his great discoveries were known to other scholars while others like Orthography were of small importance. His treatment of Indians was not as exceptional as was made out in the eighteenth century. British officers had close contact with Indians although Indians were never treated as equals not even by Jones. However, some of his unique discoveries were of great significance. His translation of *Shakuntala* into English had a profound effect on India by saving Kalidasa from the medieval commentators. **He ushered in what is called an Indian renaissance.** His career is important because it shows more clearly than anything else the dichotomy of the attitudes of some of the British officers in India. Many were radicals at home and they were attracted by India, her 'glorious past' and her 'simple people'. Yet they had to uphold an authoritarian rule. Jones epitomizes this dichotomy in his life and works."

"It must always be difficult to distinguish between changes imposed by an alien government upon a subject people and the free acceptance by the people of the standards brought by the alien government. In law and justice for example there are certain tenets of British jurisprudence, certain offences in the penal code to which Indian opinion is not wholly reconciled but the great bulk of both civil and criminal law which the British Government has enacted commands the general intellectual assent of the people, the more so as their indigenous family law has been respected and preserved. In many regions of art and literature, India has paid western culture the compliment of imitation for instance in the poetry of Toru Dutt and Mrs. Naidu. Music remains a striking exception; to the Indian ear European music has little attraction as Indian music with

its 'melody untouched by harmony' and its subtle cross rhythm and quarter tones has for the ordinary European. But in nation building services and education India has met them with zealous approval'."

(Modern India and the West—A Study of the Interaction of their Civilizations.

Edited by L.S.S.O'Malley. Foreword by Lord Meston)

"Lord Meston goes on to say that education has been the chief instrument for bringing western influence into Indian life. There has been a continuous debate and discussion, both amicable and acrimonious, on the sagacity of the British Government in replacing the old indigenous systems of teaching by definitely Western methods and particularly in giving the English language prominence at the secondary stage and dominance at the university stage as the medium of instruction. Time alone will judge its wisdom and efficacy. But the facts today are clear. The orthodox view is that British policy has inhibited the spontaneous flowering of the intellectual genius of the people. In the field of scientific development this criticism would not apply, if only because no scientific vocabulary exists in any of the Indian languages. But in other intellectual realms—literature, history, philosophy—the teaching of English has deflected the Indian mind from the traditional lines of culture which an advanced vernacular education might have encouraged."

"This is one side of the scenario. It is also true that the widespread knowledge of English and the use of the English language has enabled the Indian mind to turn to new concepts; freedom of speech and pen, criticism of authority, the questioning of accepted dogmas, the insistence on the rights of man as opposed to his duties. Introduction of English as the medium of instruction gave a new dimension to the Indian outlook; skepticism and rationalism, a subtle resistance to authoritarianism, and a demand for representative government.

"This author feels that language is both a vehicle of ideas and on a deeper level the mirror of civilizations. As the German philosopher Fredrich observed 'He who acquires a new language acquires a new soul'. One wonders to what extent the super-linguist William Jones was aware of this. It is possible that he was less aware of this than Macaulay.

“After two and half centuries since India came into contact with western virtues and vices, its rich creativity, as well as its formidable powers of destruction, one has to ponder on how the basic tenets of the two civilizations will blend and be reconciled. Will India, in its customary fashion, slowly assimilate and adopt western ideas and concepts to suit its own native genius or will India be transformed? The answer lies in a bit of both.

“The viewpoint of a Frenchman gives another insight into the question of clash and dialogue of civilizations. ‘There was an awakening of India’s head and heart when India was firmly under British rule. This was sparked by contact between European culture and India’s ossified civilization was quickened by the fact. European culture was already in full development and had generated the industrial revolution. Incidentally this took place in an Anglo-Indian atmosphere and expressed itself in relatively new linguistic mediums. English replaced Persian as the universal language of India (as Persian had replaced Sanskrit) and the vernacular developed an entire group of autonomous literatures in various provinces.”

“The first British proconsuls felt romantically attracted by an alien culture that they did not understand and encouraged its renewal rather than its modernization. Warren Hastings founded the Calcutta Madrasa in 1781. William Jones the great Orientalist founded the Asiatic Society in 1784. The Resident of Benaras Jonathan Duncan started a Sanskrit College there in 1792. But as British rule spread and became more and more secure the British began to lose interest in an alien culture that they had hardly begun to understand. Charles Grant, a Company civil servant, first touched upon the idea of establishing a new educational network to teach English and impart European culture to Indians on the ground that the old culture was responsible for India’s evident decadence. Christian missionaries followed up his suggestions and established educational institutions. Every tentative effort made subsequently by Anglo Indian governments to encourage strictly Indian learning was discouraged by enlightened Indians, chief among them was Ram Mohan Roy whose eloquent protest against establishment of a Sanskrit college in Calcutta remains a classic. Referring to this decision in a petition to the Governor-