

## A RABINDRANATH TAGORE RECITAL: THE CULTURAL ENIGMA

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This article is not an invitation to an evening of recitals of Tagore's poetry or songs but a lengthy and well-deserved harangue of those know it all typecast characters who have studiously kept the knowledge of Tagore's work from the general public by creating a fog of mystification that even the keenest minds are unable to penetrate. For so long I had thought of Tagore's work as a special interest subject that requires comprehension by a subtle and lugubrious mind which therefore would definitely be unsuited to someone of my energetic and hyperactive nature. At one time simply the name Tagore had a soporific effect on my senses until that is I reluctantly purchased a book on Tagore's life (Dutta & Robinson – 'Rabindranath Tagore – The Myriad Minded Man'). Before this fateful purchase, no one could convince me to read or even hear the renditions of this literary and artistic genius. The main obstacle in approaching Tagore's work for me was its bland presentation as well as the not so subtle political overtones that were imposed on it that made it appear even more oblique and baffling.

It was usually my female friends that tried originally to persuade me to take an interest in Tagore but I would rebuff their efforts by remarking that I would die of boredom and the language would be too difficult for me to understand even in translation. Another fear was my aversion to anything sentimental being of a more hardened nature such sugary phrases would not garner or evoke much emotional response or appreciation. Only after reading Tagore's *Gitanjali*, *Apaghat*, *Banshi*, *Shesh Lekha* and some amusing excerpts from *Minashi* did I comprehend that at least in these particular poems there was depth and passion. *Gitanjali* although mystical resembled the works of Khalil Gibran, Ghalib, Rumi and Omar Khayyam and seemed to emanate from a sufist tradition of poetry and writing. Other than this and few select poetry, he appears to have little affinity or sympathy with the culture and literature of Islam (see below). In parts, *Gitanjali* has universal appeal and can still be an inciting force. His social problem poetry I found equally fascinating as well as entertaining and realised that his stature could not be so easily exploited by Hindu and leftist cultural fringe groups without clear justification as has been done in Bangladesh. That this has been so is due to the esoteric air that surrounds Tagore and which has been cultivated by a section of the cultural thought police. Also in Tagore's story 'The Postmaster', there is masterfully detached observation of the characters and their situations and circumstances with an emotional empathy that does not descend into sentimentality which would have occurred in lesser hands. I would go too far to pretend all of Tagore's work attracts me, much of which seems too mystical for my tastes, but that is no criticism as many of Shakespeare's comical plays leaves me indifferent and cold: I much prefer the histories and tragedies that surely indicates a particular bent of mind or alternatively, to some, a mind bent out of shape.

Another dissuading and discouraging element in all this were the crusty, hallowed and hoary figures that are the self-proclaimed and appointed guardians of Tagore's works as well as the only persons who seem to be qualified enough to have a right or say in its interpretation or rendering. All this expertise left me dazed and bewildered and ultimately bored. I had witnessed ferocious arguments on the internet and the national press when a young band musician had the audacity to try to bring a modern rendering of one of Tagore's songs to the public on that intellectually stimulating channel we all adoringly call Boring Television or BTV for short (as opposed to enlightened television or ETV; a strange conclusion as corruption was able to provide

us with 'entertainment' and 'analysis' - words not yet used at BTV that is overwhelmed with mediocrity). This created such uproar but left me in unmitigating stitches. I thought the whole episode hilarious for weeks. Next was the letter writing campaign in 'The Daily Star' newspaper concerning the mispronunciation of a single word, in a song, on an audio cassette, by a renowned singer, who was expected to pronounce the 'holified' words without mistake. This letter writing lasted for more than a month, maybe even three. So much ink, so much time and in the end so much wind and hot air. The singer however, refuted the allegation of flatulence but accepted that it may have been a mistaken case of intonation. These two events seemed to confirm Nirad Chaudhury's refrain that Tagore in Bengal, "has become nothing more than the holy mascot of Bengali provincial vanity."

It was essentially these things that kept me away from the works of Tagore as well as the unending recitals of his songs which everyone apparently appreciated but few understood or were able to understand according to the thinking of those expert figures that lecture on the subject monotonously and who seemingly make huge sums of money out of this enterprise. What annoys me most is that in Bangladesh, the works of Rabindranath Tagore are entirely concentrated in his poems, plays, paintings, songs and music (*Rabindrasangit*) but he was also a thinking man with original ideas. What therefore passes for discussion is simply a dry academic and scholarly pursuit that interests hardly anyone and is far removed from Tagore's own belief that education should never be disassociated from life. His comment that, "Our country provides numerous instances of persons with dead minds ascending to the highest peaks of academic success," is a befitting commentary on the situation in present day Bangladesh.

What has also escaped the attention of the experts is how Bengalis were in most part ambivalent towards Tagore while he was still living, "Before 1912, Rabindranath was rejected by many, perhaps the majority, of Bengalis as being a product of western influence; for the rest of his life he experienced a unique blend of vilification and homage; and only after his death in 1941 was he canonised as Bengal's greatest creative artist and raised to the Olympian pedestal he now occupies. No writer, living or dead, is today more actively worshipped in Bengal than Rabindranath Tagore." (Dutta & Robinson – 'Rabindranath Tagore – The Myriad Minded Man') A contributing factor to his initial unpopularity in Bengal was in part his political point of view (or lack thereof) but also his very low opinion of Bengalis in general whether Muslim or Hindu which he voiced at any and all opportunity and this fact alone would disqualify him for his use as a symbol of Bengali nationalism which many in the previous government attempted to do with support from West Bengalis and Indians. It was a singular conception to denote Bengali nationalism with the name of Rabindranath Tagore as he abhorred Nationalism of any sort and had a natural aversion to democracy. In his book 'Nationalism', he hotly contends that nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, and eating into its moral vitality. Those that accept and promote nationalism are according to Tagore living under a delusion that they are free, but are everyday sacrificing their freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of world-wide suspicion and greed and panic. Tagore then asks the reader, 'does not the voice come to us, through the din of war, through the churning of the unspeakable filth which has been accumulating for ages in the bottom of this nationalism?'

He had stated in a letter to Leonard Elmhirst that, "Only individuals matter, never the race or the nation." In many respects, he was an idealist and a reactionary against injustice but he held no illusions about the potential of Bengalis and their propensity towards self-destructiveness,

“[Pandit Vidyasagar] did good to others and received ingratitude and lack of cooperation in return. He saw day after day that we [Bengalis] begin but never finish; we make a show but do nothing concrete; we do not believe what we set out to do; what we believe we do not carry out; we spin out words without end, but cannot make the smallest sacrifice; we feel pleased with ourselves by exhibiting our pride, but never think it necessary to be worthy; we depend on others for everything and yet rend the skies finding fault with them. We take pride in imitating others, we feel honoured to receive their favour, yet we throw dust in their eyes and call it politics; and the main object in our lives is to make clever speeches that fill us with intense admiration. Vidyasagar had infinite contempt for this weak, mean, heartless, lazy, arrogant, argumentative race of men.”

Returning to the issue of Tagore’s ideas (which is rarely heard about or discussed in Bangladesh at least in any intelligible way) some of the recent developments in this country may have appalled him. I have in mind the influx of experts and NGO’s backed by the same clique that governs how Tagore’s plays, songs, or poems should be performed and thought of. That they themselves may have betrayed his memory is reflected in his own words, “It was not the Kingdom of the Expert in the midst of the inept and ignorant which we wanted to establish – although the experts’ advice [is] valuable ... The villages are waiting for the living touch of creative faith and not for the aloofness of science which uses efficient machinery for extracting statistics.” (See Dutta & Robinson) I must also add in response to those who belong to the same clique of experts, NGO promoters, and cultural guardians the comment of Tagore on science which was made to his friend Albert Einstein, “This world is a human world – the scientific view is also that of the scientific man.” Quantum Physicists have come to accept Tagore’s analysis of science and rejected the impracticality of Einstein’s views on the matter and sciences’ relationship to truth and discovery.

These are aspects of his character that I had no idea of before reading the biography as Tagore has been usually painted as someone with otherworldly conceptions with metaphysical interests not quite based on terra firma. Although I have been as vague as possible, many of the readers already have an inkling if not a positive and specific idea of the characters involved in this massive subterfuge and fraud on Tagore’s character. It is those longhaired hippie types that sit around Shahid Minar in Dhaka making lengthy speeches on how great and old they are. One of these respected thinkers of culture was apparently attacked by a posse of Islamic fundamentalists during the last Awami League regime. Strangely, he survived without a scratch and only his long hair was slightly ruffled. I would be less caustic if these loosely attired, new age personalities were not so politically motivated and kept solely to their studies of Bengali literature and art.

Equally offensive is how these so-called custodians of Tagore’s memory keep him at a distance from the young and those living in this century. From reading the biography by Dutta and Robinson, I discovered that Tagore not only speaks for an older generation and but also for the new and emerging generations. Much of what he said is not only relevant today but also speaks to men of all creeds and castes and has practical significance as the following quote suggests, “What is materialism, if it is not the formalism that dominates our religion? The belief that external observances have spiritual meanings, is that not a materialistic view? Is it not materialistic to believe that sin can be washed away by water, or dust from people’s feet?” This notion of materialism and religion evokes strong emotions in me as I daily watch politicians and government officials wash away their sins of corruption by a meticulous religious observance before the television cameras and the public. In addition to these creatures, we have a flood of *ingabangas* running around the country even in some cases trying to run it as well. A term

coined by Rabindranath's brother but used effectively by him in describing a special sort of Bengali. Thus far I had only been vaguely aware of Tagore's other interests but never realised how contemporary they could be and appropriate to present day Bangladesh. But what is most galling is the avoidance of any mention that Tagore made any mistakes or had views that appear embarrassing. That we might not learn from these errors as well, as develop a better understanding of the man with all his flaws. The experts simply dismiss that he could have any flaws but not realising that such a remark constitutes heresy in Islam. A notion that got two respected professors in deep trouble during the last Awami League regime.

A notable omission of Tagore's is his lack of interest in Islam and Muslims although they were the most discriminated against during the British Raj. Many of his tenants had been Muslim but there seems to have been little inspection by Tagore of their faith. In any case, he seems to have been continually at odds with the orthodox Hindus of his time as well there being an increasing hostility for the British, possibly leaving him little time for the Muslim predicament. Credit should however be given where it is justly due as Tagore was able to predict the plight of the Palestinians and the coming conflict with the Zionists by the late 30's well before Israel was created. His prescription for resolving this question was for the Zionists to sit with the Palestinians and try to understand each other better: very idealistic considering the arrogance of the Zionists then and now. Tagore held the fanciful idea to have Zionists from Palestine settle around Shriniketan and collaborate with Bengalis in rural reconstruction which thankfully only remained a dream.

Certainly, Tagore wrote and thought about Muslims but this does not come out in Dutta & Robinson's book. The majority of acquaintances of Tagore seem to have been non-Muslims and Muslims were only admitted very late into his educational institutions. That Muslims were the most poorly educated as well as socially and intellectually impoverished should have occurred to Tagore as he saw education as the prime means of solving the myriad problems facing India. He had glowing words for Buddhism, Sikhism, and Christianity but said apparently little about Islam. Only when the political situation in British India threatened the supremacy of the Hindus (Communal Award and Poona Pact) did he overtly put in his lot with the Hindus as the following statement implies, "... the Hindus of Bengal, though numerically a minority, are overwhelmingly superior [to the Muslims] culturally." By opposing the Muslim demands in such a vehement way made him inadvertently fall into the trap of Britain's policy of 'Divide and Rule'. Tagore also put forward the odd supposition in his book 'Nationalism' that India's caste system is the spirit of toleration. For India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, while fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences. The tie has been as loose as possible, yet as close as the circumstances permitted. This has produced something like a United States of a social federation, whose common name is Hinduism. The Muslims seem according to this thesis a marauding band of invaders and conquerors but with a limited contribution to the life of the country and what little there was became assimilated into the Hindu ethos.

Tagore as a poet and a literary figure was more conscious of Islamic literary achievements and architecture and that usually outside India. This is of course the picture painted by Dutta & Robinson although they also fail to mention Tagore's relationship with Kazi Nazrul Islam which is astonishing. They do admit that their book is meant for non-Indians, for Indians who are not Bengalis, and for Bengalis – in that order, but not obviously for Bangladeshis who would have an interest in how these two geniuses interacted. An aspect of Tagore's life and a relationship that probably would not interest Indian readers whether Bengali or otherwise. That a competitive edge exists between West Bengalis and Bangladeshis and the heritage they derive

from Tagore is beyond question. For me Tagore remains a culturally enigmatic figure: as a Muslim, I can take a portion of his ideas with out difficulty but I must find an alternative cultural role model that does not offend my religious sensibilities. A compromise in tune with the solution found for the poet Kabir's dead body. Kabir had been born of Muslim parents and at around the year 1440 became a disciple of the celebrated Hindu ascetic Ramananda.

“A beautiful legend tells us that after his death his Mohammedan and Hindu disciples disputed the possession of his body; which the Mohammedans wished to bury, the Hindus to burn. As they argued together, Kabir appeared before them, and told them to lift the shroud and look at that which lay beneath. They did so, and found in the place of the corpse a heap of flowers; half of which were buried by the Mohammedans at Maghar, and half carried by the Hindus to the holy city of Benares to be burned – fitting conclusion to a life which had made fragrant the most beautiful doctrines of two great creeds.” (Evelyn Underhill – Poems of Kabir)