

# ROOTS AND ROUTES: NOTES TOWARDS A PERSONAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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## ROOTS

### *Nature*

My initial image of Tagore is as a boy in Jorasanko House, Kolkata, who writes about his home tutor to come (or rather not to come) on a rainy day. The following is a paraphrase of what I remember from my own school days of Rabindranath's writing:

"It rained all morning and all day. There was water everywhere; all drains, ponds and even roads were overflowing with rain water. I sat looking out of the window, almost certain that the teacher will not come today, praying that the rain would not stop. The rain did not stop but, alas, nor did the teacher (from coming to teach)!"

The evocation here is of external atmosphere and an internal milieu. Knowing Bengal, and the fury of its monsoon, and empathizing with the inner feelings of a young boy—sensitive and poetic to the core—one visualizes Tagore in the high ceiling room of urban Kolkata at Jorasanko ardently wishing for a reprieve from the tutor to let his mind wander freely with the rain clouds. It is the same poet who wrote in his mature years those memorable lines: *mono mor megher songi, ure chole dig digantero pane, nissim sunye, sravana barsan sangeete, rimi jhim rimi jhim rimi jhim*. As I was rummaging through my mother's Hindi translations of *Rabindra Sangeet*, set to the same tunes as originally by the Poet, there were at least two more songs celebrating rains in the months of *Asarh* and *Sawan*. First, *eshechhe asarh*, that goes like this: *abar eshechhe asarh akash chheye, ashe brishtir subash batash beye*. Second, *rimjhim ghan barse*, that goes: *rimjhim ghano ghanore barse, gagane ghan ghata sihare tarulata, mayur mayuri nachichhe harshe*.

Tagore writes on page 1 of volume 1 of *Rabindra Rachanabali*, "A country is not territorial (*mrinmaya*); it is ideational (*chinmaya*)". Clouds, rain water, waves of the ocean (as we shall see) are the symbolic vehicles through which Tagore's celebration of nature transcends the mere territorial and the geographical. Tagore is, in his own way intensely Bengali (in language

and culture) minus a territorial fixation. That is the reason why in Tagore's conception diverse peoples and cultures, irrespective of territorial and geographical boundaries, constitute the domain of a country like India—*the Indic civilization rather than a nation*. Allow me to quote Partha Chatterjee:

(Tagore) denied the centrality of the state in the life of the nation and instead pointed to the many institutions and practices in the everyday lives of the people through which they had evolved a way of living with their differences. The argument here is (apropos nationalism) that the true history of India lay not in the battles of kings and the rise and fall of empires but in this everyday world of popular life whose innate flexibility, untouched by conflicts in the domain of the state, allowed for the coexistence of all religious beliefs....<sup>2</sup>

Here we have Tagore, a Bengali without a geographical fixation and an Indian without a Nationalist fixation.

#### *Novels and the Gender question*

In his novels, as contrasted with his songs in the middle and the paintings at the other end, that of abstraction, Tagore emerges in the concrete of landscapes – villages, footpaths, rivers, and, yes, people especially women as complementary to men. Not for Tagore the stable and constant valorization of woman as goddess (devi); she is more a *sahachari*, a companion, as in *Nastanira* (*Charulata*) among the long stories or in his correspondence with women aboard ship during foreign journeys. As I shall illustrate more in his aspect of 'routes' or voyages, Tagore shatters the hubris so well depicted by Partha Chatterjee of 'woman' standing as a sign for 'nation', namely the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on. Even in explicitly insider-outsider discourse about women in *Ghare Baire* Tagore's reflexive anticipation of woman's will and wish (as also in *Chokher Bali*) militates against the standard depiction, viz., woman moving out of the physical confines of the home, making it possible for her to go into the world, under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. Finally, as Partha Chatterjee has put it, "... the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home".<sup>3</sup> The heroines of *Nastanir* and *Chokher Bali*, on the other hand, are in the boldest relief celebrations of female sexuality irrespective of whether in the home (*ghare*) or in the world outside (*baire*). It is not for nothing that Bankim Chandra's *Vande Mataram* (nation = mother = goddess) is contrasted with Rabindranath's *Jana Gana Mana* where the centrality of People, inclusive of men and women, resounds as the national anthem for the country – India.

*Gora and the Experiential*

In some ways Tagore's *Gora* is the most typical anthropological turning of the inside-out limits—a novel where the author strikingly jumps out of the skin of his ascribed identity, that of an upper middle class *bhadralok* Bengali gentleman, and is able to view India's teeming humanity as if from the widest lens of a detached yet involved film director. This attached detachment is the core of *Gora's* identity revelation of being White in the Black container (something we write about in Indian riddles as 'the coconut complex'). *Gora* is a consistent and detailed process of infusing his universal humanism—beyond East and West and outside racial stereotypes—with a strong sense of Indian reality. Tagore's depiction of *Gora's* encounters with the realities of village life and with the villagers' struggles adds chapter and verse to what has been a constant subtext, a haunting resonance, in Tagore's poetry, viz., the visage of the folk—tribal and rural—suffused in art and performance. *Shantiniketan* and *Shriniketan* were not dreamt of by Tagore in a day. They were the realized vision combining the cosmopolitan (China and Japan for example) and the indigenous (the Santal of Birbhum for instance) of his experience, cognition and creativity. The resonance of the smell of the earth is so well captured in the Rabindra Sangeet sung by the Baul: *ranga matir path*.

## ROUTES

*'The Poetics of Manhood'*

In delineating Rabindranath Tagore's routes and translating these into my personal anthropology of the Poet I am primarily indebted to two sources: one, Sugata Bose's article, 'Rabindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism'<sup>4</sup> and two, the volume *Victoria Ocampo: An Exercise in Indo-Argentine Relationship* edited by Susnigdha Dey (1992). As is well known, while Tagore's initial encounter with a foreign land, as with the majority of Bengali middle class travelers of his generation was with England (and subsequently with other European countries), his travels in Asia—to Japan, China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East—and further on to the southern hemisphere, to Argentina, mark a distinct trajectory in the life of a nineteenth/early twentieth century Indian intellectual. Rabindranath as a traveler, I should note, is not in the same genre as Marco Polo or Ibn Batuta. It is in tune with what I would call (with apologies to Michael Herzfeld for his original usage of this trope in contrapuntal depiction of male machismo in rural Greece) Tagore's 'poetics of manhood'. There are intimations of this in many vignettes of Tagore's letters to his intimate friend and admirer, the Argentinian Victoria Ocampo, statements by the

Poet suffused with what I would only call an unbearable softness of being (a male), something which we moderns nowadays call as being 'completely laid back'. Two examples will suffice.

It will be difficult for you to fully realize what an immense burden of loneliness I carry about me, the burden that has specially been imposed upon me by my sudden and extraordinary fame. I am like an unfortunate country where on an inauspicious day a coal mine has been discovered with the result that its flowers are neglected, its fruits cut down and it is laid bare to the pitiless gaze of a host of treasure-seekers. My market price has been high and my personal value has been obscured. This value I seek to realize with an aching desire which constantly pursues me. This can be had only from a woman's love and I have been hoping for a long time that I do deserve it.

I feel today that this precious gift has come to me from you and that you are able to prize me for what I am and not for what I contain...<sup>5</sup>

Another letter to Victoria Ocampo written on board ship on 5 January 1925 shortly after leaving Argentina:

...I am completely surrounded by a deep atmosphere of laziness as befits a human male in an ideal condition of life. In these two days I have been able to understand why Chinamen must smoke opium in order to realize for a few moments the profound dignity of the male, his natural birthright of intutile passiveness of which he is forcibly deprived the rest of his waking hours.. The Spanish philosopher was right when he said that it was women who civilized us, and thus they have made our life burdensome, have imposed upon us missions that are not ours. We have taken our revenge, made them more decorative than useful, turned them into hothouse where forced sentiments are cultivated, prized for their ravishing colours and perfume of sickly passion...

I have been advised never to joke with a woman but I am afraid some of the observations in this letter show signs of frivolity. You will excuse me when you know that a man who is not a prophet and yet who is treated as a prophet must give vent to his fit of laughter even at the risk of misunderstanding.<sup>6</sup>

### *Asian Universalism*

During his Asian sea voyages, the muse in Tagore 'haunted him like a passion' and transmuted through the rich mythopoetics of an imagination of Asia as an abstract entity transcending the imperial and national frontiers being erected by colonial powers on to the physical and mental maps of the colonized, thereby serving as a prism to refract the light of universal humanity. And yet, as Sugata Bose remarks, "The swadeshi (own country) cultural milieu of early twentieth-century India, despite its interest in rejuvenating indigenous traditions, was not wholly inward-looking; its

protagonists were curious about innovations in other parts of the globe and felt comfortable with ever widening concentric circles of Bengali patriotism, Indian nationalism, and Asian universalism.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, as part of Asian universalism Sister Nivedita introduced Okakura Kakuzo to the Tagore clan and a formidable bridge was established between East and South Asia. Japanese artists Taikan Yekoyama and Shunso Hishida soon followed Okakura’s trail to Calcutta. Tagore’s direct encounter with the power and scale of art in Japan during his 1916 visit to that country led him to urge Indian artists to look east in order to pioneer a fresh departure from the swadeshi corpus of ideals. He was as impressed by Japanese visual arts as he was unimpressed by Japan’s tendency to imitate the worst elements of European nationalistic imperialism. Let me add in parenthesis Tagore’s fascination also with China. The story of the founding of the ‘Hall of Chinese Studies’ or Cheena Bhavan in Shantiniketan in 1937 has recently been told in the volume, *Tagore and China*, edited by Tan Chung, Amiya Dev and others (2011). The impact of China on Tagore’s artistic imagination was made early; he was an admirer of the precise pictorial images of traditional Chinese poetry and its sober universal appeal. He preferred the subdued undertones of Chinese poetry as expressions of true modernity to the modish and bathetic manner of Anglo-American modernism. (Swapan Majumdar: ‘Looking East: China in Tagore’s Cosmology of Thoughts’, in the Tan Chung et. al. ed. Volume).

### *Mythopoetics*

In this personal anthropology of Tagore, I can only offer glimpses of what the mythopoetic imagination of the Poet created en route various destinations in Asia. My task has been rendered easier by Sugata Bose’s transcreations — from Tagore’s original writing in Bengali, I presume — of the experiences of that journey. To illustrate, Tagore set off on a global oceanic voyage from Calcutta on May 3, 1916 aboard the Japanese ship *Tasamaru*. Traveling on this easterly route for the first time in his life, Tagore encountered a mighty storm in the Bay of Bengal that left no dividing line between the clouds and the waves. “Someone seemed to have opened the blue lid of the ocean and countless demons had emerged from below wrapped in grey clouds of smoke as in the Arabian nights, and were shooting up to the sky. After four days at sea the appearance of birds in the sky signaled that land was near. If the ocean was the domain of dance, its shores heralded a realm of music. As the ship moved up the Irrawady towards Rangoon, Tagore observed the row of kerosene-oil factories with tall chimneys along its banks as if Burma was lying on its back and smoking a cigar.”<sup>8</sup>

It was in the midst of another frightening storm in the South China Sea on May 21, 1916 that Tagore composed his song—*Bhuban Jora Ashankhani*—asking the Almighty to spread his seat of universality in the individual's heart:

Your universe-encompassing prayer mat  
 Spread it out in the core of my heart.  
 The night's stars, the day's sun, all the shades of  
 darkness and light.  
 All your messages that fill the sky—  
 Let them find their abode in my heart.  
 May the lute of the universe  
 Fill the depths of my soul with all its tunes.  
 All the intensity of grief and joy, the flower's touch,  
 the storm's touch—

Let your compassionate, auspicious, generous hands  
 Bring into the core of my heart.<sup>9</sup>

#### IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: GENDER AND NATION IN TAGORE

Based on my potted and largely second-hand reading of Tagore let me state in conclusion what I have been trying to drive at. Ever since Ashis Nandy wrote his *Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, the English-knowing readers of Tagore have come to realize that the Poet was not privy to the widely prevalent mood of political and intellectual Indian nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What was his positive counterpart to that negation? It has been pointed out that, if anything, Tagore was a believer in civilizational unity (though contra state and imperial 'power') and values of mankind strongly inflected by his socialization as a Bengali, as a literary figure and, as it happened in his adult life, through his encounters with a diversity of cultures out of India. What attitude does Tagore's corpus reveal in relation to Indian culture, civilization and contemporary polity? The gist of my argument above is that this was a variety of patriotism contra nationalism. Significantly enough the gender equation in Tagore's life and letters has a bearing on how he conceived and emoted in his creative writing the encounter with gender in relation to what I have called his brand of 'patriotism'. There is a special piquancy in this relationship in that it stands in stark contrast to an influential anglo-Bengali reading of early nationalism in India, viz., Partha Chatterjee's depiction sui generis of 'derivative' Indian nationalism where the derivative

element, obviously from the West, is put into high relief by the imaging of the internal/spiritual Indian ethos in a feminine mould. In this context are recalled the equation between nation, mother and goddess on the one hand and the sequestering of female sexuality within home (never outside), on the other hand. My contention is that Tagore's life work upsets the entire configuration of that particular hubris.

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## NOTES

1. By a personal anthropology I mean that anthropology is a reflexive enterprise in which the two subjects (rather than a subject and an 'object') interact on a consistent and sustained basis in terms of their experiential and cognitive bearings. Thus in this case, what I am able to reconstruct of Tagore's reflexive trajectory is sought to be matched with my own and is expressed as an interpretation.
2. Partha Chatterjee: *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 112.
3. Ibid. p. 131.
4. Sugata Bose, "At Home in the World", *Indian Express*, 19 May, 2010.
5. Mony Chadha, 'Victoria Ocampo and Rabindranath Tagore: A Tribute to Victoria', in Susnigdha Dey in collaboration with embassy of Argentina (compiled and edited), *Victoria Ocampo: An Exercise in India- Argentina Relationship*, Delhi, B.R. Publishing Corp., 1992, p.6
6. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson: *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 314.
7. Bose, op cit.
8. Bose, Sugata: "Rabindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism".
9. Quoted in Bose, op. cit.