

Reassessing Tagore

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* Chhanda Chatterjee (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore: A Mind Staring into Infinity*. 2016. Primus, New Delhi. pp. 1-157

As the contemporary socio-political scenario is getting increasingly intolerant and violent, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi are acquiring a new relevance for both academic and non-academic readers. These two iconic figures had anticipated an acceleration of the dark forces of communalism and myopic, self-serving majoritarian nationalism in India, if the cultural and institutional framework of thought and values celebrated a consumerist materialism transplanted directly from Western imperialism. Tagore's creative genius sought to liberate the Indian elite and middle-class imagination from a blatant imitation of a crass Western material acquisitiveness. Such imitation could only result in a double disorientation of the literate communities within Bengal, for the ethos of the culture one was imitating would always elude the imitator, while the vernacular culture which provided the ground beneath one's feet was discarded as "uncivilized". A deeply concerned Tagore forged a different and far more creative manner of locating oneself within a synthesized new cultural idiom which retained a selection of the universalizing values from within the Bengali culture but which combined much that was liberating and beautiful from Western intellectual and cultural traditions. Chhanda Chatterjee's edited volume puts together a string of essays by different Tagore scholars. There seems to be two broad themes around which the essays are arranged.

The first set carefully maps the myriad pathways Tagore trod in order to creatively fuse values intrinsic to Indian life, with the intellectual, institutional and physical dynamism present in Western societies. Sobhanlal Dutta Gupta's "Tagore and Western Modernity: Towards an analytical Understanding" turns on this theme of a smooth synthesis between the two civilizations – the East and the West.

Bipasha Raha's explorations of the "Recovery of the Self: Rural Welfare and Rabindranath Tagore", shows how Tagore's vision could combine a new sense of action-driven community welfare programmes based on Western scientific organizational rationality, which could then lessen the intellectual isolation of the rural communities vis-a-vis larger, more cosmopolitan urban regions. Further, such a vision, backed by action-oriented practices, would build on an indigenous notion of community – broadening and deepening its notion of harmony with the environment and with each other, thereby ensuring that such gradually modernizing identities would retain their intrinsic humanistic values as they reoriented themselves to the global.

Uma Dasgupta's essay on *Santiniketan's Place in India's nationalist History: As Gleaned from the Letters of Andrews, Tagore and Gandhi 1912-1940*, maps the success of Rabindranath's vision of creating a community attuned to universal values, through an educational agenda that harmonized with all the natural elements within a sylvan space he called Santiniketan – a vision which runs in his rural welfare programme too. This space seemed to retain for both Gandhi and Andrews what was essentially Indian – a free space beyond the colonized Indian nation which contained repose, quiet contemplation of the fast-moving world beyond, and joyousness. Jose Paz, in a similar vein, traces the confluence of liberal western thought which found expression in creative pedagogy, and Tagore's vision of synergic communities which harmonized science and nature within the everydayness of *Santiniketan* in "Tagore's Educational Model and Its Relation with the New School Movement". Somdatta Mandal's essay, *The itinerant Traveler: Tagore and America*, dwells on a Tagore openly critical of America's disconnection with the non-Western world staggering under Western imperialistic exploitation, yet the reasonable success of Tagore's personal fund-raising activities from rich

Americans for building Santiniketan also convinced him of the generosity of the American spirit which could rise above criticism.

The second set of essays engage with Tagore's creative desire which sought to inculcate an expressiveness in ordinary everyday lives through a heightened daily awareness of grace, beauty and freedom of an embodied human existence. Mandarkrant Bose's essay on Tagore's fascination with Vaishnav Padabali and his creative merging of the new literary and musical tastes with the poetic, rhythmic and devotional depths of the vaishnav padavalis, which produce a wonderful rush of words and music unique to Tagore. The essay of course delves into other cultural influences from different parts of the world, but Tagore did serve up a blend of the East and the West with such consummate skill that his creations could not be split into different cultural components. Tagore's influence in shaping literate Bengali communities' musical aesthetics, devolving right down to the present day, in this sense is still vibrantly alive. Amrita Dutt's "Tagore and Dance" trace the tremendous energy which infused the poet as he attempted to make a stilted community, scared and anxious of beautiful bodily movements, open up to the idea of aesthetic beauty of the dancing body. As Sutapa Choudhury's essay, *The Prince's Progress: Tagore, Tasher Desh and Revisionist Myth-Making*, points out, there is a deep connection between Tagore's dismay at frozen, immobile, human beings who have forgotten their connection to a dancing, joyous, challenging life, and his highly popular and provocative dance drama, *Tasher Desh*, which reveal how the rule-bound and lifeless marionettes suddenly, confronted by two

impulsive and restless strangers – a prince and his friend from a distant land– who sing and dance their way into their hearts and allow them how to reconnect with life replete with movement, surprises, amazement and joyousness. Against this recurring Tagorean leitmotif of the joyousness of life and its constant ability to surprise, amaze, and produce wonder within the human mind, Raman Siva Kumar examines the darkness, the loneliness and the melancholy which rise up from Tagore's drawings in his "*Rabindranath as Painter*". Tagore himself had confessed to Andrews – as Uma Dasgupta has sensitively explored – that he could not enter into a close relationship with anyone – there was a part of him that always remained aloof and detached. His perception of sadness and darkness splayed onto paper. However, one has to keep in mind that Tagore did create images of darkness that held within it, unseen and invisible, an incandescent light: *The King of the Dark Chamber* immediately comes to mind.

All the essays address Rabindranath's vision of a regenerated community, or communities, who would share a different notion of occupying space, even to the manner they would lay claim to it. The essays are perceptive, and the range of the scholars – from Tagore's appreciation of Vaishnav Padavali to his pedagogical engagements with the creation of a community who moved differently, thought differently, and were positioned within a different understanding of the nation – in effect – a new community of citizens – makes this book a good addition to the corpus of academic works on Tagore.