

3 Rabindranath and His Times

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Rabindranāth Tagore, the first non-European Nobel laureate in literature, had a long life (1861–1941) that may be divided into two almost equal phases in two very different eras. The first phase relates to the emergence of colonial and political modernity in Bengal; the second to an age of wars, revolutions, and what he termed a ‘crisis in civilization’. Tagore was influenced by Western modernity from his formative years, yet he came to condemn the engulfing evils of Western colonialism and militant nationalism. The attack, however, was in a constructive spirit, admitting the benefits of engagement with the West: ‘As our encounter with the British has warmed our heart up, the dying forces of our lives are getting conscious again.’¹

THE INHERITANCE

The impact of Western rationalism led educated Indians, with support from some Europeans, to think of reconstructing society. Major social reforms like the regulation banning *sati* or widow-burning (1829) and the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act (1856) had taken place before Rabindranath’s birth, and institutions for female education set up. But benevolence was hardly the goal of the colonial agenda. The East India Company drained India’s wealth for individual and collective profit. Its economic policy forced Indians to supply raw materials cheaply to England and buy back finished products at a higher price. Indigenous craftsmen were robbed of their livelihood to provide cheap labour in the new colonial city of Calcutta (now Kolkata). Lord Cornwallis’s Permanent Settlement Act (1793), which permanently impoverished India’s peasantry, had its earliest and most pernicious impact in Bengal. Rabindranath observed that the colonial rulers looked upon India as an ‘eternal pet-cow in their royal barn’.²

Historians often talk about the ‘Bengal Renaissance’ of the nineteenth century, but like many terms drawn from Western intellectual idiom, its application is problematic. Some early Marxist scholars have stigmatized the period as an age of compradors, Rabindranath and his forefathers among them. By this view, a particular class of Indians, mostly upper-class English-

educated Bengali Hindus, improved their lot socially and economically in this period: it was a Renaissance for them and them only.

Rabindranath was the scion of a land-owning family, but the privileged, protected ambience of his family mansion at Jorasanko, in the northern part of the burgeoning city of Kolkata, was not cut off from community life. The boy Rabi bonded more intensively than might be expected with family retainers like Shyām, an elderly helping hand, and Abdul Mājhi, a fisherman: in his autobiographical writings, they are portrayed in the same emotive register as the Bengali elite and educated middle-class *bhadralok*. The poet's grandfather actively pursued wealth, and his father assiduously protected his landed legacy. But that legacy also involved a social commitment recognized and creatively activated by Rabindranath, while supervising his family estates in eastern Bengal and later in his initiatives at Santiniketan. Nikhilesh, the caring landlord in *Ghare-bāire* (*At Home and in the World*), embodies this ideal.

Although belonging to the priestly brahmin caste, the Tagores were considered 'degraded' in caste terms because of alleged Muslim connections in a previous century. But wealth, even more than caste, was becoming the new mark of status in the changing times. Kolkata was the new seat of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth; English was ousting Persian, the language of the Mughal court, as the language of power. The stigma of 'degraded' caste was more than compensated by the new wealth acquired by the poet's grandfather, Dwarakānāth (1794–1846), through dealings and sometimes direct collaboration with the British. He bought landed property, founded a bank, and engaged in opium trading, coal mining, shipping, and indigo planting. A friend of the scholar and reformer Rāmmohan Rāy, the 'father of modern India', Dwarakanath also learnt English, was active in social reform, became a member of the international elite, and hosted lavish parties. His wealth and status earned him the sobriquet of 'Prince', though he held no such formal rank.

Rabindranath seems to have been embarrassed by his 'princely' grandfather: he even asked his biographer Prabhātkumār Mukhopādhyāy to relegate Dwarakanath to an appendix. He was uneasy with ostentatious wealth, and wrote against the opium trade in which his grandfather participated. Not that he was opposed to private property as such: in this respect, neither Rabindranath nor Gāndhi was a socialist. The radical humanist Manabendranāth Rāy criticized the poet on this score. In his essay 'City and Village', Rabindranath uses two contrasting mythological figures to critique the capitalist economy: he rejects Kubera, the Mammon-like demigod of selfish acquisition, in favour of Lakshmi or S[h]ri, the benevolent

goddess of prosperity for the entire people.³ He named his institute of rural reconstruction 'Sriniketan' (*niketan*, abode).

Though uneasy about his grandfather, Rabindranath paid due tribute to his *bābāmashāi* (respected father) Debendranāth (1817–1905). Debendranath too set out in the family business, but the influence of Rammohan Ray soon engaged him in social and religious reform. Nineteenth-century Bengal was a melting pot of Eastern and Western ideas. Restoring the Indian past in the new light of Western modernity became a mode of collective self-assertion for many educated Bengalis of the time. Besides campaigning against widow-burning, Rammohan founded the Ātmiya Sabhā (Society of Companions) to revive the worship of Brahma, the formless non-dualistic God of the Upanishads. The association offered prayers to Brahma in intimate gatherings. On Rammohan's death in England in 1833, Debendranath took the lead in promoting 'Brāhmadharma', institutionalizing its practices in the Tattwabodhini Sabhā (Society for the Propagation of Truth) in 1839. Though he preached against idolatry, he once made an alliance with the orthodox Hindu leader Rādhākānta Deb against the foreign Christian missionaries. This indicates how cultural nationalism was latent in his religious programme. Rabindranath was grateful to his father for inspiring an ardent interest in the Upanishads and reverence for the *swadesh* or motherland.

Dwarakanath's untimely death was a blow for Debendranath. He dissociated himself from the family businesses, deciding to support his household solely on the revenues from his landed property. He thereby ensured financial security without the distracting compulsions of commerce, allowing him to diversify his social and religious activities. He preached a sophisticated form of indigenous religion all over India, published the philosophical journal *Tattwabodhini patrikā*, and set up Bengali *pāthshālās* (elementary schools). These activities won him the title of 'Maharshi' (great sage) from his countrymen.

Rabindranath, eighth son and fourteenth child (of fifteen) of Debendranath and Sārada Debi, was born on 7 May 1861 (25 Vaishākh 1268 by the Bengali calendar). Among his brothers were Dwijendranāth the philosopher, Satyendranāth the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service, and Jyotirindranāth the dramatist, a man of many parts and Rabi's special mentor; among his sisters, the talented writer Swarnakumāri.

In 1857, four years before Rabindranath's birth, India saw an uprising variously labelled a soldiers' mutiny and India's first war of independence. The dream of independence, if it existed at that date, was brutally crushed, and India was placed directly under the British crown. The Hindu *bhadralok*

of Kolkata, the new colonially educated salariat and professional class, had dissociated themselves from the prospect of rebellion and anarchy; the British found new ways to reward them and consolidate their support. New avenues of education and employment were opened up, and three universities (including that of Calcutta, as it is still called) set up in the three 'Presidencies' of the new Indian empire. Long before that, an institution had been founded to hegemonize the Indians: Hindu (later Presidency) College, established in 1817 not by the British but by the Hindu Bengali elite. Its alumni played a notable part in the birth of a new Bengali culture in the earlier nineteenth century.

Dwarakanath had a role in setting up the college; Debendranath was its student for some time. In their respective ways, they were both deeply affected by its social impact and spirit of reform. While largely conforming to the colonial *status quo* in their external lives, the Hindu *bhadralok* asserted a new sense of nationhood in their inner domain of family, society, and culture. (Muslims effectively joined their ranks only from the 1880s.) They initiated major social reforms and public debates about the Hindu way of life. This new imaginary of nationhood could not but challenge the rulers' agenda in many ways, at least implicitly. It marked a profound and, in the long term, truly momentous engagement with Western modernity.

Many major Bengali writers of the time worked for the colonial government and judiciary. The novelist Bankimchandra Chattopādhyāy (Chatterjee) was a deputy magistrate; the poets Michael Madhusudan Datta (Dutt), Rangalāl Bandyopādhyāy, Nabinchandra Sen, and Hemchandra Bandyopādhyāy were lawyers; and the dramatist Dinabandhu Mitra was postmaster-general. Yet all these servants of the Crown expressed nationalist sentiments in their writings and a commitment to their own society. Debendranath's second son, Satyendranath, joined the Indian Civil Service in 1864. An admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft, he was eager to effect a 'vindication of the rights of woman' in Indian households. The traditions of the Tagore family were overturned by Satyendranath and his wife, Jñānadānandini, who accompanied her husband to his workplace at Mumbai against Debendranath's strictures. Debendranath travelled all over India as a preacher but seems to have spared little thought for his housebound wife. His children, too, rarely enjoyed his company. On his visits home, he was treated with patriarchal deference. Armed with the cachet of his professional success, Satyendranath challenged this ethos, setting an example for his brothers.

Rabindranath was less self-assured. He and his wife Mrinālīni had to compromise with their elders for the sake of harmony. He generally fell

in with his father's regressive decisions, partly no doubt because of his economic dependence on Debendranath. The Brahmo Samaj was opposed to child marriage, but Rabindranath married off his daughters at an early age to ensure their annuities from family funds. The Maharshi also sent Rabindranath to dissuade Sāhānā Debi, widow of Rabindranath's nephew Balendranāth, from marrying again.

Yet in his own way, Debendranath did his duty and more by his youngest surviving son. After Rabi's sacred thread ceremony, he took the eleven-year-old with him on his travels through northern India, giving father and son an opportunity to bond. After Rabi's marriage, he supported the couple and their children by engaging Rabi to manage their estates in eastern Bengal from 1890. He also gifted his son some land at Birbhum that he had bought from a local landowner to build a spiritual retreat called 'S[h]āntiniketan' (home of peace). This was where Rabindranath would set up his unique centre of alternative education.

GROWING UP: LITERATURE AND THE NATION

Young Rabi was admitted to several Kolkata schools in turn. They uniformly failed to engage the sensitive, introvert boy, not least because their language was English. He was finally educated at home by a battery of teachers in different subjects. Yet his elders did not abandon hope of his formal education: he was dispatched to England in 1878 to be trained in law. He attended some classes at University College, London, watched plays and operas, and savoured English society and culture before returning to India without a qualification. But his experiences abroad helped him to mature as a writer: his letters home to his beloved sister-in-law Kādambari, Jyotirindranath's wife, were serialized in *Bhārati*, a Tagore family periodical edited by Dwijendranath. In that age, Bengali books were generally written in a chaste (*sādhū*) form of the language, but both the diction and the grammatical register of this early travelogue are colloquial (*chalit*).

Rabindranath and his illustrious elder brothers briefly followed in their father's religious footsteps. They attended regular prayer sessions of the Brahmo Samaj, which already featured Rabi's devotional songs. He was elected secretary of the Ādi (Original) Brahmo Samaj in 1884, and later briefly edited its periodical, the *Tattwabodhini patrikā*. Gradually, however, he freed himself from the constraints of the Samaj. He recalls this transformation in his Oxford Hibbert lectures, *The Religion of Man* (1930). Initially, he was delighted to be elected secretary despite his youth, but this joy soon turned to a burdensome sense of duty. To his disappointment, the

hymns he wrote for the Samaj took on 'the many-thumbed impression of orthodox minds'.

At last I came to discover that in my conduct I was not strictly loyal to my religion, but only to the religious institution. This latter represented an artificial average.... After a long struggle with the feeling that I was using a mask to hide the living face of truth, I gave up my connection with our church.⁴

The keyword in this confession is 'artificial average'. In every sphere of life, Rabindranath preferred the individual signature to the institutional 'thumbed impression' erasing one's personal choices. In 1924, a year before Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*, Rabindranath published his play *Raktakarabi* (Red Oleanders), ending in a revolution of mine workers forced into nameless machinelike toil in a gold-mining city. In 1930, the poet visited post-revolutionary Russia. He was elated by the welfare of the proletariat but did not forget to warn the Soviets about the political mould in which they were trying to set 'humanity':

Man has two sides: on the one hand, he has his independent self, on the other he is related to everybody else. If one leaves out either of these sides, what remains is unreal.⁵

This synthesis of the 'independent' and the 'related' self grew out of the religious, political, and literary debates of nineteenth-century Bengal – its tussle between tradition and individual aspiration, the latter subsumed in a modernity that gradually became many modernities. The tension between the individual and the collective stamped itself on the young poet's mind.

After the Maharshi's death in 1905, Rabindranath gradually freed himself from conservative family restraints. He encouraged his son Rathindranāth to marry the widow Pratimā Debi. But this liberation in private life was anticipated in his writings: his poetry focused from its earliest phase on romantic love, and his early short stories brought out the waste and pathos of constricted lives, especially among women. In the later nineteenth century, *sāhitya* (literature: literally 'with-ness' or social consciousness) became a new means for young moderns to meet their social obligations: this may have provided Rabindranath with additional reason for a literary career. An introvert young adult without conventional academic education, he could acquire confidence and social standing by propagating new themes and concerns, with the language to convey them.

In the nineteenth century, the Bengali language won prominence over other modern Indian languages for historical reasons. An article by the Englishman John Beams, translated in Bankimchandra's journal *Bangadarshan*, offered the equivocal praise that 'Bengali literature in comparison to the literature of other provinces of India excels and elevates its standard almost to the rank of European literature'.⁶ Beams also proposed a Bengali literary academy. His idea came true in 1893 in a 'Bengal Academy of Literature', fittingly renamed in 1894 by the Bengali equivalent, Bangiya Sāhitya Parishat. Rabindranath became an active member and, in 1894, its vice-president; Satyendranath was elected president in 1900.

Beams's assertion of the pre-eminence of Bengali was based on reality. Bengal was the seat of the British government and, since the days of the East India Company, its most important trading zone and a major field for the missionaries' evangelical zeal. Fort William College was set up in Kolkata for 'civilians' to learn the language; grammars, textbooks, and other works were published for the purpose. Most crucially, missionary and civilian activity, most importantly at the Baptist Mission in Shrirāmpur (Serampore), led to the virtual start of Bengali printing with movable type.⁷ Before that, literature had mostly circulated orally in traditional poetic forms like the *pnāchāli*, *mangal-kābya*, *padābali*, and *gitikā*, performed at gatherings (*āsars*) under the patronage of local lords. Manuscripts were the preserve of a literate minority for special purposes. Both production and consumption of literature were transformed with the coming of print. Not the least outcome was that literature could now support private reading.

The young Rabindranath commented on the print medium in the allegorical fantasy 'Lekhā kumāri o chhāpā sundari' (Miss Script and Madame Print), mourning how the personalized manuscript has succumbed to the uniformity of print. The subject continued to engage him: he brings out its deeper implications in the 1932 poem 'Patra' (The Letter).⁸ He deplores the shackling of 'poetry to be heard' by the chains of sight; moreover, the 'ogre of the printing press' smears the poetic sky with ink, crowding out the intervals separating poems either as composed or as recited in more spacious times. But print might have its compensations. In the 1895 poem '1400 sāl' (The Year 1400), he imagines someone reading his verses a hundred years later, and through that reader, he sends his greetings to the new poets of that age.

Before Rabindranath, the cultural transformations worked by print were most intensively discussed by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the leading writer of his age. Bankim's discourse turns on practical issues like the cultivation of good taste through 'good books' and the forging of patriotic

bonds among readers by the circulation of printed texts. He founded the journal *Bangadarshan* in 1872 as part of this literary agenda, designed to sweep the courtyard of Bengali culture clean of 'bad *bat-talā* literature' (that is, pulp literature).

Rabindranath admired Bankim, and modelled his early novels *Rājarshi* and *Bauthākurānir hāt* on Bankim's historical fiction. However, his attitude to his literary idol Bankimchandra was many-layered. Bankimchandra was drawn to the Hindu revivalist movement that arose in Bengal in reaction to the new, intellectually sophisticated monotheism most influentially spread by the Brahmo Samaj. His 'revivalist nationalism' imagined the motherland as a mother goddess, as in his celebrated hymn 'Vande mātaram'. Rabindranath respected Bankim's literary genius but persistently questioned this revivalist discourse. Fierce arguments between their camps broke out in periodicals like *Sanjibani* and *Bangabāsi*. The two writers might be said to follow opposite trajectories. Bankim, a romantic novelist, gradually became a strong proponent of Hindu religion and nationhood. Rabindranath, on the contrary, started out within a formulated religion and celebrated his motherland's golden past but came to seek a truth beyond chauvinism and religious institutionalism.

His three elder brothers Dwijendranath, Satyendranath, and Jyotirindranath were keen participants in cultural activities of nationalist bent. Nabagopāl Mitra, a champion of Hindu nationalism, started a 'Hindu *melā*' (fair) to showcase national culture through traditional sports, crafts, and performances. The Tagores knew Nabagopal well: Debendranath had funded his English weekly, the *National Paper*. Dwijendranath was associated with the Hindu *melā* from the start; Jyotirindranath wrote for it the song 'Mile sabe bhāratsantān' (All India's children, gathered together); Rabindranath read there his poem 'Hindumelāy upahār' (A Gift for the Hindu Melā) extolling the Hindu past. It was modelled on poets like Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay and Nabinchandra Sen, who extolled India's past glory and mourned her present decline in a style and diction influenced by Western poetry. The young Rabindranath so far fell in with them as to write a hostile review of *Meghnādbadh kābya*, the epic masterpiece (modelled on Milton) of the greatest of the new poets, Michael Madhusudan Datta (Dutt), whom Bankim's *Bangadarshan* had adjudged the 'national poet of Bengal'. It is worth note that barring some juvenilia, Rabindranath composed no epic or other long poem, and few of even moderate length.

Kadambari Debi, Jyotirindranath's wife and young Rabi's close companion, introduced him to the work of Bihārīlāl Chakrabarti, who

initiated a new lyricism in Bengali poetry. Rabi was deeply drawn to this model. In an obituary for Biharilal, he wrote:

If [Bankim's journal] *Bangadarshan* is the morning sun of modern Bengali literature, little *Abodhbandhu* [the journal for which Bihārīlāl wrote] may be called the morning star. People were yet to awake at that dawn, [but] a morning bird had started to sing [in] a melody of its own. I do not know what history might say, but I heard there for the first time the voice of an individual in Bengali poetry.⁹

History might not have paid Biharilal such attention if he had not been a decisive influence on Rabindranath.

Modernity had two aspects for Rabindranath: it was both contemporary and beyond time. He saw Biharilal as reacting to the cultural nationalism of his time by asserting a private, individual voice. Rabindranath found his own inner voice in a quasi-mystical experience of 1882, described in his reminiscences, leading him to compose the poem 'Nirjharer swapnabhanga' (The Awakening of the Waterfall).¹⁰ It was a moment both temporal and eternal: temporal as located on the axis of time, eternal as expressing a voice within. This was the true starting point of his poetic journey.

His poems evoked a mixed response among readers. Shortly before 'Nirjharer swapnabhanga', Bankimchandra had garlanded Rabindranath in a distinguished gathering for the latter's early collection *Sandhyāsangit* (Evening Songs, 1882). Not all readers were so appreciative. Conservative Sanskrit pundits laughed at his allegedly impure and even incorrect Bengali, as they had earlier laughed at Bankim. This was part of the continuing controversy between those who viewed Bengali as a dependent offspring of Sanskrit and those who asserted its independent entity. Among the latter, though in different veins, were the three greatest prose writers of the century, Rammohan Ray, Ishwarchandra Vidyāsāgar, and Bankimchandra. Bankim pronounced that simple and lofty, indigenous and Sanskritic, high and low language should all be used as the subject demanded, with the basic aim of lucidity and comprehensibility. Words can be drawn from various sources such as English, Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, or even rustic and primitive diction, if it aided clarity.¹¹

This was the spirit in which Rabindranath wrote the poems in *Karhi o komal* (Sharps and Flats, 1886), which the conservatives lampooned. He employed images and descriptions of unprecedented intimacy. This paved the way for the full-fledged Romantic utterance of *Mānasi* (Woman of the Mind, 1890), the firstfruits of his maturity. From 1890 to 1913, he

experimented continually with both poetic diction and range of themes. Besides intimate lyrics, he wrote narrative poems, chiefly based on tales from the past. His growing reputation reached heroic proportions when he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for the English volume *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*.

THE CHANGING WORLD, A CHANGING LIFE

This creative growth was held in tension against many factors in Rabindranath's private and public life during these twenty-four years. His wife, Mrinalini, died in 1902, leaving behind five young children of whom the middle daughter, Renukā, died in 1903, and the younger son Shamindranāth in 1907. Debendranath too passed away in 1905. Shamindranath's death, in particular, affected Rabindranath deeply; yet six weeks later, he had controlled his grief sufficiently to write: 'There is so much sorrow, want and abjection all around us that I feel ashamed to be overwhelmed by my personal grief or consider myself to be specially unfortunate. When I think of our country's present state and its future, it draws me out of my own sorrow.'¹² He did not disown his private bereavement but did not allow himself to be paralysed by it, rather turning his thoughts outward to the general human condition.

In fact, the year 1905 saw a great political crisis in Bengal, which plunged the poet into the most actively political phase of his life. The British planned to split Bengal in two parts, with the aim of dividing the Hindus from the Muslims. People across the province rose in protest, their chief rallying force being Rabindranath's first great cycle of patriotic songs. The poet's nephew, the artist Abanindranāth Tagore, has described the magical impact of these songs on the crowds.¹³ Composed in simple Bengali and set to folk tunes, they proved to affect public sentiment more powerfully than political speeches. They demonstrated the force and utility of the mother tongue, to whose advance Rabindranath had already made a major contribution. In later life, he adopted the same strategy with the colloquial *chalit* register of prose as a binding force across classes and communities.

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, largely through the efforts of the Englishman Allan Octavian Hume. In its early days, it was the resort of an English-educated Indian elite eager to prove its nationalist credentials. (Satyendranath Tagore was a member.) Rabindranath was all too aware of the disjuncture of this privileged conclave from the common folk, particularly after he witnessed the miserable condition of the latter during his years managing the family estates in eastern Bengal. This encounter

with village life is reflected in his early short stories, which he cited in his defence when accused of indulging in poetic romanticism. He also initiated some practical measures for the villagers' welfare; later, he invested the greater part of his Nobel prize money in a rural co-operative bank.

The experience of rural life also taught him the importance of the mother tongue for the welfare of the common people: how else could they make their voice heard? This, in turn, called for a greater role of the mother tongue in education, as he argued at the Rājshāhi Association in 1892. He was strongly supported by, among others, Bankimchandra and Gurudās Bandyopādhyāy (Banerjee), the first Indian vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, although the latter's efforts were defeated in the university senate. Rabindranath was a member of a panel that reported on the issue after circulating a public questionnaire under the aegis of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat. Yet his commitment to the cause led him into a great misjudgement: in his 1898 essay 'Bhāshābichched' (Linguistic Separation), he urged the people of Assam and Odisha to merge their linguistic identities with the Bengali, causing great protest and resentment. He corrected this hegemonic outlook towards neighbouring languages in course of time, and came to support Gandhi's proposal to make Hindi India's *lingua franca*, but his basic advocacy of the mother tongue for education and culture never faltered. It was central to his programme at Santiniketan, though not at the cost of the many other languages taught there.

As English became the language of power and knowledge, some Bengali authors tried to use it creatively. Madhusudan and Bankimchandra both started their literary careers in English but soon turned to their mother tongue. Rabindranath took a different path. His literary life was firmly rooted in Bengali from beginning to end; but when the time was ripe, he adopted English to carry his harvest to the West. On a seminal visit to England in 1912, he took with him a volume of his own English renderings of his poems. These won the admiration of a circle of friends, including W.B. Yeats and the painter William Rothenstein. Unsurprisingly, the vein that found the readiest reception was that which, commencing with *Naibedya* (Prayer Offerings, 1901), reaches its height in *Gitānjali* (1910). Here human love transforms itself in diverse ways into love of the divine, both as lord and as beloved. Rothenstein circulated the drafts among influential connoisseurs of poetry. The published volume, brought out in 1912, bore the title *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* but contained poems from ten Bengali collections (including the then unpublished *Gitimālya*). In his introduction, Yeats writes how he carried the manuscript everywhere for days, reading it in trains, buses, and restaurants. Perhaps what attracted him and his Western contemporaries

was the complete contrast to the frenetic and competitive milieu of the West, as reflected in Rabindranath's own response to London:

At what tremendous speed are all the streets of London moving!
How gigantic is the mind whose external image is this speed! They
are tugging at time and space with great force, this way and that.¹⁴

This uncompromising difference of theme and purpose may have been the crucial factor behind the Nobel award for the English *Gitanjali* in 1913. The prize not only won him international celebrity but also ensured his impregnable prestige at home.

Yet just as he seemed to be reaching the pinnacle of acclaim, a new generation of Bengali poets turned against him for new reasons. They were close observers of world politics and ardent readers of continental literature. They were also disillusioned by the economic depression following the First World War. For them, Rabindranath was the exponent of an outdated *rabiyānā* ('Rabindrism'), a vintage concoction of literary spiritualism and unreal sublimity. Achintyakumār Sengupta, author of *Kallol jug* (The Kallol Age), blames Tagore in his poem 'Ābishkāṛ' (Discovery) for obstructing the path of the new generation. These young writers published their work, often celebrating carnal love or attacking economic disparities, in a new generation of periodicals like *Kallol* (Waves), *Kālikalam* (Pen and Ink), and *Pragati* (Progress). In Rabindranath's view, this was crude realism masquerading as modernism. A controversy sprang up on these issues: the *Kallol* and *Kālikalam* brigade crossed swords with the *Shanibārer chithi* (Saturday Letter) group led by Sajanikānta Dās, not only a monumental reader but an expert lampoonist who turned his talent to cutting use. A literary convention was called at the Tagore mansion in Kolkata, in Rabindranath's presence, to debate the issues of realism, modernism, and the writer's social responsibilities. Later, the leftist Indian Progressive Writers' Association, with chapters in London and Kolkata, also kept its distance from Tagore's overwhelming presence where, they might have felt, they did not have the freedom to be themselves.

Yet the modernists could not but acknowledge his formidable genius: in fact, many formed close bonds with him. Amiya Chakrabarti was his secretary for ten years and a valued associate. Sudhindranāth Datta also interacted closely with him and was entrusted with drafting the introduction to an *Oxford Book of Bengali Verse* that Rabindranath was asked to edit but that sadly did not materialize. Buddhadeb Basu (Buddhadeva Bose), who had declared in 1938 that the age that produced Tagore was long over,¹⁵

was invited to Santiniketan in the poet's last days. He recounted the visit movingly in a book entitled *Sab peyechhir deshe* (In the Land of All I Want – that is, Utopia). Sadly, Rabindranath did not live to see it, but he had already replied to his young contemporaries in the poem 'Samayhārā' (Beyond Time, 1939). He pictures himself there as a superannuated dollmaker, but a voice 'from beyond the lion-gate of Orion' tells him that his toys are bespoke by a new age, and a fairytale princess is coming to buy the lot.¹⁶

Yet Rabindranath, always sensitive to new stimuli and ready to change course like a mighty river, found modernism a rejuvenating force with which he played hide and seek. In his novel *Shesher kabitā* (The Last Poem, 1929), the protagonist Amit Rāy disparages him as an outdated survival and pits against his poems those of the fictitious Nibāran Chakrabarti, actually Amit's *nom de guerre*. But Amit, of course, is Rabindranath's own fiction, and in the collection *Mahuyā* published the same year, the poems reappear in their true identity as the poet's own work! Three late stories, collected as *Tin sangi* (Three Companions, 1941), and the still later 'Badnām' (Ill Repute) and 'Pragatisanghār', written shortly before his death, are examples of modernist writing that testify no less to his innovative power to the end.

By this time, Rabindranath had changed decisively to *chalit bhāshā*, the popular or colloquial register of Bengali, in his fiction and much other writing. He had tried out the mode in some early series of published letters but (excluding dramatic dialogue) made a formal literary start only with the short story 'Strir patra' (The Wife's Letter, 1914) and the novel *Ghare-bāire* (At Home and in the World, serialized 1915–16). Both were published in *Sabuj patra* (The Green Leaf, but also The Fresh Page), a journal started in 1914 under the editorship of Pramatha Chaudhuri, husband of Rabindranath's favourite niece, Indirā Debi, to whom, during his years in east Bengal, he had addressed a series of letters (*Chhinnapatra*, meaning both 'Torn Leaves' and 'Torn Letters', later expanded as *Chhinnapatrābali*). Pramatha had started a movement to make *chalit bhāshā* the medium of literature and other formal writing. Rabindranath was converted to the cause and wrote many such pieces, most importantly fiction, for *Sabuj patra*.

'Strir patra' and *Ghare-bāire* are both first-person narratives – the latter in three voices, one a woman's. Long before this, Bankimchandra had employed first-person narrative in his novel *Rajani* but not in conjunction with *chalit bhāshā*. By combining the two, Tagore not only accommodated the female speaking voice in literature but used it to express a vocal protest against patriarchy. In 'Strir patra', Mrināl leaves her husband's home on realizing that her views counted as nothing there. It was not easy to write such a socially subversive story in Bengal at that time. For Tagore, *chalit bhāshā* was the

language of the mind, not simply of the tongue: he used it to bring into the open the suppressed anger and protest at the heart of Bengali womanhood.

It was alleged that Tagore had insulted Bengali women by dragging them out of the home and involving them in extramarital relations. Nothing could have been farther from his intentions, but in both the stories, he raised questions about the patriarchal institution of marriage. The *Sabuj patra* phase initiated the modernity of thought and expression that reaches its high point in the stories of the late collection *Tin sangi*.

Even this radical change is as nothing to the extraordinary new venture he took up when well in his sixties. In 1928, after four years of intensive doodling begun in the manuscript of *Purabi*, he began to experiment with the brush despite having no formal training in art. This 'volcanic eruption'¹⁷ of creativity in a new medium resulted in a corpus of over 2,000 paintings, first publicly exhibited in Paris in 1930 – while he was running a major programme of education and social reconstruction, travelling extensively in India and abroad, and engaging with matters of great public moment, not to mention the pursuit of literature.

The exhibition of paintings was made possible by the support of the French artist André Karpéles and the Argentinian writer and cultural personality Victoria Ocampo. He addressed Ocampo as 'Vijayā', an Indian equivalent of her first name, and dedicated to her the poetical collection *Purabi*. Ocampo writes:

When Tagore lived in San Isidro I was impressed by the copy-book where he was writing his *Puravi* poems in Bengali.... That copy-book, I think, was the beginning of Tagore the painter, of his urge to translate his dreams with a pencil or a brush. I took such delight in his doodles that it encouraged him to go on.¹⁸

THE SAMĀJ, THE NATION, AND THE WORLD

The words 'public' and 'nation', taken from Western political parlance, became current among the English-educated political class of India from the early twentieth century. Rabindranath took a different approach, partly owing to his intimate encounters with folk forms as a creative writer, composer, and performer. In the essays 'Rangamancha' (The Stage) and 'Swadeshi samāj' (Indigenous Society), he explains his idea of *lok* (folk) and *samāj* (society). The folk imagination does not rely on realistic stagecraft and props to create a dramatic illusion. Rabindranath charges European practice

with robbing Indian spectators of this imaginative genius. In the second essay, as in other writings before and after, he stresses the need to build an Indian *samāj* (society) instead of a 'nation'. However, he soon realized that it was impossible to advance these ideas in the muddled waters of Bengal politics. The communal harmony evinced during the anti-partition movement was soon threatened by tensions. The youth were turning to violent means in their fight for independence, while their elders were affected all too often by narrow-mindedness and the search for short-term gains. Hence, after the anti-partition movement, Rabindranath turned more and more to his own distinctive means of political engagement, chiefly through writings and speeches, with only occasional public participation. Most importantly, he projected his vision of a total development of society and personality, subsuming the conventional spheres of the political, economic, and cultural, by founding Visva-Bharati.

The Nobel award extended Rabindranath's role beyond the purely Bengali or Indian. He was now an international figure whose opinions and actions carried force for both India and the world. He utilized this position to raise his voice against social and political injustice in a two-part agenda: on the one hand, to sustainedly oppose the Western model of avaricious nationalism, 'militarism' (*militaritwa*) and destructive imperialism; on the other, to advance ideas and institutions to counter these conjoint evils.

For Rabindranath, imperialism based on nationalism was the root curse of the twentieth century. The idea of the nation was, for him, a crucible of militant capitalism that alienated people not only from nature but also from their fellow humans, promoting only the material interests of a particular group within a defined territory. Poem #64 of *Naibedya* was given the title 'Jugāntar' (Change of Era) in the anthology *Chayanikā*. The poem, composed on 31 December 1900, begins: 'The century's sun has set today amid blood-red clouds.' In the essay 'Birodhmulak ādarsha' (An Ideal Based on Conflict) written about the same time, Tagore elaborates on the same image of blood:

Europe's cheeks are florid with the blood of mounting militarism.
Can it be a sign of health? Do we not see daily how the malady of
nationalism, like swelling obesity, is invading its heart, its core being,
its religious principles?¹⁹

This conflict of nations had to be excluded from India at all cost. At the same time, to conceive of an exclusively Hindu India would destroy the social integrity of the subjugated *samāj*. Instead, Rabindranath held out a message of universalism. In the novel *Gorā* (1910), Bengali readers encountered for

the first time a message of universal humanity, even if set in an Indian frame. Gorā, earlier a Hindu nationalist and revivalist, ends with a vision of pan-Indianism leading on to universalism on discovering his mixed Indian and European parentage: 'a mantra of worship to the god who belongs alike to Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist, whose temple doors are not closed to any race, any person' – a 'god of India' (*bhāratbarsher debātā*).²⁰ This expanded view of India provides the foundation on which Rabindranath constructs his internationalist ideal.

Rabindranath preached his humane gospel against nationalism, violence, and greed to audiences in East and West alike, and even to extremist movements in India. A focal point was his consistent condemnation of the misdeeds of colonial rule in India. After the massacre of unarmed Indians at Jaliānwālā Bāgh in Punjab in 1919, he gave up his knighthood (conferred in 1915) in protest.

Two vital issues occupied him ceaselessly: harmony between Hindus and Muslims, and the extremism of one current of the Independence Movement. Particularly in the 1930s, Hindu–Muslim tensions escalated in colonial India, with the British fomenting the Indians' own abuse of institutional religion for nationalist politics, and leading finally to a demand for two separate nation states. By contrast, the teachings of medieval Indian saints provided an alternative model of religious practice based on love and exchange. Rabindranath wrote an introduction to Kshitimohan Sen's 1929 lectures at Calcutta University on 'The Religious Traditions of Medieval India'. Medieval precedent altered Rabindranath's view of the nineteenth-century pietist Rāmkrishna. During Ramkrishna's birth centenary in 1936, Rabindranath chaired a session of a religious parliament and delivered a lecture on India's traditional religious harmony, alluding specially to the premodern saints. He also composed a four-line poem on Ramkrishna as successor to that saintly tradition.

There was an economic and class dimension to the religious conflicts. Muslim peasants were often cheated by their Hindu landlords in collusion with government officials and sometimes even opportunistic *swadeshi* leaders. This cynical exploitation is described in the novels *Gorā* and *Ghare-bāire*. Again, though Rabindranath continued to revere the extremist freedom fighters for their courage and sacrifice, he could not support their pursuit of violence, which often destroyed the lives of common people.

Ghare-bāire has another distinction: for the first time, Rabindranath employs three narrative voices, following the example of Bankimchandra's *Rajani* (1877), itself professedly modelled on Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859). The presence of multiple narrators enables Rabindranath to

set Nikhilesh, the benevolent landowner, opposite Sandip, the duplicitous *swadeshi* leader who even abuses Bankim's hymn 'Vande mātaram', a rallying cry of the Independence Movement. Literary and political issues are deeply enmeshed here, as in the novels *Gorā*, *Chaturanga* (*Quartet*, 1916), and *Chār adhyāy* (*Four Chapters*, 1934). Rabindranath's literary constructs are not only a vehicle for his politics; their humane ethos infuses that politics with a synthesis all his own.

On a different plane, Rabindranath's relations with Mahatmā Gandhi were complex in many ways. He argued vehemently with 'Bāpu' on many basic issues but never lost his esteem for the man who transformed the Congress Party from a club of moderates to a national party of the entire Indian people. He offered hospitality to Gandhi's followers in 1914–15 on their first arrival in India from South Africa, when few were willing to shelter them. In 1940, during Gandhi's last visit to Santiniketan, the poet handed him a letter requesting him to protect Santiniketan after his death. Yet the ethos of Santiniketan diverged from the Gandhian model of national schools, which, Rabindranath told Gandhi, had too limited an objective.²¹ Instead, the poet invited scholars from the world over to help him build his new university, and at the same time to learn something from the creative aspects of Indian culture. He also opposed Gandhi's advocacy of the spinning wheel as a focus for indigenous economic enterprise. Rabindranath argued that this might serve a symbolic function but would not seriously challenge the Lancashire cotton mills.

Two younger nationalist leaders, Jawāharlāl Nehru and Subhāshchandra Basu (Subhas Chandra Bose), were also dear to Rabindranath. Subhash, in particular, he knew from the latter's college days: when Subhash was rusticated from college for political protest, Tagore wrote to the authorities in his defence. Subhash's later politics did not always win his support, but there is ample evidence of the affection and respect between them. In January 1939, Subhash was given a reception at Santiniketan after being elected President of the Indian National Congress. He returned there again after falling out with other leaders of the Congress. Nehru, too, was in Santiniketan at the time, and both leaders held discussions with Tagore. This could not resolve the conflict: Subhash was expelled from the Congress. When the convention centre Mahājāti Sadan (Hall of the Great Nation) was set up by Subhash after his expulsion, Tagore laid the foundation stone.

The conservative patriot-politician Chittaranjan Dās was perplexed by Rabindranath's anti-nationalist stance. He also crossed swords with him on gender issues. He was so incensed by Rabindranath's story 'Strir

patra', where a spirited woman leaves her husband and marital home for an unknown world, that he published a counter-tale by another conservative nationalist, Bipinchandra Pāl, in his magazine *Nārāyan*. Clearly, Chittaranjan and Bipinchandra were unable to see the connexion between their brand of nationalism and patriarchy.

Rabindranath's own stand on women's issues was not unequivocal by any means, but especially in his fiction, he treats women with sensitivity and an empathy beyond the reach of legal reforms and social practices. His novels *Jogājog* (*Relationships*) and *Shesher kabitā* (*The Last Poem*) appeared in 1929, the same year as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. There is no evidence that Tagore knew of the last (though Woolf knew of Tagore and had reviewed the English *Gitanjali*); but it may be significant that Kumudini in *Jogājog* is a victim of marital rape, while Lābanya in *Shesher kabitā*, in a rare act for a woman in that age, rejects her ardent wooer, the highly eligible, supremely egotistical Amit Ray, for the humble Shobhanlāl. Rabindranath also created a new model of sensitive masculinity. The British held Indian males in contempt for their alleged effeminacy. In reaction, Indian writers not only told heroic stories of old kings and warriors but also created figures of aggressive manhood. In Rabindranath, however, figures like Bihāri (*Chokher bāli*), Nikhilesh (*Ghare-bāire*), Shribilās (*Chaturanga*), and, to some extent, Bipradās (*Jogājog*) are men of strong character who can defy norms but who never act violently, aggressively, or domineeringly.

VISION AND CREATION

Rabindranath devoted himself to a creative alternative agenda by giving shape to his ideal *samāj* at Santiniketan. This institution developed through many phases. Founded on a somewhat simplistic model of the ancient *tapovana* or forest hermitage, it burgeoned into a multifaceted centre working constructively in the cause of universal humanity. On 11 October 1916, he wrote from Chicago to his son Rathindranath:

The school at Santiniketan has to be made the meeting-place between India and the world. The days of narrow chauvinistic nativism are coming to an end. Preparations for the great *yagna* [sacrificial worship] to mark the union of all the world's nations must be made on the plains of Bolpur.²²

Santiniketan became the territory of many innovative disciplines and pursuits beyond the conventional curriculum. Tagore writes in 1919:

This school will practise agriculture, cattle farming and weaving to high standards. By adopting the co-operative model for economic sustenance, it will bond closely with the students, teachers and surrounding inhabitants through the ties of livelihood.²³

In another direction, art and music came to be equally important parts of the activities.

One by one, Santiniketan came to attract persons as capable, and in due course as eminent, as Kshitimohan Sen, scholar of early Indian religion; Bidhushekhara Shāstri, Sanskritist and Indologist; Haricharan Bandyopādhyāy the lexicographer; Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay, Tagore's biographer and historian of Visva-Bharati; and the artist Nandalāl Basu (Bose). Dissolving provincial and national boundaries, persons from across India and many other countries joined the community. Mahāsthābir from Sri Lanka taught Buddhist philosophy; Kapileshwar Mishra from Mithilā, Pānini's Sanskrit grammar; and Hājari Prasād Dwivedi, Hindi. Alex Aronson, a German Jew, found refuge in Santiniketan from the Holocaust. The French orientalist Sylvain Levi came too, besides many from Britain: Charles Andrews, William Pearson, Leonard Elmhirst, and Arthur Geddes. Links increased with China and Japan as well. The Chinese youth Tan Yun-Shan came to stay in 1928; Visva-Bharati's Cheena Bhavana was set up with his assistance in 1937. In every way, the hermitage was blossoming into a universal society. Nehru sent his daughter Indirā to Visva-Bharati; Abdul Gaffar Khān, the 'Frontier Gandhi', sent his son to study art at Kala Bhavana. Vijaykrishna from Mālābar joined as a student, as did Narbhup and Chāru from Dārjeeling.

The poet's personal and family life was set against this backdrop. After his wife's death, Santiniketan became his usual abode. He divided his stay between a number of adjacent houses of contrasting plan and appearance but bound by a common architectural vision: all of them single storeyed but with different floor levels, hence never too hot in the summer nor cold in the winter. The furniture was built at trifling cost, often from discarded materials like an upturned packing box made into a table, but with an elegance that became the hallmark of the place. The whole community, the poet himself in particular, was designedly housed in a style contrasting with colonial Kolkata. He even wished to be buried in the soil of Santiniketan – a wish not to be fulfilled.

Rabindranath's vision was ahead of his time in other respects as well. He wrote his play *Muktadhārā* (The Freed Stream, 1923) long before the modern environmentalist movement. The crisis in *Muktadhārā* begins when a big dam is built over a stream, cutting off a community from their supply of

water. The story might remind us of the water politics of our own time. Nature provides resources for all, but humans rob one another as they do in other spheres. Rabindranath, the ambassador of world peace, raised his voice in protest and appeal, but the crisis intensified in his own land and across the world.

During his last twenty years, Rabindranath travelled worldwide, preaching against nationalistic hegemony and aggression, be it in the East or the West. He realized that the version of nationhood spawned by Western capitalism was turning into an escalating crisis for humankind. His experiment in alternative living at Santiniketan did not attain completeness for many reasons, not least because it was hard to convince people that it would succeed in larger communities. He also studied other alternative models for humane living and social organization. He shared his anxieties with personalities like Romain Rolland and Albert Einstein, though his meetings with the latter were philosophical rather than political. Both of them alerted him to the dangers of fascism, but when invited to Italy by Mussolini, he accepted, being imperfectly aware of the nature of the regime. Pictures of the poet with Mussolini made a good propaganda point for the fascist government, even if Rolland's expostulations later made Rabindranath issue a recantation. In a general way, Tagore was sceptical about modern political and religious institutions but retained faith in cooperative enterprise. He was impressed by the progress of post-revolutionary Russia (which he visited in Stalin's day, again to the alarm of liberal Europeans). The positive changes in Persia also attracted his attention.

Back home in Santiniketan, however, he was apprehensive about the future of the institution he had founded, owing to the death of dedicated workers, lack of funds, political turmoil, and his own ill health. He felt, moreover, that the ideal of universalism had not been adequately embodied in the place. On Gandhi's last visit to Santiniketan in February 1940, Rabindranath pressed a letter into the Mahatma's hand at parting, beseeching him to take care of his 'life's best treasure' when he, Rabindranath, was no more. The prospect of death had troubled him ever since he suddenly fell unconscious on the evening of 10 September 1937: on recovery, he felt he had returned from 'extinction's cave'.²⁴ In a poem in *The Modern Review* responding to *Prāntik*, Dilipkumār Rāy, son of the poet and dramatist Dwijendralāl, described Tagore as a 'Bird of Fire' who 'in the dark of sleep ... cannot nest', whose 'flame-wings burn the dusk'.²⁵

Death came on 7 August 1941 (22 Shrāvan 1348 of the Bengali era). In the preceding years, the poet had felt mounting concern at the violence,

intolerance, and competitive greed engulfing the world. It was nearly two years into the Second World War. He was also deeply perturbed over the Spanish Civil War. He published an appeal on 3 March 1937 in the Kolkata paper *The Statesman* appealing to 'the conscience of humanity' to support the Spanish People's Front. Japan's imperial aggression in China was a third major cause of anguish, leading to some acrimonious exchanges in 1938 with the Japanese poet Yone Noguchi. 'Sabhyatār sangkat' ('Crisis in Civilization', 14 April 1941), Rabindranath's last Santiniketan oration, is a cry of despair. In a poem written twelve days before his death, the sun asks the same question, who knows to whom, on the first and the last day of the world: 'Who are you?' On neither day is there an answer.²⁶

In the only two poems Rabindranath wrote thereafter, he moderates that total incertitude; but this poet of positive values ends his days still facing challenges and seeking answers. We may recall a passage in the 1933 lectures *Mānusher dharma* (The Religion of Man).²⁷ There, to define the human condition in contrast to an animal's, Rabindranath borrows a term from Buddhist philosophy: humanity is *anāgārik*, 'without a home'. The animal has a den to bide in; humanity's lot is the road.²⁸ The human quest never ends in time.

NOTES

1. 'Ingrāj o bhāratbāsi' (The English and the Indians), *RRVB* 10:394.
2. *Ibid.*, *RRVB* 10:390.
3. *EW* 3:513.
4. *The Religion of Man*, ch. 7, 'The Man of My Heart', *EW* 3:129.
5. 'The Soviet system' (1931), *EW* 4:426; tr. of *Rāshiār chithi*, 'Upasanghār' (Letters from Russia, Conclusion).
6. Beams's original English article cannot be traced. The Bengali appeared as 'Bangiya sāhitya samāj, anusthān patra' in *Bangadarshan*, Āshārhh 1279 (*June 1872).
7. There was a brief disjunct episode of earlier Bengali printing by the Portuguese.
8. *RRVB* 16:18.
9. 'Bihārīlal' (1894), *RRVB* 9:412.
10. *Jibansmriti* (Reminiscences), *RRVB* 17:396.
11. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Bānglā bhāshā' (The Bengali Language), in *Bibidha prabandha: rachanābali*, ed. Alok Rāy et al. (Kolkata: Paschimbanga bānglā ākādeśi, 2015), 4:205.
12. Letter to Jagadishchandra Basu, 8 January 1908, *CP* 6:55.
13. Abanindranath, *Gharoā*, in *Abanindra rachanābali* (Kolkata: Prakāśh bhaban, 1973), 1:71.

14. 'Landane' (In London), *RRVB* 26:515. This essay of 1912 was recast in 1939 for inclusion in the collection *Pather sanchay*.
15. As Tagore himself complains in a letter to Amiya Chakrabarti, 30 December 1938, *CP* 11:222.
16. *RRVB* 23:106.
17. As phrased by Abanindranath Tagore: see Rāni Chanda, *Shilpiguru abanindranāth* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1972), 79.
18. Victoria Ocampo, 'Tagore on the Banks of River Plate', in *Centenary*, 40.
19. *RRVB* 10:595.
20. *RRVB* 6:571.
21. See Leonard K. Elmhirst, *Poet and Plowman* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1975; rpt. 2008), 6.
22. *CP* 2:70.
23. *Bishwabhārati* #1, *RRVB* 27:346.
24. *Prāntik* #17, *RRVB* 22:18.
25. Dilipkumar Ray, 'To Rabindranath: On Reading "Prantika"', *Modern Review*, March 1938, 313.
26. *Shesh lekhā* #13, *RRVB* 26:49–50.
27. This is different from the 1930 English lectures with a synonymous title.
28. *RRVB* 20:394.