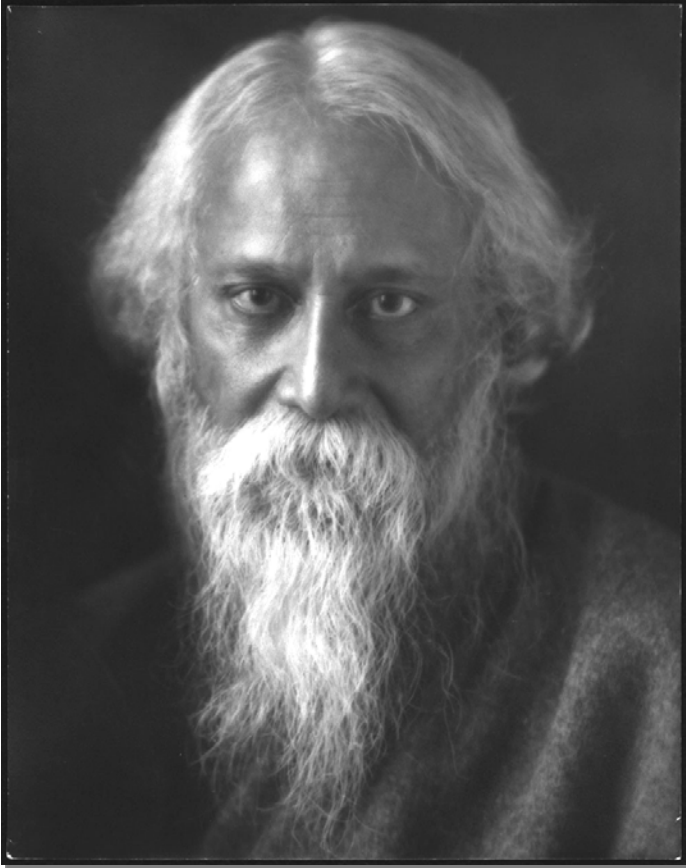


Rabindranath Tagore

Suketu Mehta



This photo of Tagore was taken during his visit to Canada in 1929. Credit: John Vanderpant / Library and Archives Canada / a195928

August 15, 1997. I am at a party in a New York loft to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence. The guests are a motley group of Indian students, exiles, artists. A giant birthday cake with the tricolor is brought out. We are all searching for some sort of connection to our distant homeland, somebody to give voice to the tarnished dreams we have for our country. Then, hesitantly, somebody reads out a poem, in English:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into
fragments by narrow domestic walls;....
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its
way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;....
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country
awake*

After this, we all sing, in Sanskrit: “Jana gana mana...” Not all of us remember the words, but those of us who grew up in India know it well; it is the national anthem, and it was played in every movie theater before the main feature and you got fined if you didn't stand for it. Slowly, stumblingly, we take up the chant. Both of them, the Rabindranath Tagore.

The clever young men don't write about Tagore anymore. As a contemporary American poet said, when I mentioned Tagore, “The only place I've heard Tagore's poems has been at Episcopalian wedding ceremonies.” Where he lives on is a place of considerably firmer loyalties: the hearts of his people, on both sides of the British-made frontier in Bengal. Bengalis will quote Tagore at the drop of a hat; his poetry - Rabindrasangeet, “the music of Rabindra” - is used by young men to woo their lasses, by parents consoling themselves after the death of a child, by politicians in campaign speeches. It is no wonder, then, that when Bangladesh became independent in 1971, it followed India's lead in choosing another of his songs - “Amar Sonar Bangla” - for its national anthem.

The word and the deed were never far from each other in Tagore's life. He was, a long time before the term was coined, a truly engage writer. He was a polymath: a poet, fiction writer, dramatist, painter, educationist, traveler, political thinker, philosopher of science. In appearance, with his long, flowing white beard, he was like a figure out of a mystical vision. Over sixty years Tagore gave to the world some two and a half thousand songs, over two thousand paintings and drawings, twenty-eight volumes of poetry, dramas, operas, short stories, novels, essays, and diaries, and an equivalent number of letters.

Tagore was born in North Calcutta in 1861, into one of the richest and most progressive families of Bengal. In 1912 he published Gitanjali, an English translation of some of his poems. This led to his winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. In retrospect, the book demonstrates why writers should never be their own translators. Few twentieth-century writers have been as badly mistranslated as Tagore, not least by himself.

Even so, the stories retain their power. I reread "Kabuliwala," his 1892 story about an Afghan merchant's friendship with a little girl, to find out if it would still affect me the way it did when I last read it, in a school textbook. It is a sentimental story, but it is not melodramatic. Towards the end of the story, the upper-class narrator discovers, through a small picture - a little girl's handprint, carried across borders as a memento - what he has in common with a murderous Afghan, something that spans the huge distance between them. "I forgot then that he was an Afghan raisin-seller and I was a Bengali Babu. I understood then that he was as I am, that he was a father just as I am a father." This is what the best of Tagore's stories do: erase distinctions between the self and the other. There are no real villains in Tagore's stories, or in his worldview. The Devil is absent or misunderstood.

What Tagore understood well was oblique love, necessarily hidden love. A frequent theme in his work is love for a brother's wife, or a husband's friend. His first great love, unconsummated, was for his sister-in-law, who committed suicide within five months of Tagore's marriage. At 63, he was offered another chance at love, when the beautiful Argentinean poet Vittoria Ocampo pursued him energetically. But Tagore withdrew, preferring to confine his love to letters; making it flesh would detract from the poetry of it. He wanted a Bengali love, she an Argentine one. Tagore's love stories dealt with the peculiar romantic entanglements that the Bengali gentry relished: full of meaningful glances and languorous sighs, but very little action. Where the object of the love isn't its consummation, but the tristesse afterwards, or, better still, instead of.

Santiniketan, the school and university he set up in rural Bengal, is by now a failed experiment; but before it failed, it educated, among others, Indira Gandhi, Amartya Sen, and Satyajit Ray (whose best films were adaptations of Tagore's stories). Within the concrete walls of my school in Bombay I dreamt about a place such as Santiniketan, where, if you were going to study biology, you did it sitting on the branch of a tree.

The most controversial, and, in retrospect, prescient, aspect of Tagore's political thought was his opposition to nationalism. He was no friend of the British. In protest against the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which the colonial government killed 379 unarmed people, Tagore returned his knighthood. But he had strong differences with Gandhi on the direction the freedom struggle should take. In later life, he traveled continuously, almost monomaniacally, writing to friends abroad to schedule a lecture tour even as his favorite daughter lay dying. But even if his travels were often escapist, they gave him an insight into the gross human stupidity of borders and patriotism. Within Tagore, East met West - and also North, South, Up, and Down. His ideal was Universal Man. "Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity," he wrote.

He was embraced by the West and then rejected by the West. His reception in Germany in 1921 was Beatlesque in proportion, and occasioned newspaper reports such as the following: "Scenes of frenzied hero worship marked a public lecture given by Sir Rabindranath Tagore today at Berlin University. In the rush for seats many girl students fainted and were trampled on by the crowd." The range of famous men and women he met in his travels is astonishing: Yeats, Shaw, Russell, Gide, Mussolini, Helen Keller, Kawabata, and everybody else of note. His conversations with Einstein show that Tagore anticipated the findings of quantum physics in his views on the nature of truth. The chemistry Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine, commenting in 1984 on Tagore's conversations with Einstein, remarked, "Curiously enough, the present evolution of science is running in the direction stated by the great Indian poet." But by 1935, Yeats, the same man who had lobbied for his Nobel Prize, was saying, "Damn Tagore."

Towards the end of his life Tagore added one more role to his personalities. He took up painting in earnest. In this, he was no dilettante; his paintings anticipate much of modern Indian art. When he was seventy Ocampo arranged for an exhibition of his paintings in Paris. They still command high prices at auctions around the world. Tagore died in his bed in Santiniketan in 1941, at the grand old age of eighty.

As usual, Jawaharlal Nehru had the last, best word. He wrote this to his daughter Indira from prison upon hearing of Tagore's death, in 1941.

"Gandhi and Tagore. Two types entirely different from each other, and yet both of them typical of India, both in the long line of India's great men... There are many of course who may be abler than them or greater geniuses in their own line... There may be greater poets than Tagore, greater writers... It is not so much because of any single virtue but because of the tout ensemble, that I felt that among the world's great men today Gandhi and Tagore were supreme as human beings."

Maybe the good Episcopalians know something the clever young men don't.

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