

NEW HUMANISM AND PARTISAN UNIVERSALISM IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE SELECT PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

History reveals that institutions or artifacts produced by human beings can lead to the exploitation or the loss of freedom of other human beings. Thus the celebration of the good life of an Athenian citizen in Plato's time can hide the wretchedness of vast numbers of slaves whose labor made it possible for the few free citizens to enjoy that good life. Our criteria then must apply to all, or at least the vast majority of the vast of the human group concerned, if they are to lay claim to universality.

Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Perilous Passage*¹

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Indo-Anglican literature is the story of yesterday, of a little more than a century, and today. One of the natural results of the British rule in India is the rise and development of literature. The term "Indo-Anglican" was first used in 1883 when a book published in Calcutta that bore the title *Indo-Anglian Literature*.

After the publication of two books by Dr.K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, the term "Indo-Anglian" has not only acquired considerable currency, but also which has come to stay as a familiar and accepted term applied to Indian contribution to literature in English. This has come to be known as Indo-Anglian writing and has been quite an active school of didactic and creative art for at least a century.

The first theatre offering English language drama in 1776, Indian drama in English has never achieved the same status as Indian fiction and poetry in English. As in other colonies such as Canada, the Indian theatrical scene was dominated by foreign companies, touring plays drawn mainly from Britain. Notable among the few examples of Indian plays written in English in the nineteenth century are *The First Parsi Baronet* (1866), by C. S . Nazir, probably the earliest Indian English play in verse, and *Is This Civilization?* (1871) by M.M. Dutt.

K.R.S. Iyengar, in his essay "Drama in Modern India" in *Drama in Modern India and the Writer's Responsibility in a Rapidly Changing World*, 1961, which he edited, points out that theatre implies not only a building but a cultivated audience. The production of English plays by Indians continues to reveal an abyss between the producer and playwright, and the audience. Indo-English drama is a purely literary activity divorced from the realities of the theatre. While some Indian plays in English have been staged in the UK and the USA and have received laudatory notices, Indian playwrights in general seem to neglect conditioning their writing to meet the demands of a theatrical audience. Urban areas in India have responded well to experiments in local language drama, but theatre in English gets little ready response.

India is a vast country with fourteen major languages. The Indian writers, who have expressed their hopes and dreams in English, did not come from any one part of India, though, for nearly fifty years, Bengal supplied the great bulk of Indo-Anglian writers. Thus Bengali literature developed much faster than Hindi literature or Gujarathi literature.

Indian Literature in English has acquired a new identity as much identity as American and Austrian literature have acquired which, of course, is quite distinct from Indian English. The efforts by writers like Raja Rao in Indianizing English language cannot be ignored, though it is very difficult to express the Indian sensibility in English to clothe the very Indianness in English tongue – though it has gone into the very system of life – without making it appear bizarre is yet another difficulty for the cloth which sometimes is either too long or too short which makes one prefer the naked majesty itself. A rapprochement is somehow wrought between Indianess and the English tongue and sometimes vice versa.

Indian writing in English also known as Indo-Anglican writing has gained its reputation in the world as other English writings. Indian writing in English comes under post-colonial literature which is the production previously colonized countries such as India. It has evolved into various genres such as poetry, prose, novel, drama and short story. Drama has now become a fruitfully cultivated field in Indian Literature in English.

History reveals that institutions or artifacts produced by human beings can lead to the exploitation or the loss of freedom of other human beings. Thus the celebration of the good life of an Athenian citizen in Plato's time can hide the wretchedness of vast numbers of slaves whose labor made it possible for the few free citizens to enjoy that good life. Our criteria then must apply to all, or at least the vast majority of the vast of the human group concerned, if they are to lay claim to universality.

During the early twentieth century the theatre moment in the Indian languages gathered momentum but not the English theatre. Rabindaranath Tagore, Kailasam, Gurucharan Das, Sri Aurobindo and Asif Currimbhoy are some of the renowned playwrights of the yesteryear. Drama is integral to Indian literature and culture. Traditional theatre played a vital role in integrating and harmonizing divergent stands of our social fabric based on race, sub-cultures, languages and regions. New interpretations of old, known tales and relating them to contemporary life are not alien practice. Indian theatre was not a means of entertainment or individual's desire for self-expression. It was aimed at education and edification, as well.

Rabindranath Tagore belonged to this era of national awakening with its deep roots in Bengal. The Noble Laureate proved himself the most successful writer in finding a new path for the world outside. Acclaimed as the "Spiritual Guru" for India, he was essentially a writer with modern vision and a gifted novelist with a message for the rebirth of spirit of individualism. He is one of the internationally recognized writers and has produced a number of pieces in literature in English. He used in his writings history as backdrop and he used the real characters from history in his dramas for example, Bimbisara, Ajatasatru and Devadatta are historical names in Buddha's period.

According to a traditional story that the king Bimbisara was killed by his own son by the intention of capturing the throne and as far another tradition the king himself gave up his kingship for the sake of his son Ajatasatru. This is clearly portrayed by Tagore in his play, *Natir Puja* in which he mixed up history with fiction and produced a wonderful piece of work. This play depicts how history has become a part in interweaving the work. Historicism may be contrasted with reductionist theories, which suppose that all developments can be explained by fundamental principles (such as in economic determinism), or theories that posit historical changes as result of random chance.

Bengali literature, though developing fast, was confined to Bengal and the surrounding places, delighting those who know Bengali. It was Rabindranath Tagore, who with his mastery of English, translated his Bengali literary masterpieces into English and first took Indo-Anglian Literature to the Westerners first and later to the world, earning for India name and fame.

Indian English drama can be divided along historical lines into two broad sections- drama of the pre-Independence period and drama of the post-Independence period. The first Indian play in English *Is This Is Called Civilization* was written by Michael Madhusudan Dutt in 1871. There after no creative effort was made for about two decades. Later there were worthy contributions from Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurabindo, T.P.Kailasam, A.S.P.Ayyar, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharati Sarabhai. Tagore's well known Bengali plays were translated into English – *The Post Office* was by Devebrata Mukerjea and *Mukta-Dhara*, *Natir Puja* and *Chandalika* were translated by Marjorie Sykes. While translating his plays from Bengali into English, Tagore did not indulge in word for word rendering from Bengali into English.

The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 was rightly hailed by the New York Review of Books as "one of the most important of novels to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation." A new star dawned in Indian English literature. Tagore began to write early at the age of ten. He had written about 7000 lines of verse before he was eighteen. Tagore was a poet, dramatist, actor, producer, musician, painter, educationist and a practical idealist, who turned his dreams into reality at Santiniketan.

TAGORE'S VISION

He was a reformer, philosopher, prophet, novelist, short-story writer, and critic of life and literature. He even made occasional incursion into nationalist politics, although he was essentially inter-nationalist. As K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar comments "he was a many person, he was darling versatility, still he was the same man: he was integral whole the rishi, guru dev, next only to Mahathma Gandhi and Sri Aurabindo, Tagore has been supreme inspiration to millions in modern India."

Tagore's literary output is large. His major poetics are, *Gitanjali*, *Crescent Moon*, *Fruit Gathering*, *Stray Birds*, *Lovers Gift*, *The Gardener*, *Crossing*, *Fugitive*, *Kavi Kahani*, *Santhiya Sangeet*, *Sona Tari*, *Kalpna*, *Swedish*, *Shishu*, *Purabi Akash Pradeep*, *Parandk*, *Naba-Jadak*, *John Madine*, *In Sheshlekha*, *Manashi*, *Mana Sundari*, etc.

As a play wright he wrote many plays, in which some of them are musical plays; they are, *Chitra*, *King and Dark Chamber*, *The post Office*, *Red Oleanders*, *Balcony*, *Chandalika*, and *Natir Puja*. Tagore was also a novelist and who has written so many novels like *Home and the World*, *The Wreck*, *Gora*, *Chaturang*. He was also a short story writer and he was written stories like *Mashi and Other Stories*, *Hungry Stories and Other Stories*, *The Home Coming*, *Capuli Wallah*, *The Child Return*, *The Subja*, *The Post Master* and *The Babus of Nayangjore*. He was also an essayist and his essays including *Sadhana* (Lectures), *Personality*, (Lectures delivered in America), *Hundred Poems of Kabir* (Translated), *Autobiography of Maharishi* and *Devendranath Tagore* (Biography) *Raju Bhakti* (Political essays), *Jipan Mirte* (Reminiscences), were much acclaimed by the readers and critics alike.

The pen of Tagore raised letter writing to the status of a literary genre in Bengali. Throughout his life he wrote innumerable letters, almost all of them are rich in thought and expression. Tagore's last role as a creative artist was that of the painter. It started from the criss-cross scratches in one rough copy of his poems. The inspiration and urge of Tagore as

an artist is different from his literary inspiration and urge. This perhaps makes Tagore one of the complete man of art, one world has ever known.

The first half of the twentieth century is generally known as the age of Tagore in modern Bengali literature. As the second half of the nineteenth century is generally known as the Bankim era, so the first half of the twentieth century may be called the Rabindra era. Rabindranath's reputation, however, started in the eighties of the nineteenth century with publication of a number of his poetical works, novels, plays and books of essays bearing the stamp of his genius.

Bankim Chandra was then the uncrowned king of Bengali literature and the fame of young Rabindranath was continued to limited circles. Rabindranath's poetical works from *Sandhya Sangit* (Evening Song, 1882) to *Caitali* (1986), plays from *Praktir Pratisodh* (Nature's Revenge, 1884) to *Malini* (1986) and two novels, *Bau Thakuranir Hat* (Market of Daughter-in-law, 1883) and *Rajarishi* (King-Ascetic, 1887) reveal the versatility and depth of his talent.

Even then it was not possible for Rabindranath to shot into prominence and only after the award of the Nobel Prize in 1913, he precisely began to influence in a big way Bengali literature and the writers of Bengali. His influence is still dominant even so many years after his death, and there is no dot that it will continue to influence for years to come.

Rabindranath attained universal eminence in Bengal, for the first-time, for his *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). His recognition as Visve-Kavi (a worked poem was also partly due to *Gitanjali*). In 1913, he was awarded by the Swedish academy, the Nobel Prize for literature for his *Song-Offerings* (the English renderings of *Gitanjali*). In addition to *Gitanjali*, it contains some poems in translation from other poetical works. As the recipient of the Nobel Prize, he became instantly famous all over the world and received unexpected admiration from India and abroad.

TAGORE'S POETRY

The Post Office is considered to be his best play. W.B. Yeats in his preface to the play makes the following comments "on the stage the little play shows that it is perfectly constructed, and conveys to the right audience an emotion of gentleness and peace." (Indian Writing in English 186)

The most notable thing about Tagore's plays is their variety. *Chandalika*, a short lyrical play, brings out of the cardinal truth that all caste and class distinctions are false and that all human beings are equal. *Mukta Dhara* has a political tone and the theme of the play is defiance through passive resistance. In *Chitra*, Tagore presents the evaluation of human love from the physical to the spiritual. *Sacrifice*, *The Cycle of Spring* and *Red Oleanders* are some of his other notable play.

It is a curious thing how often people refer to Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) as if he has a future. This is sometimes about his poetry being timeless – as great poetry should be – although with Tagore the awesomely beautiful and significant lyrical verse is held out by his Bengali admirers, only to be snatched back from anyone who does not know his language. It is more curious that the other Tagore – the one with the myriad mind – who left a vast amount of non-literary writings, much of it the vestiges of his efforts to communicate his ideas to uncomprehending and unreceptive audiences – is written about as if he has a future, a future in which he will deliver on his promises.

The demands on the future Tagore have become more urgent as time has gone on, as we see from what is written at his significant birth anniversaries. In 1986, the 125th birth anniversary, a weeklong international seminar was held at the

Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, on the subject of “Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today.” In 2011, for the 150th, conferences and commemorative volumes appeared with titles such as *Contemporarising Tagore and the World* (Dhaka), “Tagore’s Relevance Today” (Dartington, Devon), “Revisiting Tagore” (Tagore Centre, London) and “Tagore: The Global Impact of a Writer in the Community” (Edinburgh).

TAGORE’S DRAMA

Bengali sociologist and economist, Sasadhar Sinha, writing in the 1960s in his *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*, suggests that Tagore’s ideal of human unity “could only come when the present possibilities of compromise and reform had been completely exhausted,” and that this would involve “the disappearance of one’s own familiar world” (Sinha 53). Tagore wrote in 1941, in his last essay “Crisis in Civilization,” of a “new dawn” to come when the cataclysm was over (359). The end of the Second World War and of British rule in India did not bring that new dawn; another whole lifetime has passed since Tagore’s death and we are still waiting. I suggest in this article that we are waiting for the end of the modern era, which began at the end of the seventeenth century when Newtonian ideas of universal order began to be extended to “positive” and “rational” studies of human nature, history and progress (Cassirer 3-8). There have been critics of the Enlightenment from the beginning – the great historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, has written on three of them: Vico, Hamann and Herder. Berlin has also written, albeit briefly, on Tagore, not making any direct connection with these thinkers, but with a sense of a connection, perhaps with Herder in particular.

The trajectory of expectations of a Tagorean future has its origin at the birth centenary in 1961. Only twenty years after Tagore’s death, there were many people around who had known the poet in life. The handsome *Centenary Volume* produced by the Sahitya Akademi has a special section of contributions from his close relatives, friends and colleagues. The Introduction to the book is by Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, who writes that he grew up under Tagore’s influence, which he sees as an emotional and spiritual one (Nehru xiii-xvi). Contrasting Tagore with Gandhi, Nehru says: “Tagore was the poet and the singer; Gandhi was the man of action, the true revolutionary,” who “crept into the hearts of those who were disinherited and whose life was one long tale of unhappiness.” After musing over Tagore’s “outlook on life,” Nehru decides that Tagore, for all his Indianness, was “essentially a person of international mould and thinking,” who helped to break down the barriers of nationalism, which is apt to become a “narrowing creed,” “and yet,” Nehru writes, Tagore “believed firmly in a people growing from their own soil and according to their own genius” (xv). Those words “and yet” (my emphasis) are crucial to understanding Tagore’s “outlook on life” – and why it is that the hopes that were so high in 1961 were disappointed in 1986 and 2011. 1961 is a long time ago, and one is bound to wonder about the high hopes in 1961 for a Tagorean future – and what went wrong.

CONCLUSIONS

We can get a good idea of the kind of future for India Tagore wanted from one of the books which came out of the centenary celebrations. *Towards Universal Man* is a collection of eighteen representative essays, “containing a message for humanity,” with a lengthy eulogy on Tagore’s genius by Humayun Kabir, India’s Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs (Kabir 1-35). This was the first book on Tagore that I read, after hearing about him in 1990 from Marjorie Sykes, who had worked as a teacher at Santiniketan in the last years of Tagore’s life. She told me that Tagore was a deep ecologist, and quoted from his essay “City and Village,” where he relates an intriguing fable about how a race of greedy moon people had ruined their planet. “My imaginary selenites,” Tagore writes, “behave exactly in the way that human

beings are today are behaving upon this earth” (314). I found a copy of the book containing that essay, and learned from it that Tagore’s vision of the new India meant reviving the life of its villages (Tagore 302-22). Some years later I found out more about his rural reconstruction projects when I carried out research on the Elmhirst Papers in the Dartington Hall Trust Archive. I recognised the approach which Tagore and Elmhirst had taken as essentially the same as relocalisation initiatives gradually attracting support worldwide in recent years. Since then I have been interested in making connections between Tagore enthusiasts and people currently engaged in his kind of world change.

Buddhism is major part in this play. Tagore was inspired by Buddhism and the teachings of Buddha. It is only in Buddhism that there is hope for the world driven by greed and hatred and torn by conflict and cruelty. Buddhism in the play has been depicted with deep sympathy and understanding. The endless procession of Buddhist monks and nuns that bestride the stage in the play sing songs of praise to the Buddha and their formula of Refuge. Refuge teaches of a dharma that saves, and which stands supreme in the *Sangha* and serves as their formula of prayer.

The play *Natir Puja* throws light on the history which gave importance to spiritual growth and also witnessed the social condition of down-trodden. This play talks about a dancing-girl Srimati who lives in the palace of Bimbisara and is asked to offer whatever precious things she has, and princesses are jealous of her that she has been blessed by a Buddhist monk Upali. Srimati receives an order from the king Ajatasatru not to offer any worship in the *stupa*. It is clear that the king Ajatasatru forbids the practice of Buddhism under the influence of Devadatta. She is unmindful of the king’s order and on the day of Purnima of Vaisakhi she offers her dance worship to the lord Buddha.

The climax of the play is her impassioned and awe-inspiring dance. One day one by one she removes her jewels and costly garments, casting each in turn on the broken alter as an offering until she stands revealed in the simple yellow robe of a Buddhist nun and face penalty. When she dies, she thinks that Buddha wants her dance from her and out of the jealousy of the princess she is killed.

Tagore by bringing out the theme of *Natir Puja* from history showcases the condition of the Buddha period. He also was influenced by the teachings of Buddha. He sees Buddhism as a solution for social discriminations. Srimati, dancing-girl finds shelter in Buddha. Tagore believes that Buddhism teaches the highest value of life because it emphasizes unity and love. This is the reason why Buddhism was established everywhere. And he also gives a picture of how people of lower caste and down-trodden were treated. Thus this project is an attempt to study the social and cultural issues as expressed by Tagore in his *Natir Puja* in its historical and political context.

Now, Rabindranath never forgot the fact of India’s colonized condition, nor the deformation introduced by it. The struggle for decolonization that he undertook through his aesthetic and ethical pedagogy was political in a highly nuanced and social way. It seems unlikely that he would have rejected Fanon’s ‘new humanism’, his “partisan universalism”.

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