

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gleanings of the Road [Pather Sanchoy]*. Trans. Somdatta Mandal. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. 223 pp. ISBN: 978-93-86906-25-0.

It has become customary among subcontinental critics to begin a discussion of Rabindranath Tagore by eulogising his copious versatility. Poet, novelist, lyricist, composer, playwright, painter, educationist, Tagore was no doubt a colossus on the South Asian cultural scene. And even today, particularly in Bengal, he elicits the kind of devotion usually reserved for spiritual guides. Amidst so many accomplishments, readers may be forgiven for overlooking his career as a traveller and travel writer. In this sphere too, he outshone his compatriots.

However, as soon as Tagore's travel books are mentioned his readers will fondly remember six or seven titles. Somdatta Mandal reminds us that even those do not exhaust his output in the genre. Whether at home or abroad, Tagore was always writing, his pen carried along by an aesthetic of Romantic spontaneity that was instinctual rather than a theoretic construct. With writers of this stamp textual problems are inescapable, for the shaping of a book may be subject to numerous revisions and additions.

In her Introduction, Somdatta does a good job of disentangling the textual intricacies underlying the text she has chosen to translate. She is an experienced hand at translating and critiquing travel narratives in Bengali by Tagore and others among his contemporaries; among the latter were a number of his kinsfolk. If I have got the count right this is her sixth translated volume; others are on their way.

It will not be out of place to fill in the historical and biographical background of Tagore's travel books. They straddle the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, covering over half a century, roughly from the 1880s to the mid-1930s. This was no doubt the great age of the traveller, coming after the centuries of Western discovery and exploration, and before the age of the tourist, which shows no sign of nearing its end. In those days it was possible to travel in relative safety and yet feel the thrill of adventure. Most travellers, needless to add, were Western; and this makes Tagore's accounts all the more extraordinary and valuable. He was of course a colonial Bengali gentleman of the upper class, free of any hint of a "colonial cringe." Frank and even-handed in making his observations and his critical comments, he came as close as possible under the circumstances to the stature of Universal Man.

The *Gleanings of the Road* comprises essays and letters that first appeared in print in periodicals. In both forms we find Tagore's characteristic stylistic fluidity, Romantic diction and imagery, and idealist philosophy. Lawrence Durrell, himself a noted poet and travel writer, has observed that travel conduces to contemplation. The truth of the observation is palpable on every page of Tagore's

travel writings, including the present volume. Interspersed with the descriptions of the physical experience of moving from one country or continent to another, mainly by sea, are ruminations on society, music (Eastern and Western, shown in a comparative perspective), poetry and education. He writes on friends and friendship; his portraits of Stopford Brooke and Yeats are sensitive as well as sensible. In other words, the variety that is the hallmark of Tagore's oeuvre as a whole can be appreciated between the covers of this handy little book.

However, I will be scanting in my role of critic if I do not point out at least a couple of infelicities. In the very first paragraph of the Introduction Somdatta describes Tagore as "an itinerant traveler" (as if there were any other sorts); and declares that his "grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, was the second person among educated Indians (after Raja Ram Mohan Roy) to sail to England" (5) Sake Deen Mahomed settled in Britain and published his *Travels*, the first book in English by an Indian, in 1884; Mirza P'tesamuddin travelled to the West in 1766, and Mirza Abu Taleb at the turn of the eighteenth century, and both Mirzas wrote travel narratives in Persian. Somdatta has in fact written about them in a critical study. I do not know what notion of "educated Indian" she had in mind when she made the extraordinary statement quoted above.

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