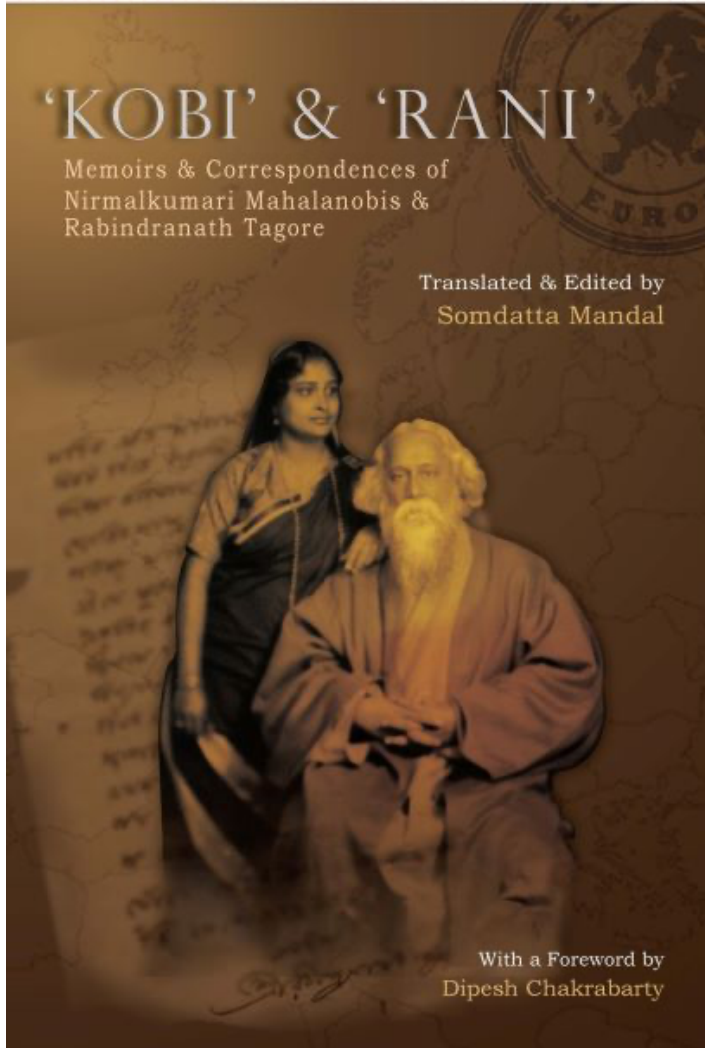


Somdatta Mandal, trans. & ed. *'Kobi' & 'Rani': Memoirs & Correspondences of Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis and Rabindranath Tagore*. Bolpur: Birutjatio, 2020. 536 pp. ISBN 978-81-944352-8-0.



International Tagore-scholarship is largely dependent on translation for primary materials and it is a shame that only a very small portion of the work of the great man outside his English works is available in English today, nearly eighty years after he breathed his last. The untranslated – and thus unexplored by

many – texts include a stupendous amount of non-fictional and polemical writings and letters and correspondences, whose significance in knowing the man and his work through a close textual study of his life and thought can hardly be exaggerated. One cannot but remember in this context the importance of many fine memoirs involving the poet, produced in Bangla by a host of eminent and not-so-eminent people, close to him at various stages of his life. The last decade or so that began with the sesquicentenary birth-celebrations of Tagore has seen some wonderful translational contributions in this direction. It is heartening to note that the (Tagore) translational impetus generated by the event has not yet lost its steam, and the volume under review is a valuable addition to the existing corpus of Tagore-related primary texts available in English.

Born and brought up in the late nineteenth-century Brahmo tradition of religious eclecticism and idealistic inclusivism built on a modern rereading of the *Upanishads*, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a lifelong champion of universal humanism that inspired his relentless critique of all sorts of divisive ideologies, including an exploitative and dehumanising imperialism and an aggressive, alienating hyper-nationalism in the same measure. It was his ceaseless endeavour to promote understanding and brotherhood across cultures, creeds, and communities through transnational exchange of ideas in an age troubled by the Great Wars, Fascism and other varieties of totalitarianism, colonialism, and other civilisational crises. Tagore's travels abroad, especially those to Europe and the Americas, thus were often marked by a different sort of a "missionary zeal" from that of his illustrious contemporary, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). They were also significantly different from the late nineteenth-century Western travels of his noted Brahmo Samaj predecessors, Keshab Chandra Sen and Pratap Chandra Majumdar, who functioned largely within the orientalist trope of the material West and the spiritual East. Seen from this perspective, his European sojourn of 1926, simply because of the globally challenging political and cultural crises engendered by the fateful time, was arguably the most critical of Tagore's travels to the West. The poet was at the zenith of his Western acclaim, and Europe and India, jointly and severally, were caught in an unprecedented historical whirlpool of negative developments. His uncompromising devotion to the objective of the foundation of the shrine of "Man" that culminated in his dream project of Visva-Bharati, where the world was supposed to "make its home in a single nest," is the keynote that rings through all his travelogues, travel-diaries, and travel-memoirs, and through those produced by his companions in these travels. But these ideas seem to acquire additional significance with regard to his travels to Germany and Italy, among other countries, in 1926, as captured in this volume. The same spirit of cross-cultural communication shines through this driven traveller's Indian – that is, subcontinental – travels too. It is worth remembering that the gradual growth

of Visva-Bharati from an *ashram*-inspired school into a university – the university was founded in December 1921 – resulted in a tremendous fund crisis. Raising funds through lecture tours across continents, thus, was also one major objective of these travels.

At the same time, there is this other Tagore, the aimless itinerant adventurer, whose joyful purpose it was to appreciate and celebrate the beauty of the unbounded earth in all its manifold splendour, to soak through his exceptionally keen senses in all that life has got to offer in its inexhaustible abundance. It is to the credit of Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, or “Rani,” as Tagore fondly called her, that she succeeded in capturing the two Tagores – the “missionary” and the mirthful, the ambassador and the artist, often inextricably intertwined together – in a singular expression in the two memoirs translated for this volume. Both the Bangla originals – *Kobir Shonge Europey* and *Kobir Shonge Dakshinattey*, narrating the travels undertaken in 1926 and 1928, respectively – offer us fascinating glimpses of the Tagore consciously and unconsciously driven by serious historical missions and the Tagore glittering in all his personal wealth of wit and humour, and warmth. Unlike a formal documentary or a historical narrative, as the translator of the two volumes – *With the Poet in Europe* and *With the Poet in the South*, respectively – points out in the brief but illuminating Introduction, Mahalanobis’s memoirs are “written in a very relaxed style,” depicting “the Poet in ordinary and domestic circumstances” (xiii). Such informal and non-chronological representations of “history” add an element of intimacy and personality to the otherwise impersonal “records” by accommodating a whole “lot of unnecessary information” that “would creep into the writing” (xiii). This “excess,” or “superfluous” details, that add to the readability of the books by way of injecting a “personality” into them, also make these narratives veritable subjective histories of times and places. This is one reason why historians interested in the exploration of the history of the mind, or “mentality” – of the likes of Tapan Raychaudhuri (1926-2014) and Rajat Kanta Ray (1947-) in Tagore’s own native cultural context – put a high premium on literary narratives, memoirs in particular, in reconstructing those times and places. Mahalanobis eminently fits the bill of the “alternative” historian, and Mandal’s able translation that keeps the informal and personal flavour of the narratives and letters intact, does justice to the role such works are meant to play in and outside the world of Tagore criticism.

The liberal humanist Tagore always relied on the creative personality of eminent individuals to bring in meaningful and sustainable changes in the civilisational relationship between the East and the West, leading to a kind of regeneration in the world order, and in other spheres of Indian subcontinental life. His interactions with renowned artists, scholars, intellectuals, philosophers, social workers, political leaders, students, and ordinary admiring individuals – each imbued with a unique personality of their own – thus constitute arguably

the most important thread of both the memoirs. Quite fittingly, one of the attractive features of the book is the visual treat offered by a series of photographs of famous or not-so-famous individuals and small groups. On the other hand, the female narrator's perspective adds an insider's graceful personal outlook to which the readers are made privy, and which partly accounts for the delightful literary quality of the work. Translating such double-edged narratives that playfully deal with the serious is never an easy job, but the experienced and creative translator Mandal's pleasurable translation lives up to the task with élan. The result of the joint love's labour of a woman narrator and a woman translator is a wonderful exposition of the protagonist's pleasant personality what Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his insightful Foreword, describes as "the human being that Rabindranath Tagore was for the women whose company he sought and kept" (iv-v).

The third major component of the book, comprising a series of sixty selected letters of Tagore's to Mahalanobis, titled "Pathe o Pather Prante" (On the Road and Beyond It), adds to the personal quality of the volume, apart from allowing us glimpses of the fascinating epistolary artist that the poet was. The first few of these letters, written during his homeward journey on board the ship, after he parted ways with the Mahalanobises post-European sojourn, capture as if the "afterlife" of the joint venture. While the rest, written on a myriad of subjects from 1926 to 1938, offer us vignettes of various Tagores. The published collection of the prolific letter-writer's personal correspondences, which runs into volumes, occasions for us valuable entry points into what Dipesh Chakrabarty in his beautiful formulation calls "the workings of that complex organic illusory device-in-the human-body we call the mind" (iii) of Tagore's. Together with his essays and other polemical writings, these innumerable letters form an enormous intertextual web that can, and does, offer rich promises of discursive positioning/re-positioning of Tagore's creative texts in the conventional sense of the term. For example, the 26<sup>th</sup> letter of the series, dated 6 Agrahayan 1345 BS (November 1938), deals in a typically leisurely aphoristic vein with its writer's philosophy of work and leisure, which he expounded in various forms and genres throughout his entire mature creative life, and which is central to his idea of a creative personality. Tagore writes: "When work is not materialistic it gives man a taste of the distance which beckons [one] with the music of the flute . . . [I]f you see from the outside you will feel that nowadays I don't even have a little bit of time, but if you see from the inside then each moment is my leisure" (429). Three other articles of Mahalanobis's, translated and added as Appendixes to the volume, add to the reader's appraisal of her as an independent thinker.

An otherwise absolutely commendable production, the book is not completely free from editorial lapses. In a few places, the names of individuals and the Bengali months have been spelled variably, which should be rectified in

future editions. The scheme (or the lack of it) of adding notes on individuals is curious: there are brief notes on many foreign individuals while there is none on several Indian personalities like Girindrasekhar Basu, P. C. Roy, J. C. Bose, Mukul De, Abanindranath Tagore, or Brajendranath Seal, to mention only a few of the less-equals. Considering the presumable primary target readership of the translated volume, it should have been the other way round. Such small editorial snags, however, do not take away from the eminent readability of a book of academic importance and common readerly interest, thanks to the hard work put in by the editor-translator.

A word of praise must also be reserved for the producer of the book, done with quality paper and printing and a charming cover-design. It is high time that many such translation projects were taken up to address certain conspicuous lacunae in Tagore scholarship by opening up the archive of Bangla texts to the global English readership. Somdatta Mandal, among some others, has been very active in this direction over the last few years. At least one more translation-work of hers in this field, to this reviewer's knowledge, *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs* (2021), has recently hit the stands. Such enterprises can lead to the dispelling of many a wrong perception about one of the greatest products of the East-West encounter in this part of the world and one of the most tireless promoters of civilisational camaraderie. They can also contribute towards initiating more fruitful dialogues with that inexhaustible wellspring of ideas in these troubled times in global life, no less testing than those which the present volume records.

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