

## Never Not an Educator: Tagore as a Poet-Teacher<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Tagore was an educator in everything he wrote and did. He was also always a poet, in his novels and plays as well as his poetry. The dénouement of his novel *Yogayog* can be faulted on novelistic grounds, but is understandable if one relates it to his sometimes oppressive sense of his own destiny. His play *Muktadhārā* shows that he was well aware of the perils of charisma and *gurugiri*. His educational experiment at Santiniketan, which rested so heavily on his own charisma, may therefore have had some inherent dangers. Visva-Bharati's chequered history may in time lead one to ask whether there were problems with the Poet's dream itself.

### Keywords

Tagore, education, Santiniketan, Visva-Bharati, poet, *gurugiri*

On 22 March 2006, an unusual and inspiring event took place in London. In a beautiful new hall that has been made in the basement of the Commonwealth Club in Northumberland Avenue, off Trafalgar Square, an evening was dedicated to "Tagore's Gifts to English." Sponsored by the English-speaking Union and the Royal Commonwealth Society, and masterminded by Mr. Michael Marland CBE, a retired headmaster and keen fan of Tagore,<sup>3</sup> the programme ranged from a talk by me on "Tagore the World Over: English as

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a conference on Tagore's Philosophy of Education, organised in memory of Amita Sen, Ramakrishna Mission, Kolkata, 29 March 2006.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Marland died in 2008. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/jul/04/mainsection.obituaries>.

the Vehicle,”<sup>4</sup> to readings from *Gitanjali* and other texts, a presentation by the Tagore Centre UK on Tagore’s “Impact on English Schooling,” a fine performance of two Tagore settings for tenor voice and piano by the English composer Frank Bridge, and a song and dance sequence called “The Golden Boat” by the Tagoreans – an old-established group. In his speech at the end, Michael Marland gave us four quotations from Tagore that could also serve as mottoes for this conference here today:

1. The reciprocal easy relationship between the teacher and the pupil has been regarded by me as the most important medium of education.
2. The teacher is one who can immediately come down to the level of the student and transfer his soul to the student’s soul.
3. We must constantly remember that neither the education of the senses, nor the education of the intellect, but the education of the feeling should receive the place of honour in our schools.
4. Education should be conceived of as life and not merely as a preparation for life.

The capacity audience was so warm, the organisation and planning so successful, the songs and dances so enchanting that I felt quite carried away. Yet my colleague at SOAS, Dr. Hanne-Ruth Thompson, a rigorous researcher on Bengali grammar<sup>5</sup> and always to be relied on for an objective, unsentimental view, murmured to me, “If this isn’t a cult, I don’t know what is.”

Those words have stayed with me as I read and prepared for this paper, for the dangers of falling into the attitudes of a cult seem to me even greater when discussing Tagore’s philosophy and practice of education than they are when celebrating his purely artistic achievements. What is a cult? It is a group and mind-set in which beliefs inside the group can seem, to those inside, true and sane, whereas to those outside they can seem unbalanced, false and even dangerous. Sanity and madness is a theme that I shall return to in this paper, but first let me tell you what was in my mind when I proposed its title.

“Never Not an Educator: Tagore as a Poet-Teacher.” It seems to me undeniable, both to those inside and those outside the Tagore cult, that in everything Rabindranath did and wrote he was always, in one way or another, a teacher. He wasn’t didactic: he didn’t prescribe a particular line or dogma that everyone should follow, but he was always concerned with what he called, in

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<sup>4</sup> Now published in Subhankar Bhattacharya and Mayukh Chakraborty, ed. *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. Kolkata: Parul Prakashani, 2007: 279-84.

<sup>5</sup> Her *Bengali: A Comprehensive Grammar* has now been published by Routledge (2010).

the pronouncement that Michael Marland quoted, “the education of the feeling.” His aim was to widen and deepen our sensibility, suggest new possibilities, open windows and doors. For him, modernity was “freedom of mind.” In so many of his short stories we have a clash between sensitive and insensitive characters, with the insensitive characters – and the readers – ultimately learning something from the sensitive ones (who are often, though not always, women and children). In his novels, we are led to think deeply about society and morals and reform. In his poems, we are led by the beauty and power of imagery, language and rhythm to a deeper responsiveness to Nature, life and love. His songs explore limitless subtleties of feeling, adding to the spectrum shades and colours that we never knew existed. Even his paintings – which were for him perhaps a liberation from moral concerns – taught other artists ways of being both Indian and modern; they plumb mysterious and sometimes quite terrifying depths of selfhood; they open our eyes to new and secret lines and rhythms in everything we see. One could go on, and in much more detail, analysing poems and songs and plays and paintings to describe and explain what they teach. One could also turn to the historical and psychological roots of Rabindranath’s identity as a poet-teacher: to the drive to reform, education and modernisation in Rammohun Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda and other great figures in whose footsteps Rabindranath trod; to the mission he inherited from Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Bankimchandra Chatterjee to build up modern Bengali literature; or to the qualities of other members of the Tagore family whose example inspired him – Debendranath’s moral seriousness; Jyotirindranath’s refinement and musicality; Kadambari’s beauty and empathy; Mrinalini’s devotion; the whole “living university” of Jorasanko that is still in the genes of Visva-Bharati itself. A detailed investigation of all this could be done and no one would disagree with it. Rabindranath could often be entertaining and diverting in his creative works, but he was never *purely* an entertainer. We approach his works as we would a great Art Gallery, not a circus or a TV show. His works are worth teaching – both here in Bengal in the original Bengali or further afield through translation – because they all have something to teach.

But Tagore the “poet-teacher” can be understood in two ways: as a poet who was always a teacher, or as a teacher who was also a poet. It is the latter interpretation that now seems to me more interesting and also, in a way, more disturbing.

I have recently read two works by Tagore that I picked out serendipitously but which have given me ideas for this paper: firstly his great but rather neglected late novel *Yogāyog* (1929), and secondly his play *Muktadhārā* (1922). *Yogāyog* I read not in Bengali but in Supriya Chaudhuri’s superb translation (2005) for Oxford University Press in Delhi (in the ongoing Oxford Tagore series); *Muktadhārā* I read in Bengali, though I was grateful for help sometimes

from Marjorie Sykes' translation, published first in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* in 1941-42, and later in *Three Plays* (Oxford UP, Bombay, 1950).

*Yogāyog* (the title is translated by Supriya Chaudhuri as "Relationships") would certainly be a useful book to pick or teach as a product of Tagore the poet-*teacher*, as from its harrowing account of Kumudini's disastrous marriage to the rich but repellent Madhusudan we learn a lot about marriage and society and the need for a new kind of marriage based on love and equality rather than money and subservience. But I also find it telling as an example of a work that is – as in all that Rabindranath did, in education as well as in art – a *poet's* work. Where I part company with Supriya Chaudhuri is not in the translation itself, which cannot be bettered, or in the excellent Notes, but in the Introduction where she feels compelled to criticise Tagore as a novelist. In a student essay I recently marked, I underlined the attribution of the term "novelist" to Tagore, and wrote in the margin: "he was never a novelist; he was a poet who also wrote some novels." Of course these distinctions cannot be hard and fast. Was Thomas Hardy a poet or a novelist? He wanted to be a poet, but I would say he was a novelist who also wrote poetry. There is a fine sonnet by W.H. Auden called "The Novelist" where he distinguishes novelists from poets as follows:

Encased in talent like a uniform,  
The rank of every poet is well known;  
They can amaze us like a thunderstorm,  
Or die so young, or live for years alone.

They can dash forward like hussars; but he  
Must struggle out of his boyish gift and learn  
How to be plain and awkward, how to be  
One after whom none think it worth to turn.

For to achieve his lightest wish, he must  
Become the whole of boredom, subject to  
Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just

Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,  
And in his own weak person, if he can,  
Dully put up with all the wrongs of Man. (*Collected Poems* 147)

Rabindranath's efforts, *qua* poet, to write novels often strike me as heroic, and his achievements in character-portrayal, careful description and realist plot construction truly impressive. But who can deny that he is always, *qua* poet, "encased in talent like a uniform?" We never forget, when reading a novel by Tagore, that *he* is writing it, that a poet is writing it. This may lead Supriya

Chaudhuri and others to criticise the book, in places, on novelistic grounds: “As a fictional representation, Kumudini’s character is fatally flawed by Rabindranath’s own anxious, protective care” (*Relationships* 14); “In *Relationships*... a specific physical revulsion on the one hand, and desire on the other, are made representative of class aspirations and antagonisms... It is not surprising that the central treatment of relationships in the novel is scarcely able to carry this representational burden” (*Relationships* 10-11). Above all, the novel’s dénouement, Kumudini’s discovery that she is pregnant, leading her to abandon her plan to leave her husband, was first criticised by Saratchandra Chatterjee and remains unsatisfactory to Supriya Chaudhuri too. Saratchandra wrote in *Sābityer Mātrā* (Literary Standards), “While *Jogajog* was being serialised in *Bichitra*, and Kumu was setting up such a toil in instalment after instalment, I couldn’t imagine how her *tug-of-war* with the overwhelming and powerful Madhusudan might end. But who knew the problem was so simple – that the *lady-doctor* would come and solve it in an instant?” (Qtd. in *Relationships* 29). Similarly Supriya Chaudhuri: “That a marital relationship of such pain and conflict can be so quickly resolved by recourse to the most tired of domestic *motifs*...” (*Relationships* 7), or “This final entrapment, unsatisfactory though it may seem as a narrative resolution...” (*Relationships* 19).

Yet if we see *Yogayog* as the compulsive, obsessive work of a *poet* – a poet, moreover, with an unshakeable faith in his own destiny, in his *jiban-debatā* guiding and directing everything he did, mysterious and baffling though the paths were that it drove him along – then the novel’s resolution seems to me not only harrowing and haunting (and, at a realistic level, totally credible too) but also profoundly inevitable. For what could be truer to Kumu’s irrational conviction that she is destined to marry Madhusudan and be his devoted and self-sacrificing wife, than her discovery – after her brave and rational decision to leave him – that she is irrevocably and physically tied to him after all? This seems mad, but equally mad – even to Rabindranath himself at times – was the *jiban-debatā* concept, and quite frankly from any rational or scientific standpoint a sense of guiding and inevitable personal destiny *is* mad, an impossible principle of which fanatics and megalomaniacs and terrorists are made, as well as mystics, saints, visionaries, dreamers, or – in Shakespeare’s famous formulation – “the lunatic, the lover, and the poet” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 103).

The genre of the novel at least ensures that Rabindranath’s rational and moral faculties play a strong part in *Yogayog*, even if they don’t quite win in the end. In *Muktadbarā*, however, they can seem suspended, as in this play, often coupled with *Raktakarabi* (1926) but not so well known and never performed in Tagore’s lifetime, is actually among his craziest and most *avant-garde* creations. I may not be able to analyse it in detail now, but a few comments and quotations will bring me to the fundamental point I want to make about Tagore the *poet*-

teacher.

A bald summary of *Muktadhārā* might make it seem promising as a play that also teaches, as its central metaphor of the huge *yantra* (machine) that the *Yantrarāj* Bibhuti, chief engineer of the state of Uttarkut has built to dam the river that supplies water to the people of Sivtarai is pertinent to controversies about dams today – the Narmada Dam project in India, for example, or the Three Gorges Dam and other massive hydropower projects in China. But the text as I went through it (it might seem different if I saw the play staged) came across as a thoroughly poetic and obsessive phantasmagoria, with a pounding, hurtling rhythmic drive in the nightmarish imagery of the *yantra*, punctuated by fanatical songs to Bhairav (Siva) that build up to his festival like a kind of relentless *passacaglia*. The play didn't impress me with environmentalist fervour so much as with a dark and lurid madness comparable to the terrifying canvases of the visionary romantic painter John Martin (1789-1854). Take

*o bhāi, oi dekh. sūrya asta geche, akāś andhakār haye ela, kintu bibhūtir yantrer oi cūrātā ekhano jvalche. roddurer mad kebeye yena lāl haye rayeche.*

[3rd Citizen of Uttarkut: Oh brother, look! The sun is setting, the sky has turned dark, but the tower of Bibhuti's machine over there is still burning. It's as if it is drunk with the red of the sun.]

or

*oi dekho ceye. godhulir alo yatai nibe asche amāder yantrer cūrātā tatai kalo haye ũhche.*

[Kundan: Look at that. The more the twilight fades the darker becomes the tower of our machine.]

or the song

*jay bhairab, jay samkar,  
jay jay jay pralayamkar.  
jay samśayabedan,  
jay bandhanchedan.... etc.*

[Victory to Bhairav, victory to Sankar/ Victory victory victory to the Destroyer./ Victory to the Splitter of Doubt/ Victory to the Ripper of Bonds..]. (*Rabindra-racanābali*, Vol. 14, 222, 227, 235)

I may seem to be wandering rather far from education, but in fact the play touches on education at several points. There is the funny but frightening scene early on where a Gurumoshay drills a gang of pupils in the hero-worship of the King of Uttarkut with a fanatical fervour comparable to what we see in North

Korea today; or there are the comments by the people of Sivtarai on education in Uttarkut that are as bemused as the observations of the subversive humans in *Tāser Deś* (1933) on the regimentation of the Card-people there:

*orā majuri karbār janyei janma niyeche, kebal sāt ghāṭer jal periyē sāt bhāṭei ghure beṛay.*

[1: They have been born to slave away, they just cross river after river to get to market after market and nothing more.]

*oder ye śikṣāi nei, oder yā sāstar tār madhye āche ki?*

[2: They have no education, what can there be in their shastras?]

*kichu nā, kichu nā, dekhisni tār akṣargulo uipokār mato.*

[1: Nothing at all, nothing at all – haven't you seen their letters? They're like white ants.]

*uipokāi to baṭe. oder bidye yekhane lāge sekhāne keṭe tukro tukro kare.*

[2: They really are white ants. They gnaw into tiny pieces anything they find in their learning.] (*Rabindra-racanābali*, Vol. 14, 211)

One might also relate the whole metaphor of the breaking of a dam to the freedom and release and expansion of imagination that Rabindranath saw as the goal of education.

It is, however, the charismatic character of the Vairagi Dhananjay who I find even more significant for this paper as a whole. Lifted in personality and dialogue from the character of the same name in an earlier play, *Prāyaścitta* ("Atonement," 1909), he belongs to a long line of crazy, wandering Baul or *sannyāsi* or *Ṭhākurdā* figures with whom Rabindranath often seems to identify as poet. When Ranajit, King of Uttarkut, accusingly asks him:

*tumi ei-samasta prajāder kbepiyechē?*

[Have you turned all these citizens mad?] (*Rabindra-racanābali*, Vol. 14, 215)

He characteristically replies – and we sense Rabindranath himself at his most honest and natural in these words –

*khyāpāi boiki, nijeo kbepi.*

[I certainly turn them mad – I'm crazy myself.] (*Rabindra-racanābali*, Vol. 14, 215)

But most interestingly – and also typically – Dhananjay is aware of the dangers of his own *guruḡiri*. As he approaches the door of the King’s palace, one of the citizens of Sivtarai asks in amazement:

*yāi bala, rājdūyāre kena ye calecha bujhte pārlum nā.*

[1: Whatever you may say, I couldn’t understand why you went to the King’s door.]

*kena, balba? mane baṛo dbōkē legeche.*

[Dhananjay: Shall I tell you why? I was in a great fix.]

*seki katha?*

[1: What do you mean?]

*torā āmāke yata jāriye dharc̄his toder sātār śekhā tatai pichiye yācche. āmāro pār baoya dāy hala, tai chuḡi nebār janya calechi seikhāne yekhāne āmāke keu māne nā.*

[Dhananjay: The more you tie yourself to my coat-tails the more your learning to swim is put back. I too am obliged to swim across. So to take a break I have gone where no one obeys me.] (*Rabindra-racanābali*, Vol. 14, 210)

Similarly, the *Yuvarāj* Abhijit, whose cause Dhananjay espouses, who is on the side of the oppressed people of Sivtarai, and who achieves the blowing up of the dam that restores water to Sivtarai but which sweeps him away in the flood, warns his younger brother Sanjay, when asked to be taken on as a *saṅgī* or companion:

*nā bhāi, nijer path tomāke kbūje ber karte habe. āmār pic̄hane yadi cala tā hale amii tomār pathke āṛāl karba.*

[No, brother, you will have to seek out your own path. If you follow behind me then I will conceal your path from you.] (*Rabindra-racanābali*, Vol. 14, 202)

This leads me to my main concluding point. Just as I think we should read *Muktadhārā* not as a playwright’s play, but as a *poet’s* play, driven by the obsessions and compulsions of a poet; and just as the characters in it with which the poet identifies have a charismatic streak of madness in them and/or an awareness of the dangers of that madness as well as its attractions; and just as



I think we should read *Yogāyog* as a *poet's* novel, whose basic trajectory and resolution is underpinned by the poet's sense of his own inevitable, painful destiny; so we should see Rabindranath's work as an educationist's and as a *poet's* work, inspiring and visionary for being so, but also at times mad, and possibly even dangerous. If we keep this in mind, it may help us to steer clear of the dangers of a cult that I mentioned at the beginning and maintain at all times a hard-headed, objective, unsentimental awareness of the gulf, both during his lifetime and subsequently, between the ideal of Santiniketan and Sriniketan and the reality. It should lead us to question, as Rabindranath himself must have done at times, whether poets do in fact make the best teachers; whether they have the patience and self-effacement and altruism that great teachers require; whether the step-by-step, rigorous, uncompromising care by which great teachers enable their pupils to achieve the highest possible standards in a craft or skill or art or academic discipline is part of the nature or *svabhāb* of poets; whether the capacity of *poet-teachers* to inspire can be outweighed, in the end, by their seductive ability to send their pupils mad.

With this somewhat disturbing thought, intended to provoke debate and reflection and to start a journey beyond the clichés, I conclude my paper.

#### **Addendum (February 2010)**

My argument in this paper certainly did cause some consternation at the conference, and I have deliberately not looked at it since then until now, for fear that I would no longer agree with it myself! Dr. Uma Das Gupta, fellow participant in the session in which I gave my paper, was clearly shocked that I could have suggested that Tagore's educational ideas could be dangerous, and Professor Ananda Lal, speaking from the audience, said that I sounded like Tagore's most conservative and reactionary contemporaries, who saw Santiniketan as the whimsical indulgence of a poet, and would not risk sending their sons or daughters there. But four years later, I still stand by what I said. Tagore's writings give plenty of evidence that he was well aware of the dangers of charisma and hero-worship. *Ghare-Bāire* (1916), for example, explores the dangers of Bimala's worship not just of Sandip, but of the wise and compassionate Nihilish himself, into whom (critics and biographers are agreed) Tagore put a lot of his own personality. Bimala, in one of her sections of the novel, writes:

One day he said, "In worshipping me you make me bigger than I am and this embarrasses me."

I said, "Why should you feel embarrassed?"

He said, "I'm not just embarrassed, I'm also envious."

I said, "Listen to you! Who are jealous of?"

He said, "That fake me. This makes me feel that you aren't satisfied with the ordinary me and you want an extraordinary someone who'll overwhelm your senses. That's why your imagination has created an ideal me and you're playing a game of make-believe."

I said, "I feel so angry when you say such things."

He said, "No point in getting angry with me, instead you should be mad at your destiny. You didn't really pick me out in a swayamvara; you had to take whatever you got with your eyes shut. Hence you're trying to rectify as much of me as you can, with spirituality. Since Damayanti had a swayamvara she could pick out the man over the god and since all of you haven't had a swayamvara, every day you ignore the man and garland the god."

*(The Home and the World 75)*

Equally significant is Nikhilesh's realisation, at the end of the novel, that his liberal programme for Bimala has itself been a kind of tyranny:

Today I began to feel that there was coercion deeply ingrained in me. I was hell bent on moulding my relationship with Bimala in one set, perfect mould. But life is not to be poured into moulds. And goodness, if mistaken for an inanimate object, dies on you and takes a cruel revenge.

*(The Home and the World 205)*

Rational self-awareness of this kind enabled Tagore to make the constant adjustments and compromises that were needed to stop Santiniketan and Sriniketan from becoming, in practice, either mad or dangerous. But those compromises – which have continued relentlessly right up to the present day – are precisely what has undermined the Santiniketan ideal. Both he and (after his death) Visva-Bharati itself were caught in a jam: the ideal itself, resting as it did on the charisma of one great man, had inherent dangers; the compromise of the ideal defeated the institution's original purpose. Will Visva-Bharati prosper this century? Worries about its future have certainly not gone away. The greatest educational institutions are the most enduring ones, and those that endure do so because they have an institutional structure and a physical location that are sufficiently flexible and adaptable to ensure their survival. If in fifty years time Visva-Bharati has still found it difficult to achieve this, we may have to conclude that the fundamental problem lay in the Poet's dream itself.

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