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Tagore's Poetry: What It Can Teach Us

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Good poetry, whether in our own language, or in good-quality translations, has a tremendous capacity to teach us the truths of life, and has historically fulfilled this educative function in most societies. As a literary genre, poetry is a compact and memorable way of transmitting a people's cultural and historical traditions, including their moral values. For this process to be active and alive, however, a society has to accord respect to this art-form and those who practise it. At the outset, we need to acknowledge the fact that in contemporary English society there is, sadly, a deficit in this respect

I do not have an intimate knowledge of the Welsh or Scottish scenes, but here in England a certain scepticism has settled in with regard to poetry. Many do not see the point of it. They are not sure whether it is a worthwhile activity, or whether it can teach us anything. Members of the general public may occasionally hear a poem being recited at a relative's funeral. Or their eyes may wander over rhymed lines on a Christmas or birthday card. Poetry no longer occupies an important place in the school curriculum and plays a steadily diminishing role in higher education. Poets do of course still write their stuff, are passionate about it, run their magazines, organize workshops and even classes where people may learn how to write poems. There is a Poetry Society, a Poetry Week, even a Poet Laureate to uphold the status of the occupation. Some editors seem fixated on holding poetry competitions, as if promoting competitions might be the best way to promote the art itself. By turning poetry into a performance art, black poets have made some inroads into what was previously a white elitist space. Some minority communities pursue poetry in their languages in enclosed spaces. Despite these scattered efforts, poetry is no longer a mainstream cultural activity in England. It is very much in the margins. This ambience is our first problem in learning from Tagore's poetry.

When I first came to this country in 1960 to read English at Oxford, our tutors were very proud of the poetic heritage in their language, which was still bringing them students from the ex-colonies. They bestowed much affection on the poetic genre. By the time my sons were at a comprehensive school in Oxfordshire in the late 70s and early 80s, poetry had ceased to be important in the school syllabus. What struck me most forcibly was the absence of poetry from their syllabuses when they studied French and German at O-level or A-level. Growing up in Bengal in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I had been persuaded that poetry was not only the best entry into your own literary tradition, but also one of the best routes to a second, third, or fourth language. I was therefore aghast when my elder son went through his German A-level exam without having to ponder a single poetic text in German. When I tried to engage the teachers in this burning

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issue at parents' evenings, my son squirmed. Apparently I was the only parent who made so much fuss about poetry.

Well, of course. Not only was I raised in Tagore's land, but also wrote poetry myself. When my children were at school, I was writing poetry not only in Bengali, but also in English. Poetry occupied pride of place in my education. I was encouraged to read poetry from the old epics to the latest moderns. With each language I learnt I read some of the poetry that came with it. So let me begin by telling you a little about what Tagore's poetry has taught me.

I belong to a generation of Bengalis who received Tagore as an unquestioned classic of their tradition. His last year on this earth and my own first year on it coincided, so when I was growing up he was this great poet who had just died. I grew up trying my hand at writing poetry under the benign shade of his words. In the art of writing poetry he was my first mentor. What greater lesson can a child learn from a dead poet?

Let me take you back to the end of 1942, when my earliest memories begin. They relate to a place now across the border in Bangladesh: Meherpur, where my father was stationed as the sub-divisional administrative officer. A large wooden *chauki* was permanently stationed on the veranda of the bungalow where we lived, and a dog-eared copy of Tagore's *Shishu* was my constant companion upon this *chauki*, where all my education took place. I do not remember a time when I was not literate in Bengali. I must have learnt to read and write at a very early age, encouraged, I suppose, by the fact that I was my mother's first-born and could therefore receive her undivided attention in the relative isolation of the countryside, while the Second World War kept infringing on our lives in other ways. The first Tagore songs I ever heard were in my mother's voice, sung during moonlit nights, sitting on that same *chauki* on the veranda.

*Shishu*, meaning 'The Child', first published in 1903, was the first book of poetry I ever read. It contains the poems Tagore wrote after his wife's death to console and amuse his children, especially his second daughter Renuka (Rani) who was ill with tuberculosis and would survive her mother by only nine months. Tagore took Rani to recuperate in the hills of Almora, a change of air being the only treatment recommended in those days, and many of the poems in the collection were written there.

The foundations of both my knowledge of Tagore and of my own life as a writer were laid on that veranda, with my copy of *Shishu* by my side. I was by no means the first generation of poets to learn from Tagore how to write poetry. The poets of my parents' generation had already done that. *Shishu* taught me to align myself with nature, with the plants and animals I saw around me, with human emotions I could relate to, and to daydream, that essential preliminary to writing poetry.

Many years later I discovered that marvellous poem, no. 46 of *Shesh Saptak*, where Tagore says how, as a boy, he used to rush from his bed to the garden at daybreak, anxious not to miss the sun rising through the coconut branches. Every day was then a new discovery, a new treat for him. I felt a shiver of recognition when I read that poem, because I used to feel exactly like that in my childhood too. Sitting on that *chauki* on the veranda, with *Shishu* by my side, I would commune with each day that dropped from the sky on my lap. I stared dreamily at the fruit trees around me, at washed clothes drying in the sun, and observed hens and lines of ants going about their business. Aided by Tagore's poetry, I developed my *modus vivendi* as follows: 'Observe the outside world; integrate it with your inner being as you sense it; now write a poetical comment.'

Because it takes in details of family life, the mother-child relationship, siblings, uncles, an absent dad who writes letters to the mother, and also includes others outside the immediate family circle who are part of the human scene, neighbours, the observable lives of peasants and boatmen, *Shishu* is a wonderful training ground for a child's affective life. There is a central focus on the mother-child relationship, and the mood is usually a mingling of playfulness and pathos. We appreciate the intrinsic beauty of the relationship, but are also made aware of its vulnerability, the possibility of loss, and ways to overcome that sense of loss. Sometimes it's as if Tagore is trying to tell his children that their mother hasn't really gone away, but is hiding somewhere. In this context, a poem like 'Hide-and-Seek' can be seen as a gentle comment on death, suggesting an oscillation between visibility and invisibility, which is a recurrent theme in Tagore, connected, I think, to his protanopic vision, or failure to see the colour red. The little boy proposes precisely such a game of oscillation to tease his mother; could it be that the mother was also playing a similar game to tease her children? Let me read the first and third stanzas of 'Hide-and-Seek' in my translation.

If I played a naughty trick on you, Mum,  
     and flowered as a champa on a champa tree,  
 and at sunrise, upon a branch,  
     had a good play among the young leaves,  
 then you'd lose, and I'd be the winner,  
 for you wouldn't recognise me.  
     You'd call, 'Khoka, where are you?'  
     I'd just smile quietly.

.....

At noontime, when everyone's had their lunch,  
     you'd sit down, the *Mahabharat* in your hands.  
 Through the window the tree's shade  
     would fall on your back, on your lap.  
 I'd bring my little shadow close to you  
 and sway it softly on your book —  
     you wouldn't know that it was  
     your Khoka's shadow moving before your eyes.

A child can also learn tremendous lessons of empathy from these poems and even appreciation for a natural object such as a bird's feather, once a part of a living creature, but now just a wondrous thing of beauty. I haven't translated the poem on the bird's feather, but let me read you the poem I've translated as 'Empathy'.

If I wasn't your little boy,  
 but just a puppy-dog,  
 would you tell me off,  
 lest I tried to taste  
 rice from your dinner-plate?  
 Tell me truly,  
 don't trick me, Mum!  
 Would you say, 'Off, off, off!  
 Whence has it come, this dog?'  
 Then go, Mum, go.  
 Let me get off your lap.  
 I won't eat from your hand,  
 I won't eat from your plate.

If I wasn't your little boy,  
 but just a parrot, your pet,  
 would you chain me, Mum,  
 lest I should fly away?  
 Tell me truly,  
 don't trick me, Mum!  
 Would you say, 'Wretched bird!  
 He wants to escape, does he?'  
 Then let me get off, Mum.  
 You don't have to love me any more.  
 I don't want to stay on your lap,  
 I'd rather go off to the forest.

The child wants to intervene in the life of adults, indulging in the fantasy of rescuing his mother from the clutches of highwaymen – a poem that William Radice has translated – or seeing his mother waiting for his father's letter, proposes to write his Dad's letter on his behalf and read it out to his Mum himself in order to avoid the machinations of the postman who may be withholding the delivery of good letters, keeping them in his bag for his own pleasurable reading. Generations of Bengali children have learnt valuable lessons of role-playing from such poems, lessons which can enrich their imaginative lives. I'm going to read you a section of 'An Offer of Help' in my translation.

What's the matter today?  
 Haven't you had a letter from Dad?  
 From his bag the postman  
 left a letter for everyone,

why not one from Dad every day?  
 He keeps 'em in his bag  
 to read 'em himself.  
 The postman's very smart, a crafty beggar!

Listen, Mum, you just take my advice.  
 Don't you worry about that any more.  
 Tomorrow's market day.  
 Just ask the maid  
 to get some paper and a pen.  
 You'll see, I'll make no mistakes;  
 from *ka* and *kha* to cerebral *na*  
 I'll write Dad's letter for him, I promise!  
 Come on, Mum, what's the meaning of that smile?  
 You think, don't you, I can never write  
 as good a hand as Dad can?  
 I'll draw the lines first,  
 then the rest big and neat.  
 When you see it, you won't believe it!  
 When the letter's written,  
 d'you think I'd be silly  
 like Dad and put it in the bag?  
 Never! Myself  
 I'll read it out to you,  
 for they don't deliver good letters.

What fun we had as children, imagining the situation! But *Shishu* also taught me a very serious moral lesson, which has stayed with me all my life. In March this year, when some of us present here were at a Tagore conference in Budapest, and we were having some lunch at a restaurant near our hotel, one of the participants suddenly asked me if I still had a hankering for an academic career. I forget what the exact context was. I was startled, but replied immediately that it was not a question of hankering. I had been seriously and extensively trained for an academic career, and did begin with university teaching in India in the sixties, but could not continue it in this country because of discrimination on multiple grounds. So towards the end of the 70s I decided to cut my losses and become a full-time writer and independent researcher. I have not looked back and feel no hankering for the life in academia that I haven't had.

When and where did I learn this value-system? A few days after this conversation, back home and putting together a piece on Durga Puja, the annual festival in honour of the Mother Goddess which is the central religious festival of the Bengali Hindus, it dawned on me that I had actually imbibed this value-system ages back from no other text than *Shishu*, my favourite reading material at ages 4 and 5. There is a poem there called 'Pujar Shaj' (Puja Outfit), which is permanently etched on my memory. I have no idea if it has been translated. I'll try to give you a paraphrase.

The poem tells us the story of two brothers as the Puja festival approaches. It is usual for householders to give some new clothes to family members and domestic staff at this time. The two brothers, Modhu and Bidhu, beg their mother to show them what their father has bought for them. She shows them two *jamias* or shirts of printed cotton. I am saying 'shirt' for convenience: Tagore probably meant a long shirt like a *kamiz* or tunic. 'Nothing else?' – asks Modhu. 'Yes,' she says, 'a pair of *dhoti* and *chador* for each of you.' Modhu throws a tantrum, drops the clothes on the floor, says he doesn't want them. Why? Because Goopi, the son of the Ray family, has received a cap embroidered with silvery thread and a satin shirt embroidered with floral designs. 'Hush,' says the mother, 'don't cry. Don't you know your father is a poor man? The harvest has been bad this year. He has made huge losses, and has been very upset. But still, because he loves you, he has made a special effort to buy for you what he can afford. How could you throw that gift on the floor? Is that what you have learnt after all these days?' Bidhu says he is satisfied with what he's got, which provokes Modhu even further. Angrily he leaves home and trots to the house of the Rays. They are obviously a wealthy family and are having a ceremony in their own wide veranda. Mr. Ray is very busy and his men have been up all night decorating the veranda. Modhu slinks in and stands in a corner, and Mr. Ray notices his forlorn figure. He gives the boy a hug and asks him what's up. Modhu bursts into tears and complains about the shirt. Mr. Ray has a quick word with his son and asks him to give his shirt to Modhu. Modhu is now over the moon and walks home proudly, calling people to look at him. 'There's our Bidhu in printed cotton! I have a satin shirt!' The mother is deeply upset. 'We may be poor, but we have no debts, and we don't stretch our hands and beg. You are a boy of this family. How can you beg from others and show off like this? One's own torn *dhoti* is more valuable than the satin obtained by begging. Come, Bidhu, let me give you a kiss. Your outfit is the best. The printed cotton shirt, lovingly given by a poor father, lights up a poor boy's body.'

So what I am saying is that the lesson learnt from this poem, absorbed in childhood and re-visited from time to time, has stayed with me, given me a sense of balance and direction, and helped me to make decisions throughout my life. I have not hankered after the satin shirt of an academic career and been content to wear the printed cotton of a freelance writer. The metaphor is especially apt in the context of my writing life in Bengali, a career which gives me no visibility here, but which I have pursued with love and faith.

The next book of Tagore's poetry which I read was *Katha o Kahini* (1900), an incredible collection of narrative poems based on historical and legendary material. Tightly structured and stunning in their formal beauty, eminently suitable for recitation, these poems are a formidable storehouse of moral education. The old stories are re-interpreted for modern times. By exploring the dynamics of human interactions and the drama of human situations in story after story, the poems teach us the difference between right and wrong, justice and injustice, kindness and cruelty, meanness and generosity, truth and falsehood, treachery and loyalty, weakness and strength – providing us with an education

for a lifetime. The poems teach us in the classic way, first delighting us with their verbal splendour, then opening the doors of perception, letting the messages walk straight into our heads. No sensitive person who reads the collection can remain indifferent to these messages. A tattered and ink-smudged copy of this book became another constant companion for me upon the *chauki*. I can still recall stanza after stanza. Some of the poems are very suitable for a short dance-sequence, accompanied by recitation, and are often presented in that format in educational institutions, and even in gatherings of the Bengali diaspora. I agree entirely with Mandakranta Bose when she says that Tagore's fusion of poetry, music, dance, and drama in his dance-dramas constitutes 'a landmark in India's cultural history'<sup>1</sup>. The seed of one of the most powerful dance-dramas of Tagore's later life, *Shyama*, given its final shape in 1939, just two years before his death, is lodged in one of the poems of this collection. The poem, based on a Buddhist story, is entitled 'Parishodh', which I translated as 'The Repayment'. It is a magnificent poem with a lacerating moral dilemma at its centre, expressed in modern terms.

Another remarkable piece in this collection is 'Karna-Kunti-Sangbad', 'Dialogue between Karna and Kunti'. As with the Buddhist story of Shyama and Bajrasen in 'The Repayment', in this poem the *Mahabharata* episode of Karna meeting his natural mother Kunti is re-interpreted so that the poem can act as a bridge between antiquity and modernity. Karna's last heroic speech to his mother teaches us how sometimes, in order to remain righteous, or to put it in the Hindu way, to remain on the path of *dharma*, we have to renounce an easy option that might have given us victory, and choose instead a harder path that might lead to defeat.

Mother, don't be afraid.

Let me predict: it's the Pandavs who will win.  
 On the panel of this night's gloom I can clearly read  
 before my eyes the dire results of war:  
 legible in starlight. This quiet, unruffled hour  
 from the infinite sky a music drifts to my ears:  
 of effort without victory, sweat of work without hope –  
 I can see the end, full of peace and emptiness.  
 The side that is going to lose –  
 please don't ask me to desert that side.  
 Let Pandu's children win, and become kings,  
 let me stay with the losers, those whose hopes will be dashed.  
 The night of my birth you left me upon the earth:  
 nameless, homeless. In the same way today  
 be ruthless, Mother, and just abandon me:  
 leave me to my defeat, infamous, lustreless.  
 Only this blessing grant me before you leave:  
 may greed for victory, for fame, or for a kingdom  
 never deflect me from a hero's path and salvation.

I have concentrated on the first two collections of Tagore's poetry I ever read to give you an idea of what they taught me, lessons that have remained with me all my life. Let me just round off this discussion by mentioning some of the main lessons we can all learn from Tagore's poetry. We learn to be aware of the natural world, to notice its details, a precious lesson in our time, as we seem to be intent on damaging what is not only our environment, but also the habitat of countless other life-forms. Tagore sees the earth as a mother, but shows us that she is actually a vulnerable mother who cannot feed all her children. In an early poem from *Kadi o Komal* (1886), entitled 'Kangalini', Tagore, speaking in the voice of a poor beggar-girl at the Puja festival, questions the very concept of an all-powerful Mother Goddess. 'If you are my mother,/ why am I in shabby clothes?' And again, 'If the person who's motherless doesn't gain a mother,/ what's this festival for?' The poem acknowledges that finding mothers for the motherless is a big human task. The question that the beggar-girl poses is man's generic challenge to the concept of an all-powerful Deity. If we read Tagore's poetry with some care, we find that he neither condones social iniquities, nor thinks of heaven and earth as separate places. In one poem in *Katha o Kahini*, the poet Tulsidas finds a woman getting ready to burn herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre. He asks her where she wants to go with so much pomp and circumstance. The widow replies that she wants to go to heaven with her husband. 'And why do you want to leave the earth and go to heaven,' asks the saintly poet, smiling. 'The Person to whom heaven belongs, does the earth not belong to Him also?'

Tagore speaks to God as to a friend, and it is through imagining and pursuing this friendship that he comes to terms with his many bereavements. Sometimes he feels far from this friend and is heavy of heart. At other times he is joyous, and develops what one might call a sacred humanism, where heaven and earth are the same place.

My heart's ravisher,  
     this is your love indeed:  
 this light's golden dance  
     upon the leaves!  
     These clouds, sweetly sluggish,  
     drifting in the heavens,  
     this breeze dripping manna  
         on my skin:  
     my heart's ravisher,  
         these are your love indeed!  
 (*Gitanjali*, no. 30)

That is why  
 you take such pleasure in me,  
 why you have come down!  
 Lord of the three worlds,  
 were it not for me,  
 your love would have been naught!

(*Gitanjali*, no. 121)

To conclude, Tagore always maintained that his identity as a poet was his most abiding identity, and at the same time, there is no denying that his poetic art educates us in diverse ways.

1. See her contribution in the collection of papers entitled *Rabindranath Tagore: A Timeless Mind*, Tagore Centre UK and the ICCR, London, 2011, p. 16.

All the excerpts from my translations of Tagore are taken from *I Won't Let You Go: Selected Poems* of Rabindranath Tagore, Bloodaxe Books, second edition, 2010.