

Tagore and Indian Culture

NOTHING THAT can be said or written about Rabindranath Tagore can convey the full significance of his personality. I feel that only another poet like Tagore himself could adequately describe him. When he was living, though I admired, appreciated and loved this great man, I never realized how much I would miss him after his passing. With him a great period has passed. There have been pioneers in religion, politics, social work and education in India during the last century, but there has been only one real pioneer in the field of Art. At a time when English education attempted completely to de-nationalize the educated citizens of this country, when Indian art was dying for want of encouragement by the State, when Indian life was looked down upon as backward and inferior, there arose this great poet who brought pride in their culture to the hearts of the educated and hope to the hearts of the so-called uneducated.

Rabindranath Tagore alone knew the real value of education through the Arts and built up a centre where every boy and girl grew up in an atmosphere of exquisite Indian culture. He himself was the quintessence of that culture. In this world there are many types of pioneers and great workers, but there are few whom one might call real messengers with a divine purpose to accomplish on earth. To me he was such a one and for one like me who has similar feelings and ideas, who tries to help this country in the same way, though to a smaller extent, he was a torch bearer who showed the path of true Indian life.

I have had the good fortune to see him, meet him and to know something of his life. Except on rare occasions, he was the guest of Dr. Annie Besant and later of Dr. George Arundale when in Madras. The first thing I felt when I saw him was the great beauty and dignity of his presence. In the descriptions of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, the Lord Buddha and other great Teachers in our ancient books, the grace and beauty of their physical presence are extolled as the outward manifestation of the beauty of their spirit and teaching. That outward presence itself attracted humanity to them and that attraction was an easy means of approach to the human mind and heart. In the same way even in lesser personages, beauty becomes a helpful attribute to their mission in life. This was well proved in the personality of Tagore for whom Beauty was the expression of Truth.

Annie Besant in her way was exquisitely beautiful and majestic. To see the two together was an unforgettable experience. When Tagore came to Adyar, Dr. Besant, who had the greatest appreciation and admiration for him, received him with every honour possible. The very first occasion I saw him was with her under the great banyan tree at Adyar sitting side by side on a *chauki*. She paid him a magnificent tribute in

her deep musical voice. Then he spoke and recited his poems. What a wonderful voice he had, sending through the audience waves upon waves of fragrant words! At that time I did not know enough English, but I was deeply affected by the sincerity and beauty of his utterance. I was then presented to him by Dr. Besant. He stayed many days pervading the place with his music and his charm.

I am told that his Bengali writings and poetry are even more wonderful than their translations in English. Bengali is a most poetic language in which he was completely himself. I wonder, however, whether even India would have recognized him and given him the honour he received if he had not spoken and written in English. At one time when I travelled in foreign countries, I remember everywhere people were more conscious of him than even of Gandhiji or any other Indian. Tagore himself once said he was recognized in India only after he received the Nobel Prize. Even to-day we suffer from this mentality he then complained about. But for the translation of his most wonderful books into English, he would probably have shared the fate of so many Indian scholars and great men and women who could not translate themselves so well into English.

It is indeed a blessing that he himself had Western education, for without it he would not have been able so well to show to India and the world the real nature and the true values of Indian culture. He believed fully in the Indian genius. Even though he did express his views on politics and took active part in the work for India's freedom, the best way he showed this independence of the Indian spirit was in the beauty of his poetry and in his educational work. He gave true Indian education to the young people in Santiniketan. They wore Indian clothes everywhere, sat on the floor and lived simple Indian lives. Art and education went hand in hand, for he knew no one can be civilized just by attempting to cram himself with knowledge.

Another beautiful aspect of his teaching was the emphasis on the home. In so many of his books he paints a picture of the simple Indian home with all the grace of village life, of the customs and the art that play a great part in the Indian home. While he painted picture of the village home, he also showed the uselessness and ugliness of certain outworn ideas, orthodoxies and customs. In fact he showed how one can be truly Indian in a real and spiritual sense even without certain things we consider to be important in our civilization.

In the home he elevated the Indian woman for whom he had great regard. From my many meetings with him I could perceive that he had far greater admiration for the unsophisticated and uneducated woman than for the modern girls who were becoming foreign to their country through wrong education and ideas.

Tagore was extremely sensitive to everything. I think ugliness affected him like poison. He liked beautiful colours; he liked people to dress well. He even found it difficult to talk to people who had harsh voices. He was sensitive to crowds and noise, though he was often in the midst of crowds. He was also sensitive to nature, to the

animals and birds. Like Tolstoy, who became a vegetarian when he saw a bull being taken to the slaughter house, Tagore was deeply moved when he saw some chickens struggling to escape from their slaughterer and became a vegetarian. I am not sure, however, whether he was able to continue to be one.

Since Tagore passed away and, soon after, we attained freedom as a nation. The West attracts us with a greater glamour than ever before. We also become Western in the wrong way. Tagore was Indian to his fingertips but he was no foreigner to the best of Western culture. He was universal in his ways and in understanding while remaining an Indian. No Englishman, leaving aside great poets like Shelley, was as great a master of sensitive English as Tagore was. To-day we wear more Western clothes, copy more Western customs and habits though our knowledge of the English language has become poor. We are more conscious of Indian art, music, dance and drama but we have less culture in the home and less art in our daily lives. We furnish our houses in ugly Western style, appreciate ugly costumes and dances while we talk more art. This shows that we never understood Tagore, for to him life itself was a work of art. Art illumines daily life and when it is divorced from life, it is like a soulless shell.

Tagore gave new life to India through the arts and he gave an unusual quality to his dramas. When people witnessed those dramas, even where Bengali was not understood, they were subtly and unknowingly drawn into an atmosphere which left its mark on them. Even to-day there is a magic spell in these creations but during his time the spell was far more potent as he himself became a part of those productions as he sat on one side explaining his plays. Who can forget that experience!

In his earlier years he himself took part in his plays and the memory of his acting in *The Post Office* is still with some of us. Our sorrow is that the younger generation to-day has no one like him to look up to. One always hopes that a great person can train his successors. I am sure we are all mistaken in this idea. Successors have to be born and the only thing which can be done is to create the proper environment for them to grow in and opportunities for them to grasp. It was for this that Tagore created Santiniketan and wonderful artists like Nandalal Bose came to help him in this mission. But where are the successors? If Tagore were alive to-day, I think he would be unhappy, for I think there are even greater obstacles in the way of Indian culture than in the days of the British, because then we always believed that a foreign government was making us all foreign by compulsion.

To-day we are voluntarily losing our faith in ourselves. We may all sing '*jana-gana-mana*', but can we sing it with the same devotion and faith that he had? Can such words as

Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people,
Thou Dispenser of India's destiny.
Thy name rouses the hearts
of the Punjab, Sind, Gujrat and Maratha,
of Dravid, Orissa and Bengal.

It echoes in the hills of the Vindhya and Himalayas,
mingles in the music of Jumna and Ganges,
and is chanted by the waves of the Indian Sea . . .

be sung by our hearts even if our tongues may not be inspired by Sarasvati as his was? Where is the deep emotion which moves the lips to utter such words?

Tagore translated the above for the benefit of the students of the Madanapalle Theosophical College, founded by Dr. Besant, when Dr. Cousins was its Principal. He sat amongst the students and personally taught '*jana-gana-mana*', which was immediately taken down in staff notation by Mrs. Cousins who was an accomplished musician. I believe this is the most correct version available.

The last time I ever saw and met Tagore was when Dr. Arundale and I went to see him in Santiniketan a few months before his passing. I was giving dance performances all over India, but I went without any accompanists thinking he was too ill to see a performance. We were treated with utmost hospitality and very gently he asked if I would give a dance recital. I told him I could not do so because of lack of accompaniments, but the request was repeated. I could not refuse and so I tried to teach one or two musicians in Santiniketan and gave two items of dance before a large audience in his home, 'Uttarayan'. I had to sing and dance as the young musicians could not manage to learn all that was wanted in so short a time. After the dance, Tagore, who was reclining on a *chauki*, called me to him, held my hands for a long time and showered me with praise and affection. He quoted from *Malavikagnimitra* and said he understood Kalidasa's idea of the greatness of the dance only then; also that he had never before appreciated Bharata Natya which he had seen once in Madras and that his opinion of the art had now changed. He said more which was even more personal but to me it was as if a great sage had given his blessing for me to go ahead.

Strangely enough, my attitude to India, to Art and to the ideals of education is as if I had been brought up and taught by him and I fully believe what India needs to-day is what he tried to teach us. What we need to remember is his message which must find a great response in our hearts. Our hearts must move and be uplifted so that we see in this country the compassionate beauty of the motherland. If the Tagore centenary celebrations can bring into incarnation the invisible being of Tagore and reveal visibly the glory of our country, it would indeed be a celebration of love and rejoicing.

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