

Rabindra Miscellany

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For my wife Sati,
Presiding Guardian of my Life

(in Rabindranath's expression, "*āmār jībaner adhiṣṭhātrī debī*")

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Rabindranath Tagore [Thakur]

A Brief biographical Note

Born in 1861 into one of the foremost aristocratic families of Calcutta, Rabindranath was the fourteenth child of Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), who headed the Brahmo Samaj (a Hindu reform movement begun by Raja Rammohan Ray, 1772-1833). He was educated by private tutors, and he first visited Europe in 1878. He started writing at an early age. In the 1890s, Tagore lived mainly in rural eastern Bengal, managing family estates. In the early 1900s he was involved in nationalist campaign (*swadeshi*) against the British, but withdrew when the campaign turned violent. In 1912 he came to England with his collection of poems, *Gitanjali* that was translated by him as *Song Offering*. This work was acclaimed by the famous Irish poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), and later received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913—Tagore being the first Asian to be honored thus. In 1919 he protested against the massacre of unarmed Indians in the district of Punjab by the British military and gave up his knighthood that he had received in 1915. In the 1920s and 1930s he undertook extensive lecture tours of America, Europe, and the Far East. His lectures on nationalism in Japan (May-September 1916) and the United States (September 1916-January 1917) were later published under the title *Nationalism* by Macmillan & Co. of London in 1917. He passed away in August 1941 following a prolonged illness that of course never did deter him from writing till the day he breathed his last. He is remembered and revered by Indians with the adoring sobriquet “Vishwakabi” (Poet Laureate of the Word). He was the first to address his younger contemporary, Mohandas Gandhi, as the “Mahatma” (The Great Soul) and the latter was the first to address Tagore as “Gurudev” (The Divine Master).

Prolegomena

Rabindra Miscellany is a modest attempt to sample some thoughts and writings of India's most brilliant poet, philosopher, and patriot, a prodigious polymath, indeed the quintessential *Uomo Universale* of the Bengal Renaissance whom his modern British biographers have called "Myriad-Minded Man" (Dutta and Robinson 1995). The five essays—one of them is a translation of a chapter of the distinguished Tagore scholar and historian Professor Niharranjan Ray's book on Rabindranath's humanism and cosmopolitanism—seek to offer a window to the panoramic expanse of Tagore's intellect and imagination. This study is expected to be helpful to students, teachers, researchers, critics as well as aficionados of Tagoreana.

Notes and references for each chapter appear as discrete sources for each chapter. This has sometimes resulted in repetition but they stand in every chapter as clear sources in their fullness for the sake of readers' convenience in checking citations or further reading.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter One

Rabindranath the Aesthetic Erotic

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) reputation as a *ṛṣi* (saint), *mahāmānab* (superman),¹ or *gurudeb* (divine mentor) has created a haze and a halo through which we can neither recognize the concrete human being of flesh and blood nor appreciate his emotional sensibilities in their proper perspectives. As such, a number of critics such as Ajitkumar Chakravarti, Srikumar Banerjee, Mohitlal Majumdar, or Charuchandra Banerjee either refused to consider the direct influence of the human experiences, especially his relationships with various women, on some of Rabindranath's greatest lyrical pieces, or considered any attempt to probe into them irrelevant, irreverent, or irresponsible (Ghosh 1998, 1-57; see also Chakravarty 1353 BE, 1390 BE; Bandyopadhyay 1346 BE; Bandyopadhyay 1946; and Majumdar 1973). However, the distinguished Tagore scholar Pramathanath Bishi provided an explanation for his claim that Rabindranath's poems and lyrics dealing with love lack distinct human intimacy. A distinct signature of Tagore's love poems, Bishi goes on, is that they reveal sadness, disappointment, and compassion rather than passion, euphoria, or tumult of the heart (Bishi 1378 BE, 188; see also Bishi 1962).

If we pay heed to Buddhadeva Bose and Sankhya Ghosh's sensible suggestion to read Rabindranath's poetry *qua* poetry (*kabitār uddeśe kabitā*) (Bose 1966, 41; Ghosh 1998, 97-139) and try not to analyze it either insisting on the contexts and causes of his works or ignoring their human and historical but emphasizing spiritual or philosophical dimensions, we would readily realize that he truly was what another great poet of his day, though hailing from an earlier generation, Walt Whitman of America (1819-92), wrote in a celebrated poem "Song of Myself" (1885): "I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 1982, 87). Indeed, as Tagore has clearly stated in a letter from London to his niece Indira on October 10, 1890:

The human mind is deep and variegated; swayed by multiple pulls and pressures it has to bend [and adjust]. That is the sign of its life, its humanity, and its protests against sterile immobility. One who does not face this ambivalence and weakness has a very narrow, hard, and dead mind. Our instinct, which we ridicule often, is the motor of life, it elevates us unto the infinite through pain and pleasure, sanctity and sin (cited in Das 1367 BE, 136).

Yet, beneath all his contradictions and ambivalence in respect of a number of issues there is a strong undercurrent of Rabindranath's essential humanism that was nurtured by his native culture he inherited and the Western culture of his day he imbibed (see Majumdar 1389 BE). Nothing illustrates this problematic of Tagore's "myriad-minded" (see Dutta and Robinson 1995) genius more clearly and wonderfully than his poems dealing with love.

The following pages attempt to bring together insights of several distinguished studies in Bengali to highlight the profile of Rabindranath, the sensitive, sensuous, shy as well as a spiritual human being. Tagore's delicate and refined sensibilities dictated his poetic imagination and public discourse and his entire life was dedicated to celebrate the beautiful and the eternal and proclaim the triumph of human love sublimated in cosmic compassion and *agape* or divine love. In fact, the poet himself confessed to his own fluid understanding of love in a letter to Indira's husband Pramatha Chaudhuri: "I can't tell for sure whether I am driven by [human] love with all its pleasures and pain deriving from union and separation [of lovers] or by an indefinite but inordinate longing for beauty" (cited in Ray 1987, 289). As early as 1891, the thirty-something Rabindranath had written a poem on *prem* [love] titled "Dūrbodh" [Incomprehensible] belonging to the collection *Sonār Tarī* [Golden Boat, 1891]:

*E ye sakhī, hṛdayer prem—
Sukhdukhkhabedanār ādianta nāhi yār,
Ciradainya, cirapūrṇa hem.
. . . bujhā yāi ādho prem, ādhkhānā mon—
Samasta ke bujheche kakhan?*

[This love of mine springs from the heart.

It has limitless pangs and pleasures,
always empty, always filled with pure gold.

It's easy to figure out a little love or a bit of the heart's desires,

But who could fathom the depth of love in its fullness and entirety?] (Thakur 2002, 126)

Rabindranath Outlook on Women

Any discussion of Rabindranath's concept of erotic love, that is *prem*, must be prefaced by and predicated on his understanding of human love as well as his outlook on the feminine. Jagadish Bhattacharya has discussed in detail the Hindu cultural influences of the Tagore family (even though Brāhmo) and the Western intellectual influences of Renaissance Bengal where Rabindranath was born and brought up. The young poet at once internalized the *parakīyā prem* [love without lust or *niṣkāṃ prem*] of the Vaiṣṇab *sahajiyās* represented by the fourteenth-century poet Chandidas (c. 1339-99) as well as the *eros* of Plato

(427-347 B.C.) via the *corpus* of Tagore's predecessor in England the "natural Platonist" Percy B. Shelley (1792-1822), the love of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) expressed for Beatrice Portinari (1266-90) in *La Vita Nuova*, or that of Francesco Petrarca (1304-74) expressed for Laura de Noves (1308-48) in *Canzoniere* (Tagore 1931, ch. 6 and 65-66; see also Bhattacharya 1997, I, 19, 38 and 2000, II, 17-55). Rabindranath himself admitted to his attraction for the poet John Keats (1795-1821) in an essay in 1895: "Of all the English poets known to me, I feel an especial intimacy with Keats ... [whose] language is marked by a sincere aesthetic delight" (cited in Majumdar 1389 BE, 264).

Buddhadeva Bose argues persuasively that Tagore's collection of poems in *Mānasī* [Woman of Imagination, 1890] constitutes the primary *locus* or an "atomic world" ("anubīśva") of the poet's lyrical *oeuvres* and their *leitmotif* is love. Bose argues further that the object of Tagore love poems in *Mānasī* is not a concrete identifiable individual but an indefinite fluid entity. At best, as Bose concludes, "most of [Tagore's] poems beginning with *Manasi* down to *Gitanjali* [Song Offerings, 1906-10] are ambivalent or multivalent in that their subject matter love cannot be said to be love in human or divine sense with any certainty" (Bose 1966, 36-37). According to another distinguished Tagore scholar, Kshudiram Das, Rabindranath's literary genius consists, fundamentally, in his assimilation of visible real life (*jīban*) with the idealized or imagined unseen (*arūp*) that transcends the sensate world. This synthesis is a reflection of the poet's successful amalgam of the sensuous Western literary tradition and the introspective meditative tradition of his native culture (Das 1996, 9). While Das perhaps comes closer to truth, he tends to overlook the human experiences that inspired some of the poet's outstanding creations in a major way. In the final analysis we must recognize the vast inclusive expanse of his *Weltanschauung* that comprehends a multiplicity of perspectives and trajectories defying any straitjacketed categories.

Rabindranath's Upbringing

It must also be noted that Rabindranath's upbringing in a spartan, though never overly puritan, Brāhmo family might have conditioned him against any outward expression of emotional outbursts or sexuality. He never experienced any parental indulgence as a child being neither the eldest nor the youngest. His movements inside as well as outside the home were restricted. Admittedly, he was not neglected but, in keeping with the usual practice of his day, as a child he was kept away from the adult world under the control of the household servants, especially the two redoubtable veterans Brajeshwar and Shyam. From his boyhood, Rabindranath learnt to live a simple but disciplined life. "It could be said that luxury was conspicuous by its absence in our childhood," Tagore recalled later (Thakur 1368 BE, 5). He wrote elsewhere: "I was a lonely child, I had no friends to play with. But I had the great big visible world to keep me company" (Tagore's letter to "A" dated March 1939 cited in Tagore 1961, 25). He had been a

sparse eater, though he did take part in physical exercise on a daily basis. He, however, disliked attending school as he must have found the atmosphere there boring and choking. At the same time, as he writes in his reminiscence, *Chelebelā* [My Boyhood Days, 1940], he was subjected to a strict regimen of studies and musical lessons at home under private tutors (RR, XXVI, 596, 607).

His evolution into adulthood occurred under such a controlled environment. The Brāhmo etiquette of his family permitted free mixing between male and female members under certain parameters that were neither wholly patriarchal nor entirely egalitarian in terms of genders. Even as a mature young man Tagore manifested his uneasiness in female company. Admiring his young England-educated nephew Surendranath's (1872-1940) spontaneous socialization with young women (*beś rītimata pākā styley ālāp*), the thirty-two year old poet confessed:

Even at 32 I am unable to converse with women in such an easy, self-assured, and elegant manner. I stumble while walking, fumble while talking, and I am at a loss as to where to place hands or what to do with my long legs; while thus preoccupied with them I fail to continue conversations [with women] satisfactorily. In a crowded room [dimly] lit by three candles it becomes impossible for a clumsy and cowardly creature like me to get myself close to a young woman like iron to a magnet (cited in Chaudhuri 1398 BE, 22).

No wonder, the young Rabindranath failed to summon a typical masculine response to the Maratha belle Anna Pandurang Tadhkhat's unabashed but sincere gesture to get him to hug and kiss her. Many years later, the poet confessed to his timid unromantic indifference to the pretty Anna's (he had nicknamed her "Nalini") overtures (Roy 1950, 171-73). He was similarly unresponsive to the erotic advances of the Scott sisters of Bloomsbury, London where the young poet had been a paying guest. As he told Dilip Roy many years later, he had little doubt that the girls, his "lovers in former life" (*pūrba janamer priyā*) (Majumdar 1986, 7. See also Datta 1987, 100-29), really fell for him and yet we notice his shy behavior at the initial stage of his meeting with them; he could not even summon the courage to look at one of them, Miss J, straight in the eye, lest he should lose his cool beholding her "well-chiseled countenance" [*apūrba chāñce dhālā mukh*]. The poet's experiences with the mature, independent-minded, and intellectual Victoria Ocampo (1891-1979) of Argentina, whom he named Bijaya (a Bengali synonym for Victoria), register a similar episode of unrequited passion (Bhattacharya 1997, I, 320-27, and 2000, II, 144-46).

One might reasonably suppose that his intimacy with Kadambari (1858-84), wife of his elder brother Jyotirindranath (1849-1925), was immaculate it being a romantic communion or (as will be discussed later, *bhālobāsā*) because of a tabooed relationship (see Deb1392 BE). Kadambari had possessed the poet's heart by gifting away hers to him. In fact Tagore dedicated a number of poems to her: *Bhagnahṛday* (Heartbreak, 1881), *Chabi o Gān* (Images and Lyrics, 1884), *Prakṛtir Pratisodh* (Nature's Revenge, 1884), *Śaisab Sngīt* (Song of Childhood, 1884), *Bhānusiṅgha Ṭhākurer Padābalī* (Lyrics by Bhanusingha Thakur, 1884), and the like. Victoria Ocampo, on the other hand, fell in love hook

line and sinker with a handsome sexagenarian fit to be her father in age, and she did not hide her feelings for her *gurudev*. “I love you. Nothing can alter that,” she confessed candidly in one of her missives to the master and concluded reiterating her feelings for him: “let me tell you, Gurudev, that I love you” (cited in Dyson 1988, 250). The old bard in turn dedicated his anthology *Pūrabī* (1925) to his Argentine adorer Bijaya. As he recalled his enchanted encounter:

Bideśer bhālabāsā diye
Ye preyasī peteche āsan
Ciradin rākhibe bāndhiy
Kāne kāne tāhāri bhāṣaṇ.
Bhāṣṣā yār jānā chila nāko,
Ānkhī yār kayechila kathā
Jāgāye rākhibe ciradin
Sakarūṇ tāhāri bāratā

[The lover who has gifted a throne
 with her love from a strange land.
 Her whisperings will ring in (my) ears
 For all time to come.
 Her language I did not know
 Only her eyes spoke to me.
 Her melancholy message will endure for all time to come] (Thakur 1941, 8).

Ketaki Kushari Dyson, who has admirably probed Ocampo’s relationship with the aging Rabindranath in 1924-25, maintains that she became a Muse for the poet’s creative corpus after 1924 (Dyson 1988, 267).

Dyson’s claims for Ocampo’s impact on Rabindranath’s literary output since the mid 1920s conflict with Bhattacharya’s observations on the influence of the precocious child Ranu Adhikari (later Lady Ranu Mukherjee, 1899-1997), whose beauty, simplicity, and gloriously freewheeling love and admiration for the handsome old man inspired his creative genius in significant ways (Bhattacharya 1997, I, 13).² The child Ranu appeared as the messenger of the poet’s *Jibandebatā* reminding him of the playmate of his early youth Kadambari—“morning star of his life transformed into the evening star [of his old age]” (*bhorer tārā elo sāñjher tārār beśe*) (Bhattacharya 1997, I, 306). Even Tagore’s younger relatives wondered about the “new inspiration” and “cause” of the “outpouring of new poems of a fine and noble vintage” (Kripalani 1980, 323). There were other women in the poet’s life, less glamorous intellectually, but who impacted his psyche and work, women such as his child-bride Mrinalini (though more a spouse than a Muse), his niece Indira, his sister-in-law Jnadanandini, his daughter-in-law Pratima, his grand-daughter Nandita, and Rani Mahalanabis, and Rani Chanda.

Rabindranath's Changing Attitudes to Women

When we examine the various stages in Tagore's understanding and appreciation of woman's humanity we cannot fail to notice that while as an adolescent, he saw her as a fairy queen of his dream world, as a young man he saw her as a romantic princess. Naturally, women awakened his unbridled youthful passion, witness his output during 1878-84. For instance, his *Kabikāhinī* [A Poet's Lore] and *Banaphool* [Wild Flowers], the two novellas in verse, published in 1878 and 1880 respectively, with their theme of an intimate relationship between femininity and the natural world, express the poet's spontaneous lyrical genius but contain a mishmash of wishy-washy sentimental excesses. Recalling *Bhagnahrday*, Tagore himself observed later that at the time of composing this piece his mind was filled with vaporous bubble and his sentimental gunk was being churned in the whirlpool of fantasies without any purpose. This was sterile stirring—devoid of creativity and beauty. His lack of direction and aimless amorous fantasy yielded to intensely passionate longings especially in pieces such as *Asahāy Bhālabāsā* (Unbearable Passion), *Āmi Hārā* (Lost Me), *Upahār* (Gift), and *Durdin* (Hard Times), all belonging to the collection titled *Sandhyā Saṅgīt* [Evening Song, 1882]. The young poet's heart was shivering in trepidation having been overcome by an uncontrollable longing for the bliss of a mysterious woman's touch:

Man mor pāgaler hena

Prāṅpane śudhāy se yena,

Prāṅer mājhe ki karile tomāre go pāi,

Ye thñāi rayeche śunya ki karile se śunya purāi

[My ecstatic heart seeks you in daring desperation,

Asking how could I get near you,

how [could I] fill the void [in my heart] that you created] (cited in Majumdar 1986, 7; see also Gangopadhyay 1988, 78).

As he confided to Pramatha Chaudhuri: "I passed the whole day [during the period of the composition of *Chabi o Gān* [Pictures and Songs] like a lunatic—I was overwhelmed by the gushing flood tide of my newly awakened youth" (cited in Majumdar 1986, 7).

By the time Rabindranath composed the poems of *Chabi o Gān*, he had crossed the boundary of the dreamy and idealized romantic longings of adolescence and entered the tumultuous world of youth assailed by an intense feeling of adult erotic urge. Unlike the earlier mood of his adolescence, when he sought the abstract and idealized woman of his fancy, the fully grown young man now set out to construct the image of a realistic female. As he recalled the period of the composition of *Chabi o Gān* in his old age, his "desire [for a woman's love] was not to be satisfied with mere music, he now wished to savor her physical beauty" (cited in Majumdar 1986, 8). This state of mind is made lyrically manifest in the piece

in *Māyār Khelā* (1888) that cries out loud:

Hṛdaye jāgāye bāsanār śikhā
Nayane sājāye māyā marīciikā
Śudhu ghure mari marubhūme
Tabu kena, tabu kena miche e pipāsā.
Biśva-carācara luṭṭa haye yāy
E ki ghor prem andharāhu prāy
Jībana-youbana grāse
Tabe kena, tabe kena miche e kuyāsā.

[I move about aimlessly with my heart burning in desire/

And my eyes beholding an illusive mirage./

What, then, my love is for?/

This tremendous passion, like the blinding *Rahu*, consumes my youth and my life./

Why, then, is this love of mine?].

Such anxious longings and ecstatic excitement mark his poems, *inter alia*, “Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga” [The Awakening of the Waterfall], and “Ananta Jīban” [Eternal Life], all belonging to the anthology titled *Prabhāsaṅgīt* (1883) (Thakur 1345 BE, 10-20, 24-32). It is well known how Rabindranath came to write his profoundly moving long poem “Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga” in a fit of sudden illumination that had all the qualities of an epiphany. Sometime in 1881-82, Rabindranath lodged with his brother Jyotirindranath and Kadambari at 10 Sudder Street, Kolkata, just behind the National Museum. Here, as he later recalled in *Jībansmṛti* [My Reminiscences]:

One morning I happened to be standing on the verandah looking that way. The sun was just rising through the leafy tops of the trees. As I gazed, all of a sudden a lid seemed to fall from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. That very day the poem ‘Nirjharer Swapnabhanga’ (The Awakening of the Waterfall), gushed forth and coursed on like a cascade (Tagore 1991, 153-54).

Interestingly enough, Rabindranath’s ecstatic exclamation “*jāgiyā uṭheche prāṅ/ore uthali uṭheche bāri/ore prāṅer bāsanā prāṅer ābeg rudhiā rākhite nāri*” [My aroused heart is overflowing with uncontrollable passion] was as sensual as it was spiritual, reminiscent of child Ramakrishna’s (1836-86) *samādhi* at the sight of flying cranes in the cloudy sky or the sixteenth-century German reformer Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) wondrous vision of the merciful Christ upon reading St. Paul’s letter to the Romans(see Thakur 1345 BE, 13; Saradananda 1983, I, 55-56; Sil 1982-83). The poem contains Tagore’s paradigm of love and, as many critics agree, heralds the birth of Rabindranath, the future world poet. It is fairly certain that the inspiration behind this literary masterpiece was the poet’s sister-in-law and that there developed an intimacy between the two young sensitive and impressionable individuals of almost the same age (see Chaudhuri 1398 BE, 27-35; Gangopadhyay 1997, I, *passim*; Bhattacharya 1997, I, ch, 2 and 2000, II, ch. 6).

It is noteworthy that the poet's later creations, *Kaḍi o Komal* and *Mānasī*, in particular, brought in, to paraphrase his own observations, the fresh fruits of the heady autumn (*śaratkāḷ*) in place of his former sentimental torrents of the rainy season (*barṣākāḷ*). However, the autumnal fruits also generated an ambivalent image of the female—at once a passionate mistress and a compassionate mother. Thus in his essay *Dui Bon* [Two Sisters], Tagore wrote that women are of two kinds: erotic (*priya*) and motherly (*ma*) (Sen 1975, 138). To cite a few lines from the poem “Hriday Asan” (Heart's Throne) in *Kaḍi O Komal* [Sharps and Flats, 1886]:

Komal dukhāni bāhu sharame latāye
Bikaśita stan duṭi āgulyā ray,
Tāri mājhkhāne ki re rayeche lukāye
Atiśay-sayatan-gopan hṛday!
Sei nirālāy sei komal āsane
Duikhāni snehasphūta staner chāyāy
Kiśor premer mṛdu pradoṣkirane
Ānata āṅkhir tale rākhibe āmāy

[(Her) two tender arms cling shyly to cover and protect the two blossoming breasts.

In between them lies hidden [her] carefully nurtured heart!

In that secret tender seat under the shade of the two loving breasts and her sunken eyes [she] will keep me ensconced at the faint twilight of youthful love] (Thakur 2002, 37).

In *Pūrṇa Milan* [Total Union], the poet's eroticism is acutely clear:

Trṣita parān āji kāṅdiche kātare
Tomāre sarbāṅga diye karite darśan
Ābār kothāo—
Oi dehakhāni buke tule neba bālā
Pañchadaś batsarer ek gāchi mālā

[My thirsty heart is crying out

To behold you with my every limb.

Girl, I shall place your body in my heart like a garland of fifteen] (cited in Dhyang 1993, 11).

Other pieces, such as “Stan” (Breast), “Cumban” (Kiss), “Bibasanā” (Naked), “Bāhu” (Arms), “Caran” (Feet), “Deher Milan” (Physical Union) etc. from *Kaḍi o Komal*, celebrated the charms of the female physique.

In his maturer years Tagore came to view his relationship with women as something deeper and dearer than that of a partner in the game of love. In one of the poems of his *Sonār Tarī*, the poet's *kabitā kalpanālatā* [Muse] or *mānassundaī* becomes *jībaner adhiṣṭhāatrī debī* [presiding goddess of life] and *antaralakṣmī* [goddess of the innermost recesses of heart] (Thakur 2002, 113-24 “Mānassundarī”). She

also becomes what the poet calls *jībandebatā* [Lord of life]. As he wrote in *Citrā* (1896):

Rāte preyasīr rūp dhari

Tumi esecha prāṇeśvarī,

Prāte kakhan debīr beśe

Tumi samukhe udile hese

Āmi sambhrambhare rayechi dāṇḍāye dūre abanata śire

Āji nirmalbāi śānta ūṣāi nirjan nadītūre.

[You came to me at night in the/

Guise of a lover.

At dawn you appeared similing,

Decked as a Goddess./

And awestruck, I remain standing on the desolate riverbank yonder

With my head hung low in wonder] (Thakur 2002, 234: “Rāte o Prabhāte” [At Night and at Dawn]).

For Tagore, thus, woman is *se yena tufān/āhāre cancal kare se tarīke kare khān khān* [she is like a torrent./She pulverizes the boat she shakes]; she is a *yādukarī bacane calane* [a charmer in her gait and speech], who is *prasādhan sādhan caturā* [an adept at making herself up], and yet the same woman “lights and puts out a small lamp iné her room./ After her morning bath she unlocks her hair and meditates her silent prayer” [*grhakone chota dīp jvālāy nebāy/ Snān sāṅga kari elocule prabhāte nīrab nibedane stab kare ekmane*] (cited in Bishi 1378 BE, 359: “Ujjīban”, *Mahuā*).

This *mélange* of opposite attitudes bears testimony to the poet’s unstated albeit undoubted thesis that true human love is more than lust, it is also the channel of receiving the assurance of divine grace. The capstone for such a realization is to be noticed in *Mahuā* (1928) which contains, among others, the following piece: “Woman is God’s greatest gift descended on earth to bestow dignity and honor upon man” [*Nārī se ye mahendrer dān,/eseche dharitrītale puruṣere saṁpīte sanmān*] (cited in Majumdar 1986, 200: “Spardha” (Audacity). In another piece the poet wrote: “*Dibe se khuli/E ghor dhūlir/Ābaraṇ./Tāhār hāte/āṅkhir pāte/jagat-jāgā jāgaraṇ./Se hāsikhāni ānibe tāni/sabār hāsi/Gaḍibe geha, jāgābe sneha/jībanrāsi* [She will unveil/this dusty cloak./This world will awaken to her look./Her smile will make everyone smile,/ And nurture a home and evoke affection in every life] (cited in Majumdar 1986, 189: “Śūnya Hṛdayer Ākāṅkhyā” [Desires of an Empty Heart]). Thus, as the poet proclaims in *Malini*, woman is neither a goddess nor an abstraction but a familiar female of flesh and blood—*debī nā re, dayā nā re, gharer se meye* (cited in Bishi 1378 BE, 345)

VI

We also need to note that Rabindranath’s idealized woman is no mere abstraction even though she is a product of his creative genius. Thus his *mānasī* is a mix of sensuous experience as well as poetic

imagination. As has been noted above, he did acknowledge *la femme* to be god's gift, and yet he could write: “*Śudhu bidhātār sṛṣṭi naha tumi nārī./Puruṣ gaḍeche tore soundarya sañcāri/Āpan antar hate*” [Woman, you're not created by god alone./You're also made of the beauty of man's heart] (Thakur 2002, 245: “Mānasī”, *Caitālī*). In his famous lyric from *Mānaspratimā* [Idol of Imagination] he sang: *Tumi āmara sādhera sādhanā/Āmi āpana manera mādhurī miśāye tomāre karechi racanā* [You're the prayers of my desire/ I've created you from my imagination of the sweet and the beautiful] (Pal 1982-90, IV, 152). Thus the poet could announce to his *mānasī* with confidence as well as humility: *Āj tumi āpanāke cinecha/Āmār cenā diye* [You now know who you are/By my reckoning] (Thakur 1359 BE, 12: “Dvaita” [Duality]).

In a number of subsequent poems, Rabindranath celebrated the beauty and beatitude of femininity in nature. His idea of *prem* has now been transmuted or sublimated into *bhālobāsa*, that is as much spiritual and cerebral (*manomai*), as it is passionate and physical. The poet even resurrects the Hindu cupid Madan, who suffered death by being immolated in Shiva's angry fire, as the deity of love reborn as a hero: “*mṛtyu hate oṭho Puṣpadhanu/Hey Atanu, bīrer tanute laho tanu*” [Arise from death, O the Bearer of the Flower Bow/Assume the form of a hero, O the Formless] (cited in Mukhopadhyay 1978, 346). Here we must recall Rabindranath's definition of *bhālobāsa*. As early as 1881, the young poet had written in an essay in *Bharati* that “*bhālobāsa* is more than mere self-surrender. Rather, it is surrendering the very best of one's self. *Bhālobāsa* is not just installing the idol of the goddess in the heart. It is, more appropriately, installing the idol in the heart's sanctum” (Thakur 1288 BE cited in Bhattacharya 1997, I, 164). In his “Paścim Yātrīr Diary” (Diary of a Traveler to the West) written on board the vessel “Haruna Maru” *en route* to South America in October 1924, Tagore expatiated on the meaning of *prem* in the double import of the word: *bhālolāgā* (liking) and *bhālobāsā* (love). The former is directed toward the self while the latter toward the other. *Bhālolāgā* is gratified in enjoyment, *bhālobāsā* achieves fulfillment in sacrifice and surrender. “*Bhālobāsā* realizes itself in the spirit, it is the expansion of human personality,” Tagore concluded (cited in Gangopadhyay 1988, 92).

In “Upahār” [Gift] Tagore wrote:

*Bhule gechi kabe tumi chelebelā ekdin
Maramer kāche esechile
Snehamay chāyāmay sandhyāsama āñkhi meli
Ekbār bujhi hesechile
Āge ke jānita balo kata ki lukāno chila Hṛdaye nibhṛte
Tomār nayan diyā āmār nijer hiyā
Pāinu dekhite*

[I have forgotten the day you came to my heart
In my youth,
And looked at me with your loving eyes cool as the evening shadows.
Who could have known what treasure was hidden in my heart
Until I could discover it through your gaze] (cited in Mazumdar 1986, 14-15: *Sandhyāsaṅgīt*).

The poet's lover is not just an erotic playmate of youth; she is also his soul mate in life and beyond. His idea of femininity shows a remarkable fusion of Western and Eastern ideas in his reconstruction of the character of Chitrangada, a character in the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata* (c. 1370 B.C.). As he makes her proclaim in the famous lyrical play *Citrāngadā*:

*Āmi Citrāngadā āmi rājendranandinī
 Debī nahi, nahi sāmānyā ramanī.
 Pūja kari rākhibe māthāy, seo āmi
 Nai; abahelā kari puṣiyā rākhibe
 Piche, seo āmi nahi. Yadi pārśve rākho
 More saṅkater pathe, durūha cintār
 Yadi aṅśa dāo, yadi anumati karo
 Kaṭhiṅ brater taba sahāy haite,
 Yadi sukhe dukkhe more karo sahacarī,
 Āmar pāibe tabe paricay.*

[I am princess Chitrangada,
 Not a goddess to be worshiped
 On an altar,
 Nor a mere woman pushed behind
 With indifference.
 If you let me walk beside you
 In weal and woe/
 And make me your comrade
 In difficult venture,
 You will know me
 For what I am] (Thakur 1356 BE, 69-70. Translation borrowed from Ray 2003, 48-49).

“In her,” observes Rajat Ray, “the older Indian idea of wife as a partner in the duties of family life (*sahadharmini*) had developed, under Western influence, into the romantic concept of a comrade in perilous action” (Ray 2003, 48). Clinton Seely further clarifies the term *bhālabāsā* by comparing it to the commonly understood terms such as *sneha* (a kind of filial attraction) and *prem* (amorous romantic love). *Bhālabāsā*, Seely concludes, “comprehends both *sneha* and *prem*” (Seely 2000: Online). Niharranjan Ray astutely observes that for Tagore “love cannot deny or bypass the reality of the body's desire; but a love which never learns to go beyond the body knows no real fulfillment, no peace, and is, therefore, unreal” (Ray 1967, 119). Indeed, as the poet himself has written in *Creative Unity*, “in human nature sexual passion is fiercely individual and destructive, but dominated by the ideal of love, made to flower into a perfection of beauty, becoming in its expression symbolical of the spiritual truth in man which is his kinship of love with the Infinite”(Tagore 1922, 7-8). In his poem “Niṣphal Kāmanā” [Useless Passion, 1887] he had admonished: *Bhālobāso, preme hao balī,/Ceonā tāhāre./Ākāṅkhār dhan nahe ātma mānaber/* [Love (her), and be strong in love,/but do not desire her./Human soul is not an object of lust] (Thakur 2002, 50).

VII

Rabindranath has often been seen as a mystic for whom, in Vaṣṇavic terms, *ātmendriya prītiicchā* [self-

centered love and desire] or *eros* [*kām*] coalesced in love for God [*prem*], *Kṛṣṇendriya prīticchā* [Krishna-or God-centered love and desire] (Sen 2002, 7). In other words, the poet's idea of love is tantalizingly comparable to the Christian idea of *agape*. However, I argue that Rabindranath's idea of love cannot be apprehended by regarding him a mystic or regarding his idea of *prem* or *eros* as divine *agape*. Abbé Henri Bremond (1865-1933) distinguishes between mystical, that is, religious and poetical, activity and considers the latter as an imperfect form of the former. Even if poetry is considered as a kind of prayer in that it employs "some of the resources of the deep-seated soul," it is, according to Bremond, an imitation of mystical prayer, an *ersatz* religious solution to soteriological problems (see Bremond 1971).

Then, *agape* is radically different from *eros*. *Agape* is a noble spiritual love that mimics the love of God for all His creations. In *agape*, all things are loved unconditionally with no consideration of a transactional *quid pro quo* (Nygren 1953, 81, 112). It is unmotivated or as the Bengali expression has it *ahaitukī prem*. *Eros*, on the other hand, is motivated by the acquisition of happiness. *Eros* recognizes value in the object of love and loves it. *Agape* loves and creates value in its object of love. As the psychologist Erich Fromm has it, *eros* is based on the proposition "I love you because I need you" while *agape* is predicated on the plea "I need you because I love you." *Eros* is man's way to God, *agape* is God's way to man (see Fromm 1974).

VIII

Jagadish Bhattacharya, following the definition of the seventeenth-century Bengali aesthetician Kabikarnapura, posits that Rabindranath's idea of love could be something analogous to suprasensuous *eros* or *prītirati*, that is a feeling or sentiment which delights (*rati*) the heart but remains *asamprayogabiṣayā* or devoid of carnality (Bhattacharya 2000, II, 20). Rabindranath's idea of *prītirati* is poignantly expressed in his poem *Banaspati* [The Dendron] in which, standing in the sunset hours of life, the tired titan expressed his desire for a final repose and quiet after having struggled with the *Sturm und Drang* of his soul buffeted by the crosscurrents of his unrequited passion and unfulfilled mission in life. In his response of December 28, 1924 to the overture of his Argentine hostess, Victoria Ocampo, who had written him to say "I have gone through such joy and such sufferings all these days! Joy because I felt near you; sufferings, because you ignored my nearness," the aging and ailing Rabindranath wrote to that "incomparable one" [*tulanahinare*] he had met "on the verdant bank of the blue ocean" [*sunil sagarer shyamal kinare*]:

*Dayā karo, dayā karo, āraṇyak ei tapasvīre,
Dhairyā dharo, ogo diganganā,
Byartha karibāre tāy aśānta ābege phire phire
baner aṅgane mātiyo na.
E kī tībra prem, e ye śilābr̥ṣṭi nirmam duhsaha–
Duranta cumban-bege taba
Chin̄ḍite jharāte cāo andha sukhe, kaha more kaha,*

*kiśor korak naba naba?/
 Āsuk tomār prem dīptirūpe nīlāmbartale,
 Śaktirūpe eso, digāṅganā.
 Uṭhuk spandita hoye śākhe śākhe pallabe balkale
 Sugāmbhūr tomār bandanā.
 Dāo tāre sei tej mahatve yāhār samādhān,
 Sārthak hok se banaspati.
 Biśver añjali yena bhariyā karite pāre dān
 Tapsyār pūrṇa parīṇati.*

[Hold back, please, O Goddess of Directions,
 Do not distract this mendicant of the forest with your restless desire.
 The hailstorm of your intense passion is merciless and unbearable.
 Tell me, do you intend to pluck the new born buds with your violent kisses?
 Let your love descend as the light from the blue sky.
 And you, Goddess, come as the primal energy, *Shakti*.
 Let the leaves and the bark of this *Dendron* pulsate in singing your paeon.
 Endow it with your power so that it may achieve the final consummation of its prayers
 By offering all it has to the world at large].(Thakur 1358 BE, 204-5).

Especially Tagore's last three collections of poems—*Rogśayyāy* [From the Sickbed], *Ārogya*, [Recovery], and *Janmadine* [On My Birthday] written during October 1940-March 1941—reveal an enigmatic convergence of the artist and the ascetic. All the pieces of these collections are characterized by a quiet grandeur: *shanta rasa*. Though, according to *Ācārya* Bagbhatta, this particular *rasa* or aesthetic delight has its marker in *samyakjñān*, that is, awareness of the Absolute Soul [*Paramātman*] or God, in Tagore *śanta rasa* displays the unity of the two divergent consciousness: “the sweet earthy passion” [*martyer madhuratama āsakti*] and “the sublime freedom of the heavens” [*ākāśer nirmalatama mukti*]. This consciousness informs his idea of love or *bhalobasa* as it evolved from the impetuous, rebellious, and “delirious cascading waterfall” [*nirjharer pralāpkallol*] of his youth to a serene and silent prayer “in cosmic quiescence” [*nikhiler br̥hat śāntite*] (Bhattacharya 1997, I, 397-99). In the sunset hours of his life, in a relatively obscure but a truly lyrical piece titled “Sandhyāy” [In the Evening], the poet beseeches his beloved to be as beautiful, serene, and quiet as the evening and asks her to come to his life all by herself: *Ogo tumi sandhyār mata hao ...omni sundar śānta ...mata dhīre dhīre amār jībantīre/Bārek dāñdāo ekākinī* (cited in Majumdar 1389 BE, 252).

IX

Rabindranath was a humanist *par excellence* who loved this beautiful earth and its colorful inhabitants so much that he refused to depart from this world: “I do not want to die in this beautiful world,/ But live in the hearts of men” [*Marite cāhinā āmi sundar bhubane, /mānaber mājhe āmi bāñcibāre cāi*] (*Kadi O Komal*) (Thakur 2002, 28: “Prāṇ” [Life]). He candidly confessed to his commitments to the world at large in his letter of January 13, 1925 to his Argentine admirer Victoria Ocampo: “My true home is there where from my surroundings comes the call to me to bring out the best

that I have, for that inevitably leads me to the touch with the universal” (cited in Dutta and Robinson 1997, 179). He wrote in his *Reminiscences*: “I guess my work has only one theme—reconciling the finite with the infinite” (Thakur 1368 BE, 133).

Tagore’s quintessential humanism is implicit in his concepts of *dharma* and *debatā*. For him *dharma*, loosely translated as religion, is *mānuṣer dharma* (*Religion of Man*, 1931) and *debatā* [God] is *Jībandebatā* [Lord of Life]. As he explained: “That creative energy inside me which is unifying as well as signifying all the pleasures and pain of my life, and my changing self through many rebirths I had called Lord of Life [*Jībandebatā*]” (Thakur 1347 BE, IV, 555).³ The *Jībandebatā* is also, as Tagore himself has said borrowing the *Bāul* [rustic roving singing minstrels] imagery, “the man or woman of the heart” or *maner mānuṣ*. A noteworthy feature of Tagore’s God is that He presides over His created world. Tagore has little patience with Shankaracharya’s (c. 650-700 CE) *māyāvād* that reduces this world to a mere illusion or a dream. To him, this world, created by God, is intensely real. “Without the world,” he declares, “God would be phantasm, without God the world would be chaos” (cited in Basak 1991, 43). Tagore’s conviction that “to know the Supreme Joy through all earthly love, to perceive the visible form of the Exquisite One through the world of beauty is what I call the realisation of freedom” is a telling testament of his pronounced earth-credo or terraphilia (Cited in Dutt 1984, 18).

As early as 1901 Rabindranath wrote: “*Bairāgya sādhanē mukti, se āmar nai/Asaṅkhyā bandhan-mājhe mahānandamay/Labhibā muktir svād*” [Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. /I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight] (Tagore 1999, 49 (# 73) About three decades later, he reiterated: “*Śudhāyo nā more tumi mukti kothā, mukti kāre kai,/Āmi sādhak nai, āmi guru nai/Āmi kabi, āchi/Dharaṅṅir ati kachākāchi/Epārēr kheyār ghāṭāy*” [Ask me not what salvation means or where to get it./Sage or mentor I’m not./I am but a poet who stays close to this earth on this side of the bank (of life)]. (“Pāntha” [Traveler] in *Pariseṣ* [Conclusion] cited in Bhattacharya 1997, I, 28). In another poem, he confessed: “How I wish to quench my thirst by drinking time and again the wine of bliss from all the vessels of this world” [*Ichhā kare bārbār mitāite sādhan/Pān kari biśver sakal pātra hate/Ānandamadirādhārā naba naba srote*] (cited in Chaudhuri 1398 BE, 84). Sometime later, the poet announced: “*Labhiāchi jībaloke mānbjanmer adhikār,/Dhanya ei soubhāgya āmār*” [I’m blessed to born a human in this world living beings] (“Barṣaṣeṣ” [Year End], 1926). In a short poem composed toward the end of his life the poet proclaimed in no uncertain terms: “*Śeṣ sparśa niye yābo yabe dharaṅṅir bale yabo, ‘Tomār dhūlir tilak parechi bhāle; dekhechi nityer jyoti duryoger māyār āḍāle./Satyer ānandarūp e dhūlite niyeche mūrati/Ei jene e dhūlāy rākhinu praṅṅati*” [When I go having touched this earth for the last time, I would say, ‘Today I have marked my forehead with your dust;/I have seen the bright eternity behind the mist of danger and turmoil./I know that the beautiful truth has realized itself and I place my head on the dust (of this world)’] (Thakur 2002, 762: “Madhumay Pṛthibīr Dhūli” [The Sweet Dust of this

Earth], *Ārogya* [Recovery]). He had sung:

Āmār mukti āloy āloy ei ākāśe
Āmār mukti dhūlāy dhūlāy ghāse ghāse
Āmār mukti sarbajaner maner mājhe
Duhkha-bipad tuccha karā kaṭhiñ kāje”

[My deliverance is in the lighted firmament,
 In every dust particle and in every grass of the earth
 My salvation is in the universal mind and in
 My exertions defying all dangers and disappointments] (cited in Bhattacharya 1997a, 66-67).

The ailing *Biśvakabi* tendered his final offering not to a deity of the distant heavens but to humanity of this world:

Āmi brātya, āmi mantrahīn.
Sakal mandirer bāhire āmār pūjā āj samāpta hala
Debalok theke Mānabloke,
Ākāśe jyotirmay puruṣe
Ār maner mānuṣe āmār antartama ānande

[I am the uninitiated pariah,
 Today I have performed my final worship with
 Profound bliss of the bright God of the skies
 And the Man of My Heart on this world
 Away from the temples] (*Patraput* [The Leaves], 1936) (Thakur 1353 BE, 56-57: *Patrapūt* [The Leaves]).

X

Yet Tagore was far from a naïve starry-eyed philanthropist or a supramundane mystic or prophet. Even though he delighted in his interaction with peoples and ideas, he was also painfully aware of the deceit, deviousness, and iniquity of his world. Some of his contemporaries considered him as a poet of ethereal, even unreal [*bastutantrahīn*] fantasies (Mukhopadhyay 1997, 88. A one-time friend of the poet, Narendranath Datta (premonastic name of *Svāmī* Vivekananda, 1863-1902), who had taken lessons in Brāhmo prayer songs from Rabindranath, called him a purveyor of “erotic venom” (Sil 1997, 118). An influential poet and literary critic in Britain ridiculed Tagore’s English translation of his own poems as the product of an illiterate Indian (Sen 1997, 56: William B. Yeats’ [1865-1939] invective). On October 25, 1930 Rabindranath wrote to Indira: “By god’s grace I was born with a tough physique so that I could take as much abuse as I can from my own country[men] (cited in Ghosh 1388 BE, 28 [read, especially, 89-106: “Ahaitūkī Bidveṣ ebañ Nihśabda Sahanśīlatā” (Gratuitous Animosity and Silent Suffering)]. On September 14, 1933 Rabindranath wrote: “It is a matter of great regret that for [some people] scandal mongering makes a good living. I thus realize how widespread and deep are the animus against me in my country. How little pain my country people feel by hurting and insulting me! Had this not been the case, scurrilous criticisms against me would not have been so profitable” (cited in Chaudhuri 1398 BE, 7). Tagore’s biographer Mukhopadhyay laments: “At what an inauspicious moment did he compose *Sonar Tari!* No other single creation of Rabindranath spewed so much flattery as well as vitriol either earlier or

later....Really speaking, the poet was actually the target of attack, his poetry an excuse, because some people sought to belittle those qualities of Rabindranath's multifaceted genius that had been recognized by the majority of the intellectuals of the country" (Mukhopadhyay 1997, 39).

Although Tagore frankly confessed to being a romantic he did reckon with his personal struggle against the terrifying real world on his own terms. He would deal with it by bringing together the *bhairab* [terrifying reality] and the *sundar* [the ideal and the beautiful]. He wrote:

*Yethā oi bāstab jagat
Sekhāne ānagonār path
Āche āmār cenā.
Sethākār denā
Śodh kari—se nahe kāthay āhā jāni
tāhār āhbān āmi māni.
Shoukhīn bāstab sethā nāhi hai.
Sethāy sundar yena bhairaber sāthe
Cale hāte hāte .*

[I'm familiar with the road to the real world.
I know, too, that I can't pay my debts to it in words
But I respond to its call....
No fancy reality could be found there.
There the terrific and the terrible walk hand in hand] (cited in Tagore 1990 in Majum dar 1990, 68).

His *Śeṣlekhā*, composed in the last year of his life contain a couple of poems that reveal his personal struggle:

*Rūp-nārāner kule
Jege uṭhilām,
Jānilām e jagat
svapna nai.
Rakter ākṣare dekhilām
Āpanār rūp—
Ciniām āpanāre
āghāte āghāte
bedanāy bedanāy;
Satya ye kaṭhīn,
Kaṭhīnere bālobāsilām—
Se kakhano kare na bañcanā.
Āmṛtyur dukkher tapasyā e jīban—
Satyer dārun mūlya lābh karibāre,
Mṛtyute sakal denā śodh kare dite.*

[On the bank of the Rup-narain
I awake;
This world is not a dream.
In words of blood I saw
My being.
I knew myself
Through hurts
And pain.
Truth is hard
And never deceives.
I loved that hardness.
Death-dealing *tapasya* of suffering
To win truth's terrible value
And to pay all debts
In death. (Thakur 2002, 832-33. Translation by Amiya Chakravarty in Tagore 1966, 363).

The very last piece, dictated from deathbed is eloquent, elegant, and evocative:

*Tomār sṛṣṭir path rekhecha ākīrṇa kari
Bichitra chalnājāle
He chalanāmayī.
Mithyā biśvāser phāṇd petecha nipuṇ hāte
Saraḷ jībane.
Ei prabañcanā diye mahatvere karecha ciṇhita.
...Satyere se pāi
Āpan āloke-dhouta antare antare.
Kichute pārenā tāre prabañcite,
Śeṣ puraskār niye yāy se ye
Āpan bhāṇḍāre.
Anāyāse ye pereche chalanā sahite
Se pāy tomār hāte
Śāntir akṣay adhikār.*

[Sorceress, you've strewn the path of
Your creation in a mesh of varied wiles.
Cleverly you've laid a snare of false beliefs
In artless lives.
You've marked the (honest) and great with deceptions
...Though crooked outside
He's upright within,
And that is his pride.
Though all call him disturbed,
He finds truth in the inner recesses of his heart
Washed clean by his inner light.
Nothing can fool him;
He carries to his treasure-house
His final reward.
He who could put up with your deceit receives from you the right
To everlasting peace] (Thakur 2002, 768-69. Translation adapted from Chakravarty 1966, 373-74 and Chaudhuri 1974, 1031).

XI

Tagore's humanism in its cosmic expanse makes him an aesthete whose experience of beauty and the creative art expressed in it goes against the grain of ancient Indian or Vedāntic aesthetics which, to quote a sentence from a modern exponent of the subject, "makes us progressively conscious of the illusoriness of the empirical world and ego-life and of the reality of the higher and non-attached spirit within us" (Chaudhuri 1953, 102).⁴ However, Tagore did not think that the function of art was to make us realize "the illusoriness of the empirical world" and the hyper-reality of a higher world. By detachment and disinterestedness of aesthetic experience he understood detachment from the exigencies of action and never from the world of humanity and of nature where his every step on the green meadow or in the grove has filled his life with enchanting and exciting delight [*Ghāse ghāse pā phelechi baner pathe jete/phuler gandhe bhareche man uṭhechhe prāṇ mete*]. He has found his niche under the starry firmament and his song springs forth in utter amazement: *Ākāś-bharā surya-ārā,/Biśva-bharā prāṇ/Tāhāri mājhkhāne āmi peyechi, peyechi mor sthān./Bismaye jāge, jāge āmār prāṇ* [I have found my niche in the world full of life under the starry firmament with its sun and moon] (Tagore 1924). Thus he wrote, "From the dawn of history the poets and artists have been infusing the colours and music of their own soul into the structure of existence. And from this I have known certainly that the earth and the sky are woven with the fibres of

man's mind" (Tagore 1959, 74). One of the most poignant pieces proclaiming the poet's aesthetic amalgam of human and cosmic love may be found in the collection titled *Caitāli* [Late Harvest] (1896): *Āmāder dujaner pratham cumban./Ananta nakṣatralok uṭhila śihari/Āmāder chakṣe ela aśrujal bhari* [Our first kiss./The limitless galaxy shuddered./ Tears filled our eyes] (cited in Gangopadhyay 1988, 109). This is what Theodor Lipps had called *Einfühlung* or empathy. This empathy is love in all its forms: love between a man and a woman (*eros*), man's love for God and God's for man (*agape*), and aesthetic love (*Einfühlung*), that is, love for the world at large through empathy, which means "feeling into" rather than sympathy, which means "feeling with" (see Lipps 1903, 185-204).

We should bear in mind that the poet had expressed such sentiments eloquently earlier, in his poem "Ananta Prem" [Love Eternal, *Mānasī*]: *Nikhiler śukh, nikhiler dukh, Nikhil prāṇer prīti./Ekṭi premer mājhāre mśeche/ sakal premer smṛti—/Sakal kāler sakal premer gīti* [The bliss, blight, and love of the world has merged into one love that holds the memory and music of universal love for all times] (Tagore 2002, 77). Elsewhere he endorsed the sentiment of a woman poet of medieval India and cited her in his own translation: I salute the Life in the house and the Life abroad in the unknown,/The Life full of joy and the Life weary with its pains,/The Life eternally moving, rocking the world into stillness,/The Life deep and silent, breaking out into roaring waves (Tagore 1961, 25). Nirad Chaudhuri observes that mystical faith in "Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of life is at once rooted in the faith in earthly existence and in life beyond death" (Chaudhuri 1978, Online). In other words, following Abu Sayeed Ayyub, it may be concluded that for Rabindranath love of woman, nature, and god is a connected concept (Ayyub 1984, 167).

XII

The lover Rabindranath cannot be separated from the aesthetic priest, the worshiper of his *Jībandebatā*. As he had declared in a lecture in the United States in 1917: "With the growth of man's spiritual life, our worship has become worship of love" (Tagore 1959, 159). This worship is also accompanied with a gender transformation of the object of love. Thus the poet's usual lover, the woman, now becomes a male with a masculine name *Jībandebatā*, *antarātamā* (the most intimate one) to whom the male poet now expresses his love as a woman (in Edward Thompson's unkind words expressing a "zenana imagery"): *Ohe anaratama,/miteche ki taba sakal tiyās/Āsi antare mama?/Duhkhasukher lakṣa dhārāy/Pātra bhariā diyachhi tomāy./Niṭhur ḍpīdane niṅgāḍi bakṣa/Dalita drākṣā sama./* [My lord, have you drunk enough of me? /I have crushed my breast like vineyards,/ filling your cup with my joys and sorrows/].⁵

This reversal of gender whereby the poet himself becomes a woman supplicating to a male lover must have been facilitated by his Vaiṣṇabīc cultural heritage (Dutt 2001, Online). Also, as he wrote elsewhere, Indians "are not afraid to regard male and female as expressions of the real divinity [*bhagāner*

svarūp]. The realization of the most intense and glorious aesthetic delight in the poet's life has been sometimes masculine and sometimes feminine. Both realizations are a testimony to the infinitude of joy. Thus it is not a problem for him to address his *jibandebata* endearingly in masculine as well as in feminine terms" (Thakur 1334 BE ,515-16). Interestingly enough, Rabindranath's poetic career began as the precocious Bhānusimha composing erotic lyrics on the Vaiṣṇavic theme of the love between Radha and Krishna. In his advancing years, especially past his middle age, the poet harked back to the same font of his poetic consciousness, the Vaṣṇab devotional style of feminization of the male devotee. Thus the poems addressed to his *Jibandebatā* are more philosophical version of his romantic lyrics of adolescence and early youth transforming his erotic consciousness into *prem* (in the true sense of *bhālobāsā*): *Sab cheye satya mor, sei mrtyuñjay,/se āmār prem./Tāre āmi rākhiyā elem/Aparibartan arghya tomār uddese* [My love is immortal and it's the highest truth (of my life)/That eternal offering of mine I have dedicated to you] (cited in Das 1996, 317). The unabashed romantic matured into a brooding philosopher who combined in himself the *premik* (lover) and the *pujārī* (worshiper). This erotic ascetic, the dendron of the forest [*āraṇyak banaspati*], awaited till his dying day, staking all his possessions, the advent of his surreal lover, *Jīandebatā*, the darling deity of life, who is also *kautukmayī antaryāmī* [playful indwelling woman], *antartāma jībannāth* [lord of life who is inside the innermost], or *priyatama prāṇes* [the most beloved lord of life]:

For the return of the One
Who has left me on the road
I eagerly wait with all my load.
He is never seen but he can see.
Yet thus unseen he loves me.
My heart is lost in my secret affair
With that amazing intimate Lover.

[*Āmār sakal niye base āchi*
Sarbanāśer āśāy.
Āmi tār lāgi path ceye āchi
Pathe ye jan bhāsāy
Ye jan dey nā dekhā yāy ye dekhe
Bhālobāse āqāl theke
Āmār man majeche sei gabhīrer
Gopan bhālobāsāy] (Tagore 1353 BE), 65)

Rabindranath Tagore was no world-weary self-abnegating ascetic. He was a seeker of the ultimate freedom and beauty in this life on this planet, and not a beyonder. "Not self-immolation, but self-expression must be our aim," the poet proclaimed—and this should serve as his enduring epitaph (Tagore 1961, 1).

Notes

¹ These stylized sobriquets could be found in any popular study of the poet either in Bengali or in

English in Kolkata book market. See, for example, Dasgupta 1361 BE. All Bengali citations used throughout this anthology are accompanied by my English translation except otherwise stated. BE stands for Bengali Era that follows Common Era (Gregorian Calendars) by 593 years 3 months 14 days.

² See also an exaggerated albeit entertaining account in Gangopadhyay 2001.

³ Srikumar Bandyopadhyay adduces several poems (# 3,4,5,12,15,39,46) of the collection *Utsarga* [Offerings] (1308-15 B.E.) to illustrate Tagore's use of the concept of *Jībandebatā*. See Bandyopadhyay 1946, II, 203.

⁴ This section of my paper borrows some references from Ayyub 1961, 78-87.

⁵ "Jībandebatā" in *Citrā* (1302 B.E.) reproduced in *Sancaitā*, 265. I cite the translation by Buddhadeva Bose in Bose 1962, 91 (see 92 for Thompson's remark).

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Chapter Two

Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetics Revisited

For the authors of those great poems which we admire, do not attain to excellence through the rules of any art; but they utter their beautiful melodies of verse in a state of inspiration, and as it were, possessed by a spirit not their own. Plato, *Ion* (380 BCE)

Prolegomena

If aestheticism, a term invented in the nineteenth-century Europe, stands for “a devotion to beauty” and/or “a new conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with—and even in opposition to—other values” (Johnson 1969, p. 1), then Rabindranath Tagore (Thakur, 1861-1941), the poet laureate of the World or the *Biśvakabi* was an aesthetic personality *par excellence*. As he averred, beauty does not emanate from the outside, rather it energizes and enriches the mind and helps us behold our inner light with which to recognize that He [God] is all sweetness [*raso vai sah*] (Thakur 1930 cited in Poddar 1376 BE, p.87).¹ Tagore's insights were rooted deeply in his native culture and harked back to the discourse on aesthetic suggestions of the theory of *dhvani* that Anandavardhana (820-90) had postulated in respect of an evocation of mood or *rasa* as the hallmark of good poetry in his celebrated *Dhvanyāloka* (Ray 2008, ch. 7. See also Pandey 1972, I). This *rasa* or sweetness (that is, divine bliss), Tagore says further, is the mysterious essence of beauty—the quintessential truth that is beyond our reason's reach. An interesting, albeit hitherto unmentioned, perspective of Rabindranath's aesthetic sensibility is that it harbored a deep intimacy with the insights of his inherited Eastern and his imbibed Western thought, especially that of the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), even though apparently there is no evidence of the poet's direct acquaintance with the *philosophe's* thought in this regards. Yet Tagore furnishes the clearest and noblest appropriation

and assimilation of Western, most interestingly Kantian, aesthetic ideas in his poetical and lyrical repertoire.

Western and Eastern Ideas on Beauty

Before we delve into the aesthetics of Kant and Tagore, a brief overview of Western and Eastern ideas on beauty and ugliness (absence of beauty) is in order. Even though we do not have much of a problem in recognizing beauty and ugliness, we need to remember that our ideas about beauty and ugliness are formed in our mind through our experience, upbringing, education, and culture. Needless to mention, sometimes we educate our mind to recognize some hidden beauty in objects that are apparently without any qualities of beauty to many others. For example, had we not been told about abstract art or something about the history and theory of European art of the nineteenth and twentieth century or had we never been to school, we might dismiss Pablo Picasso's "Guernica" (1937) as unworthy of possessing or hanging on the wall. But if we knew something about the man who composed it and about the reasons for his doing so, we would most probably find some deeper meaning in this drawing and hence consider it a work of art, that is, a beautiful piece. Our understanding of this problem will be helped greatly when we know how the peoples of different cultures have defined beauty.

Western

As far as one can tell, awareness of beauty or the existence of an aesthetic response in the Western world dates back to the days of Homer (*fl. c.* 8th century BCE), the celebrated author of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, we read how on the shield of Achilles the dark soil of the earth under the golden plough looked like a "marvelous piece of work" (Book XVIII)—an unmistakably genuine aesthetic response. In the 5th century BCE the Athenians raised profound questions about appearance and reality and about the relation between the image and that which it represents. Two words came to be used by the philosophers of art and music: *mimesis* [imitation] and *eikon* [likeness]. The Pythagoreans, the Sophists, Socrates (*c.* 470-399 BCE), and Plato (427-387 BCE) articulated the basic concepts of aesthetics. As Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz has it, the Greeks "valued two kinds of beauty, the universal beauty of harmony and symmetry and the individual beauty of suitability [*kairos*]"'. According to the former,

“whatever is beautiful in one thing is also beautiful in every other and...whatever appears beautiful to one person, is also beautiful to everyone else” and according to the latter, “each thing has its suitable shape, and in different things this shape is different” (Tatarkiewicz 1970, p. 335).

We note a clearer and firmer development of the Pythagorean precept of beauty in Plato’s dialog *Philebus* (c. 360-347 BCE) in which Socrates is made to assert that measure [*metron*] and proportion [*symmetron*] constitute beauty. In other words, according to Plato, a beautiful object must be shapely [mathematically proportionate], that is pleasant to the eye. For Plato, beauty came to mean not only a pleasant and proportionate shape but also truth and excellence (see Cooper 1968, pp. 12-15). Plato went on to argue that the universe created by God [*Demiurgos*] represented the highest form of art because it was created as an imitation [*mimesis*] of ultimate and unchanging ideas. Plato thus made the perception as well as apperception of beauty intellectual and spiritual.

Apropos their Greek forbears, the *philosophers* of the early Christian era, St. Augustine (354-430) in particular, called something beautiful if it caused admiration and held the eye. He thus defined the beautiful as being “what is pleasing to see” and what possesses radiance [*claritas*], color, wholeness, and harmony. For Augustine (*Confessions*, c. 397-98), beautify also implies something deeper: proceeding from unity, proportion, and order it exists in varying degrees in the universe as a whole and thus the beauty of God (see Chapman 1941, pp. 16-51). Following Augustine, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) held that “The *beautiful* is the same as *the good*, but from a different point of view...that is called *beautiful* the mere apprehension of which is pleasing” (Aquinas 1892, vol. 1, part 1, § 3).

It is clear that in Western culture beauty is considered something or some object that causes pleasure—sensual, sensational, as well as spiritual. Beauty is truth and divine because God is truth. The early modern English poet William Shakespeare (1564-1616) exclaims: “O! how much more doth beauty beauteous seem/ By that sweet ornament which truth does give” (Shakespeare # 54). The Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821), wrote at the end of his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’—that is all/ Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952) proclaimed: “beauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing” (Santayana 1896, p. 49; see also Gilman 1897, pp. 401-04). Most Western thinkers and writers would testify that beauty is the splendor

of truth. Truth has a beauty of its own and that is why the intellectual experience of truth is as pleasurable as is the aesthetic experience of beauty.

Eastern

The *locus classicus* of Indian aesthetic thought is the *rasa-bhava* theory of Bharatamuni's (fl. 1st century BCE-3rd century CE) *Nāṭyaśāstra*: “*vibhānubhāva vyābhicārī saṁyogāt rasanīṣpattih*” [*rasa* or aesthetic relish (or enjoyment) is realized through a combination of the determinants or causes [*vibhāva*], consequents [*anubhava*], and fleeting emotions [*vyābhicārī (bhāvas)*] (Bharatamuni 1981, vol. 1, ch. 6, *śloka* 32). Following the sage Bharata, the fourteenth-century theoretician Bishvanath Kabiraj (fl. 1378-1434), author, *inter alia*, of *Sāhityadarpaṇa* (c. 1384), posited that any composition capable of providing tasteful pleasure (*rasa*) is poetry [“*vākyam rasātmakam kāvyam*”] and suggested, just like his European contemporaries and forbears, especially Plato, that only the artists, lovers, and philosophers can discern the truth, the real substance, in this world of *maya*, reminiscent of the impermanent material world that Plato had despised. Later, in the sixteenth century, Paramananda Sen (or Kabikarnapura, 1527-c. 1577), in his *Alaṅkāra Kausthūbha* [Ornament of Jewel], regards *rati*, a term usually designating lust, as a *rasa* that induces joy in the mind [*cetorañjakatā*], that is free from any carnal contamination. Such a *rasa* is aesthetic and mental [*manomaya*] unlike, as has been noted above, the Western understanding of aesthetic experience as a response, an “objectified pleasure” (see also Pandey 1972 and Larsen 1978).

Indian sense of beauty, as the aesthetician Abhinavagupta (c. 950-1020) has it, is *rasa*, which is occasioned by a work of art, and is “the process of perception” and an amalgam of the objective identity of the art object as well as its experience by the beholder (see Pandey 1963). Paul Hine explains that “*Rasa* can be understood as a dynamic experience between the artist, expression, and those who receive it” (Hine Online). However, the most important characteristic of the Indian theory of beauty lies in the concept of *śāntarasa* (denoting “quiet” or “silence”), the ninth in addition to the eight fundamental feelings or mental states, that is, *sthāyibhāvas* (see, in this connection, Masson and Patwardhan 1969). Even though an artwork—a painting, a piece of

sculpture, or even a musical note—is constantly speaking, as it were, it is mute, standing silently. It is a center of silence and requires for its right apprehension a silencing of desires and thoughts. This silence is no mere absence of sound. It is surcharged with creative energy. It is concentration--a spiritual experience *par excellence* for the cultivated, for the connoisseur, that is, for the *rasika*.

Arguably beauty in Western and Eastern (Indian) world stands for almost the same thing: clarity, truth, harmony, and peace, some differences of perception and conception notwithstanding. More important, the two regions of the world agree that beauty is an ideal that should be appreciated with a sensitive and cultivated mind. As the bohemian artist Pellerin Hussonnet, a character in Gustave Flaubert's (1821-80) novel *The Sentimental Education* (1869), avers:

Don't bother me with your hideous reality! What does it mean—reality?
 Some see things black, others blue—the multitude see them brute-fashion....
 The anxiety about of external truth is a mark of contemporary business....
 But without identity there is no grandeur; without grandeur there is no beauty (Falubert 1922, pp. 60-61).

Kant on Aesthetics

In his Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant considers aesthetic judgments as “judgments of taste” that are predicated neither on our desires to possess pleasurable objects nor on our feelings about promoting moral goodness but are “disinterested” (in that we simply appreciate beauty and aesthetic judgment is detached from all practical life contexts) and by the same token, “universal” (Kant 2013). Our feeling of pleasure or displeasure is of three kinds: judgment of the agreeable, of beauty, and of the sublime. In an earlier work, Kant appears to valorize the sublime over beauty. “The emotion of the sublime is stronger than that of the beautiful,” he writes; and thus “Friendship has mainly the character of the sublime, but love between the sexes, that of the beautiful,” he continues (Kant 1991, pp. 51, 52). To put it blandly, if not bluntly, “the sublime and the beautiful differ essentially in that the sublime arouses awe and admiration, whereas the beautiful arouses joy” (Kant 1991, p. 18: translator's Introduction).

Kant further writes: The sublime's feeling “is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy, in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty

completely pervading a sublime plan. The first I shall call the *terrifying sublime*, the second the *noble sublime*, and the third the *splendid*” (Kant 1991, pp. 47-48. Emphasis in original). The *splendid* comprises the beautiful and the sublime. He believes that human nature *eo ipso* is capable of exhibiting the sublime as his virtuous life is guided by the “feeling of beauty and the dignity of human nature.” Goldthwait sums up Kant’s anthropology that “man’s dignity is the ground of the judgment that man himself is sublime” (Kant 1991, p. 25: translator’s Introduction).

Tagore on Aesthetics

Even though Tagore shares the Kantian concepts of the identity of the true and the beautiful and of the detachment (“disinterestedness”) of art from the utilitarian concerns of our quotidian life (Nandi 1999, p. 123; see also Sen Gupta 2005, pp. 73, 75)), his aesthetic ideas were grounded solidly in the literary, philosophical, and religious traditions of his culture he inherited, albeit embellished and complemented significantly by the impact of Western influence that of the Romantic movement in particular, he imbibed. Thus his consciousness and his career as a poet were nurtured by Vedāntic and Vaiṣṇavic traditions as well as by the *Volksgeist* of his native Bengal and, additionally, nourished by the burgeoning impact of Anglo-Bengali culture of his day. However, it’s not easy to discover the poet’s aesthetic ideas and philosophy through any straitjacketed category. He is neither always consistent in his views nor eager to provide an explanation for his multi-faceted creative outpourings. As he writes with unabashed candor:

*Ye-āmi svapan-mūراتi gopancārī,
Ye-āmi āmāre bujhāte nāri,
Āpan gāner kāchete āpani hāri,
Sei āmi kabi, ke pāre āmāre dharite.*

[I am that poet

who is a dream-like being moving about stealthily,
and who is unable to make myself understood.

I fail to [fathom the import of] my own song.

Who could get a handle on this poet?] (Thakur 1346-1404 BE, vol. 10, pp. 36-37 cited in Bhattacharya 1403 BE, vol. 1, p. 21).

Rabindranath was a humanist, who loved the earth with its variegated flora, fauna, and human beings (see Anand 1979). He is so committed to his planet and its inhabitants that, contrary to the Hindu spiritual worldview with its salvific prescription of the life of a world-

weary anchorite, he seeks liberation through his engagement with and service for people. To cite from his famous lyric in “Pūjā” series in *Gītabitān*:

*Āmār mukti sarbajaner maner mājhe,
duhkha-bipad tuchha karā kaṭhiṅ kāje.
bidhātār yajñaśālā ātma homer baṅhi jvālā—
jīban yena diy ahuti mukti-āśe.*

[I seek my deliverance in the universal mind
In my exertions defying all dangers and disappointments.
Seeking my ultimate freedom may I offer my life as
oblation of my individual self to God’s sacred fire ritual] (cited in Bhattacharya 1997, pp. 66-67).

He wrote in “Naibedyā” [Sacred Offerings] in 1901:

*Bairāgya sādhanē mukti, se āmār nai.
Asankhya bandhan-mājhe mahānandamay
labhība muktir svād.*

[Deliverance is not for me in renunciation.
I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight] (Thakur 1913, p. 49 # 73).

Hence he refused to depart from this world (as in “Prāṇ,” *Kaḍi o Komal*):

*Marite cāhinā āmi, sundar bhubane,
mānaber mājhe āmi bāñcibāre cāi.*

[I do not want to die in this beautiful world,
but live in the hearts of men] (Thakur 2002, p. 28).

He candidly confessed to his commitments to the world at large in his letter of 13 January 1925 from aboard the ship *SS Giulio Cesare* to his Argentine hostess and admirer Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979): “My true home is there where from my surroundings comes the call to me to bring out the best that I have, for that inevitability leads me to the touch with the universal” (cited in Dutta and Robinson 1997, p. 179). He wrote in his *Reminiscences*: “I guess my work has only one theme—reconciling the finite with the infinite” (cited in Sil 2005).

Tagore’s Ideas of Humanist Religion and Humanized God

Tagore’s quintessential humanism is implicit in his concepts of *dharma* and *debatā*. For him *dharma*, loosely translated as religion, does not carry a clear import. As he writes in his “Āmār Dharma” [My Religion]:

I cannot say I know quite fully or clearly what is my religion even to this day—it is not by any means the written religion of a book in terms of a few doctrines, or in the form of a theology....It is not possible for me to say that I can define it in actual

words. But I know this for certain that the aim and substance of my religion is neither to enjoy the idle tranquility nor to be immersed in languid beauty. I do admit I believe in joy [*ananda*]. But ‘it is joy from which beings are born; it is joy towards which they proceed and it is joy into which they enter’ (Dutt 1984, p. 61).

On the existence of God [*debatā*], he asserts:

I only say from what I feel that my innermost God [*Antardebata*] has a joy in expressing Himself through me—this joy, this love pervades every part of my being, suffusing my mind, my intellect, this entire universe which is so vivid before me, my infinite past and my eternal destiny. This game of life is beyond my comprehension, and yet right within myself He is intent on playing His game of love continuously.... This manifestation that I have felt within my own life—a manifestation that, putting up a sail of Love, has carried me along in the boat of Life, out of the Past, from harbour to harbour, through the great ocean of Time, drawing me towards a Future that has yet to come—it is that God of Life [*Jibandebata*] I have spoken of (Dutt 1984, pp. 9, 13).

Tagore’s religion is what he calls *Mānuṣer Dharma* (*Religion of Man*, 1931) and *debatā* [God] is *jībandebatā* [Lord of Life].² As he explains: “That creative energy inside me which is unifying as well as signifying all the pleasures and pain of my life, and my changing self through my many rebirths I called Lord of Life (*Jībandebatī*)” (Thakur 1346-1404 BE, vol. 4, p. 555: Granthapariçay [Introduction] to “Citṛā”). The *Jībandebatā* is also, as Tagore observes borrowing the *Bāul* [rustic roving singing minstrels of Bengal] imagery, “the man or woman of the heart” or *maner mānuṣ*. A noteworthy feature of Tagore’s God is that He presides over His created world. Tagore has little patience with Shankaracharya’s (c. 788-820) *māyāvād* that reduces this world to a mere illusion or a dream. To him, this world, created by God, is intensely real. “Without the world,” he declares, “God would be phantasm, without God the world would be chaos” (cited in Basak 1991, 43). Hence he could write:

Ekādhāre tumiy ākās tumi nīḍ.
He sundar, nīḍe taba prem sunibiḍ
prati kṣane nānā barṇe, nānā gandhe gīte,
mugdha prāṇ beṣtan kareche cāri bhite.
Sethā uṣā ḍān hāte dhari svarṇathālā
niye āse ekkhāni mādhyer mālā
nīrabe parāye ḍite dharār lalāte;
sandhyā āse namramukhe dheṇuṣunya māṭhe
cihṇahīn path ḍiye laye svarṇajhāri
paścimsamudra hate bhari śāntibāri.
Tumi yethā āmāder atmār ākās
apār sancārḱṣetra—sethā śuvra bhāṣ—
ḍin nāi, rātri nāi, nāi janaprāṇī,
barṇa nāi, gandha nāi, nāi nāi bāṇī.

[O my Radiant One, you’re at once the heaven and the hearth.
 Your deep love with its variegated hues, fragrance, and music
 has enveloped my enchanted soul.
 There the dawn descends carrying in her right hand
 a beautiful garland in a golden disc to crown the earth.

And the evening comes with her head hung low
over the trackless paths in the lonely meadows deserted by herds,
carrying a golden sprinkler [*jhāri*] filled with the auspicious water
from the western sea.

Where you remain as the unbounded firmament of
our soul there reigns a pure white radiance,
there is neither day nor night, no living being,
no color, no flavor, no speech] (Thakur 2002, p. 397).

Rabindranath's *Jībandebatā* becomes his *Mānasī* or *Mānassundarī* [the beautiful woman of imagination] or *kabitākalpanālatā* [creeper of poetic imagination], whom the poet addresses as the *kautukmayī antaryāmī* [the mysterious indwelling deity] acting as his creative impulse. Rabindranath often felt the presence of this creative impulse deeply to express it his art and literature as well as an awareness of an expansive life or cosmic life [*Biśvajīban*] since his early youth. A clear hint of this enigmatic awareness of the poet can be found in some of his letters, reminiscences, and poems. His celebrated poem "Awakening of the Waterfall" [*Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga*] that gloriously expresses his unrestrained creative urge is too well-known to be discussed here (Sil 2013).³ In this connection, we need to take note of his two letters that are appended below with the comments from a study by the distinguished Tagore scholar Professor Niharranjan Ray:

My memory of my childhood is hazy, though I distinctly recall how some mornings I suddenly felt an intense joy of life [*jībanānanda*] apparently for no reasons whatsoever. All the quarters of the world seemed to be enveloped in mystery. In the granary I used to dig the soil with a stick eager to discover something unknown. I enjoyed the company of a half-familiar gigantic being formed in different shapes out of the beauty and smell, and movements of the earth, the coconut trees in the compound of my home, the banyan tree on the bank of the pond, the shadows upon its altars, the noise from the street, the call of the kite, and the aroma from the garden.

Part of another letter reads:

We can derive great happiness from nature by feeling an intimate connection with it. Our pulse beats along with the grass, the breeze, the revolving light and shadow, the movement of the planets and stars, and the innumerable successions of life on earth. We are set in the same rhythm with the world and our mind responds to its movement and music....We are not a class apart from what we call inanimate and thus we coexist, otherwise there would have been two distinct worlds.

Although most poets have enjoyed a deep delight in nature, in Rabindranath this bliss has found a special intensity. He has felt a profound intimacy [*niguḍha ātmīyatā*] with nature's abundant manifestations. All the beautiful and variegated expressions of the world of nature filled his being with a single grand whole. The sensation of this mysterious innermost one suddenly touches the poet's soul making it restive and frantic apparently for no reason. The world of nature vibrating within the poet's heart leads it to seek itself out in the outer world. It's

not easy to recognize this *anubhūti* [realization], it's a mysterious, mystical, and quasi-familiar being. Perhaps this wondrous mystery is hidden in every expression of nature. Yet there is little doubt that this stranger resides in the poet's interiority as his indwelling companion—the first faint signifier of cosmic life. This faint hint becomes clearer and expresses itself beautifully for the first time numerous poems of *Prabhātsaṅgīt* [Song of the Dawn], especially “Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga.” The sentiment and sensation welling up to burst out of the poet's *soma* and psyche [*deha-man*] find their release in the infinite varieties of the phenomenal world” (Ray 2004, vol. 2, pp. 34-35). As he averred in a conversation with Albert Einstein (1879-1955): “Beauty is the ideal of perfect harmony which is in the Universal Being; truth the perfect comprehension of the universal mind” (Gosling 2007, p. 162: Appendix A: The Nature of Reality).

This belief in *Satyam* [truth value], *Śivam* [good value], *Sundaram* [beauty value] makes the poet a truly spiritual aesthete who sings:

*Ei mor sādḥ yena e jībanmājhe
taba ānanda mahāsaṅgīt bāje.
Tomār ākāś udār ālokdhārā,
Dvār chota dekhe phere nā yena tārā—
chay ṛtu yena saḥaj nṛtye āse
antare mor nitya nūtan sājhe.*

*Taba ānanda āmār aṅge mane
Bādhā yena nāhi pāi kono ābarane.
Taba ānanda param dukkhe mama
Jvale uṭhe yena punya-ālok-sama,
taba ananda dīnatā cūrṇa kari
phuṭe uthe pheṭe amar sakal kāje.*

[It is my desire that your joy resonate in cosmic music.
Let not your sprawling sky and waves of light turn back
from my small narrow doors, let the six seasons
come dancing into my life dressed in ever new attire.
Let your bliss touch my body and soul
despite my coverings.
May your bliss blaze in my dire distress
and blossom in my every exertion
by smashing all my shortcomings (Thakur 1994, p. 127).

The poet's clearest aesthetic pronouncement is:

*Sīmār mājhe asīm, tumi
bājāo āpan sur.
Āmār madhye tomār prakāś
tāi eta madhur.*

[Limitless even in bounds
You play your tune.
Thus you reveal Yourself
so charmingly in me] (Thakur 1994, p. 152 # 120).

Tagore's Consciousness of the Real World

Yet Tagore was far from a naïve starry-eyed philanthropist or a supramundane mystic or an ascetic aesthete. Even though he delighted in his interaction with peoples, places, and philosophies, he was also painfully aware of the deceit, deviousness, and devilry of this world. Even when he admitted of being a romantic he did reckon with his personal struggle against the terrifying real world on his own terms. He would deal with it by bringing together the *bhairab* [terrifying reality] and the *sundar* [the ideal and the beautiful]. He wrote:

*Yethā oi bāstab jagat
sekhāne ānāgonār path
Āche āmār cenā.
Sekhāner denā
Śodh kari—kathay tāhā jāni
tāhār āhbān āmi māni.
Shoukhīn bāstab nāhi hai.
Sethāy sundar yena bhairaber sāthe
cale hāte hāte.*

[I'm familiar with the road to the real world.
I know, too, that I can't pay my debts to it in words,
but I respond to its call.
No fancy reality could be found there.
There the terrific and the terrible walk hand in hand] (Thakur in Majumdar 1990, p. 68).

Niharranjan Ray argues that the aesthetic phase of the poet's work lasted from *Prabhātsaṅgīt* down to *Kalpanā* and *Kṣaṇikā*. Thereafter began a new chapter in his life starting with *Naibedyā* [Offerings] and *Kheyā* [Ferry] when Rabindranath parts company with his blissful aesthetic interaction with nature. Despite the persistence of the *anubhūti* of *Jībandebatā* in several pieces of *Kalpanā* and *Kṣaṇikā*, the subsequent poems cease to invoke the image of the *Mānassundarī*:

*Samay hayeche nikat ekhan
bandhan chindite habe.*

[It's time now
to cut the knot of the tie] (*Kalpanā* in Ray 2004, 53).

Beginning with *Naibedyā*, a new phase of his poetic career reaches its acme in *Gītāñjali* and

Gītimālya [Garland of Songs]. It is the Lord of World Spirit who now presides over the poet's new life. The regime of his Lord of Life, *Jībandebatā* is over. His heart and soul now remain absorbed in the deeper *mysterium tremendum* of his communion with *Biśvajīban* and his *anubhūti* of *Biśvadebatā*. The poet's transition from the *anubhūti* of *Jībandebatā* to *Biśvadebatā* leads him to deeper and greater *arcana*.

But, would the poet's *Mānassundarī* (or *Jībandebatā*) be forgotten forever? Could the *Biśvadebatā* replace the *Jībandebatā* totally? We know that the composer of *Gītāñjali-Gītimālya-Gītālī* found a new life in *Balākā* [The Crane]. *Balākā* is poetry of restlessness and movement celebrating love, youth, and beauty and the poet's *Jībandebatā* larks tantalizingly behind this motion and emotion of love, youth, and beauty: “*Matta sāgar pāḍi dila gahan rātrikāle, ai ye āmār neye*” [“My helmsman set sail in turbulent sea at the dead of night”]—we hear the faint footsteps of this stranger, the man in the heart [of the poet] in this line. *Balākā* is followed by *Palātakā* [The Fugitive] which testifies to the poet's concern with the multiple mundane trials and tribulations, and the weal and woes of human life that is a part of universal life. This consciousness of universal life colored his childhood, adolescence, and youth, and the same consciousness brings a twilight tinge to fill the sunset hours of his life.⁴

In his poem “*Tapobhaṅga*” [Waking from Ascetic Meditation], the sexagenarian poet recalled his encounter with the dancing Śiva whose ecstatic rhythm had inspired his poetry and lyrics.

*Sedin unmatta tumi ye nṛtye phirile bane bane
se nṛtyer chande-laye saṅgīt racinu kṣaṇe kṣaṇe
taba saṅga dhari.*

[When you danced your way through the forests
in mad frenzy I followed you and composed my music on the
rhythm of your dance].

He is proclaiming his purpose to the dancing deity:

*Tapobhaṅgadūt āmi Mahendrer, he rudra sannyaśī,
svarger cakrānta āmi. Āmi kabi yuge yuge āśi
taba tapobane.
Durjayer jayamālā pūrṇa kare mor ḍālā,
uddāmer utarol bāje mor chander krاندane.
Byāthār pralāpe mor golāpe golāpe jāge bāṅī
kiśalaye kiśalaye kautuhal āni
mor gān hāni.*

[O the Terrible Ascetic, I am the messenger from the great god Indra
To distract you from your contemplation, I am the conspiracy of the heavens.

I am the poet who appears in your hermitage in every age.
 I fill the basket with my laurels of victory and the cry of pain
 in my strophes resonate with a maddening tumult.
 The flowers speak out touched by groans of my pain.
 My song makes the tender green leaves [*kishalay*] noisy and curious] (Thakur 2002, pp. 530-31).

Nevertheless, some of Tagore's contemporaries considered him a poet of ethereal, even unreal [*bastutantrahīn*], fantasies (Mukhopadhyay 1997, p. 88). A distinguished scholar and critic of the present time, Arabinda Poddar, accuses him of being hesitant in appreciating the reality of the material world. Poddar further finds fault with the poet for disregarding Hegel's dictum that "beauty is made vital in appearance" and that "metaphysical universality...must combine...with the determinate content of real particularity" (Poddar 1376 BE, p. 92).⁵ Arguably, Poddar has either unwittingly overlooked or deliberately neglected Tagore's several poems as well as essays. Consequently, he appears to be as guilty of unqualified materialistic interpretation as his questioning what he regards as Tagore's skewed ethereal and idealistic romanticism. Poddar's Marxist-materialist orientation is impervious to the poet's plea: "Do not try to see me from outside, / Do not hold me outwardly" (Dutt 1984, p. 22: "Who Sits Behind My Eyes").

Tagore has averred:

Essentially, my religion is a poet's religion....My religious life and my poetical life have followed the same mysterious line of growth....Perhaps this will explain the meaning of my religion. The world was alive, intimately close to my life. I still remember my repulsion when a medical student brought me a piece of human windpipe and tried to excite my admiration for its structure. He tried to convince me that it was the source of the beautiful human voice, but I rejected that information with disgust. I did not admire the skill of the workman, but rather the artist who concealed the machinery and revealed his unified creation. God does not care to expose His power written in geological inscriptions, but He is proud of the beauty in green grass, in flowers, in the play of the color of the clouds, in the music of running water.

He says further:

That which merely gives information can be explained in terms of measurement, but that which gives joy cannot be explained by the grouping of atoms and molecules. Somewhere in the arrangement of this world there seems to be a great concern with giving delight, showing that in addition to the meaning of matter and force there is a message conveyed through the magic touch of personality. This touch cannot be analyzed, it can only be felt....The final meaning of the delight which we find in a rose can never be the in roundness of its petals, just as the final meaning of joy of music cannot be in a phonograph record....Facts and power belong to the outer, not to the inner soul of things. Gladness is the one criterion of truth, and we know we have touched it by the music truth gives, by the joy it send to the truth in us (Chakravarty 1966, pp. 86-88).

Tagore is intensely aware of the mud but would take delight in the lotus that blooms in it, he will open his heart and mind in contemplation of the beautiful but will not be impervious to the hard realities of life. What he then does is invoke the *asīm* or the *bhūmā* [unbounded or infinite] and the *sīmā* [boundary or bounded] or the *bhūmi* [the limited ground or the earth] and identify both in his artistic (literary) repertoire, *sāhitya* (a term derived from the Sanskrit root

sahita, that literally stands for “along with”). To sum up, Tagore’s aesthetic idea has to be understood with his humanistic and holistic worldview that is dedicated to enjoying the *rasa* deriving from his consciousness of his God of Life, God of the Universe, his personal life as a *pūjārī* of beauty and *bhūmā*, but never losing his intimacy with *bhūmi*. As he writes:

From the dawn of history the poets and artists have been infusing the colours and music of their own soul into the structure of existence. And from this I have known certainly that the earth and the sky are woven with the fibres of man’s mind.⁶

Three years before death, the aging bard of Bengal is praying to Sun God, Pusan, in Upaniṣadic terms:

*Nakṣatrabedīr tale āsi
ekā stabdha dāṇḍāyiyā, ūrdhe ceye kahi joḍhāte—
He Puṣan, saṁharaṇ kariyācha taba raśmijāl,
ebār prakāś karo tomār kalyāṇtama rūp,
dekhi tāre ye puruṣ tomār āmār mājhe ek.
[Standing alone in silence under the starry sky
I plead with folded hands,
O Pusan, you who have withdrawn your net of rays,
reveal your benevolent mien, and
let me behold the Person who is the same
between You and I].(Prāntik [Terminal], 1938 cited in Bhattacharya 1997, p. 82).⁷*

The poet who is aware of the cosmos of which his planet is an integral part, the infinite in this finite world, his own *Jībandebatā* extended into the *Biśvadebatā*, is now seeing himself at one with God, the evanescent with the Everlasting. Thus his ultimate wish on the eve of his final departure from this world is:

*Śeṣ sparśa niye yāba yabe dharaṇīr
bale yaba tomār dhūlīr
tilak parechi bhāle,
dekhechi nityer jyoti duryoger māyār āḍāle.
Satyer ānandarūp e dhūlīte niyeche mūrati,
Ei jene ei dhūlāy rākhinu pranati.*

*[When I go having touched this earth for the last time
I would say, “Today I have marked my forehead with your dust;
I have seen the bright eternity behind the mist of danger and turmoil.
I know that the beautiful truth has realized itself and
I bend my head on the dust (of this world)] (“Madhumay Prithibir Dhuli” [The Sweet Dust of this Earth], “Arogya” [Recovery],
February 14, 1941, Thakur 2002, p. 762) .*

And the sublime aesthete offers his soulful and grateful prayer to his “Lord, Friend, and Innermost One”:

*He bandhu mor, he antaratara,
E jībane yā-kichu sundara
Sakalyi āj beje uṭhuk sure*

Prabhu, tomār gāne, tomār gāne, tomār gāne.

[My Lord, my dearest Friend,
Let all that is beautiful in this life
ring the melodies dedicated to you] (Thakur 1994, p. 104 # 79).

Epilogue

Kant, let us recall, wrote about the highest category of the sublime in his aesthetics as the “splendid sublime” that combines the “noble sublime” with beauty. He never discussed anything resembling the Indian concept of *rasa* or *prīti*. Rabindranath, while complementing, not contradicting, the “beautiful magister” of Königsberg, postulated *ānanda* [literally, bliss] that springs from *gravitas* and gladness.⁸ He does not consider the sublime as killjoy but as the noble and blissful state of identity between the *ātman* and the *Brahman*. His final testament to the aesthetic moment is enshrined in a poem, part of which has already been cited above:

*Ei mahāmantrakhāni,
caritārtha jībaner bānī.
Dine dine peyechinu satyer yā-kichu upahār
madhurate kṣay nāi tār.
Tāi ei mantrabānī mṛtyur śeṣer prānte bāje—
sab kṣati mithyā kari ananter ānanda birāje.*

[This is my life’s most sacred message.
All the gifts of Truth that I saved
will never be sullied in my love [*madhuras*].
Hence rings this blessed prayer
at the terminal point of Death
that all my hurts and losses
would be set at naught by my joy in the bliss of eternity] (Thakur 2002, p. 762: “Madhumay Pṛthibūr Dhūli”).

Notes

¹The full Sanskrit expression runs thus: *Raso vai sah rasam hi evayam labdhvānandi bhavati* [The One is Bliss. Whoever perceives the Blissful One, the reservoir of pleasure becomes blissful forever] (*Tattirīya Upaniṣad*, 2.7: *śloka* 1-2).

²A most succinct and elegant explanation of the concept of *Jībandebatā* comes from the poet himself: his poem “Jībandebatā” (1302 BE) in the collection titled *Citrā*. See Banibinod Bandyopadhyay [Rabindranath’s penname] (1334 BE). For a scholarly discussion of this concept see Bhattacharya (1403 BE, vol. 2, pp. 280-89).

³For the poem “Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga” see Sil 2013. For an apocryphal, albeit highly titillating, account of the context of this poem see Gangopadhyay 1996-1997, vol. 1, pp. 144-56.

⁴Much of the contents of this paragraph as well those of the paragraphs above under this section are taken with some minor adjustments directly from my translation (Sil 2007) of Ray (2004).

⁵Poddar cites Georg W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) without proper documentation. Apparently he is referencing (Hegel 1975), p.28: Introduction.

⁶*Personality* [Lectures delivered in the United States, 1916-17] (Tagore 1959, p. 74).

⁷The Sanskrit *śloka* occurs in the *Īśopaniṣad*, *śloka* 15: *Hiranmayena pātreṇa satyāpihitam mukham/Tatte Puṣaṅ*

apavṛṇu satyadharmāya dṛṣṭaye (cited in Bhattacharya 1997, 82).

⁸ Actually Kant was a homely looking “little man, stooped and stunted by a deformity from birth”(Kant 1991, p. 2: Goldthwaits Introduction).

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Chapter Three

Rabindranath and World Life *

The two poems of Rabindranath, “Antaryāmī” (The Interiorized One) and “Jībandebatā” (Lord of Life) in the collection titled *Citrā* reveal a delectable mystery of the poet’s life.

*E ki kautuk nityanutan
 Ogo kautukmayī
 Āmi yāhā kichu cāhi balibāre
 Balite ditecha kai?
 Antar mājhe basi ahahaha
 Mukh hote tumi bhāṣā keḍe laha
 Mor kathā laye tumi kathā kaha
 Miśāye āpan sure
 Ki balite cāi sab bhule yāi
 Tumi yā balāoāmi bali tāi
 Saṅgītsrote kul nāhi pāi
 Kothā bhese yāi dūre. (“Antaryāmī,” *Citrā*)*

[What’s this prank of yours
 My mischievous one!
 Why don’t you let me speak
 What I want to say?
 Seated inside me all the time
 You speak stealing my word
 And I forget mine and speak
 Only at your bidding.
 I am being swept away by the
 Surging waves of my lyrics.]

Who is this wacky wonderful female commandeering the poet's thoughts into his lyrics and poems? He has no control over his own words—all his output happens to be the product of this amazing *dea ludens* (lit. “playful goddess,” *rahasyamayī kautukmayī*)?

Ohe anataratama
Miteche ki taba sakal tiyās
Āsi antare mama?
Duhkha sukher lakṣa dhārāy
Pātra bhariyā diyechi tomāy
Niṭhur pīḍane niṅāḍi bakṣa
Dalita drākṣā sama. (“Jībandebatā,” *ibid.*)

[My lord, have you drunk enough of me?
 I have crushed my breast like vineyards,
 Filling your cup with my joys and sorrows.]¹

Who is this *antaraatama*, the innermost one to whom he offers cupful of his weal and woes wrung out of his heart? The poet has declared her as the one who resides in his innermost being—the presiding deity of his life, *Jībandebatā* [note the change of gender here. Translator] He hasn't sought him out. The *jībandebatā* has welcomed him. This god (or goddess) is the guardian angel whom the poet offers his lyrics and poems as ritual flowers. The poet's life is a lyre, as it were, tuned by *Jībandebatā*, who makes the poet write the musical notations. Does this deity reside in the poet's own imagination, who bursts out of his heart in poetic form? Probably his own thoughts, sensation, or consciousness, or realization (*anubhūti*) have become the sovereign lord of his whole life to whom the humble poet brings his meager offerings:

Debī, niśidin kari parāṅpan
Caraṇe ditechi āni
Mor jībaner sakal sreṣṭha sdher dhan,
Byartha sādhan khāni.
...Tumi yadi debī palake kebal
Kara kaṭākṣa sneha sukomal
Ekti bindu phela yadi āṅkh jal
Karuṅā māni.

Sab hate tabe sārthak habe

Byārtha sādhan khāni. (Jībandebatā, Citrā).

[My goddess, I bring to your feet
 All my failed enterprise,
 The prized possession of my life
 ...I shall deem it very kind of you
 If you, Debi, look at me
 With compassion
 even for a moment.
 Then all my failed efforts
 Will have received some justification.]

There is little doubt that this deity is the poet's *Jībandebata*. All his failings and failures, his unspoken words, unsung lyrics, and unfulfilled aspirations have been offered to this deity's feet seeking fulfillment. But, who's this god?

All human beings harbor a creative impulse inside them propelling them to express themselves in art and literature, indeed in all their actions. Rabindranath often felt the presence of this creative impulse deeply. An intense urge from within him expressed itself through his work. The three pieces cited above illustrate how this *anubhuti* manifests itself aesthetically. This impulse from within him triggers his works to express it.

But the question is: Does this Creative Impulse well up from within only? Isn't there an external source for it? Does this impulse, which Rabindranath calls *kautukmayī antaryāī* [the mysterious indwelling deity], awaken spontaneously without any external stimuli? I think not, though I cannot argue my point philosophically. Human mind appears to be incapable of appreciating the beauty of the world unless it is inspired by something in this world or universal life [*vishwajiban*] that triggers human capacity to appreciate beauty. Human creativity is thus dependent upon forces from the phenomenal world outside. Surely Tagore's creative impulse was triggered by the wonderful expression of the variegated life of the world at large.

Human creative impulse, then, does have a springboard and its *anubhūti* is the lord of life or *Jībaner Adhīśwar*, that is *Jībandebatā*. Thus Tagore's poetic *oeuvres* owe to this intimate

deity. He feels that all his creations owe to this impulse's grace. He has offered cupfuls of his joys and sorrows and his life's greatest treasure to its feet, as it were, and sought assurance that his innermost one [*antaratma*] is gratified by them. This poet calls this impulse the mysterious innermost being [*kautukmayī antaryāmī*] who has filled the poet's life with new ventures and surprises at all times. As this impulse gains stature inside the poet, he becomes its puppet and devotee, as could be seen in a few poems of *Chitra*.

However, I do not certainly claim that his empathy with the cosmic life or universal life (*biśvajīban*) and his creative impulse are one and the same thing. I mean to posit that Tagore's awareness of this expansive life since his early youth fueled the creative impulse for his work. This awareness has found unique expression at the different stages of his life; its flow has taken twists and turns at times—waning in winter and waxing in the rainy season. I claim, even at the risk of repeating myself, that the poet's creative impulse is instigated by his awareness of the cosmic life and this awareness has been identified by him later as his lord of life.

We get the first clear hint of this awareness in some of Tagore's letters and in his reminiscences. All of us are familiar with his experience of this sensation as he stood on the balcony of the Sudder Street residence looking at the garden at the eastern corner of the street. We may very well skip this episode, but two passages from the poet's letters merit mention. In one of his letters the poet wrote:

My memory of my childhood is hazy, though I distinctly recall how some mornings I suddenly felt an intense joy of life (*Jībanānanda*) apparently for no reasons whatsoever. All quarters of the world seemed to be enveloped in mystery. In the granary I used to dig the soil with a stick eager to discover something unknown. I enjoyed the company of a half-familiar gigantic being formed in different shapes out of the beauty and smell, and movements of the earth, the coconut trees in the compound of my home, the banyan tree on the bank of the pond, the shadows upon its waters, the noise from the street, the call of the kite, and the aroma from the garden.

Part of another letter reads:

We can derive great happiness from nature by feeling an intimate connection with it. Our pulse beats along with the grass, the breeze, the revolving light and shadow, the movement of the planets and stars, and the innumerable successions of life on earth. We are set in the same rhythm with the world and our mind responds to its movement and music.... We are not class from what

we call inanimate and thus we coexist, otherwise there would be two distinct worlds [instead of one].

Although most poets have enjoyed a deep delight in nature, in Rabindranath this bliss has found an especial intensity. He has felt a profound intimacy (*nigūḍha ātmīyatā*) with nature's abundant expressions. All the beautiful and variegated expressions of the world of nature filled his being with a single grand whole....The sensation of this mysterious innermost one suddenly touches the poet's soul making it restive and frantic apparently for no reason. The world of nature vibrating within the poet's heart leads it to seek itself out in the outer world. It's not easy to recognize this *anubhūti*, it's a mysterious, mystical, quasi-familiar being. Perhaps this wondrous mystery is hidden in every expression of nature. The truth, however, is that it actually lies within the poet's psyche and not elsewhere. Yet there is little doubt that this stranger resides in the poet's interiority as his indwelling companion—the first faint signifier of cosmic life.

This faint hint becomes clearer and expresses itself beautifully for the first time in numerous poems of *Prbhātsaṅgīt* [Song of the Dawn], especially “Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga” [The Awakening of the Waterfall]. The sentiment and sensation welling up to burst out of the poet's *soma* and psyche (*deha-mön*) find their release in the infinite varieties of the phenomenal world....

Hṛday āji mor kemane gela khuli
Jagat āsi sethā kariche kolākuli.
Dharāy āche yata mānuṣ śata śata
Āsiche prāṇe mor hāsiche galāgali

.....

Parāṇ pure gela haraṣe hala bhor
Jagate keha nāi, sabāi prāṇe mor.

[My heart unfolded today
 To embrace the world.
 All the humanity of this earth
 Have come to join my life.

.....

My life has filled with joy and when dawn came
Every one in the world has come in my life.]

Or,

Āji e prabhāte rabir kar
Kemane paśila prāṇer par
Kemane paśila guhār āndhāre,
Prabhāt pākhīr gān.
Nā jāni kenare etadin pare
Jāgiyā uṭhila prāṇ. (“Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga,” *Prabhātsaṅgīt*)

[How did the sun’s rays
Touch my life this morn?
How did the song of the morning bird
Penetrate this dark cavern?
How did my soul wake up from the slumbers of the ages?] (Translation in Sil 2015)

Everywhere one notes occasional flashes of this sensation. The poet subsequently named it *Jībandebatā* and this *anubhūti*, appearing in various guises, has been his intimate consort throughout his life. Nevertheless, in *Prabhātsaṅgīt* this sensation is still pretty vague and unformed.

It is not really difficult to discern the concept of this sensation and it is Rabindranath’s favorite and familiar concept. In fact the poet himself has explained the concept behind his *anubhūti* in numerous poetical works and other writings.² It has also been echoed by some thinkers in our country and overseas. The innumerable visible manifestations of universal life could be realized within the confines of our heart as a complete sensation [*anubhūti*]. However, this *akhaṇḍa anubhūti* [undivided sensation] refuses to rest within, always seeking to break all bounds to realize itself in the infinite universal life. To be sure, what is limitless is neither real nor realizable; the unbound is formless, it has its *raison d’etre* only with bounds. The unlimited

cannot be realized unless it is comprehended within limits. By the same token, nothing within bounds can reach perfection until it transcends its limitedness and merges in the unlimited and the unformed. The finite and the infinite, the form and the formless, the part and the whole coexist. Our individual mortal life is thus organically related to the universal eternal life. We realize the latter within the finitude of our personal life. There is nothing in creation that cannot be apprehended in our interiorized feelings. Otherwise, our individual life, even the life universal, would be devoid of any meaning.

A poem composed in his maturer years expresses this concept wonderfully:

*Dhūp āpanāre milāite cāhe gandhe.
Gandha se cāhe dhūpere rahite juḍe
Sur āpanāre yog dite cāhe chandeChanda āpani phire yete cāi sure.
Bhāb pete cāi rūper mājhāre aṅga
Rūp pete cāi bhāber mājhāre chanda
Asīm se cāhe sīmār nibiḍ saṅga
Sīma hate cāi asīmer mājhe hārā.
Pralay sṛjane nā jāni e kār yukti
Bhāb hate rūpe abirā yāoā āsā
Bandha phiriche khuñjiyā āpan mukti
Mukti māgiche bandhaner mājhe bāsā. (Chabi o Gān)*

[The incense wants to dissolve into its aroma
And the aroma wants to stick to the incense
The music wants to join the meter
The meter wants to return to the tune.
The thoughts seek form and
Form seeks release in thoughts.
The infinite seeks close touch of the finite
The finite wants to be lost in the infinite.
Whose idea is this: creation and dissolution?
Moving back and forth from thought to form?
Confinement seeking release and freedom residing in restraint?]

...As will be seen later, as the poet advanced in age, his realization of an intimate connection with the cosmic life grew deeper and possessed his literary life. While his *Prabhātsaṅgīt* gives a

faint hint to this realization, it becomes clearer in “Rāhur Prem” [The Demon’s Love] (*Chabi o Gān*) [Pictures and Songs]:

Śhunechi āmare bhāla lāge nā
Nāi bā lāgīla tor,
Kaṭhin bandhane caraṇ beḍiyā
Cirakāl tore raba āṅkaḍiyā
Lauha śṛṅkhaler dor.
Tui ta āmār saṅgī abhāginī,
Bāṅdhiāchi kāṛāgāre
Prāṇete śṛṅkhal diyechi prāṇete
Dekhi ke khulite pāre.

...

Jagat mājhāre yethāy beḍābi
Yethāi basibi yethāy dāṅḍābi
Ki basante śīte, dibase niśīthe
Sathe sathe tor thakibe bajite
E pasan pran ananta shrinkhal
Charan jadaye dhare
Ekbar tore dekhechhi yakhan
Kemane edabi more. (Chabi o Gān)

[I hear I do not please you:

Ley it be.

Like rugged iron-ankle bands

I’ll clasp your feet with grappling hands

Eternally.

A wretched captive in my thrall,

I’ve seized you,

Fettered your life in my life’s chains:

Who’ll free you?

Wherever you walk in the world,

Wherever sit, wherever stand,

In spring or winter, day or night,

You’ll bear the ceaseless clanking weight

Of this hard heart in shackles round your feet.] (Translation in Chaudhuri 2004: 47)

Unmistakably the hazy and misty sensation of *Prabhātsaṅgīt* is becoming clearer and

assuming a distinct and intimate form in the poet's imagination, as if another life, the life eternal, is seeking to mingle with and blossom in his life ephemeral. This fragile and fleeting life is surrounded by eternal life in every season and every direction and in every mood at every moment. The eternal universal life finds expression in the entire cosmic life.

Anantakaler saṅgī āmi tor
Āmi ye tor chāyā
Kibā se rodane, kibā se hāsite
Dekhite pāibe kakhan pāśete
Kakhan samukhe kakhan paścāte
Āmār āndhār kāyā

Ye dike cāhibi, ākāṣe āmār
Āndhār mūrati ānkā
Sakali paḍibe āmār āḍāle
Jagat paḍibe dhākā. (Chabi o Gān)

[I am your partner for all time,
 Your shadow.
 Now in tears and now laughter,
 Now before you and now after,
 Now beside, my dark shape you will see.] (translation in Chaudhuri 2004: 47).

Another piece from *Chabi o Gān*, “Niśīth Jagat” [World at Night], evokes this *anubhūti* elegantly and eloquently in its poignant presentation of an acutely charged sensation. Clouds are gathering in the western sky, lightning flashing in the cloudy horizon, “bats flying and owls hooting”; in this stormy night a child walks to the forest holding his mother's hand. Suddenly he frees himself from his mother's clutch in a playful mood and falls behind. The mother calls for her boy and cannot find him. He sits in the forest alone:

Sahasā samukh diye ke galo hhāyār mata,
Lāgila tarās.
Ke jāne sahasā yena kothā kondik hate
śuni dīrghaśvās.
Ke base rayeche pāśe? Ke chuiṅla deha mor
Himhaste tāñr?

[Who goes like a shadow all of a sudden

It's eerie.

I know not where I hear a sudden sigh from.

Who's sitting near me? Who's touching me with

A chilly hand?]

(translation in Chaudhuri 2004).

Who is this invisible man? He pervades the whole cosmos with all the invisible creatures of the dark. The child has also drowned in the dark vast life universal. He cannot even recognize himself because his own self is submerged in him. It is impossible to see this imprisoned self:

Andhakāre āpanāre dekhite nā pāi yata

Tata bhālobāsi,

Tata tāre buke kare bāhute bāndhiyā laye

Haraṣete bhāsi.

Yata yena mane hay pāche re calite pathe

Tṛṇa phuṭe pāy,

Yataner dhan pāche camaki kāndiyā oṭhe

Kusumer ghāy.

[The more I can't see myself in the dark

The more I love him,

The more I hold him in my arm

With delight.

I dread his being stung

By a thorn while walking

Or shocked

(even) by the flower falling on him.] (*Chabi o Gān*)

This “precious treasure” [*yataner dhan*] may be his beloved mate whom he wishes to see:

Sakhāre kāndiyā bale—“Baḍa sādḥ yāy sakhā

Dekhi bhālo kare.

Tui śaiśaber bandhu, cirajanma kete galo

Dekhinu na tore.

*Bujhi tumi dūre ācha, ekbār kāche ese
Dekhāo tomāy!’’
Se amni keñde bale—‘‘Āpanāre dekhi nāi
Ki dekhāba tore?’’*

(Ibid.)

[He entreats his mate ‘‘It’s my
only desire to look at you up close, my friend.
You have been childhood companion, and
All my life is spent without seeing you.
I know you stay far away, but come to me
And reveal yourself just for once.’’
He responds in tears ‘‘What could I show
You, alas, I haven’t even seen my own self.’’] (*Chabi o Gān*)

Had he been visible, that *anubhūti* would have vanished in the thin air. His mystery consists in his invisibility. That is why there is so much anxious longing to see him and recognize him.

As I have observed, the very first piece of the poet’s collection titled *Mānasī* bears testimony to the nexus between his concepts of *Jībandebatā* and *biśvajīban*....In ‘‘Upahār’’ [Gift] we get a glimpse of how the waves of life are striking against the poet’s heart relentlessly and how the different tunes of bliss and blight of life are resonating inside him....He takes all the music of the vast world outside inside himself and shapes the goddess of his imagination [*mānasī-pratimā*] with his love and *logos*. This *mānasī-pratimā* keeps company with him sometimes as a male playmate, sometimes as his dearest female lover, sometimes as his interiorized deity [*antarer debatā*] or sometimes as the presiding goddess of life [*jībaner adhiṣṭhātrī debī*]....

*Bāhire pāṭhāy biśva katagandha gan dṛśya
aṅgīhārā saundayer beše
Biraḥī se ghure ghure byāthābharā kata sure
Kāñde hṛdayer dvāre ese.
Sei mahāmantra gne kabir gabhir prane
Jege uṭhe biraḥī bhābana,
Chāḍī antahpurabāse salajja charaṇe āse
Mūrtimatī marmer kāmanā.
Antare bāhire sei byākulita milanei*

Kabir ekanta sukhochvās

Sei ānandamuhūrtaguli taba kare dinu tuli

Sarbaśreṣṭha prāṇer prakāś.

[The world sends out so much beauty in

sight, smell, and sound that

Moves about as a forlorn lover and weeps

In piteous melody at the portals of my heart.

This mystical music inspires lover's thoughts [*birahi bhabana*]

In the innermost core of the poet's heart.

The perfect form of his desire

arrives in hesitant steps.

The poet's greatest bliss lies in this passionate union of the outer and the inner.

I dedicate to you those blissful moments as the greatest gift of [my] life.] (*Mānasī*)

Even the last piece in *Mānasī* ("Āmār Sukh" [My Pleasure]) is worth noticing. The poet feels that he has scored one up over his constant companion residing in him. The latter never enjoyed the aesthetic delight [*mādhurī*] that he did....The poet believes that he himself has been fused with the world and hence he is infinite and eternal. But he has turned on him who has graciously enabled the poet to have such a realization:

Tumi ki karecha mane dekhecha, peyecha tumi

Sīmārekḥā mama?

Pheliyā diyācha more ādi anta śeṣ kare

Paḍā puñthi- sama?

Nāi sīmā āgepahe, yata cāo tata āche,

Yatai āsibe kāche tata pābe more.

Āmāreo diye tumi e bipul biśvabhūmi

E akash e batas dite paro bhare.

Āmāteo sthān peta abādhe samasta taba

Jībaner āśā.

Ekbār bhebe dekho e parāṇ dhariāche

Kata bhālobāsā.

[Do you think you've fathomed my limit

And discarded me like a book read from beginning to end?

I am unlimited.
 You'll have more of me the more you come near me.
 You could fill the universe
 With my self.]
 Let all the aspirations of your life
 Rest in me.
 You need to consider
 How my own life harbored
 So much love.] (Mānasī)

We get to see Rabindranath's mysterious creative impulse as the ideal woman of his imagination in the poet's collection titled *Sonār Tarī* [Golden Boat]. ... We noted how a half-familiar being representing all the beauty, smell and movements of the world used to give him company. Though he did not yet get to know this companion fully, the poet used to have regular tryst with her in his room, on the rooftop under the sky in the morning and in the evening. She was his constant childhood companion as a little girl but now she appears in "Mānassundarī" [the Pretty Woman of his Imagination] as his lover [*preyasī*] of his adult years. The poet asks:

*Mane āche kabe kon phullayūthi bane,
 Bahubālyakāle, dekhā hata dui jane
 Ādh-cenāṣonā? Tumi ei pṛthibīr
 Pratibeśinīr meye, dharār asthīr
 Ek bālaker sāthe ki khelā khelāte
 Sakhī, āsite hāsiyā, taruṅ prabhāte
 Nabīn bālikāmūrti, śubhbrastra pari
 Ūṣār kiraṇdhāre sadya snān kari
 Bikaca kusumsama phullamukhkhāni
 Nidrābhāṅge dekhā dite niye yete tāni
 Upabane kuḍāte śephālī. Bāre bāre
 śaiśab kartabya hate bhulāye āmāre,
 Phele diye puñthi-patra, keḍe nite khaḍi,
 Dekhāye gopan path dite mukta kari
 Pāṭhśālā-kārā hate; kothā grhakone
 Niye yete nirjanete rahasya-bhabane;
 Janaśūnya grhachāde ākāśer tale,
 Bhulāte āmāre, svapnasama camatkār
 Arthahīn, satya mithyā tumi jāna tār.*

[Recall the time long ago when we two children
 Half-familiar with each other used to have a tryst at
 The fully blossomed *juthi* grove?
 You, a little girl from a neighboring planet [*prithibir pratibeshinir meye*],
 Used to play with a restive boy of the earth, clad in a white dress and
 Bathed in the bright light of the dawn;
 You used to appear as a blossoming flower to awake me
 And drag me to the garden to collect *shephali* flowers.
 So many times you made me oblivious of my child's chores
 And discard my books and you took away my chalk and showed me
 The secret alley, thus rescuing me from my school prison-house.
 You dragged me to some secret niche of the desolate mysterious
 Mansion or the lonely rooftop to play with me or to entertain me
 With your wonderful stories under the blue sky; this was like
 A wondrous dream that's meaningless and purposeless—you only
 Know if these were real or not.] (“Mānassundarī”, *Sonār Tarī*)

But the poet's childhood is now over. Even his female playmate has crossed over the juvenile playground. His life is now swayed by the first Spring breeze of mature youth; new aspirations and anxieties as well as the world spirit have touched his heart with new magic and new form. The poet now looks at his childhood companion

--*Khelākṣetra hate*
Kakhan anatarlakṣmī esecha antare,
Āpanār antahpure gauraber bhare
Basi ācha mahiṣīr mata.
Chile khelār saṅgnī
Ekhan hayecha marmer gehinī,
Jībaner adhiṣṭhātrī debī.

[You, the goddess of my heart, have
 Left the playground and come gloriously into my heart,
 Your own dwelling, where
 You sit as my queen.
 You were my playmate
 But now you've become my soulmate,
 The presiding goddess of my life.] (“Mānassundarī”, *Sonār Tarī*)

The childhood companion now appears to the poet as his lover...But this innermost lover is no longer confined within him, she has revealed herself in the infinite world of nature outside. The sensation remains the same, though it has taken another form. But this indwelling lover can no longer be confused with his inner self, she has blossomed in the infinite world of nature outside. Perhaps he had blossomed in his heart in a previous birth. Though death has snapped the tie their love now pervades the whole universe. Hence the poet beholds the majestic beauty of his lover everywhere in the universe:

Ekhan bhāsicha tumi

Ananter mājhe; svarga hate martabhūmi

Karicha bihar; sandhyār kaṇakbarṇe

Rāngichha anchal! Usar galitaswarne

Gaḍicha mekhalā; pūrṇa taṭinīr jale

Karicha bistār, ṭalṭal chalchale

Lālita youbankhāni, basanta-bātāse

Cañcal bāsanābyāthā sugandha niḥśāse

Karicha prakāś; nisupta pūrṇiāa-rāte

Nirjan gagane, ekākinī klānta hāte

Bichāicha dugdha śubhra biraha śayan.

[You're now hovering in eternity between heaven
And earth; dipping the corner of your garment in
The golden hue of evening; making your girdle
With the molten gold of dawn; mixing and spreading
Your luscious liquid youthful [beauty], and exuding
Your restive pangs of desire in the fragrant breath
Of the spring breeze.
You have spread
The milky white lonesome bed with your
Tired hand in the sleepy desolate
Firmament in the full-moon night.] (“Mānassundarī”, *Sonār Tarī*)

However, the poet is unable to find solace and satisfaction in the mere touch of the *anubhuti* of his indwelling lover. He longs to see his *manasi* in real life, and he asks her:

Sei tumi

Mūrtite dibe ki dekhā? Ei martabhūmi

Paraś karibe rāṅgā caraṇa tale?

Antare bāhire biśhve śūnye jale sthale
Sarba thñāi hate, sarbamayī āpanāre
Kariyā haraṇ, dharaṇīr ekdhāre
Dharibe ki ekkhāni madhur mūrati?

[Would you, please, assume a tangible form
 And touch this earth under your colorful feet?
 Would you take yourself off from all quarters of the
 Universe you pervade and
 Show your magnificent visage in a
 Corner of the earth?] (“Mānassundarī”, *Sonār Tarī*)

Anyway, this *anubhūti* of the world of nature never materialized in any tangible form to the poet though he felt touched by its myriad manifestations. One day he wakes up suddenly to find his lover, his “*parāṇ*” [life], as it were, embrace him in trepidation. His heart dances in joy under her unrelenting delightful clutches. Until now he has carefully and tenderly nurtured his *mānassundarī* lest she is hurt or otherwise importuned, he has smothered her with his passionate kisses and filled her with all that is sweet and charming. In her euphoria she is now senseless to touch and unable to bear the weight of flowers even. But the poet is concerned lest he should lose his charming lover in the bottomless pit of the ocean of dream. He must get her back again.

Bhebechhi ajike khelite haibe
Nutan khela,
Ratribela.
Marandolai dhari rashigachhi
Basiba dujane bado kachhakachhi
Jhañjhā āsiā aṭṭa hāsīā
Māribe thelā—
Āmār prāṇete kheliba dujane
Jhulankhelā
Niśīthbelā.
De dol dol!
De dol dol!
Mahāsāgare tuphān tol
Badhūre āmār peyechi ābār—
Bhareche kol.

...

Prāṇete āmāte mukhamukhī āj
Cine laba doṅhe chāḍi bhay lāj,
Bakṣe bakṣe paraśiba doṅhe
Bhābe bibhol.
De dol dol.

[Hence have I thought to play today
 A novel game
 In the night-time.
 Clutching fast the death-swing's ropes,
 The two of us shall nestle close,
 The storm will come and give a push
 With laughter high:
 We two shall play the swinging game
 At midnight-time,
 My soul and I.
 Swing, swing!
 Swing, swing!
 Raise a tempest on this sea!
 My lap is full—my bride again
 Has come to me!

.....

Face to Face, my soul and I
 Today, all shame and fear laid by,
 On rapture's wing:
 Swing, swing! (“Jhulan” [Swaying], *Sonār Tarī*. Translation in Chaudhuri 2004, 77)

We now witness the poet's wondrous *jhulanmelā* and the tumult in his heart as well as in the air and in the sky. However, at another moment this same *mānassundarī* is dragging him somewhere without a destination [*niruddeś*]; the poet does not even know what is his sojourn for except that he is being led by his in-dwelling goddess to nowhere. On his way he asks his innermost companion:

Ār kata dūre niye yābe more
He sundarī?
Balo, kon pār bhiḍibe tomār
Sonār tarī?

Yakhani śudhāi ogo bideśinī
Tumi hāsa śudhu madhurhāsini—
Bujhite nā pāri, ki jāni ki āche
Tomār mane.
Nīrabe dekhāo aṅguli tuli
Akūl sindhu uṭhiche ākuli,
Dūre paścime ḍubiche tapan
Gagankone
Ki āche hothāy-calechi kiser
Anveṣane?

[How much farther will you lead me, fair one?
 Tell me what shore your golden boat will moor on.
 Stranger-woman, when I ask
 You only smile, sweet-smiling one:
 I cannot tell what passes in your mind.
 You point a finger silently
 Towards the heaving shoreless sea,
 The sun upon its western edge inclined.
 What wits us there? What do we go to find?] (“Niruddés Yātrā” [Sojourn to Nowhere], *Sonār Tarī*. Translation in Chaudhuri 2004, 89).

And yet, the poet was acutely aware that in spite of multiplicities this *anubhūti* has a single undivided reality in him and it is the presence of his *mānassundarī* or his *Jībandebatā*. ...

Jagater mājhe kata bicitra tumi he
Tumi bicitrarūpinī.

[You wear multiple masks
 In this variegated world]

But

Antarmājhe śudhu tumi ekā ekākī
Tumi antarbyāpinī.

[And yet in my innermost being
 You remain as the only and lonely one.] (*Citrā*)

We have seen that the single *anubhūti* of the world of nature has pervaded the poet's interiority as his *mānassundarī* whom he has found in every manifestation of the life universal and who is giving expression to his life guiding it, straying him off his path at every step on to nowhere. He has no word of his own it being provided by his *manassundari* who is also the presiding deity of his life [*Jībandebatā*]. What is this unfathomable mystery, how queer—without purpose, without end!

E ki kautuk nityanūtan

Ogo kautukmayī,

Āmi yāhā kichu cāhi balibāre

Balite ditechha kai! (Translation provided at the beginning of this chapter).

Is that all? Are you making a mockery of my lyric and *logia*? You have also made my life an object of your purposeless fun—I want to go one way and you lead athwart that direction, you have made me a puppet of yours—

Ekadā pratham prabhātbelāy

Se pathe bāhir hainu helāy

Mane chila, din kāje o khelāy

Kāṭāye phiriba rāte.

But

Pade pade tumi bhulāile dik,

Kothā yāba āj nāhi pāi ṭhik,

Klāntahṛday bhrānta pathik

Esechi nūtan deśe.

[When one morn I went out casually

I thought of spending the day in work and play

And return at night]

But

[You made me forget my way at every step,

I can't find my destination.

I now come to a strange land, a tired and wayward traveler] (*Citrā*)

But have you been gratified yet after having accepted my life as the offering for your worship, made me your puppet and an object of your fun and pleasure?

Ohe antaratama,

Miṭeche ki taba sakal tiyās

Āsi antare mama. (“Jibandebata”, *Citrā*). (Translation provided above).

If you have made me bankrupt after having possessed my lyric, spirit, and splendor, if your night of love tryst with me is over, then you create me anew so that we start a new tryst. You yourself are ever changing, let your unending playfulness find expression in my transience:

Bheṅge dāo tabe ājikār sabhā,

Āno naba rūp āno naba śobhā,

Nūtan kariyā laho ārbār

Cirapurātan more.

[Let’s be done with our tryst today.

Bring new form and beauty

Make a new man out of my

Familiar old self.] (*Citrā*)

Yet this novelty has no limit, no end. The grapevine of the poet’s life has blossomed due to the touch of this in-dwelling one. He again invokes this *antarātamā* in his life:

Tumi esa nikuṅja nibāse

Esa mor sārthak sādhan.

Luṭe lao bhariā aṅcal

Jībaner sakal sambal,

Nīrabe nitānta abanata

Basanter sarba samarpan.

Hāsimukhe niye yāo yata

Baner bedan nibedan.

[Come, enter my grove

O my fulfillment!

Take away my life’s spring treasures

Humbly and silently offered.

Take all the pain and pangs of this
Grove with a smile.] (Caitālī)

We have endeavored to get to know the *anubhūti* of life in Rabindranath's poetical career from the composition of *Prabhātsaṅgīt* to *Caitālī*. Though numerous poems of his provide a glimpse of this *anubhūti*, those bearing a clearer stamp of it help us comprehend this wondrous mystery. We noted that from the beginning of his literary career the poet demonstrates a close connection between his inner sensibilities and the myriads of manifestations of the external world of nature.

Moreover, he visualizes with his eyes or in his imagination [*maner dṛṣṭi*], hears, and feels with his touch a bird's song, wind's murmur, the sun, the moon and the stars in the firmament, human movements, trees and shrubs, rivers, and everything else—they all have gathered in his innermost being. He is partially familiar with this holistic form and yet it is his constant companion. However, this undivided form cannot realize itself within the confines of the poet's interiority; it seeks to mingle with the wider world outside. The pieces of *Prabhātsaṅgīt* express this aspiration. As I mentioned earlier, the hazy presence of this in-dwelling being gradually achieves a distinct profile. Appearing initially as a composite of the multiplicities of the world of nature it goes on to become the poet's playmate, his intimate consort—the childhood companion becomes the presiding deity of his heart in his youth and ultimately his beloved spouse [*marmar gṛhinī*]. This marital game [*dāmpatyālīlā*] could become tiresome and boring from time to time requiring a fresh start or it could raise occasional doubts about its success or satisfaction. However, this *mānassundarī* is more than just the poet's lover—she is his *jībaner adhiṣṭhātrī debī*.

Really speaking, the realization of this supreme governor, the lord of life, on the poet's life is *eo ipso* a wondrous and mysterious aesthetic presence. This is because his *Jībandebatā* is a wonderful representation as well as the realization of the cosmic life. As he is connected to the cosmos by an umbilical cord, as it were, he easily and elegantly finds an aesthetic pleasure in the most trivial natural objects and phenomena. The poems and lyrics of the poet's *opus* beginning with the *Prabhātsaṅgīt* through *Kathā o Kāhinī* [Story and History], *Kalpanā* [Imagination], *Kṣaṇikā* [Momentary] contain no somber philosophy or rhetoric but an unlimited reserve of

unalloyed beauty and music. The poems of this phase of the poet's life illuminate the joy emanating from a complete union between the outer and the inner, between earthly life and cosmic life. The [poet's] entire life is drowned in the beauty, love, and enjoyment of the world of nature—as if he is spiritedly seeking to lose himself in the ever flowing beauty of cosmic life. We sense the *Sturm und Drang* of this gushing sentiment in such pieces as “Basundharā” [Earth], “Yete Nāhi Diba” [I Won't Let You G³], “Samudrer Prati” [To the Ocean], “Svarga Haite Bidāy” [Farewell to Paradise], and “Prabāsī” [Emigrant]. His *anubhūti* is arguably wonderfully uncanny.

Tṛṇe pulakīta ye mātir dharā
Luṭāy āmār sāmne
Se āmāke dāke eman kariyā
Kena ye kaba ta kemane?
Mane hai yena se dhūlir tale
Yuge yuge āmi chinu tṛṇna jale
Se duār khuli kabe kon chale
Bāhir hayechi bhramaṇe.

...

E sātmaḥala bhabane āmār
Ciraḥjanamer bhiṭāte
Sthale jale āmi hājār bandhane
Bāndhā ye giṅthāte giṅthāte.

[I can't express how
 The grass-laden earth beacons to me!
 I feel as if I have wandered out
 Of the door [of my home]
 Behind which I had lived for ages
 Under the dust, in the grass, and in the water.

...

In this grand mansion,
 My eternal home,
 I remain tied
 Knot by knot on land and in water.] (*Sonār Tarī*)

It is common knowledge that Rabindranath's poetical career starting from *Prabhātsaṅgīt* down to *Kalpanā* and *Kṣaṇikā* is primarily an aesthetic experience. Thereafter begins a new chapter in his life starting with *Naibedyā* [Offerings] and *Kheyā* [Ferry], when the poet parts company with his blissful aesthetic interaction with nature. There is pain in this parting and it finds expression in several poems of *Kalpanā* and *Kṣaṇikā*. However, the *anubhūti* of *Jībandebatā* still lingers in the poet's heart. Yet, alas, it's time say good bye to his *mānassundarī*:

Āmi niṣṭhur kaṭhiṅ kaṭhor
Nirmam āmi āj
Ār nāhi derī bhairab bherī
Bāhire uṭhiche bāji.
Tumi ghumāicha nimil nayane
Kāṅṅpiyā uṭhicha biraha śayane
Prabhāte uṭhiyā śuṅya nayane
Kāṅṅdiyā cāhiā rabe...

[I am relentless and unsparing today.
 The terrible drum is beating outside,
 There's no time.
 You're sleeping with eyes shut
 But you shiver in the pang of separation.
 You'll wake up weeping at dawn
 With a vacant look ...] (Kalpanā)

The poet is well aware, and yet—

Samai hayeche nikaṭ ekhan
Bāṅṅdhan chinḍite habe.
 [It's time now
 To cut the knot of the tie.] (Kalpanā)

...The poet's parting with his aesthetic life is complete in *Naibedyā*. His close connection with the world of nature could no longer be felt. There will be no realization of beauty in the most trivial and tiny objects; there will be no occasion "to see a world in a grain of sand," no

moments to savor the sheer bliss of experiencing the sublime; this world of joys and jitters, smiles and sorrows will no longer move the poet's heart. This new phase of his poetic career reaches its acme in *Gītāñjali* [Song Offerings] and *Gītimālya* [Garland of Songs]. It is the lord of world spirit who now presides over the poet's new life. We notice a sea change in the poet's thoughts about his *Jībandebatā*. His heart and soul now remain absorbed in deeper mysteries than his communion with world life. The poet's *anubhūti* of *jībandebatā*, that is contingent upon his intimacy with world life, is yielding place to a higher arcana.

We will understand this change better if we bear in mind that consciousness of the world life or spirit is not quite the same as consciousness of the lord of the world. Admittedly, the consciousness of world life and the consciousness of the lord of the world are related. Yet we must not confuse the two. *Jībandebatā* expresses himself not in world life but in individual life. He enacts his *lila* in the interiority of the individual human being who realizes him in the external world. We realize our temporal life in the world life by the grace of *Jībandebatā*. This is because our life is connected to the world life—"we share the same rhythm" and that is why we feel in our life the pulsation of the life universal. In this sense, *Jībandebatā* is actually a deeper and larger extension of the poet's own life. However, this is not exactly Rabindranath's understanding of god or the lord of the world. Yet it seems that for him the *Jībandebatā* consciousness merged gradually with that of world spirit and he was led to the realization of the lord of the world or god through his identification with the cosmic life. There are sparks of thoughts of the divine in some of the poems of *Kheyā*, *Gītāñjali*, and *Gītimālya*.

My analysis of the mysteries of Rabindranath's poetic life highlights a simple truth of which I have tried to provide but a faint hint. Perhaps the *mysterium tremendum* of his *Jībandebatā* underlies this truth. I do not think it necessary to unravel the mysteries of Rabindranath's poetic consciousness through such lofty philosophies as monism or Hegelianism. The poet's mystery belongs primarily to the affective domain....Rabindranath is a poet *par excellence* and not a pedantic scholar. The font of his poetic consciousness is neither an identifiable philosophy nor esoteric knowledge about truth, but rather his extraordinary spontaneous capacity for feeling. This faculty has enabled him to unravel the inscrutable

mysteries of life—*na medhayā na vahudhā śruteṇa* [neither by ratiocination nor with the help of profound philosophies]. Hence I do not try to search for a theory or a philosophy to explain the mystery of *Jībandebatā* as I do not think any such theorizing will help us know the poet or grasp his output.

But let me return to the theme of our discourse. Is it really the case that the poet of *Kalpanā* or *Kṣaṇikā* lost the wonderful *anubhūti* of his *mānassundarī* or *Jībandebatā*? Apparently, the poet seems to have lost it. Would the poet's beloved *mānassundarī* who lived inside the poet's heart be lost forever? Would the lord of the world [*biśvadebatā*] replace his lord of life [*Jībandebatā*]? It is fairly known that Rabindranath, the composer of *Gītāñjali-Gītimālya-Gitali*, found a new life in *Balākā* [The Crane]. This “born again” experience of the poet is truly wonderful. We used to think that Rabindranath finally eschewed his aesthetic sensibilities of *Gītāñjali-Gītimālya* and surrendered himself to the feet of *Biśvadebatā*. Indeed this would have been the normal evolution of human nature. But this was not the case with Rabindranath. I have discussed this elsewhere and do not wish to repeat my arguments here. *Balākā* is a poetry of restlessness and movement celebrating love, youth, and beauty with a high intellectual appeal. The poet's *Jībandebatā* tantalizingly larks behind this motion and emotion of love, youth, and beauty. “*Matta sāgar pāḍi dila gahan rātrikāle, ai ye āmār neye*” [“My helmsman set sail in turbulent sea at the dead of night”]—we hear the faint footsteps of this stranger, the man in the heart [of the poet] in this line. *Balākā* is followed by *Palātakā* [The Fugitive] which testifies to the poet's concern with the mundane multiple trials and tribulations, and the weal and woes of human life, which is a part of universal life. It seems that his poems in *Palātakā* seek to probe the varied experiences of life through the variegated emotions and sentiments of human heart expressed in them. It is becoming clear that the consciousness of his female playmate of childhood, companion of his adolescence, and the pretty princess of his youthful imagination mysterious and inscrutable, approaches slowly closer to his heart's sanctum. Ever she comes, she comes.

In fact she arrives in *Pūrabī* [titled after an Indian musical note], in spite of the poet's deeper consciousness of the lord of the universe. This is because world life is dearer than the

lord of the world to Tagore. Rabindranath is a poet of human and universal life. I have discussed the deeper thoughts of *Pūrabī* elsewhere, though I find it necessary to reproduce some parts of my critique here.⁴ For whatever reasons, Rabindranath's poetic career that had been grounded in deep spiritual thoughts staged a comeback to his deep engagement with the smiles and sorrows, with the water, dust, grass, and tress of this sacred earth: “*puṇya dharār dhūlomāṭi phal hāoā jal tṛṇa tarur sane.*”

Ei yā dekhā ei yā choṅwā, ei bhālo ei bhālo
Ei bhālo āj e saṅgame kānnahāsir gaṅgā yamunāy
Ḍheu kheyechi ḍub thiechi ghaṭ bharechi niyechi bidāy.
Ei bhālore prāṅer raṅge ei āsaṅga sakal aṅge mane.
Puṇya dharār dhūlomāṭi phal hāoā jal tṛṇa tarur sane.

[That I have seen, touched, dived in the
 Confluence of joys and sorrows, and filled my pitcher
 And have bid farewell—this is enough.
 I am blessed that I have shared
 My body and soul with the water, dust, grass, and trees of this sacred earth.] (*Pūrabī*)

Now the poet could easily feel:

Āj dharaṅī āpan hāte
Anna dilen āmar pāte
Phal diyechen sājiye patrapuṭe
Ājke māther ghése ghāse
Nihśvāse mor khabar āse
Kothāy ācha biśvajaner prāṅ.

[(Mother) earth served me
 Food with [her] own hand today.
 (She) has put the fruits on plates of leaves
 The meadows bring my news in every grass
 Where are you the vital force of the universe?] (*Pūrabī*)

This echoes the thoughts of his youth—a desire to feel the universal life within his own. The resurgence of this feeling also ensures the return of the poet's playful companion, his

mānassundarī. She has come:

Duār bāhire yemani cahire
Mane hala yena cini
Kabe, nirupamā ogo priyatamā
Chile līlāsāṅginī.

[I look outside of my door
 And feel as if I recognize you.
 When did you, my dearest one,
 Play with me last?] (Pūrabī)

This palymate had met the poet many, many times in the past, opening his doors, and charming him in various guises—sometime as newly bloomed flower or sometimes as newly formed cloud. She has come back at the fag end of the poet's life. Would he be able to welcome her to his home?

Dekho nā ki hāy, belā cale yāy
Sārā haye ela din
Bāje pūrabīr chande rabir
śeṣ rāḡinīr bīṅ.
Etadin hethā chinu āmi parabīsī,
Hāriye phelechi sediner bānśī
Āj sandhyāy prāṅ oṭhe nihśvāsi
Gānhārā udāsīn.
Kena abelāy dekeche khelāy
Sārā haye ela din.

as, time is rolling by
 The day is coming to its end;
 The sun's lute is playing
 The final note in the *Purabi* melody.
 I have been a stranger here so long
 I have lost the flute I had.
 My heart is heavy with melancholy without any music.
 Why has she summoned me to play [with her]
 When the day is coming to an end?
 At the end of the day?] (Pūrabī)

In several pieces of *Pūrabī* we notice the poet's unmistakable expression of his recovery

of the consciousness of his lover of imagination (*mānasipriyā*), his lord of life (*Jībandebatā*). The aesthetic delights that had filled his earlier life with bliss and then had been lost have crept stealthily and silently into the realm of his imagination and thoughts in the poet's later life....

Āj dekhi sediner sei kṣīṇ padadhvani tār
Āmār gāner chanda gopane kariche adhikār,
Dekhi tār adṛśya aṅgulī
Svapna aśru sarobare kṣaṇe kṣaṇe dei dheu tuli.

[I now know the sound of her faint footsteps of yore
 Have mysteriously possessed my lyrics, I also see her unseen fingers causing ripples in the
 Tear-filled lake of my dream.] (Pūrabī)

The poet's lover gave her parting kiss long ago. He has almost forgotten it in the hiatus of the long separation. But he now remembers her and asks her forgiveness piteously for his lapse of memory. How many leaves of *madhabi* flower wilted, how many noons noisy with dove song, how many evenings have left their golden amnesia, how many nights have written an obscure script and lapsed in oblivion after that last kiss. Even if the poet asks forgiveness of his long lost beloved, he nevertheless is fully aware that his lover, his *Jībandebatā*, has already blessed his life with her touch.

Tabu jāni. Ekdin tumi dekhā diyechile bale
Gāner phasale mor e jīban uṭhechila phale.
Ājo nāi šeṣ

Tomar paraś nāhi ār
Kintu ki paraśmaṇi rekhe gecha antare āmār
Biśver amṛta chabi ājio to dekhā dey more
Kṣaṇe kṣaṇe akāraṇ ānander sudhāpātra bhare
Āmāre karāy pān.

[I know my life blossomed in songs because
 You came to me.
 It's still not empty yet

.....

Though I miss your touch
 I know I carry your touchstone inside me
 I still behold the immortal visage of the world
 And drink the cup of gratuitous bliss every moment.] (*Pūrabī*)

...I have tried to unravel the mystery and mystique of Rabindranath's *jībandebatā* according to my own understanding. My explanation may not be valid even. Yet, I must conclude by claiming that the font of Tagore's sensibilities enriching his poetic career and filling it with variegated forms and fragrance is, undeniably, his consciousness of universal life. This consciousness colored his childhood, adolescence, and youth, and the same consciousness brings a twilight tinge to fill the sunset hours of his life.

* Translated by Narasingha P. Sil from the original *Bāmlā* of Niharranjan Ray (1903-81), *Rabindranath o Bishwajiban*, originally published under the title "Rabīndra-pratibhār Utsa" [The Source of Tagore's Genius] in *Bhāratvarṣa* (Kārtik, 1336 BE [1929]), and reprinted in Niharranjan Ray, *Bhāratīya Aitihya o Rabīndranāth* [Rabindranath and Indian Heritage], vol. 2 (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 2004), 31-59. Certain sections of the original text have been omitted (marked by ellipses) as they appear to be repetitive in English, although such repetitions add rhetorical flourish in Bengali and Niharranjan was unquestionably a master of Bengali prose noted for its scholarly merit and literary richness. Needless to mention, ample care has been taken to maintain the integrity of the author's arguments and conclusions. All citations from Rabindranath's poems appear in Sil's translation barring those where another translator's rendering is used and referenced for its better quality and elegance.

Notes

¹Translation by Buddhadeva Bose in his *Tagore: Portrait of a Poet* (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1962), 91. There is a more literal, albeit quite readable, translation in Indu Dutt, *A Tagore Testament: Translated from the Original Bengali of Rabindranath Tagore* (1969. Third impression. Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1984), 1.

²[Note as in original. Slightly edited by the translator] A most succinct and elegant explanation of this concept comes from the poet himself writing under the pseudonym Banibinod Bandyopadhyay in a review of Edward Thompson's two books on Tagore: *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work* (1921) and *Rabindranath Tagore; Poet and Dramatist* (1926):

“It wouldn’t hurt to admit that he [Mr. Thompson] was unable to appreciate the idea of “Jibandebata” as it is expressed in different writings of the poet. We Indians believe in the presiding deities of our village, family, home as well as the personal gods of our choice (*iṣṭadebatā*). Such faiths are far from a fetish. Our devotional theology does not recognize the infinite as merely boundless. He remains the infinite in the midst of all limits. Hence the devotees delight in realizing Him in all bounds. We endear the infinite sky within the confines of our hearth and home. ...The oversoul [*paramātmā*] resides in each individual soul [*jībātmā*] precisely because He is infinite. Hence we find our bliss to identify our individual soul with the oversoul....In our desire to gain intimacy with the infinite firmament we have confined a part of it in our home but in so doing we may have denatured the part. We might imprison the infinite sky or envelop it in darkness, or even strip it of its beauty. Hence the poet has pleaded through some of his poems: ‘My lord of life, have I sickened you with my perversions? If I have, please break the bounds of my life and make them anew.’ In other words, if there is any rhyme or reason in confined existence, may I be able to express the infinite in my life beautifully and fully and find my fulfillment [in life]....

The poet often conflates masculinity with femininity in his *Jibandebatā*....Indian mind does not shy away from conceptualizing an abiding unity among trees, beasts, humans, and even inanimate objects. Likewise, they [Indians] are not afraid to regard male and female as expressions of the real divinity [*bhagabāner svarūp*]. The realization of the most intense and glorious aesthetic delight [*nibiḍ ras*] in the poet’s life has been sometimes masculine and sometimes feminine. Both realizations are a testimony to the infinitude of joy. Thus it’s not a problem for him to address his *jibandebatā* endrangingly in masculine as well as in feminine terms [*priyatamā* and *preyasī*]. ” Banibinod Bandyopadhyay, “Rabīndranāth Sambanddhe Reverend Thompson Sāheber Bahi” [“Rev. Thompson’s Book on Rabindranath”], *Prabāsī* (Shrabān, 1334 BE): 515-16.

Translator’s note: Tagore also published an explanation of his concept of *Jibandebatā* in his own name in 1904 and it is translated by Indu Dutt, *Tagore Testament*, 3-22. This article (also an article of faith for the poet) led to a misunderstanding with his elder brother Dwijendranath Tagore (1840-1926). Rabindranath responded to his brother’s critique in a note published in *Baṅgadarśan* and sections from this rejoinder of the poet are also translated by Dutt(109-10).

³See Rabindranath Tagore, *I Won’t Let You Go: Selected Poems*, trans. Ketaki K. Dyson (Columbia: South Asia Books, 1992).

⁴Niharranjan Ray, “Rabīndranāther ‘Pūrabī’,” *Prabāsī* (Caitra, 1332 B.E.).

Chapter Four

Rabindranath's Anti-National Patriotism

Prolegomena

On the New Year's day in 1877, a charismatic and cultivated Calcutta aristocrat of superlative charm, Rājā Sourindramohan Tagore (Thakur, 1840-1914), a distinguished musicologist, celebrated Queen Victoria's (r. 1837-1901) proclamation as "Empress of India" (the title having been conferred on her formally on May 1, 1876 by an act of Parliament in London) declared on that day in Delhi by the Viceroy Lord Robert Lytton, r. 1876-80) at his home at Pathuriaghata, northern Calcutta, hailing Her Imperial Majesty in a song composed and tuned by himself:

Jai, jai, rājarājeśvarīr jai!
Āji re Banṅgarājya atul ānandamay!
 [Victory! Victory! Victory!—
 Success to our Empress!—
 To-day is a day of perfect joy
 For thee, O Land of Bengal! (Tagore 1882, 162).¹

Recalling the same occasion a month later, Sourindramohan's kin the handsome precocious genius, the teenager Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) of Jorasanko, northern Calcutta, defiantly struck a discordant note of protest:

British bijay kariyā ghoṣṣaṇā
Ār ye gāi gāk, āmrā gābo nā,
Āmrā gābo nā haraṣa gān,
Eso go āmrā ye kajan āchi
Āmrā dharibo ārek tān.
 [Let any one who desires
 Proclaim the triumph of the British.
 But the rest of us will not sing paeans to them,
 We shall start a different music] (cited in Roy 2003, 255. Roy, however, erroneously dates the event in 1887).

Rabindranath sang at the nationalist association *Hindu Melā* [Hindu Fair] organized by the so-

called “National” Nabagopal Mitra (c. 1840-94). The sensitive youth was imbued with patriotic ideas sweeping the world of Bengali *bhadralok* [educated genteel class]. In the previous year he had joined a secret association called Sanjibanī Sabhā [Regeneration Society] founded by the Brāhmo intellectual and Headmaster of the Midnapur District School Rajnarayan Basu (1826-99) and Rabindranath’s elder brother Jyotirindranath (1849-1925) at an abandoned homestead in an obscure Calcutta lane. This society was modeled after the Italian secret political society *Carbonari* (named after the Italian charcoal-burners’ brotherhood founded in 1808. Rabindranath also published in *Bhāratī* (Agrahāyaṇ 1284 BE [1877]) “Jhānsīr Rāṇī” [Princess of Jhansi], a biographical essay on Laksmibai, the dowager queen of the princely state of Jhansi in northern India, who, like Boudica, the British dowager queen of the Celtic tribe of Iceni in Norfolk fighting the force of the imperial Romans to death in 61, died on June 18, 1858, fighting against the force of the British East India Company during the so-called Sepoy Mutiny (1857-58). Tagore’s interest in ancient Indian history and culture and in the lives of heroic patriots could be seen in numerous stories, poems, and essays all published before his fortieth year (Ray 1410 BE, 104-5); see also Dasgupta 1993, 56-58).²

Less than a decade later, in 1884, in his adult youth, Rabīndrabābu, the blossoming Renaissance genius, recalled the achievements of his famous forbear Rājā Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), one of the earliest educated *bābus* of colonial Calcutta and the first *uomo universal* [universal man], of the Bengal Renaissance:

Rāmmohan Rāy, āhā, tumi yadi bānciyā thākite, Tomāke Baṅgadeśer baḍai ābaśyak haiyāche. Āmrā bākpāṭu lok, āmādigake kāj karate śikhāo. Āmrā ātmambhari āmādigake ātmabisarjan diteśikhāo. Āmrā laghuprakṛti...āmādigake aṭal thākite śikhāo. Āmrā bāhīrer prakhar āloke andha, hṛdayer abhyantarastha cirojival āloker sāhāyīe bhālomanda nirbācan karate o svadeśer pakṣe yāhāmaṅgal tāhāi abalāmban karate śikṣā dāo.

[O Rammohan Ray, how I wish you were with us today! Bengal needs you badly. We are all talkers, teach us how to be doers. We are self-centered, teach us self-denial. We are irresolute... teach us how to remain steadfast in crisis by the strength of our character. We have been blinded by the glare of foreign shine, teach us how to discriminate between right and wrong with the enlightenment of our heart and choose that which is good for our country at all times] (cited in Narlikar 2002, 94).³

Rabindranath’s invocation of Rammohan was not just a respectful remembrance of the founder of the Brāhmo Samāj to which Tagore belonged but a tacit approval of Roy’s wonderful assimilation of Indian tradition—his Brāhmo belief essentializing the monism of Hindu Vedānta—and Western Christian *Weltanschauung*. Roy favored English education and opposed the establishment of Sanskrit College in Calcutta in 1823 and pleaded before the Parliamentary

Select Committee in London for the increasing importation of British capital and technology (Misra 1961, 210). And yet his Vedānta hermeneutic, highlighting the quintessential messages of pristine Hinduism, was so powerful and persuasive that it frightened the Christian missionaries of his day into thinking that “modern minds which had turned away from Hindu idolatry, would be attracted to Vedanta and thereby prevented from accepting Christianity” (Killingley 1976, 135).

Tagore came to appreciate the salutary effects of Western contact as he grew older and as he had come to acquaint himself with Western thought through further study, reflection, and travel. In one of his essays in *Kālāntar* [Fin de Siécle] published in 1937, the Nobel Laureate (1913) Rabindranath, famously called *Biśvakabi* [Poet Laureate of the World or World Poet] by the Bengalis, made an unabashed admission in his mature old age:

Mānuṣ hisebe ingrej raila musalmāner ceyeo āmāder kāch theke anek dūre, kintu Europer cittadūtrūpe in grej eta byāpak o gabhīrbhābe ām āder kāche esече ye, ār kono bideśī ār konodin eman kare āste pāreni.

[As people the English, more than the Muslims, are vastly different and distant from us, but Europe’s intellectual ambassadors the English have come so close to us as no other foreigners did] (cited in Mukhopadhyay 1403 BE, 34).

And yet the poet retained his native pride till his dying day. Barely two months before death (August 7, 1941) the ailing octogenarian remonstrated in his response to Eleanor Rathbone’s (1872-1946) open letter of indictment dated May 28, 1941 to the Indian nationalists:

It is not so much because the British are foreigners that they are unwelcome to us...as because while pretending to be trustees of our welfare they have betrayed the great trust and have sacrificed the happiness of millions in India to bloat the pockets of a few capitalists at home. I should have thought that the decent Britisher would at least keep silent at these wrongs and be grateful for our inaction, but that he should add insult to injury and pour salt over our wounds, passes all bounds of decency (cited in Ray 1410 BE, 207).⁴

The above documentation of Rabindranath’s changing attitude to the colonial authorities notwithstanding, he was never impervious to the beneficent impact of Mughal India’s contact with the West. He indeed was a supporter of India’s independence but his priority lay in social upliftment of the people through education and cultural and economic freedom before they could aspire for political freedom. It must be recognized that the poet actually made a distinction between *deśaprem*, sentiment of love of land, that is, patriotism, and *jāṭīyatābād*, nationalism, the ideological foundation of nation state.⁵ The former is rooted in the indigenous culture, the latter and import or implant from the West. He was a patriot *par excellence* but no nationalist. His patriotism called for true freedom of the people, freedom of the spirit as much as freedom

from external control.

On this score, Rabindranath remained an unabashed anglophile because of his admiration for British civilization. By the same token he found the colonial state a poison breathing Leviathan that must be tamed. He deemed nationalism narrow, divisive, violent, anti-culture, and anti-life, and thus his *deśaprem* dovetailed into his personal ideal of *biśvajīban* [Universal Life], that ran athwart the contemporary ideology of nationalism. This essay anatomizes Rabindranath's concepts of nationalism and nation state and suggests that anti-statist and anti-nationalist outlook are imbricated in his conception of Universal Unity and Universal Life. This worldview colored his understanding of the rational and national role of the state both in India and in the West, including Great Britain. Nevertheless, this lacuna or bias does not devalue his grand vision of human life in a world of unity in diversity.

Rabindranath's Ideas of Nation and Nation State

Tagore conflates nation with nation state or just state, and appears to use an essentialized dichotomy of emotional community (*Gemeinschaft*) and rational community or civil society or state (*Gesellschaft*) (Tönnies 2001/1887: 22-91) identifying the former with precolonial India and the latter with the modern West in general and Great Britain in particular. Tagore's views on nationalism—arguably a Western theory and praxis—were predicated on his twin assumption that it is coercive at home and predatory in the world.⁶ He considered it as “an applied science” and even compared it to “a hydraulic press, whose pressure is impersonal.” He preferred informal, even coercive but personal, government—feudal, monarchical, or imperial—and a deep distrust for impersonal and legalistic and structured authorities, however efficient. If both the personal and the national governments appear coercive, then, in his estimation, the former is the handloom operated by human touch, while the latter the power loom—“relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous” (Tagore 1994/1917: 56-57). These two assumptions, based undoubtedly on his experience and disenchantment with the aggressive nationalist states of pre-War and inter-War Europe and the extremist nationalist agitation in India, resulted in a skewed understanding of the historical role of nationalism.⁷ At the same time, his Romantic sensibilities—on his own admission he was spiritually as well as aesthetically influenced by some leading Romantic poets and thinkers of England—led him to formulate his notion of

what he considered government by nations, that is, nation states (see Majumdar 1389 BE).

Then, Tagore misreads both Indian and English history in his nationalist critique. He believes that India never sought nationhood, its historical mission being assimilative, not adversarial. Ever since the settlement of Aryavarta by the Aryan invaders it encountered numerous other tribes over the centuries: the Hellenistic Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians, [Kushanas (Yueh-Chi), Afghans, and the Mughals. All these conquerors were not “nations” but “human races” who were eventually absorbed in the diversity of cultures, customs, and peoples of the land. Thus pre-British India was a multicultural social organism pulsating with life, social interaction, cooperation, and a spirit of tolerance. With the British conquest, however, as Tagore writes, “we had to deal, not with kings, not human races, but with nation—we, who are no nation ourselves” (Tagore 1994/1917: 51).

We do know, however, that as early as the third century BCE, the Indian statesman and political theorist Kautilya (*c.* 350-275 BCE) had written elaborately about *rāṣṭra* [state] and *daṇḍanīti* [rule of the rod or rule of law] (Sil 1989: 19). The imperial Mauryas (323-185 BCE) and Guptas (320-550) had built up a massive state apparatus and rule of law. Hindu culture and civilization thrived under the protection and patronage of the state. Moreover, “self-aggrandizement and self-assertion” are not the exclusive behavior of the nation states of Europe. Kautilya was unequivocal in his endorsement of a *vijigīṣu* [he who wants to conquer] who aspires to become a *cakravartī* [universal ruler] or a *sārvabhauma* [world sovereign] or *dominum omnium* [lord over all] (Sil 1989: 81).

Tagore perhaps overlooks the ancient and early medieval history of imperial Britain that uncannily mirrors that of India. Celtic Britannia, a motley congeries of rival petty principalities and chiefdoms, was conquered, colonized, and Latinized by imperial Rome in the first century. Thereafter, during the fourth through the sixth centuries, Romano-Celtic Britain was invaded by the continental Germanic tribes, who from the seventh century onward developed seven independent Anglo-Saxon states, the *Heptarchy*, until these coalesced in King Alfred’s (r. 871-99) nation state of England. At the same time, this fledgling nation state coexisted with another state, the Danelaw, in the northeastern and southeastern parts of England—a state within a state created by mutual agreement between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons. This political coexistence resulted in cultural and ethnic commingling, a process that underwent further racial

and cultural infusion from the Norman Conquest in the late eleventh century. The point to note is that despite their historical odyssey England did eventually emerge as a single nation from the sixteenth century under the rulers of the Tudor dynasty much like India from the seventeenth under the imperial Mughals, albeit with a difference. The Islamic Mughals could never completely absorb the vast Hindu culture to forge a truly integrated nation. India's lack of nationhood thus was not caused by any consciously constructed anti-statist ideology or philosophy but by the exigencies of history.

At the same time we need to recall that the predatory Western states, their autocratic nature and structure notwithstanding, never repressed free thinking, open criticism of social and political abuses, innovation, and experiments of their peoples. On the other hand, such monumental efflorescence as the Renaissance, Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and above all, the Enlightenment, not only thrived under state patronage and support, but the humanists, reformers, scientists, and *philosophes* were protected from the reactionary, oppressive, and repressive religious institutions by their governments. Louis XIV, the absolute Grand Monarch of France (r. 1643-1714), who is reported to have claimed "*l'état cest moi*" [I am the State], was a builder, an indefatigable workaholic, and a patron of arts and learning—in fact the Enlightenment movement was born during this time—even though he dissipated his country's resources in multiple military engagements toward the latter part of his long reign. Similarly, the rulers of Mughal India could boast a well-organized state with a sophisticated bureaucracy and a well-trained and-equipped army that sponsored and patronized some of the world's best architectural achievements, a flowering Indo-Persian culture that produced a refined court language, poetry, painting, music, religious and reformist movements (especially the Vaiṣṇavism of Shrichaitanya [1486-1533] and śikhism of Guru Nanak [1469-1539]), as well as an elegant social manners, meals, and morals. Mughal India was an organized state that could never be considered as a quaint community or a *Gemeinschaft* of Tagore's imagination.

Tagore's emphasis on a self-regulated, self-sufficient, and egalitarian society of community and culture makes him a votary of Epicureanism on the one hand, and Anarchism (Tagore 1994/1917: 52) on the other. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) enjoined avoidance of politics, war, and competition and a hassle-free life to obtain and maintain equipoise [*ataraxia*] with his celebrated admonition: "Not what we have but what we enjoy constitutes our abundance" (see

[O'Connor 1993). The nineteenth-century Anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) envisioned a free society in which people entered into free agreements for their production and consumption with their belief that freedom of each was freedom for all (see Kropotkin 1970). Like Kropotkin, Tagore's vision of the ideal society in *Pallī Prakṛti* [Nature of Village, published posthumously 1368BE] is centered on the idyllic sylvan countryside and he laments the loss of the self-sufficient rural republics under the aegis of colonial administration. As he wrote:

Once the village community was alive, and the vital force of the society used to flow from it. It was the seat of all our education and culture, religion and rituals. The great soul of the country used to find its expansion and nourishment in the villages (cited in Sen Gupta 2005: 42).⁸

His Romantic yearning is elegantly expressed in “Janmāntar” [Next Life]:

Āmi cheḍei dite rājī āchi susabhyatār ālok

Āmi cāinā hate bababaṅger nabayuger cālak.

Āmi nāibā gelām bilāt

Nāi bā pelām rājār khilāt—

Yadi parajanme pāi re hate brajer rākhāl bālak

Tabē nibiye deba nijer ghare susabhyatār ālok.

[I'm ready to give up enlightened civilization.

I don't wish to be a leader of modern Bengal.

I may not visit England

Nor receive a royal reward.

If in my next birth I could become a cowherd of Braja.,

I would put out the light of civilization in my own home] (Thakur 2002: 369-70).

Yet we note that Rabindranath is neither a starry-eyed indigenist nor a diehard xenophobe. In fact he is an unabashed admirer of the British as cultured and civilized people. “I have a deep love and a great respect for the British race as human beings. It has produced great-hearted men, thinkers of great thoughts, doers of great deeds.... We have felt the greatness of this people as we feel the sun,” he wrote (Tagore 1994/1917: 56). He also admitted with disarming candor that Indians suffer tyrannical social restrictions, lack imagination, are intemperate in their habits, have been an easy prey to greed and manipulation (Tagore 1994/1917: 96-97). He thus lent his unqualified support for English education that would liberate the Indians from superstition and intellectual stagnation (See Thakur (1328 [1921], “śikṣār Milan” [Unity of Education], *Prabāṣī* (Āśvin 1328 [September 1921]).

Rabindranath's Ambivalent Attitude to the West

Rabindranath's attitude to the West—respect for its intellectual accomplishments but revulsion for its crass materialism and stifling organizational structure and control—is not unique, but in fact quite in line with similar attitudes discernible in the West itself. Writers and thinkers such as

Pierre J. Proudhon (1809-65), Karl Marx (1818-83), John Ruskin (1819-1900), and William Morris (1834-96) had warned against the disintegration of society and the degradation of human values under the impact of industrialization and mechanization. Such human protests against the inhuman behemoth of “progress” mandated from above fueled the social, political, and especially national, revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that sought to heal the disrupted social bonds, harmony, and equality and awakened a desire to restore love and respect between peoples.

The nationalist movements that Tagore witnessed or read about were triggered by stark disparity between Europe’s powerful and resourceful states and those that were struggling to become nations and states. Those movements had been energized by an “awareness of shortcomings, a conviction of backwardness or inadequacy, and an anxiety to learn from the superior culture or nation, so as to emulate it and reach equality, to obtain recognition by peaceful means, or to extort it by violent ones” (Berlin 1996: 256). The situation was the same in colonial India, as Stanley Wolpert writes:

All Indians, whatever their religions, caste, or regional origins may have been, were immediately conscious of the “foreign” character of the white Christian *sahibs* who ruled their land, if they had any direct contact with these new rulers at all....The influx of missionaries, the funding of English education, the opening of India to private trade, and the continuing process of British unification and modernization, served only to intensify Indian perceptions of their “native” differences, cultural, socioeconomic, and political, from the officials who ran the Company Raj (Wolpert 1982: 250).

The passage cited above provides the context and part explanation of Rabindranath’s attitude to the metropolitan masters of his country.

However, Tagore never endorsed violent opposition to the British government. His youthful adversarial stance mellowed and matured during his adulthood. “I am not for thrusting off western civilization and becoming segregated in our independence. Let us have deep association,” he averred in his lectures in the U.S. in 1916 (Tagore 1994/1917: 85). Quite naturally he disagreed with Mohandas Gandhi’s (1869-1948) nationalist campaign of non-cooperation, boycott of British goods, and production of home-spun cloth [*khādī*] and faith in the spinning wheel [*carkhā*]. His disagreement with Gandhi’s political program was also based on a broader philosophical conception of global unity: “Let India stand for the *cooperation* of all peoples in the world. The spirit of rejection finds its support in the consciousness of separateness, the spirit of acceptance in the consciousness of unity” (cited in Sen Gupta 2005: 46; emphasis in original). He opposed the aggressive Svadeśī (movement 1906-12) activist, the

Cambridge educated Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose (1872-1950), who had declared that “nationalism is immortal...because it is...God who is working in Bengal” (Ghose 1952: 7).⁹ He wrote a stern letter to the popular novelist and short story writer Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) after having perused his blockbuster novel *Pather Dābī* [Rights of Passage, 1926] that it was sure to incite people’s antipathy toward the government as well as its aggravation (Ray 2003: 133). Rabindranath’s controversial novel *Cār Adhyāy* [Four Chapters, 1934] exposed the ugly underside of animated terrorism of Bengal’s benighted youths and brought as much acrimony of the author as unqualified accolades had been heaped on Sharatchandra’s *Pather Dābī* eight years earlier.

At the same time Tagore is acutely aware that the benefits accruing from colonial contact remained essentially alien to the Indians unless they elevated themselves to the level of the foreigners. As he declared in a public speech in 1908: “What the British have set up may be good but they do not belong to us...It will never do if we seek to use somebody else’s eyes because we have lost our own” (Berlin 1996: 262). What he demands of the British is not justice but humanity and equality. The universal unity that he frequently invokes has to be unity of equals. The weak, the oppressed, and the humiliated must be allowed to develop on their own natural resources, on their own terms. Isaiah Berlin considers Tagore’s demand as “the eternally valid element in nationalism, the true and only case for self-determination” (Berlin 1996: 264). Thus it would be grossly unfair to regard the poet a quiescent non-violent dreamer. Actually he endorsed a relentlessly resolute struggle against apathy, cowardice, pettiness, and moral decadence in place of the terrorists’ agenda of murder and mayhem against the colonial government in the name of patriotism and nationalism. In his article “Saphalatār Sadupāy” [Right Means of Achieving Success] delivered at the Scottish Church College, Calcutta on March 11, 1905 and subsequently published in *Baṅgadarśan* [View of Bengal, April 1905] and its English translation published under the title “The Way to Get It Done” (1921), he admonished his readers in no uncertain terms:

When sitting in judgment on British behavior toward ourselves, it is well to note their human fallibility and the difficulties which they face; but when searching out our own lapses, there must be no excuse or palliations, no lowering of standards on the basis of expediency. The rousing of indignation against the British government may be an easy political method, but it will not lead us to our goal; rather the cheap pleasure of giving tit for tat, of dealing shrewd blows, will detract from the efficient pursuit of our own path of duty (Chakravarty 1966: 204).

In one of his significant poems, titled “Suprabhāt” [Blissful Morn], invoking the terrible

Rudra, the annihilator of *tamas* [indolence and apathy], who challenges us to transcend our love of self and fear of mortality, he proclaims “he who is ready to sacrifice his life will never die” [*Nihśeṣe prāṇ ye karibe dān, kṣay nāi tār kṣay nāi*]. In a later stanza of the same poem he vows to offer his fear of death to the feet of the Lord of his life [*Jībaneśvar*] with a view to sublimating his mortality into veritable ambrosia [*mṛtyure laba amṛta kariyā tomār caraṇe choṅāye*] (Thakur 2002: 434-35). In another poem, titled “Mṛtyuñjay” [Conqueror of Death], he thus seeks to shade his fear of death by defying the mortal blows of the high and mighty proclaiming with adamant vehemence before breathing his last that he is greater than death itself: “*Āmi mṛtyu-ceye baḍa ei śeṣ kathā bale yāba āmi cale*” (Thakur 2002: 591).

Rabindranath’s Humanism and Its Limitations

Tagore’s intellectual assumptions and convictions, above all, his poetic vocation or *kabi-svadharma* colored his *Weltanschauung* (Tagore 2002: 115: Translator’s note). His views on human life on this planet are squarely situated in his vision of an idealized world where all contradictions, conflicts, and differences are resolved and dissolve into a cosmic consciousness of unity upholding and undergirding the life of the world of beings. This humane outlook prompts the poet to confess:

I have arrived as a pilgrim on this great planet [*mahātīrtha*] where the Deity of humanity [*Naradebatā*], sometimes referred to as *Paramātmān* or Supersoul or the the Innermost Overman, presides over the history of all places and races. I sit under His throne to perform the uphill task of shedding my ego and all sense of discrimination (cited in Poddar 1376 BE: 35).

As he proclaims in a poem titled “Prabāsi” [Nonresident]:

Sab ṭhāin mor ghar āche, āmi sei ghar mari khuñjiyā.

Deśe deśe more deś āche, āmi sei deś laba juhhiyā.

[I search for my home that exists everywhere.

I’ll exert [myself] to get to my country that exists in all countries] (Thakur 2002: 418-20).

For Tagore, a real and concrete human being is never the arbiter of his destiny. His life remains unfulfilled and imperfect until he is able to express the Universal Man in him in thought and action. The poet pays his tribute to the Lord God of the universe, who brought so many strangers near to Him and provided them shelter in so many homes endearing so many distant others: “*Kato ajānāre jānāile tumi kato ghare dile ṭhāin--dūrke karile nikat bandhu, parke karile bhāi*” (Thakur 1994/1910, 17).

However, as a critic has pointed out, this Universal Man or the Innermost Overman remains hidden, accessible only to a man of equipoise [*samāhita*] who has undergone a rigorous regimen of ascetic moral exercise and contemplation. The goal of human life's journey cannot be found in the real world of real people with their real sufferings, strivings, struggles, triumphs, and tragedies. It resides in the abstract world of spirit. Sadly, the purity and sincerity of such a sublime vision (that has a venerable antiquity in India's intellectual history) notwithstanding, it cannot explain why human beings, supposedly blessed with their inner treasure and strength, and their being united by universal tie, have not been able to reconstruct or reorder their society. As Arabinda Poddar posits, "Rabindranath placed an unquestioning reliance on the Upaniṣadic philosophy without bothering to examine critically its usefulness for the ongoing problems of life or the evolving newer thoughts. He was perhaps unconscious of any need for this." For Poddar, herein lies the poet's philosophical failure. (Poddar 1376 BE: 37, 77). Then, though Tagore provided a general idea of his attitude to a communitarian rural life in *Pallī Prakṛti*, he did not proffer a blueprint for his preferred polity like a Thales (c. 624-c. 546 BCE) who planned a confederation for the Ionian cities, or a Plato (c. 427-c. 347 BCE) who wrote the *Republic*, or a Rousseau (Jean Jacques, 1712-78) who wrote *Le contrat social* (1762) and a constitution for the Polish-Lithuanian state, *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* (1772)—it greatly influenced the Constitution of Poland (May 3, 1791). Indeed, Rabindranath's *Gemeinschaft*, propelled by consensus among enlightened and free spirited citizens, was actually a Utopia, a "Nowhere." But as Sibnarayan Ray reminds us, "those who envision any utopia and want to work towards its realization in society...run counter to entrenched institution, vested interests and established habits and mores." While these problems do stare the visionary reformers in the face, they do not nullify the meaningfulness of their visions. On the other hand, concludes Ray, the problems constitute "challenges to our moral and imaginative resourcefulness, but the utopias offer us valuable direction towards worthy alternative lifestyle" (Ray 2006: 279-80).

It must also be noted in this context that Tagore was painfully aware of the realities of his caste ridden Hindu society that with its discrimination against the Indian Muslims proved to be impervious to the realization of his exalted social ideal. In his letter of Āṣāḍ 30, 1315 BE [July 1908] to Manoranjan Bandyopadhyay, headmaster of the boarding school [*Brahmacaryāśram*], Tagore confessed in no uncertain terms: "...I no longer feel any desire to idealise the Hindu

samaj through delusions pleasant to the ear.” Upon his return from the Soviet Union, he wrote his son Rathindranath (1888-1961) on October 31, 1930: “Today I feel ashamed of this whole business of zamindari...my sorrow is that I have been brought up from childhood as a parasite...The time is coming for a fundamental change in our way of life” (cited in Dasgupta 1993, 140). By the same token, Tagore had anticipated the fate of his critique of nationalism being labeled as impractical and idealistic. But he remained steadfast in his convictions. In the conclusion of his lecture “Nationalism in India” at the University of Illinois, Urbana on December 30, 1916, he admitted:

I am willing to acknowledge that there is a law of demand and supply and an infatuation of man for more things than are good for him. And yet I will persist in believing that there is such a thing as the harmony of completeness in humanity, where poverty does not take away his riches, where defeat may lead him to victory, death to immortality, and where in the compensation of Eternal Justice those who are the last may yet have their insult transmuted into a golden triumph (Tagore 1994/1917: 99).

Arguably, Tagore’s so-called Utopia is what Seyla Benhabib, anticipating Sibnarayan Ray, had called a “practical-moral imperative” (Benhabib 1992: 230).

Conclusion: An Estimate of Rabindranath’s Worldview

Clearly Tagore’s personal intellectual and spiritual make up prompted him to plead for an ideal world of bliss and bonhomie, and for an endowment mentality that delights in giving rather than gathering. Such a human and humane habitation, reminiscent of the Augustinian City of God, cannot be ushered in the mechanized, organized, regulated, regimented, and *quid pro quo* transactional world of nation states that resembles, to cite St. Augustine’s (354-430) terms once again, the City of Man (see O’Daly 1999). Although Tagore failed to work out a satisfactory alternative worldview from the reigning paradigm of the Enlightenment notion of progress, power, and prosperity via a vision of the reformed state that conduces individual freedom and even local autonomy, in other words, a viable democracy, his vision of a communitarian Utopia, adumbrated in *Svadeśī Samāj* [Society of Our Country] (1902), cannot be easily dismissed as a variety of metaphysical nonsense.

On the contrary, we must acknowledge the merits of the vast expanse of Tagore’s philosophy that inspires us to exert ourselves to seek ways and means to achieve our true freedom. The rich repertoire of his thoughts forces us to break out of our individual boxes—our selfish ego—and keep on moving in search of something greater, more glorious, and ultimately more meaningful. The great troubadour [*bāul*] of Bengal has given his clarion call to humanity

to sublimate itself from being *homo sapiens* [thinking man] to becoming *homo viator* [pilgrim man], a perpetual wanderer in search of the magic touchstone [*paraśpāthar*], God, who is actually present in the interiority of our heart:

*Pathera sāthī name bāraṁbār—
Pathikjanera laho namaskār.*

.....
*Jībanarather he sāarathī, āmi nityapathera pathik,
Pathe calār laho namaskār.*

[Comrade of the road,
Here are my traveler's greetings to thee.

.....
My Guide,
I am a wayfarer of an endless road,
My greetings of a wanderer to thee]. (Thakur 2002: 477. English translation in Chakravarty 1966: 326).

Thus Tagore's noble and sublime humanistic vision, despite its apparent idealistic preponderance, beacons us to the possibility of bringing down the lofty and sublime *Empyrean* into the world that he saw bleeding to death. To revive and heal it, he turned his face against self-destructive nationalism and its problem child the nation state.

Notes

¹ For Sourindramohan's international reputation and connection see Ghose 1983, 161-74)).

² Rabindranath's full-fledged study of the trend of Indian history titled "Bhāratbarṣe Itihāser Dhārā" [the Trend of History in India] was presented in a public meeting in Calcutta in Baiśākh 1319 BE (1912). It was translated into English by the noted historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar (1870-1958) and published in *Modern Review*, Calcutta (1913).

³ The Brāhmo Samāj movement, inaugurated by Rammohan Roy, was a reformist, enlightened, and Unitarian vision of Hindu religion. The real organizer of the movement was Mahārṣi Debendranath Tagore (18127-1905), scion of the house of Jorasanko, Calcutta Tagores, and father of the poet Rabindranath. In 1868 Keshabchandra Sen (1838-84) separated from Tagore's Ādi Brāhmo Samāj, and thereafter the Brāhmo movement was split into the Ādi Brāhmo Samāj, and the Brāhmo Samāj of India under Sen. A further schism took place in 1878 after Keshab, in violation of the Brāhmo canons, had his underage daughter married off to a wealthy aristocratic family of Cochbihar. Now the Brāhmo Samāj of India split into Keshab's New Dispensation [*Nababidhān*] and a new splinter group called Sādhāraṇ Brāhmo Samāj. Despite these internal dissensions, the Brāhmo movement did act as a dike against the rushing waves of Christian evangelism in India, especially Bengal. The best accounts of the Brāhmos remain Kopf 1979, Chattopadhyay 1983, and Hatcher 2008.

⁴ Tagore's letter dictated in Bengali was translated into English by his close associate and biographer Krishna Kripalani (1907-92) and edited by the author and published in the Calcutta daily *The Hindusthan Standard* on June 4 as a rejoinder to that of E. Rathbone, MP for the combined English universities, published in the same newspaper on May 30. Both letters are reprinted *in extenso* in Ray 1410 BE, 207.

⁵ For nationalism see Anderson 1991, 5-7.

⁶For Rabindranath's ideas on nationalism see Quayum 2006; Mukherjee 2003; Sen, ed. 2003 (especially the articles by Uma Dasgupta, Makarand Paranjape, and T. K. Ommen); Raychaudhuri 1999: chs. 2 and 9; Ray 1970; Sen Gupta 2005; Roy 2002; Nandy 1994; Guha 2002: ch. 5; and Berlin 1996: 249-66.

⁷A recent attempt to analyze Tagore's concept of nationalism by an enthusiastic scholar ends up rehashing the worn out *clichés* about Tagore's cosmopolitanism and cultural nationalism. See Bhattacharya 2009.

⁸For some critical/analytical essays on Rabindranath's thoughts on rural reconstruction see Mazumdar and Bisai 2012 and Sinha 2015.

⁹Tagore, however, composed a near obsequious long poem titled "Namaskār" [Salutation] in honor of Ghose in 1907 when the latter was a prominent spokesman and leaser at the Indian National Congress (founded in 1885) in Surat: "Arabinda, friend and voice of our land, please accept Rabindra's salutation" [Arabinda, Rabīndrer laha namaskār./He deśabandhu, svadeśātmār bāñīmūrti tumi] (Thakur 2002: 436-38).

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Chapter Five

The Radiant Summer Sun and the Serene Autumn Moon:

Rabindranath *versus* Sharatchandra

Introduction

Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore, 1861-1941), the greatest literary genius after Bankimchandra was primarily a poet, though he was also a novelist of high caliber. Admittedly, he was influenced in his youth by the subject-matter and writing style of his illustrious predecessor and composed, *a la* Bankim, a couple of historical and quasi historical novels, *Bouṭhākuraṅṅīr Hāṭ* [The Queen's Mart, 1883] and *Rājarṣi* [The Royal Ascetic, (1887)]. However, he excels in celebrating truthfulness, tolerance, and selflessness in family life, while Bankim highlights historicity, ideals, heroism, and battles. In the estimation of a scholar, Tagore's *magnum opus* among the prose writings of his mature youth, *Cokher Bāli* [Eyesore, 1903], 'ushered in a new horizon in the history of Bengali novel writing' (Mukhopadhyay, 2002: 16). This novel is based on the odyssey of a young widow Binodini and her irrepressible urge to conquer man's heart. Transcending the bounds of morals, the author explores the mysteries of the human heart, thus heralding the free expression of a revolutionary self-consciousness in Bengali novel as may be seen in his controversial novella *Naṣṭanīḍ* [Broken Nest, 1901]. At the same time, Rabindranath's poetic sensibilities could never deflect or detract from the realism of his novels by aestheticizing or apotheosizing socially tabooed sentiments of love. On the other hand, he provides an acute and

minute analysis of our familial life and portrayed realistic characters for his stories composed during the later years of his life, especially *Śeṣer Kabitā* [The Terminal Lyric, 1929],¹ *Mālañca* [The Flower Garden, 1934] and *Cār Adhyāy* [Four Chapters, 1934], that, along with *Cokher Bāli*, frankly reveal the author's disregard for the hallowed traditions and morals of his society thus heralding a new genre in Bengali novels of the post-Bankim era (Sengupta, 1974: 12-20).

Similarly, Sharatchandra's *Caritrahīn* [Libertine, 1917], *Gṛhadāha* [The Blazing Home, 1920] or *Śeṣ Praśna* [The Final Question, 1931], deal with illicit or irregular romantic liaison and its problematic *vis-à-vis* the hallowed but gradually harried morals and mores of society. In these novels the ordinary episodes of quotidian life are dramatized into poetic imaginary. The men and women in these novels are no extraordinary human beings nor are their lives touched by miracles but they are often depicted as sentimental harboring socially subversive secret desires and yet somewhat restrained and practical. Though Sharat's literary career began under the penumbra of Bankimchandra and Rabindranath and though he inherited their literary and cultural traits, he, nevertheless, carved his own niche in light of his own creative genius. His own unique prose style and the manner of constructing the saga of the common people enmeshed in their stagnant and sterile beliefs and behaviors brought him closer to his readers in Bengal as well as India at large. This essay provides a critical comparison between the two literary luminaries of the late Bengal Renaissance through their novels written in their maturer years—Rabindranath's *Śeṣer Kabitā* and Sharatchandra's *Śeṣ Praśna* and Rabindranath's *Naṣṭanīd* and Sharatchandra's *Gṛhadāha*—by way of exploring their different perspectives on almost similar human predicament.

Rabindranath and Sharatchandra: Two Contrasting Personalities

Sharatchandra made a public profession of his unalloyed admiration for Tagore's poetry and prose. As an adolescent he was overwhelmed with emotion on hearing a recitation of Rabindranath's "Prakṛtir Pratiśodh" [Nature's Revenge] (1883). Sometime later, he read Tagore's novel "Cokher Bāli" serialized in *Baṅgadarśan* [View of Bengal] and subsequently savored the "memory of his unprecedented deeply penetrating and poignant bliss [*gabīhr o sutikṣṇa ānander smṛti*]." In Burma, he used to read Tagore's *oeuvres* over and over again with the unshakable conviction that "there are no better creations either in lyrics or in prose literature

than these” (Chattopadhyay, 2009, 961: lecture titled “Rabindranath” 1338 BE [1931]). He in fact made an unabashed confession to his obsession with Rabindranath’s works when he admitted that he had underscored every page of ‘Cokher Bāli’ twenty-four times and read “Naṣṭanīḍ” ten times (Ray, 1975: 13-14). “No one is a greater devotee of [Rabindranath] than me,” Sharat declared in his letter to Amal Hom (Ray, 2009: 201: letter of Pouṣ 28, 1338 BE [December 1931]). He wrote his friend of Muzaffarpur Pramathanath Bhattacharya admiringly of his two great predecessors: “Look at the writing style of Bankimbābu and Rabibābu, it’s ‘something’ to start with!” (Ray, 2009: 33: letter of July 25, 1913).

Nevertheless, as Sharat’s distinguished literary critic and longtime associate has it, he was not an intellectual like Bankim or Rabindranath (Sengupta, 1962). He once confessed to Upendranath Gangopadhyay, his uncle of Bhagalpur (c.1894-1938): “Did I lie when I called myself an ignoramus? Am I so stupid as to make myself appear as a scholar to folks like you? I may be able to spin a tale and write it, but what has scholarship got to do with it?” (Ray, 2009: 49: letter of May 10, 1913). Even though, reportedly, he was a book lover—he told his neighbor at Bājé Shibpur (his residence in the western suburbs of Calcutta since his relocation from Burma in 1916), Balaichand Bandyopadhyay, that ‘one who is able to befriend books, can easily lighten life’s concerns’ (Mukhopadhyay, 2001: 87) and read some philosophy, science, history, economics, sociology, psychology and the like—his work does not reflect any insights based on his readings. His characters are *menu peuple* with their petty problems the extent and influence of which hardly cross beyond the portals of the home.² Beyond the mundane and familiar social problems of Bengal such as those pertaining to the joint family, caste, daughter’s marriage, conjugal incompatibility, and early widowhood, and, above all endemic penury, Sharat appears to be innocent of any larger and wider complexities and considerations of life. He does not seem to possess the experiential or educational acumen to delineate any philosophical or ideological outlook on life. Hence he takes recourse to vacuous imagination and excessive sentimentalism. Consequently, all the men of his novels and stories turn up, sadly, as unmanly, and the women loquacious [*puruṣrā tāñr sabāi niṣpuruṣ, nārīrā sabāi bagīśvarī*] (Sengupta, 1962).

Rabindranath versus Sharatchandra: A Veritable “Stellar War”

Apparently the relationship between Rabindranath and Sharatchandra was one of *guru* and

celā—one of respect and love—to quote the latter’s public profession: “*sāhitye gurubād āmi māni*” [I believe in literary mentorship] (Sharat’s address at Tagore’s seventieth birth anniversary printed in extenso in Ghosh, 2002: 95-98, here at 97). However, beneath the surface, these two literary giants stood poles apart from each other and it is Sharat who often revealed an anxiety and ambivalence in his dealings with a man who was older, socially and intellectually far superior, and as a human being far more cultivated and cosmopolitan. Rabindranath first came in contact with Sharat’s work in 1907 when he read Sharat’s “Baḍadidi” in the two issues of *Bhāratī*, edited by his niece Sarala Debi Chaudhurani (1872-1945). Even though Sharat’s name was not printed in the byeline of the story, Tagore considered the anonymous author a potentially powerful writer. Sharat, on his part, had been an ardent admirer of the poet since his boyhood.

Yet, unfortunately the two had a misunderstanding after they had come to know each other, first on some political differences and subsequently on some literary issues, though in the end both were reconciled to each other. On July 23, 1921, Sharat as the president of the Howrah branch of the Congress Party, met the poet at his home (Rabindranath had just returned from his Western travels three days earlier) and asked him to support Mohandas Gandhi’s (1869-1948) non-cooperation movement. Tagore had earlier made his attitude to this movement known to Gandhi and now he declined Sharat’s solicitation to the latter’s chagrin and disappointment. In his essay “Śikṣar Birodh” [Disputes of Education] read at the Gauḍīya Sarbabidyāyatan and published in the literary journal *Nārāyaṇ* (Agrahāyṇ-Pauṣ 1328 [December 1921]), Sharat countered Tagore’s lecture ‘Śikṣār Milan’ [Unity of Education] critiquing Gandhi’s non-cooperation philosophy and movement (read at the University Institute, Calcutta, on August 15 1921 and published in *Prabāsī*, Āśvin 1328 [September 1921]).³ Sharat’s abrasive tone in his rebuttal reveals his rage rather than rigorous ratiocination, but he promptly tried to make amends by sending his apology to the Master in a letter to Tagore dated Baiśākh 26, 1329 BE (May 1922):

I have sorely offended you but please forgive me for this first instance. I never get to visit rich and famous people’s homes [*baḍaloker bādī*] on my own and I am very sorry for having blocked my future access [to you] by my own indiscretion (Ray, 2009: 130; see also Ghosh, 2002: 10-11).⁴

It is indeed amazing to ponder the most obvious but the most overlooked reality of the radical disparity between the two men. Sharat possibly adored as well as envied Rabindranath because the latter was everything he was not. Tagore was extraordinarily handsome, deeply self-

taught, scion of one of the most respected aristocratic and cultured families of Bengal, and a Nobel laureate to boot. He wrote Amal Hom:

I saw Rabindranath in [your] marriage ceremony after a long time. How astonishingly handsome—no one can turn his gaze from him. The more he ages, the more beautiful he looks. No, not just beauty—but charm. I know no greater mystery in this world (Ray, 2009: 200: letter of December 30, 1927). .

By contrast Sharat was homely, though possessing a soft and serene appearance (Gangopadhyay, 1956: 52). Radharani Debi (1904-89) observes that he indeed ‘looked quite ordinary’ (Debi, 1982: 117). Even he himself was quite self-conscious about his appearance and mildly admonished his publisher Haridas Chattopadhyay for having printed his photo in the *Bhāratbarsa*: “You should not have printed my photo. I feel quite embarrassed the way I look!” [*Hanh, āmār chabitā bodh kari nā chāpālei hato. Ki rakam yena lajjā kare. Ye cehārā !*] (Ray, 2009: 76: undated letter). He in fact considered himself an old man at forty plus age (Ray, 2009: 75: undated letter to Haridas, 161: letter of October 13, 1919 to Sarojkumar Gangopadhyay).

Sharat never had any lasting interaction with the rich and famous of his society, except his temporary friendship with the local landholder Satishchandra, son of *Rājā* Shibchandra Bandyopadhyay of Khanjarpalli, Bhagalpur, and another landlord Mahadev Sahu of Muzaffarpur. Son of an indigent and irresponsible father though hailing from a respectable caste Brāhmaṇ family, and though an autodidact as per his own protestations and possessed of limited urban social experience, all his insights into the problems of a joint family were derived from his first hand experience at his maternal uncles’ home in Bhagalpur (Gangopadhyay, 1959). His experience at the Bhabanipur, Calcutta home of his maternal uncle Lalmohan Gangopadhyay (1902-1903) was harrowing and humiliating. Later, upon his return from Burma April 1916), his social life in Shibpur, Howrah, Samtabed, Howrah, and Calcutta was restricted to some members of the literati and his publishers. Naturally overwhelmed by Rabindranath’s social standing, not to mention his literary brilliance and recognition (Yash, 2011: 32-61, especially 60-61), Sharat considered Tagore as a “*baḍalok*” (big man, or great man, or rich man). As a defense mechanism against an inevitable inferiority complex, he disliked rich people and always avoided them. Asamanja Mukhopadhyay (1882-1967) writes that Sharat would often insist that “the history of Bengal is all about the middle class and the poor” (Mukhopadhyay, 1956: 2). He impressed several visitors and acquaintances with his “open rusticity” (Poddar, 2003: 27). It is noteworthy how he addressed younger women as ‘*didi*’ [elder sister] and made some of the

male characters in his stories do the same. Such a mode of address, generally used by the servants of Bengali households, came to him spontaneously. The storyline of some of his blockbusters revolves around sentimentally incestuous relationships between “*didī*” and “*dādā*” [elder brother] or “*bouṭhān*” [sister-in-law, i.e., elder brother’s wife] and “*thākurpo*” [brother-in-law, i.e., younger brother of husband], the latter being, incidentally, also the theme of Tagore’s famous short story “*Naṣṭanīd*.”

Yet even with all his reputed antipathy toward the rich, and love of “plain, humble, and homely lifestyle...[and his] defiance of artificiality, atrocity, and inhumanity” (Poddar, 2003: 27), Sharat reportedly had little qualms dressing up in silk, or in expensive white outfit, together with fancy walking stick. He also smoked cigars or hubble-bubble from richly decorated and polished bowls and dishes and tumblers made of sterling silver (Ray, 2003: 281). His other luxuries included collecting imported fountain pens. Radharani Debi in fact observed Sharat to be a well dressed man of good taste (Debi, 1982: 109). In his life style and in his social life since his return from Rangoon, one notices some unspoken but often unconsciously expressed anxiety on the part of an outsider—both social and literary—to prove equal or occasionally distinct and even superior (see Sil, 2012: ch. 6).

The odyssey of Rabindra-Sharat conundrum shows how Sharat, despite his untiring protestations that he was a disciple and admirer of Tagore, often insinuated or directly hurled abrasive comments on his older contemporary. Interestingly, Sharatchandra also revealed his reflexivity at times. He admitted that in his younger days he had sometimes criticized Rabindranath perversely, though, as he hastened to add, that was not his genuine feeling. He confessed to Amal Hom:

It indeed is true that I sometimes badmouthed the poet angrily but it is also a fact that no one is a greater devotee of his than I. No one recognizes him as mentor [*guru*] more than I do and no one read him thoroughly more than I. I owe him a lot for my popularity as an author (Ray, 2009: 201: letter of Pouṣ 28, 1338 BE [January 1932]).

Both Radharani Debi and the distinguished poet and literary critic Pramatha Chaudhury (1868-1946) observed Sharat’s social behavior in Calcutta. Radharani wrote: “Sharatchandra harbored a peculiarly low opinion about himself. I’ve never come across anyone so casually condemning and ridiculing himself. What caused his self-disparagement?” The answer to her query was supplied by Pramatha who was quite familiar with Sharatchandra’s family background. As he confided to Radharani:

I suspect he [Śarat] led a life he hated as it was contrary to his taste. His transition from childhood to youth occurred via wrong path. When he realized this he was so disappointed with his own failure that he could never forgive himself. It's because of self-hate that he could talk about his addictions and his experiences of the red-light districts with such poignancy as to render them contemptible.

According to Chaudhury, this was a psychological reaction. Sharat was never his own self in penury in which he had to grow up. Though quite sensitive about self-respect, he had to watch his parents lead a degrading life in the home of his maternal uncles. Sharat's dishonorable upbringing generated his self-hate (Debi, 1982: 183). Sharat's acquaintance Sarojranjan Chattopadhyay observes:

I noticed that Śaratcandra was somewhat 'shy' by nature. He could not look up while speaking. He would often look down or elsewhere while speaking. This resident of Bājē Shibpur has not quite rubbed off the rustic smell. Naturally, the neighborhood folks did not express much interest in socializing with this stranger [*nāmgotrahīn*] tenant (cited in Mukhopadhyay, 1981: 87).

However, despite his inferiority complex or precisely because of it, Sharat could never countenance any critique of his output with equanimity. As a matter of fact, he considered criticism downright abusive (Mukhopadhyay, 1959: 59). He felt demeaned by Rabindranath's critique of his *Pather Dābī* (Right of Way, 1926). Tagore had declined Sharat's request for endorsing his *Pather Dābī* banned by the colonial government for its rebellious tone and his request to the poet to supply a few lyrics for his *Ṣoḍaśī*. Tagore also advised Sharat against appealing to the authorities to lift the ban on *Pather Dābī* and reminded the author that the ban on his book was an indirect but sure recognition of this talent as an influential writer and that he ought to be prepared for the legitimate consequences of his conduct. He asked him not to stir the hornet's nest and remain inactive against the ban calmly but conscientiously. Sharat took umbrage at Rabindranath's negative appraisal and non-compliance with his request and sent him a rebuttal on both occasions, though he reconciled at the end (Ghosh, 2002; 55-89; Ray 2009: 129-131, 180-182, 195-198). Radharani Debi's father came to know of Sharat's remonstrance against Tagore in respect of *Pather Dābī* and observed: "The poet's was a verdict of a judge and therefore neutral. Rabindranath had not pleaded either for the British or for the Indians. Śaratbābu sought to make the poet his advocate and the latter responded as a judge" (Debi, 1982: 169).

Rabindranath similarly critiqued Sharat's anachronistic, and hence unrealistic, portrayal of a *bhairabī*'s character in *Ṣoḍaśī* [The Teenager], a play based on the story of *Denā Pāonā* (Assets and Liabilities, 1339 BE [1932]). He pointed out to Sharat that in his characterization of the *bhairabī* he lost perspective and depicted her inauthentic persona that was "fabricated

custom-tailored to suit modern taste” [*ekhankār kāler pharmāser mangaḍā jiniṣ*] (Ray, 2009: 348: Tagore’s letter of Phālgun 4, 1334 BE [February 1927]). Indeed, the diction, behavior, and attitude of Sodashi are artificial at best and inappropriate at worst. Tagore rightly pointed out the utter unreality of the *bhairabī*’s character. Sharat’s remonstrance that his *bhairabī* knows how to love runs athwart the well-known belief and behavior of *bhairabīs* who are adept at ritual love-making without falling in romantic love and who do not pass their times in the domestic sanctum [*thākurghar*] arranging for the daily rituals at home. Sharat was actually way out of sync with reality about the lifestyle of a professional *bhairabī* (see Bhattacharya, 1977: 310-324, 359-365, and 385-397).

Resolution of the “Stellar War”

We have a dubious (but partly plausible) “eyewitness” account of Tagore’s surprise visit to Bājé Shibpur authored by Sekhar Sen based on his acquaintance Dr. Kalidas Nag’s (1891-1966) deposition. This account describes Rabindranath and his younger associate Dr. Nag’s visit in 1926 (no specific date is given) to Shibpur to see the ailing Sharat. Sharatchandra had stopped paying visit to Tagore’s home at Jorashanko following Rabindranath’s remarks on the circumscribed canvas of Sharat’s stories. However, when Sharat saw the great poet at his home, he literally jumped out of his sickbed, forgetting his swollen feet, raced down the stairs, and prostrated on the floor at Tagore’s feet. The poet, who himself was unwell at the time, lifted and hugged him, Sharat weeping uncontrollably (Sen, 2003: 32-42).⁵

Sharat was upset enough to compose a rather caustic and rhetorical rejoinder to Tagore’s provocative essay ‘Sāhityer Dharma’ [Rules of Literature] (*Bicitrā*, Śrābaṇ, 1334 BE [July 1927]) on the burgeoning new type of literature (the *Kallol* group) that seemed to the author to have transgressed the bounds of decency. Sharat’s rejoinder (“Sāhityer Rīti o Nū” [Literary Protocols], *Baṅgabāṇī*, Āśvin 1334 BE [September 1927]) to Tagore’s essay made some witty but willfully caustic remarks verging on hitting ‘below the belt’ (to borrow Narayan Chaudhury’s expression “*komarbandher nimnāṅga*”)⁶ on Tagore’s arguments, but he later recanted his invective penitently in a letter to Radharani Debi (Ray, 2009, 255: letter dated October 10, 1927).

Reportedly, Sharatchandra and Rabindranath resolved their differences eventually and

restored amity and cordiality between themselves. Sharat wrote an unabashedly egregious critique of Rabindranath's letter to Dilipkumar Ray (1897-1980) published as an article titled 'Sāhityer Mātrā' in *Paricay* (Śrābaṅ 1340 [July 1933]). Sharat's critique appeared in *Svadeś* and in *Pracārak* simultaneously (c. 1340 [1933]). In his letter of Āśvin 16, 1340 (October 1933) to Sharat, Tagore reacted with offensive leniency to his benighted correspondent:

You have repeatedly attacked me in abrasive tone but I have never sent you a rebuttal nor have I attempted to retaliate by slandering you, publicly or in private. You now added one more [attack] in my list. Please accept my *Bijayā* greetings (Ray, 2009: 313-315, 37).

Sharat penned a magnificent felicitation for Tagore on his seventieth birth anniversary:

We never cease to wonder when we look at you... We all have received a lot from this world but have also given it back a lot through you. O the Sovereign Poet, we salute you on this auspicious day. We bow again and again to the supreme expression of your beatitude (Ghosh, 2002: 94).

A couple of years earlier, Rabindranath had sent his unstinted blessings to Sharatchandra on his fifty-third birth anniversary: "Let your powerful pen clear the path of progress and I bless you wishing for your long life." On that occasion the poet also sent him a personal letter hailing his literary contributions:

You have conquered the heart of your country by your genius and thus earned the right to fathom its very depths. Your pen has touched the chord of the Bengali psyche in newer and deeper sensibilities of laughter and tears (Ray, 2009: 350-351: Tgore's letter of benediction read *in absentia* on Bhādra 31, 1339 BE [September 1932] and his letter on the same day).

Sharat acknowledged Rabindranath's blessings as his "greatest reward." In his response to the poet on Āśvin 29 he wrote: "I accept with honor this gift from someone whose minutest charity is a prized treasure for any writer" (Ray, 2009: 197: letter of Āśvin 29, 1339 BE [October 1932]).

Admirers of Sharatchandra egregiously misinterpreted Rabindranath's remark on his personal reputation as a poet *vis-à-vis* Sharat's as a novelist to conclude that the poet was jealous of his younger contemporary. Actually Tagore in his letter of Baiśākh 3, 1333 (April 1926) to Dilipkumar Ray explains his disappointment at the misunderstanding between him and Sharatchandra. He writes:

Many deem Śarat a better novelist than me, but this is no cause for my worry because not even the most scurrilous critic of mine would ever deny my superiority to Śarat as a poet. If it is desirable to leave for posterity some evidence of one's lasting achievements, then is not one such evidence enough? Everyone says you have a much better voice than me. Instead of lamenting over this I say that my handwriting is better than Manṭu's [Dilipkumar's nickname]... even if I lacked any evidence for the future generation or if all my claims [to fame] were good only for my life, I would still have proudly proclaimed that I was not stupid enough to say that I hated Śarat's stories because I could not write as well as he. If I lack equal excellence in everything, my butting the heads of those who possess it would only crack my own skull further. The glory of my countryman is my glory too. I will deprive myself of glory by refusing to recognize his merit (printed *in extenso* in Ray, 2009: 335-356, here at 356).

An intelligent and patient reading of the above letter would at once reveal Tagore's expansive

heart, liberal mind, and genuine admiration for Sharatchandra. In fact Sharatchandra himself admitted in his letter to Dilipkumar Ray (1897-1980) that ‘Buddhadev Basu (1908-1974) had made a true statement when he remarked that Rabindranath is a greater novelist than me. I myself am fully aware that this is the ultimate truth.’ (Ray, 2009, 247: letter dated Māgh 3, 1342 BE [February 1935]).

Rabindranath on Women and Love

Rabindranath was born at a time that had been marked by a spate of modernizing developments such as the founding of the University of Calcutta, the leadership of Rājā Rammohan Ray’s Brāhmo movement by his illustrious father Debendranath Tagore, Ishvarchandra Bidyāsāgar’s widow marriage and women’s education movement (1850s), the Blue Mutiny (1859-62), the founding of Theater Groups (Nāṭyaśālā) at the Jorasanko home of the Tagores, and the advent of such literary luminaries as Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-73) and Michael Madhusudan Datta. He thus imbibed as much as much from the artistic and intellectual efflorescence of the Bengal Renaissance as he inherited the the literary, musical, and spiritual culture of his family. Thus he often exhibited his respect for the traditional Hindu ideas of women’s role in family and in society at large and their demand for subjectivity and equality as well as his revulsion against their persistent degradation. Sharatchandra of course demonstrated his deep respect for Rabindranath when, in his article “Satya o Mithyā” [Truth and Falsehood] in *Bāmlār Kathā* (1922), he expressed his disappointment and disgust at the censoring of some “seditious” stanzas by the Calcutta University authorities of Tagore’s poem “Ebār Phirāo Moré” [Take Me Back Now, Phālgun 23, 1300 BE (March 1893)] during a recitation contest: “It is seditious to recite publicly the poem that was composed for the good of the country by the greatest, the purest, and the most blameless poet of our nation! And our boys are being forced to learn this truth from the authorities!” (Sen 2002, II: 2098-2100, here at 2100). Rabindranath, too, did not hesitate to recognize his younger contemporary’s talent. In his benediction read on the occasion of Sharat’s sixtieth birthday celebration on Āśvin 25, 1343 BE (October 1936) at the Beliaghata retreat “Prafulla Kānan” [Cheery Grove] of Anilkumar De *Sāhityaratna* [Jewel of Letters], editor of the literary journal *Udayan* [Dawn], the poet hailed Sharat’s genius:

The astronomer dives deep into the limitless firmament to discover numerous glittering worlds revolving in their orbits at various speeds. Likewise, Sharat’s gaze has delved deep into the mysteries of the heart of the people of Bengal. His readers have been delighted to know who they actually are though his easy access makes him an object of our envy. . . The literary world values a

creative writer much higher than a didact because it transcends polemics and pedantry. Literature apotheosizes imaginative vision. As a poet I offer Śaratcandra the creative visionary my garland [of honor]. May he be a centenarian and enrich the literature of Bengal, teach his readers to apprehend the truth about human beings, to depict them with all their worth and warts, to authenticate the eternal human experiences in his felicitous language (reproduced *in extenso* in Ray 2009: 384).

In fact Tagore's greatest and sincerest comments on Sharatchandra as a writer as well as a person were expressed in a letter of January 26, 1938 to the novelist Prabodhkumar Sanyal (1907-83):

He [Sharatchandra] was completely of his country and of his times...[But] one had to know him intimately to understand him. I have suffered *that* loss. I have met him and conversed with him on several occasions but I realise now that it was not enough. We should have shared a deeper intimacy! Only then would the great fortune we shared of being contemporaries have been worthily utilized (cited in Chakravarti 1985; transliterations, orthography, and emphasis as in original).

Rabindranath assigned to women the traditional domestic role of mother (e.g, anandamayi in *Gorā* or Rasmani in "Rāsmañir Chele" [Rasmani's Boy] as well as the romantic role of lover (as depicted in "Dāliā" or "Jay Parājay" [Victory and Defeat] but received flaks from the literati of a younger generation, the so-called *Kallol Goṣṭhi* [the contributors to the *avant garde* literary magazine *Kallol*] fro his perceived prudery. Yet the *Kallol* attack on the poet was somewhat uncalled for as he also created such progressive and aggressive characters as Bimala of *Ghare Bāire* [Home and the World] or Charulata of *Naṣṭanīd*, Sohini of "Laboratory," and most famously Saudamini of "Badnām" [Ill Repute]. Indeed' as he pointed out in his essay "Svadeś o Samāj" [Our Country and Society], "The similarities and differences that mark the two distinct identities of men and women are both equally weighty. Yet, it is ther differences that stand but with heavy bias" (cited in Ray 2010: 72). In this connection it would be useful to recall that Rabindranath's understanding and appreciation of woman's humanity were not static but changed in course of time, as discussed in Chapter One.

Sharatchandra's Gender Consciousness and Concerns

The single and singular feminine sensibility in Sharatchandra's literary output is maternal marked by tolerance, tenderness, forbearance, forgiveness, charity, chastity, and liberality with food—a heady mix of the goddesses Lakṣmī (divine purveyor of welfare and bounty) and Annapūrṇā (divine provider of food) as gloriously depicted by the character of Rajlaksmi in his *magnum opus*, the four-part picaresque novel *śrīkānta* (1917-33). On the other hand, a woman's erotic feelings and conduct are viewed as unbecoming, if not outright culpable, as in the character of Kirnamayi in *Caritrahīn* [Libertine, 1917] or Achala of *Gṛhadāha*. We will have a

better grasp of Chattopadhyay's attitude to *kāminī*, that is, an erotic woman, once we examine his ideas of heterosexual love and lovemaking.

Sharat's ideas of love between man and woman appear at times as progressive or even liberal for his time, in that he valorizes women's humanity and subjectivity over their loyalty to husbands. For example, in his presidential address to the Literary Society of Munsiganj, he declared that "a [woman's] full-fledged humanity is superior to her chastity" [*paripūrṇa manuṣyatva satītvē ceyo baḍa*] (Sen 2002, II: 1980-81). He never confuses love with lovemaking. For him, "superior (true) love is that which not only attracts but distances lovers to and from each other" [*baḍa prem śudhu kāchei ṭānenā—ihā dūreo ṭheliyā phele*] ("śrīkānta" in Sen 2002, I: 324). To be precise, "*atrpta kāmanāi mahat premer prāṇ*" [unrequited passion is the soul of sublime love] (cited in Mukhopadhyay 1991: 137). Sharat's another idea of love as a sentiment of pity is expressed by Kamal, the female protagonist of his novella *śeṣ Praśna* when she tells Ajit, the male protagonist and her suitor, "Keep me bound to you by your feebleness" [*tomār durbalatā diyēi āmāke beṇdhe rekho*] and adds further, "I'm not so heartless as to let a character like you be swept away by the currents of mundane life" [*tomār mata mānuṣke saṁsāre bhāsiye diyē yābo, ata niṣṭhur āmi nai*] ("*śeṣ Praśna*" in Sen 2002, II: 1387).

Sharatchandra's anti-sensual attitude does not appear to be based on any philosophical, psychological, mystical, or spiritual considerations but may very well be induced by his personal aversion to active sex. He appears to have grown up to his maturity as a virgin male. He admitted having had no carnal contact with the prostitutes he encountered. He told Radharani Debi (1904-89) that though "he used to pry into the snake's pit and catch snakes...he was extremely wary of the "*bṣakanyā*" [venomous Venus] and dared not to touch them" (Debi 1982: 45). He also confided to Haridas Shastri, an acquaintance in Varanasi:

I was never a lecher in respect of women. I was an alcoholic and a drug addict and visited forbidden quarters, but...I never kusted after their body even when intoxicated. It's not because I exercised great restraint or was an ascetic or a moralist. It's because I find...[sex] quite disagreeable (cited in Ray 2003: 78).

As a matter of fact, we do not have any information on Sharat's sexual experiences from his biographers, contemporary or posthumous. The only account of his physical attraction for a woman in Rangoon comes as a failed amorous overture in the reminiscences of his acquaintance in Burma Girindranath Sarkar (see Sarkar 1365 BE [1958]). We have some idea of his pre-

pubertal intimacy with a girl named Kalidasi, his classmate at the village *pāṭhśālā* [primary school], and his youth crush on his friend of Bhagalpur Bibhutibhusan Bhatta's widowed sister Nirupama (1883-1951) (Mukhopadhyay 1366 BE [1959]: 5-6; Ray 2003: 341-55; Ray 2009: 260: Sharat's letter of Baiśākh 20, 1377 [May 1970] to Radharani Debi. Partly because of his physical torment he suffered throughout his adult life and partly due to his personal disposition Sharat, likely, remained merely an admirer of female beauty, behavior, and character that he expressed effectively in all his writings. Furthermore, his attitude might have had to do with his idea of womanly love as pity or compassion [*dayā* or *mamatā*] or by his unconscious internalization of the Vaiṣṇavic distinction between *kām* and *prem*: “*Ātmendriya prīticchā tāre bali kām/Kṛṣṇendriya prīticchā dhare prem nām*” [self-centered desires make for lust (*kām*) /Theo [Kṛṣṇa]-centered ones constitute love (*prem*)] (Sen 2002a: 7).

Sharatchandra wrote a scholarly article on women, “Nārīr Mūlya” [Women's Worth] (*Yamunā*, April-May 1913), in which he appeared as an advocate of Indian, especially Bengali, womanhood. In his moral economy the women's worth in society is diminished due to the plentitude of their supply and he took the self-centered, cowardly, and misogynistic patriarchy to task for failing to give the woman her due. Yet, beneath the veneer of his liberalism and egalitarianism in this regard, Sharat found women lacking in the wherewithal for claiming their place under the sun. Actually his attitude to women, especially widows, was quite in accord with the prevailing concern displayed in the works of several prominent literary figures from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay to Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (1898-1971). Though Sharat was genuinely concerned over the plight of the widows, he had little qualms making them conform to the prescriptions and injunctions of the Brahmanical patriarchal society (see Bandyopadhyay 2004: 108-90). In fact, he defended his enterprise (masking it as the publisher's preface to his article published as a booklet in 1923) that it was written “because the women of that time were yet unprepared to argue about their rights” (see Mukhopadhyay 2008: 24-41; see also Purkayastha 2013: 58-63). His condescension toward women is explicit in his letter to Radharani Debi:

You ladies do not quite understand your own mind as much as you're able to fathom men's mind with remarkable alacrity....Radhu, I fear you ignore your own heart and thus deceive yourself by being a good domesticated woman. Self-denial *eo ipso* is self-destruction” (cited in Debi 1982: 26).

However, in real life, Sharat had little hesitation in letting his wife Hiranmayi (m. 1910-38) collect his *pādodak* [cleansing water collected from the feet] in front of a visitor—Radharani. He even jestingly told Hiranmayi: “why feel shy in front of others? Let Radhu see for herself. They’re all modern urban ladies. You better teach her the real cunning of your devotion.” He explained this “cunning of devotion” to Radharani: “All this does not really imply devotion to husband; it is actually an anchor to tie the cow with” (meaning, Hiranmayi’s apparent devotion is to ensure her husband’s fidelity) (Debi 1982: 166-67). Actually Sharat never had any social contact with educated, cultivated, and financially well-off women except Radharani Debi and Lilarani Gangopadhyay (c. 1894-1938). His experiences were confined to the women of his maternal uncles’ families or with indigent child-widows or the so-called fallen women, whose odyssey he penned with marvelous skill.

Interestingly enough, educated women appeared to be a threat to him, especially when they also happened to aspire for a niche in the generally male dominated literary world of Bengal—women such as Anurupa Debi 1882-1958), Nirupama Debi, Ashalata Singha (1911-83), or even beneath apparent familiarity and geniality, Radharani Debi. He was particularly abrasive, even vitriolic, in his comments on Anurupa Debi’s story *Posyaputra* [Adopted Son, 1911] calling it “insufferably patronizing and pedantic” [*asahya jyāṭhāmo*] (“Nārīr Lekhā” [Women’s Writings] in Sen 2002, II: 2079). He unabashedly expressed his contempt for women writers in his letter to Haridas Chattopadhyay, proprietor of the distinguished publishers and booksellers Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons of Calcutta:

The last month’s issue of the *Bhāratbarṣa* (Kārtik 1322 BE [October 1915]) was not good. All the entries are authored by women [forty-two women contributors]. Admittedly it’s something new but expectedly worthless, as compared to other issues (Ray 2009: 72: letter of November 15, 1915).

Sharat’s attitude to Nirupama Debi was frankly patronizing when he claimed that she as mentored by him to grow up as a mature writer and “not a mere woman” (Ray 2009: 143: letter of July 29, 1915 to Lilarani Gangopadhyay).

Comparison between Rabindranath and Sharatchandra’s Select Works

Sharatchandra: *Śeṣ Praśna*

In order to demonstrate the difference between Rabindranath and Sharatchandra as writers of women's odyssey in their romantic conundrum, we need to compare and contrast their two select novellas each: *Gṛhadāha* and *śeṣ Praśna* with *Naṣṭanīḍ* and *śeṣer Kabitā* respectively. Let me begin with an overview of Sharatchandra's controversial novel *Śeṣ Praśna* which appears as a romantic novel but is actually what the author intended it to be an intellectual novel or a kind of social and cultural discourse within the framework of a story of extramarital and illicit love. Since his return from Burma in 1916, Sharat had been buffeted by multiple social, political, and economic problems he was seeking to comprehend and this book laid some shrewd questions on them. He was moving away from soft and mushy sentimental gunk that had characterized his earlier critique of social ills as he perceived them to a more intellectual and ideological discourse by articulating some serious issues or questions on love and life in the sunset years of his literary life. In *Śeṣ Praśna* he sought to demonstrate what the new literature of his time (the interwar years) ought to be like. As he wrote to Dilipkumar Ray (1897-1980), he had endeavored to provide some directions to the younger generation of authors as to how to conceive and construct modern novel. 'I have sought to provide some hints to what our ultra-modern literature ought to be like. The "central pivot" of modern literature is not the attitude of making noise about the legitimacy of pornography,' he wrote to Dilpkumar (Ray, 2009, 231: letter of Baiśākh 30, 1338 BE [May 1931]). Similarly he wrote to Radharani on the same day: "I have tried to provide a small hint to the talented younger *litterateurs* about what the ultra-modern *bell letters* ought to look like" (Ray, 2009, 263: letter of Baiśākh 30, 1338 BE [May 1931])

Śeṣ Praśna first appeared serially in the *Bhāratbarsa* in seventeen installments during Śrāban 1334 BE through Baiśākh 1338 BE (1927-1931) before being published as a discrete book with corrections, modifications, and slight addition on May 2, 1931. It is typical of Sharatchandra's woman-centered stories, and although described as a novel, it is so only structurally, not substantially or qualitatively. It's more like a debate or a discourse through dialogues on various questions of social life. Unfortunately, this piece loaded with conversations among various characters lacks any significant development of either the plot or the speakers themselves. Nevertheless, there is a leitmotif that runs tirelessly through the symphony (often degenerating into cacophony) of conversations: it is the familiar philosophical conundrum over the question of eternal truths or traditions as contested repeatedly by the protagonists, an aging

corpulent millionaire named Ashutosh Gupta, aka Ashubābu or Ashubaddi [Gupta’s preferred nickname]⁷ and a beautiful and intelligent young woman named Shibani (aka Kamal).

One of the other major characters, Kamal’s husband Shibnath is a living embodiment of irony possessing an appealing persona (an amazingly handsome visage [*aścarya sundar mukh*] (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1281), but harboring appalling heart and habits—a chronic alcoholic and an incorrigible libertine—a veritable cultivated individual *manqué*. He is a seasoned singer but a disgraced college professor having lost his job because of his alcoholism. His second wife Kamal happens to be his maid servant’s illegitimate and widowed daughter. She, however, discovers to her dismay, though she does not feel disturbed at all, that her husband is a sex crazed wretch who had ditched his homely and sickly wife to marry her merely for her sheer good looks. Theirs is not necessarily a love match but, for Kamal, it was possibly the only rational course of action of an indigent young widow under the circumstance. However, her Casanova spouse is also a shrewd man of the world. With a view to changing his fortune in view of his paltry income from a dubious business venture, Shibnath hooks Ashubābu’s only daughter Manorama by virtue of his good looks and sweet voice, though interestingly enough, on her first meeting Shibnath, Manorama took him (rightly, alas!) for a “depraved, debauch, and drunkard” [*durbṛtta, duścāritra, mātāl*] (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II:1272). However, presently the enamored young woman unceremoniously dumps her betrothed would be husband Ajit.

The good looking [*suśrī*] [Ajit, who has just arrived from overseas with an engineering degree, is the scion of a prosperous Baidya family based in the Punjab.. A few years ago Manorama’s arranged marriage with him had to be postponed half-way due to considerations of its improper inauspicious time of the day according to Hindu religious calendar. Thereafter, Ajit left for England for higher education with the understanding that his marriage will re-occur upon his return. He is reputed to be a *sātvik* [untainted soul] and a vegetarian, who reportedly had longed for the life of a renouncer. He is far from a macho male—he is feeble hearted, childlike, and prone to tears at the slightest provocation of sentiment even as a full-blooded young man of 32—just like Sharat’s typical male characters, (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1278, 1317). He confesses to Kamal disarmingly: “Truly I am a helpless weakling inside. I am absolutely unable to exert myself in anything at all” (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1353). In fact he is, as the author makes Kamal admonish him albeit affectionately, one of those who never grows up even

when an octogenarian (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1382). Nevertheless, Manorama, a traditional, pious, and caste/class conscious Hindu woman (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1273)⁸ who, ever since the postponement of her marriage to Ajit, followed the strict regimen of a *sādhvī* [faithful wife]. After his return from abroad Ajit comes to reunite with his half-wed bride Manorama, but somehow both change their mind and, as said earlier, she chooses Shibnath the scoundrel. Ajit, in turn, falls hook line and sinker in love with Shibnath’s neglected wife Kamal—a curious case of a perfect *quid pro quo*.

Of the other significant supporting characters Abinash Mukhopadhyay is a college professor and a widower who lives with his son and his late wife’s widowed sister Nilima, an attractive widow in her late thirties, and Akshay, another college professor and a cantankerous and pernicky stickler of propriety, to the extent of being extremely unsocial. There are other characters such as the young widow Bela, young men such Harendra, Satish, and Rajendra, the last named being a superfluous character—an inordinately fanatical and unmannerly young man reputed be a nationalist revolutionary—who impetuously sacrifices his life not as a martyr fighting for his homeland’s independence but a victim of burns trying to rescue the sacred idols from a blazing temple, and receives his postmortem panegyric from Ashubābu: “Yet I say, ‘O god, whatever you do please do not wipe out the likes of Rajen from your world’” [*Tabu bali, “Bhagabān, ...tumi ār yāi karo, ei Rājener jāt-tāke tomār saṁsṛre yena bilupta karo nā”*] (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1388)

Of particular interest is the intriguing background of the principal female character of the novel Kamal. A half-cast Eurasian, she has neither formal education nor social standing (she being the illegitimate daughter of her low caste mother) but she appears to be a highly intelligent autodidact, and on her own deposition, she was mentored informally by her natural father (we are not told where, when, and how she learned to speak chaste Bengali fluently and why she remained silent and smiled when Ajit asked innocently if she was versed in the English tongue) (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1297). She was married at first to an Assamese Christian and, following whose early demise, she was made to marry her mother’s employer. As for Kamal, she is not just pretty as a “white lily washed in dews” [*śiśir-dhoyā padma*] (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1268), but, more; as she is told point blank by the enamored Ajit, she deserves the crown of a goddess in the world (*saṁsāre debīr āsan yadi kāro thāke se āpnār*) (“Śeṣ Praśna” in

Sen, 2002, II: 1273, 1296). At the same time, she is a strict disciplinarian and an abnegating ascetic in her life style (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1296-97, 1300). She has no yearning for riches but stubbornly copes with her penurious condition and she is wonderfully upright and courageous in venting her deep conviction in the relativity of all the conventional absolutes and she glories in her existence as a conscientious human being and an upholder of what she believes the right way. By the same token, she is not a starry-eyed “beyond” aspiring to garner postmortem merits. Above all, she is fiercely contemptuous of hypocrisy. “I have no patience to wait for a god-given pie in the sky in the next life. My greatest and noblest truth is my desire to understand life in simple commonsense” [*ākāśkusumer āśay bidhātār dore hāt pete janmāntarkāl pratīkṣā karbāro āmār dhairya thākbe nā, ye jībanke sabār mājhkhāne sahaj-buddhite pai, ei āmār satya, ei āmār mahat*], she averred in a conversation with Ashubābu (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen, 2002, II: 1380).

What this enchantingly authentic woman lacks sadly and sorely is simple love and understanding. Since her natural father’s death when she was nineteen, she has not experienced love filial or romantic. That is why she seeks affection from her monumental *Kākābābu* [literally, Mr. uncle, an honorific and endearing mode of address for an aging male not always a direct or indirect relation], that is uncle Ashu [“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen 2002, II: 1299). She also finds Ajit a sincere and loving companion but not strong or bold enough to conquer a married woman [*parer jinis* or “other’s possession”] (“Śeṣ Praśna” in Sen 2002, II: 1318). She thus does not desire a ritual marital union with him believing marriage to a woman with a murky past, might compromise his social standing in the long run. She thus joins with her new love on her own terms declining his plea for a regular marriage and telling him in no uncertain terms: “You better keep me tied to you with your weakness [i.e., love] only; I am not so heartless as to drown you in deep waters of worldly concerns” [*Baranca tomār durbalatā diyei āmāke bendhe rekho. Tomār mata mānuṣke saṁsāre bhāsiye diye yābo, ata niṣṭhur āmi nai*]. She, however, adds quickly: “I do not believe in god, otherwise I would have asked him to let me die seeing you out of harm’s way in life” [*Bhagabān ta mānīne, naile prārthanā kartām duniyār sakal āghāt theke tomāke āḍāl rekhei ekdin yena āmi marte pāri*] (“Śeṣ Praśna in Sen, 2002, II: 1387).

Rabindranath: Śeṣer Kabitā

The genesis of Rabindranath’s *Śeṣer Kabitā*, the novel that is “almost half poetry,” to borrow

Krishna Kripalani's expression (Kripalani, 2001, 194), is linked to the poet's aborted travel to England in January 1928. He had been invited by Oxford University to deliver the Hibbert Lectures (invited lectures on theology and religion by a trust founded by the Unitarian theologian Robert Hibbert) but he postponed his voyage due to illness in Madras and made a detour to Colombo for recovery but eventually returned to India and stayed in Bangalore for three weeks. Here he completed the manuscript of his novel *Śeṣer Kabitā* that had begun in Colombo.

This full-blooded romantic love story sets out a lively encounter among Amit Ray, an amalgam of an innocently arrogant Westernized gadfly and an eloquent intellectual, Labanya, a sober, sincere, modernized Indian woman, Katie Mitter (Ketaki Mitra), a thoroughly Westernized Indian woman as the main characters—all three young and Bengali. The plot of this “novel which is almost half poetry” (Kripalani, 2001, 194) is a *ménage à trois* comprising these characters that highlights Amit and Labanya's odyssey in poignantly ironical exigencies that unite them to their former friends—Amit with Katie and Labanya with her academician father's pupil, Shobhanlal, a shy, sincere, and a quasi nerdish youth. When, after encountering Katie, Labanya comes to know of her previous liaison with Amit, she realizes that his love for her was in reality not for what she actually is as a person but for her idealized image in his fantasy. She thus “releases him from his troth” (Kripalani, 2001, 195) to her and returns to join her life with her silent but sincere admirer Shobhanlal whom she had unwittingly neglected and Amit returns to his first love Katie whom he had forgotten unwittingly. The novella ends with her poignant missive in poem that has won for Tagore well-deserved accolades from literary connoisseurs. Here is a part of Labanya's parting letter as farewell to her lover Amit:

*Tomār hayni kono kṣati.
Marter mṛttikā mor, tāi diye amṛtamurati
yadi sṛṣṭi kare thāka, tāhāri ārati
hok taba sandhyabelā—
pūjār se khelā
byaghāt pābe nā mor pratyaher mlānsparśa lege.*

[No loss is yours in losing me,
an image of clay.
If of that mortal dust
You have fashioned a goddess,
let the goddess remain for you to adore
with the evening star.
No gross touch of the actual me
shall disturb the play of your worship].

(Thakur, 2003, 125-26. Translation in Kripalani, 2001, 195).

.....
*Sabcheye satya mor, sei mrtyñjay—
 se āmār prem.
 Tāre āmi rākhiyā elem
 aparibartan arghya tomār uddeśe.
 paribartaner srote āmi yāi bhese
 kāler yātrāy.
 He bandhu bidāy .*

[I dedicate to you
 my eternal offering and
 my highest truth--
 my immortal love.
 Let me be carried away
 by the changing tide of time—
 Farewell, my Friend.]

(Thakur, 2003, 125. My translation).

Indeed, Labanya (or, in Amit’s abbreviated version of her name, Banyā, literally meaning “flood tide” or “wild”) clearly saw through the innermost secrets of Amit’s heart that it is never ready to enter into the bondage of marriage but runs after varieties of satisfaction to quench his thirst for the delicate [*ruci*]. He considers marriage as something vulgar—a cozy cushion for the comfort of the worldly minded folks fabricated by the hallowed rituals sanctioned by religion. Hence she made an astonishingly terse statement in the tenderest tone: “I beg you, don’t ask me to marry you. What I received from you is enough to last me for the rest of my life. But do not deceive your own heart” (Thakur 2003, 54).

This elegantly witty, lighthearted and yet somber, lyrical novel or *kabyopanyās* in Niharranjan Ray’s Bengali terminology, with its delectable diction and a new mode of expression, “proved...the modernity of Tagore just as it gave modern Bengali prose a new shine. It would be difficult to be dull after this,” to cite a distinguished Tagore scholar (Ghose, 1986, 77). Evidently Sharatchandra was influenced by Rabindranath’s writings and wished to imitate the Master’s intellectually rich novella by composing one for the sake of purveying what he claimed an “intellectual tonic” [*intellect-er balakāarak āharya*] in his story (Ray 2009: 304: Sharat’s letter of Jyaiṣṭha 4, 1338 BE [May 1931] to Bhupendrakishore Rakshit Roy, editor of the literary journal *Beṇu* [The Flute]). Kamal and Ajit of *Śeṣ Praśna* Kamal are a pale shadow of Labanya and Shobhanlal but “the effortlessly epigrammatic, restless, talkative Oxonian aesthete, Amit Ray” (Ghose, 1986, 118), resembling Tagore enigmatically, is not be detected in any character of Sharat’s novella.⁹ Sharat’s deliberately contrived “intellectualism” in *Śeṣ Praśna* lacks the idealism or aesthetic *gravitas* of Rabindranath’s *Śeṣer Kabitā*, though the former

arguably is robustly, even aggressively, ideological and individualistic (Chattopadhyay 1980, 122; see also 133-134). The calm grandeur of Labanya's character elicits the connoisseurs' admiration and fills their heart with aesthetic pleasure that is the hallmark of a true tragedy. By contrast Kamal, who responds to her admirer's overture by announcing her autonomy—"Kamal is nobody's property but of her own"—and mocks at his unwillingness to steal the car borrowed from their common friend and well-wisher Ashubābu" (Sen 2002, II: 1318-1319) and then tells him that he lacks the guts to appropriate other's possessions (a subtle hint at Ajit's inability to snatch Kamal away from Shibnath), appears awesome to readers. And yet, Sharat's *femme fatale* ultimately harbors an essentialized maternal sentiment for her lover, the hallmark of all the female characters in his works.

Broken Nest

The eponymous protagonist of Tagore's novella *Cārulatā* (literally meaning, "Pretty Plant") is a lonely housewife who "lacked nothing" (Tagore 1971: 23) by way of material possessions except a companion capable of sharing her sensibilities. She was starved of intellectual and emotional nourishment. Naturally studious, she "managed her studies herself by a variety of stratagems." Thus she got her brother-in-law and Bhupati's cousin Amal (literally meaning, "Stainless") her brother-in-law and Bhupati's cousin Amal (literally meaning, "Stainless") to help her with reading and as such had to put up with the demands and caprices of the young man who exhibited a remarkable degree of what sociologists call "transactional mentality" (Riesman 1987: 15). These demands, which were fairly regular, included cash for pocket expenses or even such luxuries as handcrafted carpet slippers, or the outlandish order for an embroidered canopy of his mosquito-net.

"In her wealthy household Charu didn't have to do anything for anybody, only Amal never spared her without her doing something for him" (Thakur 1386 BE [1979]: 455; I'll generally use my own translation of the Bengali original except when I cite Tagore 1971, which is Lago and Sen's translation of the novel, because of its comparative excellence) and therefore "it was very essential for her to be of use to someone and thus she had to put up with the torments of affection" (Thakur 1386 BE: 454). We thus see the relationship between Charulata and Amal as one between a lonesome, sensitive, selfless sister-in-law and her greedy and bratty

young college-going brother-in-law. Romantically inclined, Charu would imagine herself forming an exclusive committee—somewhat conspiratorial and clandestine—between the two for discussing such idle aesthetic project as the improvement of her backyard garden and she would prod Amal to write about her dream garden. Amal’s would be the characteristic response: “What will you give me if I write?” (Thakur 1386 BE [1979]: 457). It was she who awakened her brother-in-law’s self-consciousness as a writer of promise when she read and praised his highly rhetorical *Notebook*. The two further bonded and banded together to form their mutual secret club of the literati.

When she discovered one day that Amal had published a piece in a reputed magazine, she was upset because “her exclusive enthusiasm and encouragement were no longer necessary to force him into writing” (Tagore 1971: 33). It is Amal’s rise in the literary circle that distances him from Charulata (Thakur 1386 BE [1979]: 459). And her first friction with him becomes imminent when she can no longer put up with his indifference. It finally occurs because of two different but interrelated factors. Amal forgets to procure a library book for his sister-in-law and he begins to pay visible attention to Mandakini (wife of Charu’s brother Umapada visiting the Datta household) who is mystified by the sudden celebrity of the young man though she has little taste or patience for his poetic mumbojumbo. When Charu finds Amal and Manda together chatting away, she apprehends a danger. As Tagore writes, Charu “had provided the foundations for his work” and she now finds him “falling from her hands into those of the public” and worse, “now Amal did not consider her his equal” (Tagore 1971: 46). Manda and society have hijacked Amal from Charulata’s world!

Her only compensatory recourse now is to be a writer like Amal, though she would like to confine her new venture within the protected walls of her own little twosome literary world. Hence, to rescue Amal from the world at large as well as to wean him away from Manda’s charmed company, Charu proposes a hand written journal for herself and her brother-in-law. Amal, however, has tasted fame, and like a hungry tiger that has had its first lick of blood, would not be satisfied with anything less than public accolade. He in fact gets Charu’s writing published in a reputed journal without her knowledge. The result of Amal’s impetuosity proves to be something quite unanticipated. Charulata’s unaffected prose elicited praise from a shrewd critic whose review essay “Current Bengali Literary Style” lambasted “the extravagant prose” of

modern writers like Amal and commended “the natural simplicity and spontaneous flow of language as well as the artistic narrative skill of the new writer Shrimati Charubala” (Thakur 1386 BE [1979]: 470)

Although Charu was not elated at this praise for her maiden literary venture but was actually angry because “the huge hailstone of the sudden hailstorm of praise” threatened to destroy the “tiny literary nest she had built for her very personal pleasure” (Thakur 1386 BE [1979]: 471), Amal became embarrassed and even jealous of his sister-in-law and turned his attention to Manda rather vengefully. This only served to intensify Charu’s apprehension and she decided to get rid of Manda. Amal, on the other hand, began to resent his sister-in-law’s meddling with his personal affairs and even thought to himself: “Has she decided I’m only her slave?” (Tagore 1971: 54). He further feared that he might, like Manda, be kicked out of her home and thus he readily agreed to a marriage proposal brought by his brother and literally bolted to Bardhaman and thence to England as had been arranged by his would be father-in-law as part of the dowry for his daughter’s marriage to Amal. Tagore describes Charulata’s pained perplexity:

Would Amal go far away for a long time consigning to dust this eternal sweet relationship between brother-in-law and sister-in-law of the same age, with all its affection, affliction, and loving mischievousness—this shaded grove of so many private joyous talks? Wouldn’t he feel a tiny bit sorry? Would he leave without even watering this grove one last tear of their long friendship? (Thakur 1386 BE [1979]: 482).

What was Bhupati doing during this period of his wife’s aesthetic angst? Was he totally impervious to this silent sentimental storm raging and threatening to tear asunder his conjugal bond? He actually is a witty and generous individual and “his simple goodness makes him a kind of hero, but his principal flaw is his consistently misplaced generosity” (Tagore 1971: 13: Lago’s Introduction). He was not blind to his wife’s beauty and charm. While discussing Amal’s tutorship of Charu, he once jestingly, though sincerely, told her “If I could read to a sister-in-law like you” (Tagore 1971: 35). His indifference to literature and to *belle lettres* was not a cad’s inability to appreciate art and culture. In fact “Bhupati took pride in not understanding poetry” because he was interested in real human beings and not their imagined or idealized versions in literature. To clinch his point “he took Charu by the chin and said, ‘For example, I know you. Do I need to read [*M*] *eghnādbadh* or [*Kabikaṅkaṅcaṅḍī*] from beginning to end” (Thakur 1386 BE: 462). Bhupati was quite aware of his wife’s excellent power of imagination which he believed men did not possess (Thakur 1386 BE: 463). In order to help her

develop an interest in Western literature, he requested Amal to help her a little with reading ((Thakur 1386 BE: 463). We have a glimpse of his wit when he responds to Amal's characteristic *quid pro quo* by promising him a wife like his sister-in-law.

His predicament during the crisis surrounding his business as well as the misunderstanding between Charu and Amal over Manda has been made poignant by the author who observes: "There was no one to commiserate with his mundane miseries. Bhupari was preparing to fight singlehanded against his heartache and debt" (Thakur 1386 BE: 476-77). It is he who brought about some sort of solution for Amal's problem with the marriage proposal for his brother. He even sought to make up for his prolonged neglect of his wife's needs (though Tagore nowhere hints about any contemptuous neglect in this regard) by confessing and making a new pledge to her: "I can't always come to you, Charu. I've been guilty of that, but not anymore. From now on I won't spend day and night with the paper. You'll have me as much as you want me" (Tagore 1971: 55-56).

Though Bhupati realized that "Charu's love was less apparent than the ordinary woman's [as]...he had never seen any outburst of this love," he "understood why: it flowed deep in her heart in secret" (Tagore 1971: 74). This realization, alas, was of little avail because it came too late in their life. Bhupati had "lost the art of talking" (Thakur 1386 BE: 486) to his wife and she had lost "the key to the treasury of her love" (Thakur 1386 BE: 478). Charu had forgotten the art of giving her husband happiness because she had never given him anything and "he had made no demands on her, had not asked for happiness had not made her completely necessary for him" (Tagore 1971: 76). Perhaps he too has taken her for granted as is customary in arranged marriages which establish the husband's lifelong claim to his wife's "spontaneous" attention and love. Tagore was keenly aware of such patriarchal marital morals and hence observed that Bhupati "seemed to share the common belief that no one need earn his claim to his wife—the wife keeps her own lamp burning like the polestar. It is not blown out by the wind. It need not be filled with oil" (Tagore 1971: 72) Bhupati was thus acting out his cultural heritage without being aware of it.

Yet we notice his desperate attempt to salvage his lost relationship with Charu by trying to imitate her tastes, and also hers to rise to the occasion by trying to be mindful of her husband until she comes to the realization that all these efforts are but vain and she accepts the

fait accompli. In the process, her put on affection turns into heartless affectation despite herself and this deception stings Bhupati's masculine sensibility and humanity. He is upset because he feels like an "inexperienced ape" who has been led to take "the counterfeit stone" for "a precious gem" (Tagore 1971: 86). In utter rage he burns all his literary writings he had for some time been engaged in with a view to achieving a closer access to his wife intellectually and emotionally. He, however, has the humanity and intelligence to realize Charulata's pain and suffering in the process because "these were not just the ordinary deceptions of a hypocrite. Every moment of every day the poor girl had to squeeze her bleeding heart, quadruple its wounds for the sake of these deceptions" (Tagore 1971: 87). At last he decides to rejoin his abandoned profession, this time in a faraway place and in the capacity of an employee. He first refuses to take his wife along with him because he wants to forget and forgive her. However, he instantly changes his mind and asks her to come along. At this the emotionally violated woman comes to her own autonomy by accepting her life as it is and responds politely but positively in the negative: "*Nā Thāk*" [No, thanks] (Thakur 1386 BE: 496). Bhupati's belated awakening to a guilty conscience and then his discovery of his tragic deception has shaken his moral universe. Charu's coming to terms with her unspoken pang of separation from her emotional and intellectual companion, her beloved brother-in-law, has steeled her into a life of no exit (the phrase 'no exit' is borrowed from Sartre 1955). Yet both must carry on un-living the rest of their stalemated, worse, checkmated, life.

Blazing Home

Sharatchandra's *Gṛhadāha* appeared as a serial in the *Bhāratbarsa* during 1323-26 (1916-19) and it was published as a discreet novel in Phālgun 1326 (March 20, 1920). Sharat probably began composing it sometime in 1914 and completed his project after his return to Bengal from Burma (Ray 2009: 43: Sharat's letter of March 1914 to Pramathanath Bhattacharya). According to a distinguished critic, *Gṛhadāha* is exceptional among Sharat's novels in that it delineates the character of a woman, the protagonist of the novel Achala, who, unlike his women in other stories, transgresses the boundaries of tradition (Mukhopadhyay 2001: 72). Even the author himself was confident that it was his best book and felt that he had deployed all his literary energy and acumen in composing it (Gangopadhyay 1956: 163). As a matter of fact, *Gṛhadāha* is refreshingly free from the faults of his other writings; its plot is coherent without unnecessary

and jarring surprises, too many characters, and repetitiveness. It is also a sophisticated psychological and analytical story of human fancies and foibles. It is a story of illicit love and it is delineated not in vaporous romantic mishmash but in its unabashed raw physicality.

Its theme is another version of *Caritrahīn* and thus is another morality play in which the rustic widow Mrinal acts as the veritable *bibek* [conscience] purveying homespun homilies on patriarchal moral residuum and thus brings about a sort of conversion experience for the educated professional Suresh and chala's father Kedar Mukhopadhyay to recognize the sanctity and superiority of feminine chastity [*satītvā*]. Even the educated Brāhmo Achala, while finding it hard to swallow Mrinal's passive and obsequious blind faith in the essence of Hindu *nārīdharma* ["duties of Hindu women"], "the *svāmī* stuff [*svāmī jiniṣṭī*] is our religion and hence he is the ultimate truth in life and death," is made to appreciate her love and care for her septuagenarian husband, who of course dies soon after the reader meets him in the story ("Gṛhadāha" in Sen 2002, I: 920-21, 932, 936-37, 967). Yet it is not a didactic tale but a saga of human emotions buffeted by the twin pulls of traditional morality and individual desires and predilections. It is a story that does not propose or dispose any particular viewpoint but exposes the dynamic of the workings of human sentiment. Nevertheless, interestingly enough, the story subtly gives away its author's anti-Brāhmo bias and his innate faith in the efficacy of *sanātana* Hindu practices and prejudices, his occasional verbal critical interjections in the narrative notwithstanding.

The central theme of the story is the familiar love triangle, a *ménage à trois*, involving two intimate friends—the self-centered, indifferent, narcissistic, emotionally cold and even callous, but financially handicapped Mahim and the wealthy, aggressive, somewhat progressive, generous but dictatorial, and sexual Suresh, and Mahim's wife, the pretty, highly educated, progressive and yet not rabidly anti-traditional, but an erotic and vivacious Brāhmo girl Achala. There is a fourth character used as foil to Achala—Mrinal, the rustic, superstitious, garrulous, and crude but loving and religious girl, Mahim's childhood companion, now married to a man almost three times her age. Finally, there a fifth (and the third major male) character, Achala's father Kedar Mukhopadhyay, a Brahmin turned a pious but pitiless Brāhmo, and a failed father and businessman.

The novel is divided into three parts with forty-four chapters. The first part of the novel (chapters 1-19) shows the intimacy between the two friends, Mahim and Suresh, Mahim's affair

and marriage with Achala, Suresh's strong disapproval of a marriage between his Brahmin friend and his Brāhmo fiancée, his infatuation with the pretty Achala, his sudden appearance in their short-lived conjugal life, the destruction of their home in fire [*gr̥ha dāha*], and Mahim and Achala's relocation to Suresh's country home. The second part (chapters 20-37) contains events such as Achala's return to Calcutta, Mahim's illness (pneumonia), his recovery at the home of Suresh, Achala's erotic attraction for Suresh and love for Mahim, her departure for Jabbalpur along with her convalescing husband and Suresh, the sudden break of their train journey at Mogul Sarai from where Suresh abducts Achala deserting Mahim in his compartment, and Achala's attempt to get away at Dihiri-on-Shone where they put up as husband and wife at the home of Rambabu, a maniacally sanctimonious and caste-conscious Brahmin resident of Dihiri, and subsequently, her relocation to Suresh's newly purchased home at Dihiri, where she surrenders to him on a stormy night. The final part (chapters 38-44) has Suresh come to his senses, take leave of Achala to travel to the plague-ridden village of Majhuli to provide medical service to the victims of the epidemic and take ill of infection, Mahim and Achala visiting his deathbed, and Achala suffer from terrible emptiness and loneliness. The story of *Gṛhadāha* is readymade for a fulsome tragedy from the very start.

Mahim is depicted as a spineless male—inexperienced in the art of living and loving, inactive and easily displeased, intolerant and ultra-selfish. He is far from “a contained, stoic man[,] not given to expressive profession of love,” as an unsuspecting scholar believes (Purkayastha 2013: 61). His self-centered citadel of life ever closed to outsiders proves to be his undoing. As the author explains,

Achala's greatest disappointment with Mahim was that she never could get to share her husband's gripes and grief. Even Suresh had made issues with his friend since their boyhood, though to no effect. Like a miser, Mahim has kept his own [problems] to himself away from others and consequently nobody had any inkling as to his needs or sufferings let alone provide him succor. Achala failed to figure out Mahim's agony on seeing the rubble of his ancestral home following the fire...Thus that day staring intently at her husband's unruffled and calm visage she kept wondering what lay beneath his false mask of forbearance ('Gṛhadāha' in Sen 2002, I: 915-16).

Mahim opens up just for once when after recovering from his illness he confesses to Achala that he is extremely fragile and weak inside. Achala's befuddled feminine response is her welled up tears of compassion and she rushes out to hide her feelings. Mahim, unfortunately, fails to rise to the occasion and thus misses the opportunity to reconcile with his wife. Achala, however, is Sharatchandra's typical fictional woman: compassionate, nurturing, and hospitable. She has shared bed with Suresh for the sake of maintaining a social front, and breaks down when

rebuffed by Suresh, and yet is keen on tendering her sympathy for him. However, all these sentiments do not establish her real personality because her behaviors do not seem to be guided by any fixed ethical standard.

How, then, to account for her tragedy? Some might suggest it lies in her ambivalence [*dolācal br̥ṛti*]. But the novel does not quite substantiate her ambivalence as her life is buffeted by surprises. The author never bothers to provide any evidence for her ambivalent attitude to Mahim and Suresh. There is also no way to figure out the role of either Mahim or Suresh in Achala's life. We note her deference to Mahim and desire for Suresh. A possible explanation for her putative ambivalence is that Achala is perhaps fixated on her fantasy for an idealized husbandhood [*svāmīṭva*] that is unlikely to be actualized in real life. She of course pays dearly for her odyssey and this is highlighted in a poignant passage of the novel:

Mahim said, "What's your plan now?"

"Me?" Saying this Achala looked at him and pondered a while. At last she said: "I can't think of anything. I'll do whatever you tell me."

Mahim was surprised at this unexpected response. He had never looked [at her] in this manner. His sight is now clear enough to probe a large chunk of her heart. In it there's no fear, anxiety, desire, or imagination. As far as the gaze goes, there's an empty expanse of the future sky—colorless, shapeless, motionless, and formless—totally unruffled and absolutely empty ('Gṛhadāha' in Sen 2002, I: 976).

Mahim could never fathom Achala's terrifying loneliness, unbearable emptiness, and unparalleled abnegation. Achala on her part could not expect to *real-ize* her dream of idealized husbandness. She lost all colors, sound, and music of her life at the tender age of twenty-one and was left with but an empty sky. This is the tragedy of her life (I have used a few paragraphs from Mukhopadhyay 2001: 72-80). She was virtually crushed between the dead weight of her saturnine spouse, a moral monster whom she dreaded but could not love on the one hand, and by the wild loveless animal passion of her seducer whom she looked upon with benign contempt on the other. She remained stuck in the mires of her misery--totally inert, *acalā*, ironically true to her name.

It might be argued that Achala actually was enamored of herself and she sought her ultimate satisfaction by manipulating the two men in her life. This obsession with power and control deprived her of happiness. However, she is, as an astute analyst maintains, a veritable narcissus on the one hand and a masochist on the other. She perhaps discovered her true self in the empty loneliness she invited in her life by her own impetuosity. She really is no "sado-masochist" who seeks satisfaction in tormenting herself and others [*nijeke o anyake pīḍan karé*

ānanda pābār ākānkha] (Gangopadhyay 2011: 105, 120), yet still a masochist *par excellence*, deriving a perverse pleasure through personal pain (see Purkayastha 2013: “Achala remained unruffled in spirit despite her ‘fall’ in terms of social code”).

Conclusion

Tagore provides an existential problem of Charulata’s selfhood in his story without moralizing on her relationship with her brother-in-law. He highlights her silent but unmistakable stoic forbearance even amidst her unbearable separation from a beloved compatible companion. Hers is the strongest and the most admirable character in his story. Sharat, on the other hand, depicts Achala’s character as an educated woman without exhibiting any trace of the attitude of the “new woman.” There is no hint of her romantic attraction for either Mahim the *pāṣaṇḍa* [the wicked] fraud (“Gṛhadāha” in Sen 2002, I: 861), who has no means of his own to fend for himself and who reportedly confessed to his friend Suresh that he had no plan to get married as he lacked the means to support a wife in Calcutta, or Suresh the *kasāī*⁵ [butcher] (“Gṛhadāha” in Sen 2002, I: 876) for whom she develops a momentary crush for his misunderstood *bonhomie* and unabashed erotic overture. Thus, despite Mahim being described as a final year law student, Suresh a medical doctor, and Achala a *biduṣṭī* [learned] Brāhmo young woman, *Gṛhadāha*’s *ménage à trios* comprises no really educated and cultivated adults because their creator the author fails to provide mature adult dialogue for them as he possesses little familiarity or understanding of the urban educated Hindu or Brāhmo families, not to mention their womenfolk in particular. On the other hand, his treatment of Achala and her father the Brāhmo businessman Kedar Mukhopadhyay is a caricature indicative of Sharatchandra’s personal animus against the progressive Hindu sect that had defied the prejudices and superstitions of the so-called *sanātana* [catholic] Bāhmaṇical faith and practices.

Yet one must concede that Tagore’s *Naṣṭanīd*, its aesthetic and intellectual appeal notwithstanding, or perhaps because of it, cannot claim wider readership than Chatterjee’s blockbuster *Gṛhadāha* that provides the story of a wayward married woman who pays her due having been left in the lurch at Suresh’s Dihiri-on-Shone residence by her cuckolded husband, that God-like being in Hindu society, who departs for his village following Suresh’s untimely death at the village of Majhuli. The end of the story made its author a colorful creator of a

morality play. Tagore's *Charulata* was abandoned by her timid brother-in-law who decamped to Bardhaman to get into a financially lucrative matrimonial alliance but she took her own decision to lead her life, however painful it was for her personally. Sharat's *Achala*, on the other hand, was abandoned by her loveless and listless spouse to fend for herself even when she penitently prepared herself to return to him ("Gṛhadāha" in Sen 2002, I: 976-70).

In the end, one must recognize the most significant difference between the poet and the novelist: the former is an aesthete and a philosopher who also possesses a deep spiritual understanding life—both individual and global (Sil 2007 and Sil 2014). In a letter to Dilipkumar Ray (Baiśākh 25, 1333 BE [May 6, 1926] Tagore shrewdly observed: "Most probably there's something in my nature that will never chime with his (Sharat's)" [khub sambhab āmār prakṛtite eman kichu āche yār saṅge tār sur milbe nā] (cited in Ghosh, 2002: 61). Sharat's *oeuvre* is not marked by any aesthetic, philosophical, or spiritual concerns, although he reveals his personal faith in the *daiba* or the inscrutable but inexorable power of providence (see Sharatchandra's "Śikṣār Birodh" [Disputes of Education] in Sen 2002: II: 1962-69, here at 1965).⁹ He was no cosmopolitan as Rabindranath. His worldview betrays little consciousness of any concept of "world," it being primarily parochial. For him "*deś*" designates his native "country" or the village or the provincial town, and the metropolitan cities are seen as "*bideś*" or foreign (other) land. That is why his idea of patriotism cannot comprehend Tagore's "*deśaprem*" or patriotism dovetailing into the concept of "*biśvajīban*" or world life or Universal Life (see Sil 2012a: 127-40, here at 130; see also Sil 2011: 168-84).

Sharatchandra's popularity was predicated upon his innate conservatism. He never questioned the Hindu societal values and institutions. He had a respectful attitude to socially approved marriage and never let socially tabooed love to get the upper hand. He was deferential to the existing social structure and its rules. As he argued in his essay "Samāj-Dharmer Mūlya" [The Merits of Social Norms]: "So long as this is the guiding principle of society, it cannot be transgressed or challenged on the excuse of one's own legitimate right....Nor can it be claimed that it is a mark of cowardice to sacrifice one's legitimate rights at the altar of society until it reforms the tyranny of the scriptures and tradition" ('Gṛhadāha' in Sen 2002, II: 2087-89). As

Sukumar Sen has it, this “timid mentality” [*sāhashīn dhāraṇā*] of Sharatchandra rendered his work popular but at the expense of its artistic excellence” (Sen 2009, V: 218). Rabindranath is an aesthete and an artist *par excellence* but Sharatchandra, with all his warts, is a consummate *tusitala*, a veritable *galpadādu* [a grand old storyteller] (Sen 2002, I: “Śaratcandrikā” [Introduction], n.p.).¹⁰ The *Biśvakabi* provides a rich *pabulum* for the heart as well as the intellect for the cultivated and educated readership of society but the *Aparājeya Kathāsilpī* purveys the stuff that touches the heart of the multitude—witty and dilettante alike. Tagore actually summed up Sharat’s merits with admirable alacrity when he observed that Sharatchandra’s work has achieved immortality not because of its intellectual controversy [*cintśaktir bitarka nai*] but because of its sumptuous use of the power of imagination [*kalpanāśaktir pūurnā dr̥ṣṭi*] (Ray 2009: 385: Tagore’s felicitation for Sharatchandra organized by Rabibāsar [Sunday Meet] at the Belgachia, Calcutta retreat of Anilkumar Dey, editor of *Udayan* on Āśvin 25, 1343 BE [October 1936]).

Even if Sharat could be faulted as a novelist—his narrative is often disparate, disjointed, or rambling—his prose is almost flawless, it being elegant, simple, and entirely delicious. Arun Mukhopadhyay provides an erudite and elegant analysis of Sharatchandra’s prose style and diction as a writer of superlative excellence, his lack of intellectual depth and breadth of vision notwithstanding. He achieves his excellence as a prose writer by being disciplined in the choice of words and expressions, by his careful use of metaphor, simile, and simple *sādhubhāṣā* in verbs and *calitbhāṣā* in idiomatic expressions and dialogues (Mukhopadhyay, 2001: 128-166). Starting from his composition of *Baḍadidi* through the next quarter century Sharat maintained his reputation as the greatest prose writer of Bengal after Bankimchandra and Rabindranath. Perhaps his self-estimate as a novelist is not far off the mark as we note in his letter to Pramatha: “Please forgive me if I brag, with your permission, that no one other than Rabibābu [Rabindranath Tagore] can compose a story better than me” (Ray, 2009: 9: letter of April 4, 1913). Sharat was acutely aware of Tagore’s literary mastery as well as his own pride of place as a writer next to the Poet Laureate of the World.

Yet Sharat’s reknown as a popular *tusitala* was unshakable and hence undeniable among the younger generation of the literati of Bengal as well as a large lay readership. His sensible admirers and fellow literati contrasted, rather than compared, him with the magisterial Tagore

without, however, demeaning either the great poet or the great novelist. Thus Achintyakumar Sengupta (1903-76), a representative author of the *Kallol* circle, hailed *Śarat Candra*, the “Autumnal Moon,” in *Kālikalam* (Bhādra 1335 BE [1928]):

*Yini Bhānu, amarta kṛśānu, tini thākun sonār simhāsane
Kīrtimān! Tumi eso Gaṅgār māṅgalyaputa Baṅger aṅgane
Sandhyāmallikār gandhe, ghanabanabetaser nibhṛta chāyāy,
Namryamukhī-tulasīr śyāmaśrīte,--eshecha nadīr geruyāy.
Baṅger mātīr mato suśītal citta taba, tabu anirbān
Jvale sethā dukkha-śikhā se-āgune nijere karechha rupabān.*

[Let the sun (Rabindranath), the fire of the heavens, reign from his golden throne, but you're welcome to the shades of the cane-plant grove, to the verdant and humble basils, to the fragrance of the evening jasmines, as well as to the saffron [colored] river waters of the land of Bengal. Your heart is as soft and serene as the soil of Bengal, and yet within it, burns the flame of pain and suffering that makes you so beautiful] (Sengupta 1335 [1928] cited in Halder 2000: 40).

Notes

¹I translate the title not in the traditional meaning of Labanya's 'last poem' but as the poem to end (śeṣ) or terminate her relationship with Amit.

²Sharat left his shelter in Calcutta for Rangoon, Burma in 1903 in search of employment and stayed there til 1916 when he had to comeback due to deteriorating health reasons.

³The two essays by Rabindranath and Sharatchandra are printed *in extenso* in Ghosh 2002: 12-38. Tagore presented another lecture titled 'Satyer Āhabān' [Call for the Truth] at the University Institute, Calcutta on August 29, 1921(Kārtik 1328 BE). It was not only directed at the non-cooperation movement but also at the violent agitation against the British and against the movement's supporters. See Ghosh 2002: 38-53.

⁴Sharat's referring to Rabindranath sd 'baḍalok' is interesting. This word usually designates 'rich' as well as 'rich and famous.' It is usually the parlance of the lower social classes who it either respectfully or ruefully.

⁵This dramatic scene, quite imaginable as Sharat's wonted lachrymose outburst, is difficult to connect with Rabindranath, who is not known to have betrayed such emotion openly. Moreover, Sen does not even bother to ascertain the date of this incident or provide some corroborative evidence except that he related it to Pratapchandra Chandra, son of Sharat's lawyer Nirmalchandra Chandra.

⁶Chaudhury 1382 BE (1975): 92. For Sharat's article in *Baṅgabāñī* see Sen 2002, II: 1986-91.

⁷Ashubabu is a Baidya (in common parlance Baddi, and literally meaning physician or Kabirāj), a hybrid of Brāhmaṇ and Kāyastha castes.

⁸Manorama contemptuously refused to treat Kamal as her equal. As the author writes, 'she could not figure how she would address her (Kamal) after she had heard about her family's status. She felt awkward greeting this low caste [nīcajātīyā] daughter of a maidservant [dāsīkanyā] in front of her father by addressing her in familiar tone 'eso', and at the same time detested the idea of inviting her respectfully [addressing her 'āsun' or 'please come'], into her bedroom despite her great looks" (Sen 2002, II: 1273).

⁹He once confided in his publisher Haridas Chattopadhyay about his imitating a character named Pareshbabu in Tagore's novel *Gorā* for his ongoing project *Baikunṭher Will*. He admitted that though an imitation it would be

hard (for readers) to detect it. Ray 2009: 72: Sharat's letter of November 15, 1915.

¹⁰ Sukumar Sen first made the comparison between Sharatchandra and the Scottish novelist Robert L. Stevenson (1850-94) who was given the moniker of *tusitala* ['writer of stories'] by the people of Samoa.

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Addendum

Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga [Awakening of the Waterfall]*

Translated by Narasingha P. Sil

Introduction

One of Rabindranath's most famous poems, "Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga" [Awakening of the Waterfall], was composed sometime in 1881-82 in Calcutta when he was barely 21 years old. Most Tagore scholars agree that this piece "heralds the birth of Rabindranath, the future *Biśvakabi* [World Poet]. It is fairly certain that the inspiration behind this literary masterpiece was the poet's sister-in-law [Kadambari Devi, 1858-84] and that there developed an intimacy between the two young and impressionable individuals of almost the same age" (see Chapter One above). Tagore's poem is reproduced below in its Bengali original in transliteration, followed by my translation.

Āji e prabhāte rabir kar
Kamane paśila prāṇer par,
Kamane paśila guhār āndhāre prabhāt pākhīr gān!
Nājāni kena re eta din pare jāgiyā uṭhila prāṇ.
Jāgiyā uṭheche prāṇ,
Ore uthali uṭheche bāri,
Ore prāṇer bāsanā prāṇer ābeg rudhiyā rākhite nāri.
Thara thara kari kāmpiche bhūdhar,
śilā rāśi rāśi paḍiche khase,
Phuliyā phuliyā phenil salil
Garaji uṭhiche dāruṅ roṣe.

Hethāy hothāy pāgaler prāy
 Ghuriā ghuriyā mātiyā beḍāy—
 Bāhirite cāy, dekhite nā pāy kothāy kārār dvār.
 Kenare bidhātā pāṣāṇ hena,
 Cāri dike tār baṅdhan kena!
 Bhāṅg re hrday, bhāṅg re bāṅdhan,
 Sādh re ājike prāṇer sādhan,
 Laharīr pare laharī tulyā
 Āghāter pare āghāt kar.
 Mātiyā yakhan uṭheche parāṇ
 Kiser āṅdhār kiser pāṣāṇ!
 Uthali yakhan uṭheche bāsanā
 Jagate takhan kiser ḍar!
 Āmi dhāliba karuṇādhārā,
 Āmi bhāṅgiba pāṣāṇ kārā,
 Āmi jagat plābiyā beḍāba gāhiyā
 Ākul pāgal pārā.
 Keś elāiyā, phul kuḍāiyā,
 Rāmdhaṇu-āṅkā pākhā uḍāiyā,
 Rabir kiraṇe hāsi chaḍāiyā diba re parān dhāli.
 śikhar haite śikhare chutiba
 Bhūdhār haite bhūdhare luṭiba,
 hese khalakhal geye kalakal tāle tāle diba tāli.
 Eta kathā āche, eta gān āche, eta prāṇ āche mor,
 Eta sukh āche, eta sādhan āche—prāṇ haye āche bhor.
 Ki jāni ki hala āji, jāgiyā uṭhila prāṇ--
 Dūr hate śuni yena mahāsāgarer gān.
 Ore, cāri dike mor
 E ki kārāgār ghor—
 bhāṅg bhāṅg bhāṅg kārā, āghāte āghāt kar.

Ore āj kī gān geyeche pākhī

Eseche rabir kar.

[How did the sun's rays
Touch my life this morn,
How did the song of the morning bird,
Penetrate the dark cavern!
How did my soul wake up from the slumbers of the ages?
My spirit longs to burst out like the waters,
With unbridled passion.
The hills are shaking
And heaps of rocks rolling down.
The savage surging waters swelling up,
Roaring in rousing rage
And rushing in all directions in mad craze
To shatter the invisible prison door.

Why, my God! Why was I
Chained inside the stone?
I'll break loose from all shackles, and
Hurl my cascading waves to strike with a terrific force,
To my heart's delight.

When the spirit is aroused,
And the will is summoned
There is nothing to fear from the dark dungeon.
What is there to fear in the world?

I shall bare the floodgate of my love,
I'll break open the stone prison,

I'll flood the world

With my airs singing madly and merrily.

With unlocked hair I'll pick flowers,

And spread my rainbow-colored wings.

I'll sprinkle the sun's rays with my laughter

And giggling, gurgling I'll clap at every step

Laughing my heart out and singing aloud.

My heart is astir with

Passion, music and mirth.

I've so much to say.

Now I know why I am awakened today.

I hear the symphony of the mighty ocean from afar.

Why am I caged in this terrible cell?

Break open its doors.

I want to hear the song birds in this sunlit dawn.]

*Earlier versions of this translation along with the poem in Bengali was read at a gathering of "Dead Poets in Silverton," Oregon on March 28, 2009 and subsequently uploaded in Boloji Literary Shelf (2014).

Translator's note: I have taken the liberty to ignore literalness and make some adjustments in a couple of stanzas for the sake of cogency and clarity.