

S. C. SEN GUPTA



The Great Sentinel

A STUDY OF
RABINDRANATH TAGORE



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In memory
of
My Uncle
JOGESH CHANDRA SEN GUPTA

PREFACE

The essays presented here aim at a critical appraisal of Rabindranath's work in poetry, drama and fiction. The first two chapters are biographical. The biography, however, is not exhaustive nor, perhaps, can it claim complete factual exactitude. Criticism, not biography, is my theme, and I have emphasized only those incidents in the poet's life which have seemed to me to be significant in a judgment of his work.

In the critical chapter I have generally confined myself to English translations of Rabindranath's works, although I have utilized my knowledge of untranslated Bengali works to make my interpretations fuller. The consequent limitation of range will make the book more readable for the non-Bengali reader, and will, I think, be advantageous to the Bengali reader also. The bulk of Rabindranath's writings—almost all his major poems, dramas and stories—have been translated into English, and all criticism that wants to avoid amorphousness, must be selective. The English translations afforded me an excellent anthology, and I gladly availed myself of it. I only wish that I had also translations of *Chokher-Bali* and *Shesher-Kavita* to draw upon.

I have made use of the translations published by Messrs Macmillan & Co., Ltd., the Visva-Bharati and Sri Bhabani Bhattacharyya (*The Golden Boat*) and must acknowledge by indebtedness to them. My obligations to other writers are indicated in the appropriate contexts where they are quoted or discussed. I should like specially to mention my teacher Dr Srikumar Banerjee, whose writings and discourses have deeply influenced my judgments, not the least in those places where I have ventured

to differ from him. Professor Tarapada Mukherji and Professor Sadananda Chakravarti have read the manuscript through and suggested many improvements. This book would have had more errors if they had not revised it. To Sri Pavitrakumar Basu, Professor Taraknath Sen and Professor Sushilkumar Sidhanta I am indebted for advice here and there. To all these friends, and to the accomplished reader of Messrs A. Mukherjee & Co., I accord my heartiest thanks. The Index I owe to the kind assistance of my cousin Nirmalchandra Sen Gupta.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. The Growth of a Poet ...	1
II. The Fulfilment ...	20
III. Ideas and Images ...	41
IV. New Myths out of Old ...	63
V. Songs of Love ...	80
VI. Songs of Life ...	97
VII. In Tune with the Infinite ...	118
VIII. Dramas—Direct and Symbolist—I ...	140
IX. Dramas—Direct and Symbolist—II ...	160
X. Short Stories ...	181
XI. Novels ...	205
XII. Conclusion ...	230

CHAPTER I

THE GROWTH OF A POET

I

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Calcutta on the 7th May 1861, the youngest but one child of Debendranath Tagore. The father was a man remarkable in many ways. Rabindranath himself says, "My father I saw very seldom ; he was away a great deal, but his presence pervaded the whole house and was one of the deepest influences on my life. . . ." Debendranath was popularly called *Maharshi* or the great saint for his deep piety, his severe adherence to moral principles in conduct and for his stout advocacy of the worship of the Invisible God, which meant a rejection of the idolatry prevalent amongst the Hindus. As a discussion of his many-sided activities will take us far away from the biography of his son, we shall emphasize here only two aspects of the *Maharshi's* life. About five years before the birth of the poet, the Maharshi had left all his earthly pursuits, and after wandering about from place to place, had decided on settling in the Simla hills where he could immerse himself in religious contemplation, far off from worldly cares and temptations. After about two years' sojourn, he was one day watching a beautiful hill stream which was flowing towards the plains. The *Maharshi* realized that though in course of its downward journey it might be polluted with dirt, yet it would fulfil its mission only by fertilizing the earth. There, in the movement of the stream, the *Maharshi* saw the ideal of his life, too. The deliverance that might come through rejection of worldly life appeared to him to be sheer vanity. He felt that if he had learnt any divine truth he must live it in practical life, in the welter of earthly endeavours. He left the hills and

once more became a man among men, seeking the bliss of eternity in the midst of temporal activities. Here, in this achievement of freedom through bondage, we have an anticipation of one of the most significant ideas of Rabindranath's poetry.

The *Maharshi* was a believer in the One Invisible God whom he found in the teachings of the Upanisads; but he differed from the monistic interpretation of the scriptures made by the *Advaita* school of philosophy. The *Advaitin* believes in the absolute identity of the individual self (*Jiva*) and God, but the *Maharshi* reacted strongly from this philosophy in which the individual is submerged in the Absolute. His biographer Ajitkumar Chakravarti has shown that his religion, which had a good deal of eclecticism, underwent a gradual evolution. At first, he argued that the Absolute is as different from the individual consciousness as the individual consciousness is from matter, and in positing this difference he seems to have been influenced by the philosophy of Descartes. "We had no faith," he wrote, "in Vedanta philosophy, because Shankaracharya seeks to prove therein that Brahma and all created beings are one and the same". Later on he reached a more dynamic conception of the relation between the individual and the Absolute and realized the dependence of the former on the latter. In the final stage of his development as a theologian, the gulf is further bridged and he says, "This universe is the outcome of perfect truth. This universe is relative truth; its Creator is the Truth of Truth, the Absolute Truth." In his book on Brahma Dharma, there is no place for the doctrines of *Advaitavada* (Monism), *Avataravada* (Incarnation) and *Mayavada* (Illusion). In the *Maharshi's* religion, the individual soul and God are separate entities; they are like friends, but the difference between them is not insuperable. God is the Supreme Spirit, and the world is the result of a spontaneous overflow of His creative energy. He wills it, and it is there. This attitude to the world and God, which has a tinge of Vaishnavite thought

and religion—for the early Tagores were devout Vaishnavas—reaches forward to Rabindranath's philosophy of life.*

II

Who were these Tagores and what was their culture? The Tagore family became wealthy in the days of the East India Company in Calcutta, as merchants and Zamindars, and the poet's grandfather Prince Dwarakanath, who was famous for the splendour of his living, was a friend of Rammohan Ray, the founder of the Brahma religion and "the first internationally-minded man of the nineteenth century" in India. The Tagores were Brahmins, but orthodox Brahmins demurred to accept them as belonging to their fold, because they were called *Piralis*. There is difference

* A correspondent makes the following comment :

"Was the *Maharshi's* influence conducive to the development of poetical genius or was it an obstacle? It has been my impression that the *Maharshi* as well as the religion he represented was much too puritanical and ethical in character to have a benign influence on the emotional development of any budding poet. The best that these influences might have helped to sprout was the poems in *Dharma-Sangit* (*Religious Songs*) but not the lyrics in *Gitanjali* and *Gitimalya*. These latter lyrics are based on a conception of the mystical relation between the poet and the Absolute, which is found nowhere in Indian literature. The spirit which is representative of this attitude has, I think, found a very clear expression in the following lines :

'I have met thee where the night touches the edge of the day;
where the light startles the darkness into dawn, and the waves carry
the kiss of the one shore to the other.'

Can you tell me where the poet derived this sentiment from? This certainly was not the gift of Brāhmaism or a heritage from the *Maharshi*. It seems to me that the mysterious psychology of *Gitanjali* cannot be unravelled much less can it be traced to the influences of any particular brand of Hinduism."

The above comment, striking as it is, cannot be accepted without demur. Although the *Maharshi* was a theologian and had very little of the exuberant imagination possessed by his son, it is undeniable that the philosophy which formed the background to Rabindranath's poetry had its roots in his father's teaching. Says Miss Evelyn Underhill, "As the poems of Rabindranath Tagore are examples, unique in our time, rare in any time, of this synthetic mysticism, a whole and balanced attitude to the infinite, transcendent and immanent reality of God, as they speak to us out of life itself, yet not out of the thin and restless plane of existence which we call by that august name; so that the same depth and richness of view, which escapes alike extreme Absolutism and extreme Immanentism, which embraces the universal without ever losing touch of the personal, is found to be the governing intuition of his father's life."

of opinion about the exact meaning of the word *Pirali*, but tradition has it that once upon a time they had been contaminated by contact with Muslims, and that is why although they were not outcasts, orthodox people would look down upon them as a class apart. The Tagores were Vaishnavas in their religious outlook, inclining to vegetarianism in diet; they were enlightened, and Prince Dwarakanath, who had assisted Rammohan Ray in social reform, had visited England where he died in 1846.

Fifteen years after the Prince's death, his famous grandson was born in Calcutta at their Jorasanko house. In the course of a lecture in China, Rabindranath refers to the significance of the age in which he was born and the part taken by members of his family in the three revolutionary movements which stirred the country in those days. The first movement was religious, and its founder was Rammohan Ray, who carried on a ceaseless war on superstitions and proclaimed the oneness of God. It has already been noted that one of the leaders of this movement for spiritual revival was *Maharshi* Debendranath Tagore, the poet's father. The second movement was in the field of literature where Bankimchandra rescued Bengali language from the morass of dead forms, brought a new critical attitude and made Bengali a vehicle for the expression of ebullient imagination that would brook no discipline imposed from the outside. The third movement might be called National; it was partly political and partly cultural. "It was a voice of indignation at the humiliation constantly heaped upon us by people who were not Oriental," and while not opposed to the importation of Western thought, it discouraged indiscriminate rejection of traditional Indian culture and habits. This movement is reflected in the life of the *Maharshi* whom many of his countrymen thought as bad as a Christian, but who, more than any one else in his day, emphasized the study of the Upanisads, and spared no pains to stem the tide of proselytizing Christianity in Bengal. Of his sons, the eldest Dwijendranath (1840-1926)

was profoundly learned in philosophy and mathematics and expressed his speculations in a work called *Swapna-prayan* (*Dream Journey*), and the second Satyendranath (1842-1923), the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service, was noted for his wide scholarship in Indian and European literatures. Another brother Jyotirindranath, of whom more will be said later on, was a man of deep culture and versatile tastes. The *Maharshi's* eldest daughter Saudamini was one of the earliest pupils of the newly founded Bethune School.

III

Into this atmosphere of culture, both Eastern and Western, Rabindranath was born, and in the Jorasanko house, which was always humming with the noise of people who were busy singing songs, writing verses or discussing theological, philosophical and literary problems, he passed his boyhood. He has himself told the story of his early years in his own inimitable language in *My Reminiscences* and *My Boyhood Days* to which the curious reader will turn for a full account of his boyhood and youth. His mother was more or less an invalid, and he was looked after chiefly by the servants who did not allow him to go outside the house. These early years he sums up by saying that the period of the Slave Dynasty in the history of India was not a happy one, and that the same comment might be made of this portion of his life, too. "From the first time I can remember," he says in another place, "I was passionately fond of Nature", and when as a child he was confined within the pack of buildings at Jorasanko, he would yearn for the outer world of nature and man lying beyond him.

Rabindranath's education began early, and he was put into various schools, but as he did not do any useful work, he was sent to London at the age of seventeen, and there he studied for a time in the University of London under Professor Henry Morley. Of his education it may be said

that he was at school in Calcutta and London, but he was almost wholly self-taught, this process of education having started almost as soon as he had his first spelling-exercises. All learners know that after the alphabet, there are lessons in the formation of words which are made with permutations and combinations of letters. After wading like other beginners through these meaningless jumbles in a commonplace Primer, he one day came across a line that may be translated as follows: "It rains; the leaves tremble." He found that these words were bound together by an inner unity of meaning, and they brought to him a vision of pattering rain and tremulous leaves. This discovery came to him with the shock of a new revelation to which he has made many references in his works. The poet, who, later on, would express, through his writings, the lessons of unity and harmony, was struck even as a child by the central meaning which bound together the words in "It rains; the leaves tremble". Thus an elementary lesson in the language became the gateway through which the poet learnt to apprehend one of the deepest truths of his life.*

Of his experience at schools in Calcutta, he speaks with unconcealed disgust, and for only one of his teachers, Professor Henry Morley of London, he expresses genuine admiration. He compared schools to factories and the periods of time he spent there he described as terms of penal servitude in the Andaman Islands. The *Maharshi's* third son Hemendranath (1844-1884), who was in charge of the education of Rabindranath and two other boys, made elaborate arrangements for the training of Rabindranath and his other wards, studies of all sorts—science, literature, music and painting—being heaped upon them. In later life, the poet confessed that much of this learning had been lost upon him, comparing himself to a leaky boat or a losing concern. But there is one thing about the education

* *The Religion of Man*, pp. 95-96. In *My Reminiscences* (p. 4) the poet lays emphasis on the beauty of the rhyme in the sentence, and calls it the first poem of the Arch Poet.

Hemendranath gave him to which reference should be made. It was the custom in Bengal then—and it is the custom even now—to begin teaching boys and girls English almost as soon as they would be given elementary lessons in Bengali, and until very recent times English was the medium for teaching History, Geography, Mathematics and the sciences. To this Hemendranath was opposed; he would take his wards through advanced courses in Bengali, which would be the medium for teaching sciences and other subjects, before making them learn English. Even if Rabindranath had not had this early grounding in Bengali, he would in all probability have become the great poet that he is; but this emphasis on the mother tongue when the order of the day was to give primacy to English must have had its share in framing his character, of which one of the most prominent traits was consciousness of self-respect.

IV

Rabindranath went to England in 1878 and returned in 1880. He again left for England in 1881 with the intention of studying law but changed his plans and returned from Madras. There was no further attempt to “educate” him, and he had in the mean time showed considerable promise as a writer. In 1882, he brought out a book of poems called *Sandhya Sangit* (*Evening Songs*), and soon after its publication he received a signal mark of approbation. At the wedding of Rameshchandra Datta’s eldest daughter, Bankimchandra hailed him as the rising sun in the literary firmament. The most dominant influences on the poet were his brother Jyotirindranath (1848-1925) and Jyotirindranath’s wife. Jyotirindranath was himself a daring experimenter in everything; he would as easily float a new commercial venture as compose a new tune and would make his wife cast off *Pardah* with as much facility as he would devise a new dress for Bengali gentlemen. In his dealings with Rabindranath he did not allow differ-

ence in years to create any barrier; rather he encouraged his brother, who was younger by more than twelve years, to think and feel in his own way. "My brother Jyotirindra," says the poet in *My Reminiscences*, "unreservedly let me go my own way to self-knowledge." Contact with this man who was himself unconventional and loved to see unconventionality in others helped the poet also to get rid of an ingrained diffidence and shyness.

Jyotirindranath's wife exercised a deeper influence than even her husband and may be considered the most valued friend of the poet who, in later life, counted innumerable admirers and disciples in both hemispheres. After the death of the poet's mother in 1875 she was something of a mother to the young boy; she made him her playmate in her girlish pastimes, and when Rabindranath budded into a poet, she was his companion and his first discerning critic. She was a great lover of literature and pointed out to Rabindranath—what many persons were slow to recognize—the originality in the poetry of Viharilal Chakravarti. She would subject to severe scrutiny all that Rabindranath wrote, and saved him from the literary artist's besetting sin—vanity and want of self-criticism. This lady died in 1884, and in her loss the poet made an acquaintance with death which left an enduring impression on his mind; "its blow", says the poet, "has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an ever-lengthening chain of tears." Jyotirindranath's wife reappears, transformed by a poet's imagination, in some of his best poems and stories.

The influence exercised by Jyotirindranath and his wife was so all-pervasive during the early period of Rabindranath's life that once when the husband and wife had left home for a long journey, the poet felt that it was now open to him to write as he liked, and he naturally gained freedom from the style they had imposed on him, thus showing that the deepest influence in the making of a poet is the poet's own self.

Of literary influences mention must be made of

Viharilal Chakravarti who was never acclaimed as a major poet but in whom Rabindranath and his sister-in-law discovered genuine lyrical inspiration. Viharilal impressed him by his metrical experiments and may have helped him also in forming the concept of *Jivan-Devata*. A more important influence was Vaishnava lyrical poetry which is remarkable as much for intensity of feeling as for command of daring imagery and freedom of metrical movement. The similarity between Rabindranath's outlook on life and that of the Vaishnava poets will be discussed at a later page. Here it will be enough to draw attention to the impetus that the young poet received from these poems which, "full of the freedom and courage of expression", gave him boldness and enabled him to strike a new path for himself in the field of art and poetry.*

V

Rabindranath lisped in numbers as the numbers came, his first attempts at versification dating back to 1868 when he was barely seven years old. But of his early efforts he was in later life inclined to ignore all that preceded *Evening Songs* (*Sandhya Sangit*) which received the blessing of Bankimchandra and with which, he thought, his career as a poet really began. But even this book had been written before the Great Illumination came which gave him a new insight into the universe.

What was this illumination and when and where did it come? In *The Religion of Man* the poet speaks of it as happening in Calcutta when he was eighteen (pp. 93-94), but at eighteen, he was in England. In a lecture in China he speaks of it as coming to him in a village, but in *My*

* It may be useful to mention other forces that had so far been acting as formative influences in the making of the poet. Of his teachers reference has already been made to Professor Henry Morley of whom he speaks with great enthusiasm and with whom he studied Sir Thomas Browne. It is not difficult to find in Rabindranath's reflections on death echoes of Browne's curious musings on the same theme in *Religio Medici* and *Urn Burial*.

Reminiscences he again speaks of it as occurring in Calcutta, first dimly at the Jorasanko house and then clearly and emphatically at Sudder Street. But these discrepancies will not be confusing if we remember that although the poet became fully conscious of a new emotion during his stay at Sudder Street (1882) and expressed it in a memorable poem *The Awakening of the Waterfall* (*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*), there were vague stirrings before its full emergence, and possibly the earliest pulsations had come to him even before he left England. What was the nature of this experience, which receives its final expression in *The Awakening of the Waterfall*?

Of what he felt in a village he says in the lecture in China referred to above:

"My world of experience seemed to become lightened, and facts that were detached and dim formed a great unity of meaning." At the Jorasanko house one evening—

"The after glow of the sunset combined with the wan twilight in a way which seemed to give the approaching evening a specially wonderful attractiveness for me. . . . Is this uplifting of the cover of triviality from the everyday world, I wondered, due to some magic in the evening light? Never." (*My Reminiscences*)

About his experience at Sudder Street he writes in different places. The following extract from *The Religion of Man* expresses his point of view most effectively:

"I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the superpersonal world of man."

Three things stand out as distinctive of the poet's new vision of life. It is the human soul which is the source of creation, but its creative effort leads it away from itself and unites it with the inner life of Nature which, too, is full of human significance. Secondly, this union between

man's expanding consciousness and the spirit of Nature is a source of joy, and it is in this sense of joy springing from a realization of the inner harmony of objects that Rabindranath finds the definition of beauty. Thirdly, this joy or beauty is identical with freedom, for it is by lifting the outer curtain of commonplaceness and triviality that life can explore its real significance.*

VI

The Awakening of the Waterfall is the most important thing in a new book of poems called *Prabhat Sangit* (*Morning Songs*) which was published in 1884. From now on there was a ceaseless stream of poems, dramas, songs and essays from his pen, and he also gave editorial assistance to such journals as *Bharati* and *Balak*, besides organizing an abortive movement to found an Academy of Bengali literature. The publication of *Prabhat Sangit* was contemporaneous with two important events in his life—his marriage (December 1883) and the death of Jyotirindranath's wife (May 1884).

About a year after his marriage, Rabindranath became the secretary of the Adi Brahma Samaj of which his father was one of the greatest leaders. It is now necessary to draw attention to one significant aspect of the poet's character and work—his attitude to ancient Indian ideals and his relation to the nationalist movement. Although he was a nationalist to the core and joined the second session of the Indian National Congress at which he sang the opening song composed by himself, his enthusiasm was sobered by his critical attitude towards the evils in Hindu society and by acceptance of facts. With his strong faith in the unity of man, he was a sleepless critic of the organization of caste which sets artificial barriers between one set of men and

* To C. F. Andrews he said, "I have felt, ever since, that this was my goal: to express the fullness of life, in its beauty, as perfection—if only the veil were withdrawn." (*Letters To A Friend*)