





## UTSAV

*a souvenir  
published on the occasion of  
a cultural evening  
organized and performed by  
the Indian members of  
the University of Cambridge*

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## From the Editors

Nothing expresses the spirit of India better than her colourful and exuberant festivals. *UTSAV* (which is Sanskrit for 'festival') brings you the sights and sounds, tastes and smells of India right here in Cambridge. The idea of organizing *UTSAV* originated sometime towards the end of last year. Over the past six months, it has matured through the enthusiasm and the efforts of the Indian members of Cambridge University. On 23 June 1990, for the first time ever in a university outside India, a Festival of this sort is going to be celebrated.

The objective from the very beginning was not only to reveal India in all her rich diversity, but also to expose the stereotyped views that one comes across in BBC programmes, the newspapers, the colourful travel brochures and the testimonies of tourists who were taken for an elephant ride by organizers of guided tours, by presenting a more personal and to that extent alternative and authentic viewpoint. Thus the chorus songs of *UTSAV* range from a Vedic hymn of unity and amity to modern Communist group-songs; the exhibition covers every aspect of India from ancient sculpture to sophisticated space technology; and Classical dance and music are represented side by side with modern folk-dances. To complete the list, the souvenir itself contains articles on poets past and present, on devotional hymns and the latest deep sea research vessel, on the ancient Indian Cambridge, Nalanda, and Indians in Cambridge, famous and less well-known, male and female! There are articles by an Indo-Anglian novelist and Professor of English, and a famous visiting Indian scientist as well as by an English Sanskritist here! *UTSAV* also offers you a wide range of delicious Indian curries and sweetmeats at subsidised rates.

Our contributors, advertisers and patrons deserve special thanks. The cover has been designed by Satyajit Ghosh, the *UTSAV* logo (which appears on every page thanks to Kamal Chaudhary) by Jitendra Sharma, and the poster, which represents the footprint of the Buddha, by Dwaipayan Bhattacharya. Most of the illustrations have been done by Amaresh Chakrabarti and the formatting and page layout by Abhijit Guha. As editors, we wish to thank all those who helped us in our work. We are grateful to His Excellency Mr Kuldip Nayar, the High Commissioner of India, for his enthusiastic support and his article for the magazine. A special note of thanks to Mr. Swraj Paul of Caparo Group of Industries and Citibank, London for their generous financial support.

We join the organizers of *UTSAV* in hoping that you will enjoy the event.

## COMMON PEOPLE IN TAGORE'S POEMS

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[ Rabindranath Tagore was an all-round genius in Indian literature. Basically a poet, his most prolific excellence reached the farthest corners of all possible human thoughts and emotions, and appeared in every possible form of literature: poems, stories, novels, dramas, short-stories and essays. He composed about three thousand songs and set tunes to most of them which constitute one of the most important genres of Bengali songs - Rabindra-Sangeet. He founded Vishwabharati - a modern university based on his ideas of old Indian Ashrams. He also established Sriniketan - an embodiment of his dream of self-sufficient rural India. Tagore was a humanist and a philanthropist. His voice was raised against every incidence where the freedom of human mind was trampled, either by prejudice, exploitation or imperialism. He composed many patriotic songs and participated in the struggle for freedom in India. He rejected his Knighthood in protest against a mass-killing in Jalianwalabag, organized by the then British rulers. Mahatma (a title given by Tagore) Gandhi used to call him the 'Kaviguru' (the guru of the poets). He is probably the only poet in the world, whose two songs are the national anthems of two sovereign countries, India and Bangladesh. Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

This article discusses the status of common people in his poems, only a part of his whole creativity. By its very nature, it is a reflection of his thoughts into my mind, is the perception of his feelings through my senses (as opposed to describing a historical incident or a scientific truth) and hence is necessarily subjective.]

The commoners may be most simply described as the majority of the people who live just to survive, whose days turn around the meaningless repetitiveness of a routine existence. As described in one of Tagore's essays, "The Fifteen Annas", they are like the main bulk of water in a river, that does not get used either for bathing, drinking or in the paddy-field, but just flows down the destined path from the source towards the ocean. That may not be of any obvious use to us, but that does maintain the continuity of flow without which the river ceases to exist. Similarly the common people may not get any place in the usual history books but it's because of them that the cart of human civilization has moved so far and is continuing to do so. With his passionate counselling, Tagore not only goes on describing how worthy it is for them to live but, more importantly, there he emphatically identifies himself as one amongst them. In keeping with these "fifteen annas", the common people referred to in this article are all abundantly ordinary and apparently unimportant both in their deeds and thoughts.

Being one of the greatest philosophers and a sincere devotee, many times Tagore has moved in the metaphysical and devotional planes. The result was the creation of books like "The Offering of Songs" that fetched him the Nobel Prize. But equally frequently he has descended on this earth and

has dipped into its dust-laden realities: realities that not just listen to the rattling rain on a tin roof but also register the throbbing heart-beats of multitudes of common people. With the poetic touch of his creative mind, these people appear in his literature - sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, together with their everyday feelings. They establish their rights not only in his poems but also in his dramas, stories and thought-provoking essays. In fact in "Letters from Russia", they take the form of the Proletariat, as he gets deeply impressed by seeing for himself the changing social scenario in Russia after the revolution. There he describes the Proletariat as "the candlestick of civilization that stands erect with the flame on its head - people around the flame get all the light while wax trickles down their strained muscles".

If this is his attitude towards the common people, then we are hardly surprised when in one of his poems, the headpriest rebukes the king, saying that there is no God in the temple he has recently built at the cost of millions of rupees. The priest reminds the king that he has built the temple in all its pomp and grandeur, while he turned thousands of his subjects away without any food, clothing or shelter. "That day God asked Himself": "how dare somebody offer me a house, when he cannot provide that to his own subjects". Thus, together with the poor people, God left the place, leaving behind

[Everything - prose or poetry, excerpts from Tagore or other writers - that appears between quotation marks, has been translated by the present author from their originals in Bengali. The bold italicized words between quotation marks indicate the names (translated) of the poems / articles. While the best care has been taken to convey the intended meaning and even to maintain the rhyme (if there's one in the original), the translation is subject to the present author's incompetent hand. A Bengali version of this article is available from him, on request.]

the shrine as "an empty bubble of gold and vanity". Note the level of sympathy here : God Himself is sharing the miseries of the oppressed people, and Tagore, a highly devotional man, does not mind sending Him under the shades of a road-side tree.

In this context the ambitions in life of a small boy, a Tagore's creation, are worth noticing. In "Varied Wishes", he does not want to become a scholar, doctor or barrister. He intends "To throw away the slate / To roam around like a hawker". He craves to be a gardener, fancies staying awake by the side of a lane as a night-watchman. If Tagore's children choose these ordinary careers in their future lives, then one cannot but realize the poet's down-to-earth sympathy for these commonplace professions.

His sympathy for the common people can be observed also in the pages of *Punascha*. What pains he has taken to glorify Malati - a very ordinary woman whose movements were supposed to be confined to her own household - in the eyes of her idol, Naresh. But to conquer his heart was an unrealizable dream for Malati. In order to rewrite the fate of that poor girl, the poet thus has not begged to God. He rather has urged Sharatbabu (who wrote many touching novels, sympathizing with the women and their downgraded existence in society), saying "You are not as miserly as the Almighty", to write a novel about her so that at least the heroine of her name wins the race in that fiction. His plans for the proposed novel are also worth remembering - Naresh would be stuck in London for seven years, failing in his exams every year. In the meantime, let Malati pass her M.A. from Calcutta University, let her rank first in Mathematics just by a stroke of his (Sharatbabu's) pen. Then let her be sent to Europe - many gatherings of the notables be organized in appreciation of her achievements, let all the flattering remarks be showered on her head. The poet's imagination does not stop here. To set the hero's (Naresh's) jealousy ablaze, in addition, he asks - "Let Naresh watch it from a corner / With the whole group of his extraordinary admirers". But in reality - "in the kingdom of God" (who is no sympathetic novelist like Sharatbabu) - the helplessness of the ordinary girls like Malati has become poignantly eloquent in the last two lines - "Alas, the ordinary girl / Alas, the wastage of heavenly power".

Or can we ever forget that ten-years-old "Lad", who had an irrepressible curiosity for everything, whose interest centred solely around - "Why not have a look at what is there", in apprehension of whose hopeless future 'Ambikemaster' complains to the poet - the lad never pays any attention to his poems on childhood. But the poet has taken all the blame on his own shoulder - "That is but my mistake; / If there were a poet of his own world, / The beetles would have become so real in their appearance, / He could not have left them. / Have I ever been able to write about his frogs / Or the tragedy of that street-dog!"

From this compassionate feeling for the common man, the blooming of "Camellia", that

the poet has nurtured for so long with all his passion and care, finds its full significance only as the earring of an ordinary Santhal woman (a tribal woman); the junior clerk of the merchant office living over the lane of the milkman Kinu, suddenly realizes that - "There's no difference between clerk Haripada and the emperor Akbar. / In harmony with the melancholic tune of a flute, / The royal and the torn umbrellas have gone together / Towards the same heaven".

In the same way, Tagore's views about self-respect makes even a "Prostitute" to boast: "I am divine too". His sense of righteousness allows a bastard (but truthful) child to have the ultimate knowledge (which only the "Brahmin"s were supposed to receive), saying "You are the best brahmin, as you are born in the family of truthfulness". The impatient poet, being pained at the degradation of women in the male-dominated society, asks with equal concern, "Why will you not give a woman / the right to conquer her own fate?"

Tagore was very much concerned about all the oppressions, tyranny and miseries being heaped over the whole world. That's why, when the appearance of "Ananda-mayee" (the Goddess Durga here) had filled the country with boundless happiness, he could not forget the unfortunate girl begging at the doors of the rich. He thus sent his appeal of tears to the Mother - "If she stands out there at the door, / With the face full of pain and pathos, / Useless is your *Sahakar-shakha*, / Useless is the *Mangal-kalas*". (\* ritual ingredients in the worship of Goddess Durga)

How the exploitation of the landlord has made Upen a complete bankrupt, has engulfed his last belonging - "The Two Acres of Land" and then how he has been branded as a thief for possessing just two mangoes of his own tree - have all received the strongest protest from Tagore's satiric comment at the end of the poem. He has unmasked the identity of the real thief with clinical sharpness.

His sense of justice proves equally sharp, when one of his kings gets stunned when he comes to know that the queen had set a few cottages aflame in order to keep herself warm after taking a bath in a nearby river. In his desperate attempt to make her realize that destroying those torn huts was no "Insignificant Loss" to the poor, the king takes her, dethroned and stripped of wealth, power and royal dress, to the street and orders her to beg around till she can raise funds - enough for rebuilding those "tiny cottages".

He was pained to see how the present world banished the great ideals of love, forgiveness and brotherhood - taught by the sages of all time. The global occurrence of hatred, injustice and oppression "choked his voice" and "silenced his flute". In his trial against those who sank the world into eternal darkness, he asked God: "Those who put off your light, / Those who poison your air, / Have you forgiven them, / Have you loved them ever?"

He has reminded the nation of her centuries of oppression on the so-called untouchables, together with his prophetic warning - "Hail my unfortunate

country, / You have to be one with those you disdain, / Through the mutual sharing of their insult and pain". He took his hat off to those who plough the land, those who split the rock, because "*They Do Work*". So he called upon everybody to abandon their traditional ways of worshipping and *Sadhana* (meditation), and to assemble in the "*Temple of Dust*" for *Karmayajna* - the worship of work. The readers will get the same impression in "*Children of Man*", the portrait of a sympathetic poet who has unfailing friendship with the oppressed, working people and who shed his tears endlessly at their misery.

However, Rabindranath's temperament was distinctly different from that of those who may be rightfully called the poets of the Proletariat. For example, he did not proclaim like Nazrul - "Pray that those who snatch away the food from the deserving mouths of millions, / let their ruin be written in my own blood-inscription". He has not given deafening voice to the "*Porters and Workers*" in this way - "Your debts have increased day by day, / Now it's time for you to repay". The general sequence of Left-movements - the sufferings and the exploitation of the Proletariat, their struggle to change the system and, in the end, the dawning of a new era - did not excite his imagination as it did his successors', even a few of his contemporaries'. He never completely identified his poetry with the strangling reality of scarcity, suffering and disease. And so he did not feel like Sukanta - "Poems, today I let you take leave, / The earth is prosaic in the world of hunger". The moon was always painted in the rainbow colour of his imagination, the "full-moon" never became "a burnt piece of chapatti" to him. He would rather consciously create the mystic atmosphere of a nocturnal absurdity, would tune his ears to the sound of distant falls, would allow a scientist to dream a simple fairy tale.

With the advent of spring he wrote - "The blooming *Kanchans* in the spring / Mango branches bud so green / Unrestful are the humming bees / Southern breeze sways the (bamboo) trees". And I have seen a budding poet writing recently - "The spring flies away on the back of a bicycle". It's easy to imagine the face of a flamboyant girl being carried on a bike, the uncontrollable *aanchal* (end) of whose *saree* likes to tear away with the breeze of the spring, like the wavering flag of indomitable youth. That is, in the hands of this young poet, the spring has become commonplace, has descended right on the back of a bicycle. I do not know whether Rabindranath's springs were realizable without the call of cuckoo, the red abundance of *Krishnachuda* flowers or the romanticism of a fullmoon night; a poet of this era has expressed his convincing views about a girl, an embodiment of *Hemanta* (the season of austerity) - "Whether it flowers or not, this is spring".

The sacrifice and the great touch of humanity that Rabindranath discovered inside the ugly-looking, dumb "*Old Servant*" is admirable. There the

servant sacrificed his life in order to save his master from a fatal disease. But there we cannot feel the pulse of Buddhadev Basu's "*Old Servant*" - "The whole scenario sprang in front of my eyes, / Kalicharan is walking, with my deserted kurta on, / Cannot imagine how his house looks, / Perhaps it is a mud hut, perhaps it's a thatched cottage made of bamboo tree, / There he is not just our Kali / Someone's husband, someone's father or son / There he is friend, he is brother". You can see, the same old servant has undergone a complete metamorphosis in the hands of another poet. Kalicharan thrives in flesh and blood, he has an identity of his own. Tagore, on the other hand, is more interested in immortalizing the extraordinary humaneness that characterizes this apparently ordinary servant. It is the same zeal with which he discovers the eternal paternity flowing through the heart of Rahmat, a mere *Kabuliwala* (inhabitants of Kabul, more generally of Afghanistan, who come to India and normally hawk snacks and lend money on severe terms). In the "dusk of debilitating consciousness", the humane Rabindranath identified himself with the downcast; he announced categorically - "*I'm the Poet in Their Group*". But notice the extra vitality in the voice of Premendra Mitra - "I'm the poet of all the blacksmiths and carpenters / Of porters and workers / I'm the poet of all the downtrodden and destitute".

Tagore, however, loved this clayey earth so deeply that in his "*Departure from Heaven*", he could tell the gods unequivocally, "You remain in the heaven with your smiling faces, and drink all the Nectar"; he himself would rather prefer to live on this earth, in spite of the pain and the misery, because there would be love, because there would be many who would spend sleepless nights in apprehension of losing him sometime. And thus he loved this earth in its totality and observed Nature in minute detail. Even the small girl, who had lost her mother prematurely and had to work single-handedly while at the same time rearing her younger brother, did not escape his notice. His heart fully felt the sufferings of the poverty-stricken girl, while his philosophic mind got more pleasure in discovering "the representative of motherhood" in that young, working "*Elder Sister*". What other than this touching sympathy, the reader would note in his sketch of the "*Last Ferry*" - "He whose flowers did not bloom, / Failure was his harvest, / Who is ashamed even to shed tears, / Whose day-light had gloomed / yet no lamp was lit in the dusk, / Is sitting at the edge of the river".

In fact, Rabindranath's poems are based on realization. A special feeling, a simple realization gets transformed into his poems, as grief transforms into tears, as the shyness of a new bride transforms into her blushing cheeks. An anecdote is probably relevant here. A old man came to the poet in order to obtain his blessing for his recently-widowed daughter. Rabindranath smiled and gave her the *Naivedya* - one of his poetic works. As soon as the widow came in contact with the *Naivedya* (offerings to God) of a perfect devotee (the poet), her soul was at peace and

mind became restful. That is, as her realization matched with that of the poet, *Naivedya* became the offerings from the heart of an ordinary, widowed girl.

The greatest identity of Rabindranath is that he is a humanist. So, in the event of the capture of Abyssinia by Italy, the troubled mind of philanthropist Rabindranath rushed towards *Africa*. His strongest protest exploded against all imperialists who "came with iron-shackles in their hands, / Whose nails were sharper than the claws of the wolves", against "the barbaric greed of the so-called civilized people / Who exposed their shameless inhumanity" "in the insulted history" of human beings. He also wrote "*Take Me Back Now*". In this respect, it is relevant to quote Dr. Kshudiram Das (translated here from his Doctoral thesis in Bengali) - "The dry hair flies off, wet drops on eyelid / Wind rumbles through a foundation slit / Quivering flames of the lamp timid / stretches shadows in the room." The reader would, of course, understand that the tormented life of the poor people, who have been oppressed over decades after decades, has found its utterance in these lines. In this context of sympathy, Rabindranath and Vivekananda are on the same plane. It's a pity that those who blame that Rabindranath is not a poet of reality and who want to keep this great poet afar, calling him a bourgeois, do not think of these poems".

Sometimes the absence of certain aspects (about the common people) in his poetry that we've emphasized many times, in spite of his close connection with the earthly happenings and his deep sympathy for the people of the lower strata of society, is attributed to his aristocratic family background. It is alleged that he had to look on the common people from a height that is inherent in the process of upbringing in a classed society and thus he could not associate his own pleasures and pains with theirs - what he called "to add life to life". However, it is very difficult to accept that a man of Rabindranath's calibre would remain hooked with such a mundane limitation, that a man who, like Bhageeratha, brought hundreds of Gangeses in the world of thought, could not free himself from a few of his inherited prejudices.

In *Oikatan*, he himself has remarked sadly - "Sometimes I've gone upto the lawn of that locality / I had no strength to probe deeper". He admitted whole-heartedly this "incompleteness of his tune", saying - "My poems, I know / Have not reached everywhere, gone to diverse fields although." But, I think, one cannot blame him for this incompleteness, in the same way, for example, as one cannot blame Einstein for not doing research in medicine. He was only too humble to confess that "The offerings of songs became a failure with artificial ingredients"; in this regard, one has to take into account his special features of comprehension as well. Although his

sense of perception of Nature was perfect, none of the things he perceived retained their exact identities - they were assimilated to suit the template of his mind. In his autobiography (*Jiban-Smriti*) also, the poet has described himself as romantic and dreamy. Just for this reason, the happiness and miseries of the peasants and workers could not retain their respective qualities in the tangible, real sense. As a result of it, although he has become a great, humane, sympathetic poet, he did not become a poet of the peasants. Even earlier (*Navajatak*) we have seen the poet lamenting for not having the tempestuous life of a peasant and worker, i.e. he wants to greet the life of working class in order to become their poet. In *Romantic* also, he has advocated becoming a true realist; he writes: "There it is poverty, disease, meanness, / There the women are afraid of being molested - / There I put on the metal-jacket leaving the saffron clothes; / There it is hard work; / There it is sacrifice, sorrow, there let the trombone proclaim '*Mabhai*' / Let me not become a pseudo-realist there / There let the beauty walk hand in hand with the *Bhairav*".

Yes, as it stands, Tagore does not believe in the theory that one has to boycott the quest for subtle philosophical truths until all the basic problems regarding food, clothes and shelter are solved. Nor does he abandon his romanticism just because there are miseries in life. He still can appreciate "all that is beautiful" in this world, not because he is not concerned about the darkness pervading in some other spheres of life but because he can see both sides of the coin. It may be that in his poems the common people do not shout slogans, and do not fling their fists in the air, clenched in protest and determination. It may be that he does not write only about the common people and only about their day-to-day problems. But they exist in his poems: they exist with all their feelings and sufferings, they exist with dignity and inherent nobility. They do so with such conviction and prominence that even Tagore's God leaves the temple and gets identified with them, whose sweat and blood wet the dust ("*Temple of Dust*"). If that is not realism, what else can be?

Rabindranath is a poet, Rabindranath is a novelist, he is a story-teller, playwright, composer, artist, he is a philosopher, thinker, a *Rishi*. But, above all, he is a humanist. Singing the songs of humanity and eternal truth is his objective in life. Thus we have to discover the stand of common people in his poems through the sympathy expressed in this ultimate striving - "He who resembles the life of a peasant / Who has achieved uniformity in his words and deeds / Who is close to this mother earth / I'm waiting eagerly for such a poet's birth". He once asked passionately "Will not the meditation of the night bring out the dawn?" - in answer to that we can emphatically say that it always has in the past and will do so in the future.

