

I Rabindranath Tagore

From Art to Life

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I

There is an account in Rāni Chanda's book on Abanindranāth Tagore, Rabindranāth's artist nephew, on Abanindranath's response to music. Listening to song after song, he would suddenly burst out: 'Here are you all trying to construct Rabikā's¹ biography, but his real biography is in his songs.... His whole life is contained in them. You will find his living image there among the words and the music.'² Much later, Niradchandra Chaudhuri seems to be saying something similar: if Tagore's songs are arranged by date, 'one can construct his mental biography from them'.³

The two observations sound much the same, but did the two speakers have the same thing in mind by the poet's 'biography'? Abanindranath would listen to Tagore songs like 'I can bear yet more blows' or 'Strike me more, still more, O lord', or lines like 'My sorrows are like a red lotus girding your feet',⁴ and exclaim, 'No, no, not that one, sing some other song. Rabika could say things like that, he had the courage; I don't. I can only say: I have borne enough, now raise me on high, make me a lamp in your temple.'⁵ The idea of a 'biography' conveyed by such a remark ('He had the courage') seems very different from that of Niradchandra. The latter mines specific songs by Tagore for direct reflections of the poet's personal life.

He discovers, for instance, how 'just as Chateaubriand could pass from France to Bengal, Rabindranath passed from Bengal to England'.⁶ Which is the song conveying this piece of biography? According to Niradchandra, it is 'I know you, I know you, woman from a foreign land'.⁷ Niradchandra is well aware of the very different mystical insight behind its composition, as vouched by the poet himself in his reminiscences,⁸ but he does not place much reliance upon that account, as in his view, songs can only spring from sensory experience. The foreign woman, therefore, must be some blue-eyed blonde-haired beauty, not a cosmic or universal presence: if anyone thinks otherwise, 'he cannot have seen a female form in his life, or felt the touch of a woman's body against his own'.⁹ Niradchandra even knows exactly what

Tagore was recalling. On 19 September 1890, he writes in *Yuropjātrir dāyāri* (Diary of a Traveller to Europe) that Englishwomen are the most beautiful on earth.¹⁰ That perception of 1890 cannot but be the precise motive power behind this song written in 1895, with lines such as 'I have laid my ear to the sky to hear your song'.

The occasion of a single song is of little moment. What should concern us is the very idea of a particular song springing in simple causation from a particular episode of the poet's life. For Niradchandra, the language of song can never be sensorily neutral (though he admits at another point that the themes of song might be transcendent).¹¹ In what, then, does the history of a song inhere, its language or its theme? If we are to place any value at all on the theme, how can we ignore what the poet himself tells us about the inspiration behind the song?

Niradchandra himself writes in another context that he does not believe 'everything an author writes is linked to some event or experience of his life'.¹² If that is so, his other thesis must be discounted. Any person's life, let alone a poet's, comprises not just events but feelings and perceptions, expressed and unexpressed. Many moments of artistic creation originate in complex currents of experience, mundane and transcendent, spanning many layers of consciousness. It then becomes difficult to work back to some specific external event at the time of composition.

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Not that there can never be a link between a poet's work and the external events of his life. When we hear songs like 'Your dead river is now in flood', or the pledge to the motherland 'Whoever might desert you, I will never do so, O mother', or the challenge to the British 'Are you so strong that you can break the bonds of fate?',¹³ we have no problem in relating that surge of patriotic sentiment to the political movement against the partition of Bengal in 1905, the year of their composition. We do not have to deduce this from the words of the songs: we have external witness of the circumstances in which they were composed. Elsewhere, we can work out a connexion for ourselves. The early manuscript *Pushpānjali* (Flower Offering) contains songs such as 'Why did you come, why did you love though not loved in return?', 'The flower that withers drops from the branch', and 'Why did you make her weep?'¹⁴ We can easily relate them to the young Rabindranath's grief at the self-inflicted death of his beloved sister-in-law Kādambari Debi. Moments of strong emotion, impelled by patriotism or bereavement, can indeed leave visible traces in a poet's work.

But we cannot conclude that all such compelling moments will find direct expression in poetry. We would then be at a loss to explain how, in the very month that his young son Shamindranāth died, the poet could address the divine in lines like these:

Your unsullied nectar is pouring down in love, in life, in song and scent and light and joy, flooding the skies and the earth. Joy is waking in visible form on all sides, breaking all bonds: my life is brimming over with rich nectar.¹⁵

If we did not know the date, we might conclude that this song marks an especially happy moment in the poet's life. But the poet himself expresses in another song how suffering can evoke its own joy, how despair can transform into ardour: 'Let the song of joy sound on the flute of my pain. Let my boat to the other shore sail on the tide of tears.'¹⁶

Alongside this poem from *Balākā*, we might consider another from the same volume: 'Do you hear the roar of death from afar?'¹⁷ What was the poet's situation in real life on the day he wrote this celebrated poem? He had returned from Kashmir only a few days earlier. He had not enjoyed his trip at all. He writes to his daughter Mirā on 19 Kārtik 1322 (5 November 1915): 'Wherever I go, I am plagued by disturbance – there isn't a moment's respite from being bothered by people. I was on a houseboat in Srinagar, but found neither peace nor joy, so I quickly escaped.'¹⁸ Two days later, he writes in the same vein to Pramatha Chaudhuri,¹⁹ and in another two days to Santoshchandra Majumdār that he had come, exhausted, to recoup by the river Padmā.²⁰ Yet, some two weeks earlier, he had written while still in Kashmir: 'I am one song after another, one life after another. I am the shining light that bursts from the shattered heart of darkness' (*Balākā* #35).

This is the varied background to *Balākā* #37. It was composed on 23 Kārtik 1322 (9 November 1915), the very day of the letter to Santoshchandra. The poem is a call to action: 'Set out, voyagers, set out: the command has come. Your stay in the harbour is at end.' They must embark 'with the world's lamentation in your ears, the demented times beating upon your head', yet raise the flag of victory through storm and thunder.²¹ The mind that issues such a call must be tracked through a very different path than a direct situational link.

Again, the very day that Rabindranath is burdened with an urgent payment relating to some land, he can write: 'I lose you time and again only so that I can find you anew.... You are not a hidden presence but my

very own, through all time.²² On the day he exhorts Mahim Thākūr of the royal house of Tripurā to commit himself to his homeland's cause – tells him he cannot be indifferent to the call even if he wishes – he writes the poem 'Nirudyam' ('Indolence' or 'Disheartenment', *Kheyā*). Another time, he writes: 'I have a home in every place.' He hears the call of the earth, senses the exhilaration of each blade of grass: 'There is love in every speck of dust, there is joy in all creation.'²³ We would not have guessed that this was written at a time of deep financial stress. The very next day, he writes to Priyanāth Sen: 'I need about 12,000 rupees, but I am told the moneylender will give no more than 6,000. Of course, that's only hearsay. Try to get 12,000 or 10,000 if you can, otherwise I'll have to make do with 6,000.'²⁴

The disjuncture is not always between external events and inward states. The mind itself can assume various, apparently contradictory, positions at the same time. Hence Tagore can write

Now comes the destroyer.... Life joins in the revels of death....
Abandon all, come as a bride in blood-red garb.²⁵

on the same day as

You jest by dressing him [the soul] in beggar's guise.... He had thought himself the eternal pauper, in life and death.... But at close of day, you drew him to your side and shared your throne with him.²⁶

The very next day, 'We press forward, who can bind us?'²⁷ appears alongside 'Evening falls: mother, draw me to your bosom'.²⁸ It seems incredible that these two pieces should bear the same date, one with the lines

My mind has spread across the skies, I am drugged with light; but those other people skulk behind closed doors: their eyes will be dazzled when they look out.

and the other

Bring back, mother, bring back all that has been lost in this scattered life: let it all gather together in your darkness.

The true history of the poet's mental life lies in this tension between the opposite visions of light and darkness.

It is because we neglect this history that we often form wrong ideas about the poet's sensibility. The year 1905 marked the first high point of the Swadeshi movement, where Rabindranath's role has become a matter of legend. However, in the two volumes of poems that followed, *Kheyā* (1906) and *Gītānjali* (1910), he seems to be in total retreat from a life of action, conflict, and turmoil. 'Bid me farewell, forgive me [for my withdrawal],' he writes on 14 Chaitra 1312 (28 March 1906), 'I am no longer a farer on the road of work.'²⁹ On 29 Shrāvan 1317 (14 August 1910), in the last poem in *Gītānjali*, he speaks as 'one whose store is exhausted in the middle of his journey, whose brows are lined with loss'.³⁰ Such passages bear out the overt theme of renunciation: both collections strike a deeply introspective note of vigil and renunciation. This moreover was the time when each morning he would deliver a spiritual sermon to his colleagues in Santiniketan, to be collected in instalments under the title *Shāntiniketan*, and when he brought out another volume on spiritual themes actually entitled *Dharma*. The play *Rājā*, full of mystical implications, appeared in the same year as *Gītānjali*. Putting these facts together, we might well conclude that we have found the key to his mental history at this date, in a consistent narrative of retreat from the world.

For the moment, I am not raising the question of whether what we call Rabindranath's spirituality is necessarily escapist. However, to look at all his writings from this period as unidimensionally 'spiritual' is itself a restrictive approach, which has prevented us to this day from assessing Rabindranath's achievement at its true and full worth. If we look beyond those confines, we will find a body of essays on social and political issues balancing the spiritual: 'Swadeshi samāj' (Indigenous Society) alongside 'Prāchin bhārater ekah' ('The One' of Ancient India), and 'Rājbhakti' (Loyalty to the King) alongside 'Utsab' (Celebration). *Dharma* was published in 1909, but nine of its essays were written between 1902 and 1906. Over that same span of time, Rabindranath expressed these two contrary positions:

Is our music carrying us to that more secret interior of creation,
where all the tunes of the universe forgo all discord and disorder to
unfold themselves, at every moment, as a single perfected raga?³¹

and

No human and no demon has the power to eradicate by sheer force of governance the famished truth in the innermost hearts of 300 million subjects.³²

I have cited the poem in *Kheyā*, 'Bid me farewell, forgive me'. But only ten days later, he writes from *Āgartalā*, 'I am killing myself with traipsing round.'³³ Now he is in Agartala over the affairs of the state of Tripura, then again in Barishāl for the provincial gathering of the Indian National Congress. What appears from his poems to be a phase of spiritual renunciation is the very time that he turns again and again to matters like the relations between Hindus and Muslims, as in the essays 'Byādhi o pratikār' (Malady and Cure), 'Samasyā' (The Problem), and 'Sadupāy' (A Good Recourse), or the relations between British rulers and Indian subjects, as in 'Deshnāyak' (Leader of the Country), 'Jajnabhanga' (Spoiling the Sacrificial Ceremony), 'Path o pātheya' (The Way and the Means), and 'Deshahit' (The Good of the Country). In 1908, as chair of the provincial convention of Pābnā District, he held up before his audience the wretched condition of rural Bengal, and proposed means for its amelioration: how several villages might combine to form a circle, whose headmen could resolve local disputes in their own assemblies. At more or less the same time, he was writing devotional songs like 'I hear your footsteps, lord' and 'Play your veena in my heart', and a cosmic vision of joy like 'This great wave',³⁴ as also the essay 'Duhkha' (Sorrow) in *Dharma*, which reiterates the Upanishadic idea that 'the concept of sorrow and the concept of creation are inextricably linked'.³⁵

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It thus appears that during the very period marked by a deep vein of renunciation in Tagore's poems and songs, and even to some extent in his plays and essays, he also proves to be bound to social and family life by many hard, mundane commitments. There is ample evidence of this aspect of his being in his essays of the time, and in his conception of the motherland in *Gorā*. In fact, India may be called the principal character in this epic novel, composed in instalments between 1907 and 1910. The terrain it unfolds is not a land of dreams and sentiment but 'this vast, withdrawn rural India – how isolated, how constricted, how enfeebled', a land where 'the burden of inert ignorance and suffering, vast and terrifying, weighs upon the shoulders of all of us, learned and unlearned, rich and poor'.³⁶ This vision is brought out through the eyes of a vigorous servant of India: the protagonist Gorā, but no less his creator, the novelist himself. Gora gives living shape to the ethos

that Rabindranath articulates in essays like 'Swadeshi samāj', 'Chhātrader prati sambhāshan' (Address to the Students) and 'Byādhi o pratikār' – and this in the middle of the same 'spiritual phase'. It acquires force because Rabindranath is not merely uttering his thoughts about his country; he is defining the total perception of a mature and experienced citizen.

Rabindranath understood patriotism as an engagement with the country's identity, the basis of its selfhood. Over a substantial period before and after the anti-partition movement of 1905, he evolved some methods to carry out this function. He called his countrymen to the cause; but not content with motivating others, he also tried to implement his ideas in his own principles and practice. The two fields he adjudged most critical were agriculture and education. From late in the previous century, he had been conceiving of an ideal education system for India; he now set about its implementation in his own *brahmacharyāshram* at Santiniketan. When a wider programme of national education was proposed during the anti-partition movement, he was one of its principal movers. At the same time, he involved himself directly in agricultural improvements and rural uplift on his family estates.

'Bid me farewell, forgive me,' he had written in 1906 in the 'renunciatory' volume *Kheyā*. But starting the same year, he sent some young people close to him to study agricultural science abroad: his son Rathindranāth, his friend's son Santoshchandra Majumdar, and (a little later) his son-in-law Nagendranāth Gangopādhyāy. While they were abroad, he started work at home by enlisting local youths. 'I wish to set up true *swarāj* [home rule] in every village,' he writes to Ajitkumār Chakrabarti on 29 Paush 1314 (14 January 1908), 'as a small model of what should happen across the country. It's a very difficult task, but it must be done.'³⁷ He engaged people like Bhupeshchandra Rāy and Jatindranāth Mukhopādhyāy in the task: 'Some lads from East Bengal have fallen captive to my lures,' he writes elatedly to Abalā Basu in April 1908. He has set them to work 'paving roads, digging ponds and drains, clearing forest land'.³⁸ He hopes that by the time Abala and Jagadishchandra Basu (Bose) return home, the villages on his Shilāidaha estates will be markedly improved. On 12 Kārtik 1314 (29 October 1907), twenty-three years before he witnessed the transformation of Soviet Russia, he writes to Nagendranath:

You have gone abroad to study agriculture with the resources that might have fed our famine-stricken tenants at home. If you can make up for it by ensuring a few more mouthfuls for them on your return, my mind will be assuaged. Remember that the landlord's wealth is actually the peasants': they are bearing the cost of your education

by starving or half-starving themselves. It is your responsibility to repay this debt in full. That is your first task, even before the welfare of your own family.³⁹

The moment he returned, writes Rathindranath, he ‘whisked me off to Shilaidaha and set me to work’. Sitting on boat-deck while proceeding from Shilaidaha to Patisar, he would tell Rathindranath of ‘the social, ethical and economic plight he had seen in village after village of Bengal – the various problems of their daily lives, how he had tried to resolve them, and what he planned to do in future’.⁴⁰ Rathindranath and his associates set to work: Rabindranath sent instructions without fail, even when he was far away. He might write:

There is a rice-husking mill in Bolpur. It would be useful to acquire one like that for use here [on his estate at Patisar]. I was thinking what *industry* one might teach to the local farmers.... I need to know whether *Pottery* can count as a *Cottage Industry*. Try to find out about this – whether we could set up a small furnace and engage all the people in a village to work it collectively.... Another possibility is to teach them to make umbrellas.⁴¹

Again, he writes to Nagendranath on 30 Phālgun 1316 (14 March 1910): ‘Kushtiā is a promising place to set up a *Co-operative Dairy* with our tenants.... I am awaiting your arrival to start such projects.’⁴² And to Bhupeshchandra Ray on 17 Shravan 1315 (1 August 1908): ‘Encourage the tenants to plant pineapple, banana, date palms and other fruit trees around their houses and on the embankments between their fields. You can make very strong thread from pineapple leaves.’⁴³

Rabindranath writes these missives even while composing the songs in *Gītānjali*, the sermons in *Shāntiniketan* and the play *Shāradotsab* (Autumn Festival), with *Rājā* (The King) and *Dākghar* (*The Post Office*) soon to follow. His sermon on 11 Māgh 1316 (24 January 1910) at the Brahmo festival of Māghotsav addresses God in these words: ‘Whatever is beautiful, beneficent and lasting in me is where you manifest yourself within me. Everything else is precious only insofar as they contribute to this manifestation.’⁴⁴ Only nine days later, he instructs Nagendranath: ‘There’s no end to the things to do: to get the farmers to start co-operative farming, to set up banks, to build hygienic dwelling-houses for them, to free them from debt, to arrange for their children’s education, to ensure their security in old age, to build roads and dams, to solve their water supply problems, to unite them in mutual help.’⁴⁵

Is there really any contradiction between these aspects of Rabindranath's sensibility? Is there no deeper link between the spiritual life and the social? If we observe carefully, we may find that his spiritual thought has a social basis, and his social thought is empowered by spiritual motivation. The two are linked and balanced, the apparent contradictions resolved at a nodal point where all the strands of his life come together.

Whenever Rabindranath talks of India's development, he evokes the image of a vast country in decline, underscoring the disjuncture between its pervasive plight and the agenda of its political institutions. What can the country mean to the common people when there is no guiding force in their unfed, untaught lives? Living in the midst of an unrelenting 'nothing', they have been drained of all self-confidence. Ten years' close observation of the Bengal countryside underlies Rabindranath's philosophy of rural life in *Gorā* (1910), charged with a sense of its impoverishment and self-abjection. He adjudged it a principal task of Indian politics to free the common people from this demeaning state and infuse them with a belief in themselves. His social philosophy thus leads him to conceive of an inner force, a force within oneself (*ātmashakti*). To acquire this *ātmashakti* becomes the chief aim of his political thought in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the play *Prāyashchitta* (1909), Dhananjay rouses the subjects to rebel against the king, but is frustrated to find them relying on him alone, not on their own power.

Once we grasp this aspect of his thought, we realize that what might seem like Rabindranath's withdrawal from society is actually a distinctive expression of his social being. The 'effective means' (*sadupāy*), 'remedy' (*pratīkār*) and 'resource' (*pātheya*) of which he talks in his political writings are attainable only through this internal resource of *ātmashakti*.

Ātmashakti is fulfilled in social endeavour, but it springs from the heart of one's private sensibility. Rabindranath says in the Maghotsav sermon 'Chiranabinatā' cited earlier:

We must renew our youth every moment, we must be reborn in Him again and again, minute to minute – as a poem attains its movement by adding one metrical foot to another, revalidating the underlying metre every time, achieving beauty by co-ordinating every part to the whole. That is what we must do as well.⁴⁶

The notion of 'co-ordinating every part to the whole' contains his basic philosophy of life, a life that finds emancipation in moving outward from the centre to the totality.

This perception enables us to understand how he can write on the same day of darkness and light, destruction and nurture, outward and inward movement. The being in beggar's garb can be endowed with internal wealth. But where is the seat of that internal life? Who is the maharaja at whose gate the beggar will stand? The being beyond the confines of the 'I', inhering in an all-pervasive 'not-I', is the being decked in royal robes that can welcome and relieve the beggar. When one responds to that welcome, one can look outward, imbued with the inner force of *ātmashakti*, and say eagerly, 'Now comes the destroyer.' The protecting maharaja becomes one with the destroyer; life plunges into a festival of death.

The strands of our 'scattered life' are to be upgathered into a fulfilling darkness – like the darkness in the play *Rājā*, the soul's secret chamber where one nurtures one's being. That retreat into darkness is not in conflict with the call to march forward: there is unbroken traffic between the external collective being and the interiorized, individual self. We cannot chart this exchange by a straight graph. Our social existence and its representation in art are linked but also separated by the unending flow of our everyday experience – sometimes minute and trivial, sometimes momentous; now sensory, now beyond the senses. A single poem might synthesize all these diverse elements: in that case, it cannot simply reflect the poet's external life as suggested by Niradchandra Chaudhuri. Rather, we must look for the poet's life in his work in the way proposed by Abanindranath, where we view all the elements together and admire the 'courage' of the poet who could engage with them all. The poet's life is borne on the pulse-beat of that courageous heart.

Translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri from 'Shilpa theke jiban' in Dāminir gān (Kolkata: Papyrus, 2002).

NOTES

1. Short for 'Rabikākā', 'Uncle Rabi'.
2. Rani Chanda, *Shilpiguru abanindranāth* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1972), 137.
3. Niradchandra Chaudhuri, *Ātmaghāti rabindranāth* (Kolkata: Mitra o ghosh, 1996), 23.
4. Respectively: *GB*, 'Pujā' #224, *GB* 'Pujā' #228, *Gitāli* #28.
5. Chanda, *Shilpiguru abanindranāth*, 137. The last words echo a line from yet another Tagore song, 'The touchstone of fire' (*GB*, 'Pujā' #212).
6. Chaudhuri, *Ātmaghāti rabindranāth*, 23.
7. *GB*, 'Prem' #86.
8. *Jibansmriti*, *RRVB* 17:389–90.

9. Chaudhuri, *Ātmaghāti rabindranāth*, 21.
10. This superlative praise in the original text was toned down in the version in *RRVB* 1:604.
11. Chaudhuri, *Ātmaghāti rabindranāth*, 24, 57.
12. *Ibid.*, 57.
13. Respectively: *GB*, 'Swadesh' #5, #25, #44.
14. Respectively: song from the musical drama *Māyār khelā* (The Sport of Illusion), *RRVB* 1:256; *GB*, 'Prem' #387; *GB*, *Rabichchhāyā* #26, p. 882.
15. *Gitānjali* #6, *RRVB* 11:9.
16. *Balākā* #20, *RRVB* 12:41.
17. *Balākā* #37, *RRVB* 12:60.
18. *CP* 4:62.
19. *Ibid.*, 5:204.
20. *Desh*, Pujā issue (*sharadiyā*), 1362 (1955), 28.
21. *Balākā* #37, *RRVB* 12:61–2.
22. *GB*, 'Pujā' #45.
23. *Utsarga* #14, *RRVB* 10:16.
24. *CP* 8:151.
25. *Balākā* #2, *RRVB* 12:3–4.
26. *Gitimālya* #106, *RRVB* 11:209.
27. *Balākā* #3, *RRVB* 12:5.
28. *Gitimālya* #107, *RRVB* 11:209.
29. 'Bidāy' (Farewell), *Kheyā*, *RRVB* 10:150.
30. *RRVB* 11:123.
31. 'Utsab', *RRVB* 13:339.
32. 'Rājbhakti', *RRVB* 10:440.
33. *CP* 13:51.
34. Respectively: *GB*, 'Puja' #399, #409, #322.
35. *RRVB* 13:400.
36. *Gorā*, ch. 26, *RRVB* 6:276–7.
37. Rudraprasād Chakrabarti, ed., *Bhakta o kabi* (Kolkata: Paschimbanga bānglā ākādeṃi, 2007), 10.
38. *CP* 6:90–1.
39. *Desh*, Pujā issue (*shāradīyā*), 1362 (1955), 9.
40. Rathindranath Tagore, *Pitrismriti* (Kolkata: Jijnāsā, 1960), 239–40.
41. *Ibid.*, 246–7. In this and later excerpts, words in italics are in English in the original Bengali text.
42. *Desh*, 3 Agraḥāyan 1362 (November 1955), 164.
43. *Purbāshā*, Tagore issue, 1348 (1941), 114.
44. 'Chiranabinatā' (Eternal Youth), *RRVB* 14:505.
45. *Desh*, 24 Kārtik 1362 (November 1955), 9.
46. *RRVB* 14:499.