

Rabindrasangit: uncovering a 'Bengali secret'

The Composer



On 14 November 1913, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for *Gitanjali* – a selection of his Bengali lyrics in English prose, translated by the poet himself, with an ecstatic introduction by W.B. Yeats. Rabindranath was the first Asian to win the prize, and was honoured that year by bypassing one of the English greats: novelist and poet Thomas Hardy.

Rituparna Roy

Gitanjali and the Nobel

When Alfred Nobel instituted the prize in 1901, he intended for the committee to discover a new genius for the world every year. But by 1913, Tagore was already a very distinguished figure in his own country – he was the foremost poet and writer of Bengal; a pioneering educationist who had started an experimental educational institution in Shantiniketan; and a national leader who had given creative leadership in (the early phase of) one of the greatest political upheavals of the time, the 'Banga-bhanga andolan' (the anti- 'Bengal Partition' movement) of 1905. But his international career began only in 1912, when *Gitanjali* was first published in London to rave reviews; and the Nobel Prize, following closely on its heels in 1913, gave him worldwide recognition that continued for the next three decades until his death in August 1941, and beyond.

This article is *not* in celebration of *Gitanjali*; the Prize, the controversies surrounding the exact nature of Yeats' contribution to it, the decade of enthusiastic translations of Tagore's other works following the Nobel, the decline in interest thereafter – have all been well-documented. Nor is it about the theft of the Nobel Prize medal from Shantiniketan in 2004, and its replacement five years later. Instead, what I intend to focus on in this article, is a lesser known facet of Tagore's genius in the West, though ironically one of the most abiding aspects of his variegated legacy: his songs. While the world knows Tagore chiefly as a poet, he was many other things besides – educationist, philosopher, political thinker, social reformer, anti-nationalist national leader.

Tagore's prophecy

One of his earliest English admirers and biographer, E. P. Thompson, in trying to establish Tagore's impressive fecundity, wrote in 1948:

Milton's English verse is less than 18,000 lines. Tagore's published verse and dramas amount to 15,000 lines or their equivalent. His non-dramatic prose, novels, short stories, autobiography, criticism, essays of many kinds, is more than twice as much, and there is also a mass of uncollected material.¹

What is notable here, for a Bengali, is not the comparison with Milton, but the fact that Thompson omits *Rabindrasangit* [Tagore Songs] altogether – the 2000 plus songs that Tagore wrote and composed music for, over a period of sixty years. Tagore would not have been surprised; he knew he had a limited audience, but he was also confident of his creations. In a letter to Thompson as early as the 1920s, he had prophesied:

It is nonsense to say that music is a universal language. I should like my music to find acceptance, but I know this cannot be, at least not till the West has had time to study and learn to appreciate our music. All the same, I know the artistic value of my songs. They have great beauty. Though they will not be known outside my province, and much of my work will be gradually lost, I leave them as a legacy. My own countrymen do not understand. But they will.²

Almost a 100 years after it was written, this statement still holds true. Ask any Bengali and he/she will have at least one

great memory with a song. If the person grew up in a house that cultivated Tagore, then the association will be deeper and more vital – but even otherwise, there is no getting away from Tagore. Especially his songs. My own earliest memory is of my mother singing Rabindrasangit, late into the evening. A marble bust of Tagore had pride of place in our living room – it still does! – the only god that my atheist father has lived with for more than 40 years. But the deity, in this case, was kept alive through reading and mostly singing.

Rabindrasangit and India

Tagore was only partially correct in his prediction; there is at least one song that all Indians know: their national anthem, *Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka Jaya He*. And then there is the song that Gandhi made his own, and hence it has always had a national currency – *Jodi tor daak shune keu na ashe, tobe ekla cholo re* [If they answer not your call, walk alone, walk alone]. Another of his songs was chosen as the national anthem of Bangladesh in 1971, when it seceded from Pakistan – *Amar Shonar Bangla, ami tomay bhalobashi* [My Golden Bengal, I love you]. Bengal was divided thrice in the 20th century, but Rabindrasangit has remained a common legacy for Bengalis on both sides of the border.

Indians also encounter Tagore's songs through their movies. Many of the most talented composers in the Hindi film industry have used Tagore songs – mostly without acknowledgement! One example of a 'hit' Hindi song based on a Tagore tune is, *Tere mere milan ki yeh raina* (taken from the original Bengali song, *Jodi tare nai chini go sheki*) – featured in the film *Abhimaan*

Above: Example of Rabindra-Nritya Dance. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of lavik on flickr.

Inset: Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy flickr.

(1973), which happens to have been one of megastar Amitabh Bachchan's earliest successes. Luckily, this trend of using Rabindrasangit on the sly has been on the decline ever since.

In Bengali films, however, it has remained a staple. It adds to their overall aesthetic appeal and is bound to strike a chord with the audience. But it was Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, the gurus of Bengali cinema who changed its idiom in the 1950s, who took it to new heights. Ghatak produced movie magic when he had the brother-sister duo (Shankar and Nita) sing *Je rate mor duwar guli bhango jhore* in his classic, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* [The Cloud-Capped Star] (1960).³ The song was a most effective and bold dramatization of the raw emotion of the characters, rendered memorable by the voices of the gifted singers, Gita Ghatak and Debabrata (George) Biswas. As for Ray, a whole generation of Bengalis came to know Tagore through his films, which included *Teen Kanya*, *Charulata*, and *Ghare-Baire*. In each of them, he made very sensitive use of Tagore songs. He had an ear for both eastern and western classical music, but had once said: "As a Bengali I know that as a composer of songs, Tagore has no equal, not even in the West—and I know Schubert and Hugo Wolf."⁴

Rabindrasangit categories & their significance

Once again, it may be pertinent to quote Ray on the subject of Tagore's magnitude:

*Rabindranath began to compose his songs in a spirit of rebellion. He wanted to break with convention, break new ground. Though he did not abide by the prescribed forms, he did not consider them to be unnecessary either. His aim was the perfect union of word, tune and rhythm, but because he was as fine a writer as he was a composer, he had difficulty in creating this union in a song without compromising either the words or the tune.*⁵

It all began with *Valmiki Pratibha* in 1878, when Tagore was only 17 years old. He had just returned from England, his head full of the songs he had heard and himself sung there. Indeed, western classical music would remain an important strain in Rabindrasangit, along with Indian classical music, and Bengali folk songs. In *Valmiki Pratibha* itself, there are ample examples of both the western and eastern classical influences. Later in life, Tagore would lean heavily on the folk music of Bengal—the familiar, earthy, vigorous flavour of the songs would then become an effective weapon in arousing the patriotic sentiments of his people. Almost seven decades later, the same songs would once again inspire the Bengalis of East Pakistan in their fight for liberation.

It is important to note here that the entire oeuvre of Tagore's songs is divided into four major thematic categories: Prem (Love), Puja (Worship), Prakriti (Nature) and Swadesh (Patriotism), to which was later added Bichitra (Miscellaneous). Prakriti is further sub-divided into all the seasons of the land, and some of the most memorable ones are those of the rains ('Barsha'). To the connoisseur, the quintessential Tagore can be found in the songs of Prem and Puja. For Tagore, the object of love and worship are often the same; and hence to the uninitiated, classification can be deceiving. As an example, let us take the following song from Puja:

*I crave your company, o beautiful one!
You consecrate my mind and bless my body—o beautiful one!
In heavenly light my eyes open, enchanted;
The wind blowing in the heart's vault abates
in your scent—o beautiful one!
Your loving caress captivate my consciousness
Your ambrosial flow of union will be stored in my soul
Restore me thus again and again by your embrace
And I will be reborn even in this life forever—o beautiful one!*⁶

This is the impassioned worship of a devotee. But it is also a celebration of love—as much a hymn to the beloved as an expression of gratefulness for the presence of love in, and its effect on, one's life. In both, however, there is an element of yearning. And it is this that connects Tagore to the *Bauls* (the wandering minstrels of Bengal). One of the reasons that he was drawn to the Bauls was that, in their concept of *Moner Manush* [Man of the Heart], he had found an echo of his own philosophy of *Jiban Debata* [Life-God]. As Shantidev Ghosh says, "We notice that like the Bauls, in many songs of Prem and Prakriti, Gurudev (i.e., Tagore) has repeatedly expressed a deep pain for the absence of a certain dear one."⁷ This perpetual absence is, however, a presence, to be felt by the poet's innermost self; as in this song:

*You hid in the middle of my heart and I couldn't view you
I couldn't see you at all!
I kept looking outside for you but I didn't look at my heart
In all my loving—in all that hurt me—in all my hopes
You were with me all along but I wouldn't reach out to you.*⁸

The dissemination of Rabindrasangit in the 20th century

From 1878 till 1941, the year in which he died, Tagore continued to compose songs incessantly. The evolution of those songs into a distinct category of music, however, happened over a period of time. In its early phase it was intimately tied up with the advancement of the school that Tagore had started in 1901, in Shantiniketan. Shantidev Ghosh, one of the earliest students of the school, and later a most distinguished exponent of Rabindrasangit, has recounted those early days with great charm and candour in his seminal work, *Rabindrasangit Vichitra*. Tagore would write a song and teach it to Dinendranath (one of his nephews), who would then teach it to the students in the evenings, in the presence of the poet. Sometimes, he also taught all of them together—teachers and students alike—for some special occasion. "Tagore was afraid of losing his tunes", Shantidev tells us, and hence insisted on teaching them immediately, along with their notations.⁹ Everybody who was interested in Tagore's songs was encouraged to sing in those days at Shantiniketan—whether they were trained in music or not, whether they sang well or not, whether they even knew Bengali or not. Indeed, there were teachers and students from other provinces of India who never fully mastered Bengali and sang with their regional accents. Initially, Tagore did not impose any restrictions on *who* could sing Rabindrasangit, and *how*. "It was only in 1926, after the establishment of *Vishwa Bharati*, that he first gave attention to this aspect ... and made it clear to the music companies that no matter who sang his songs, they at least needed to learn the tune correctly."¹⁰

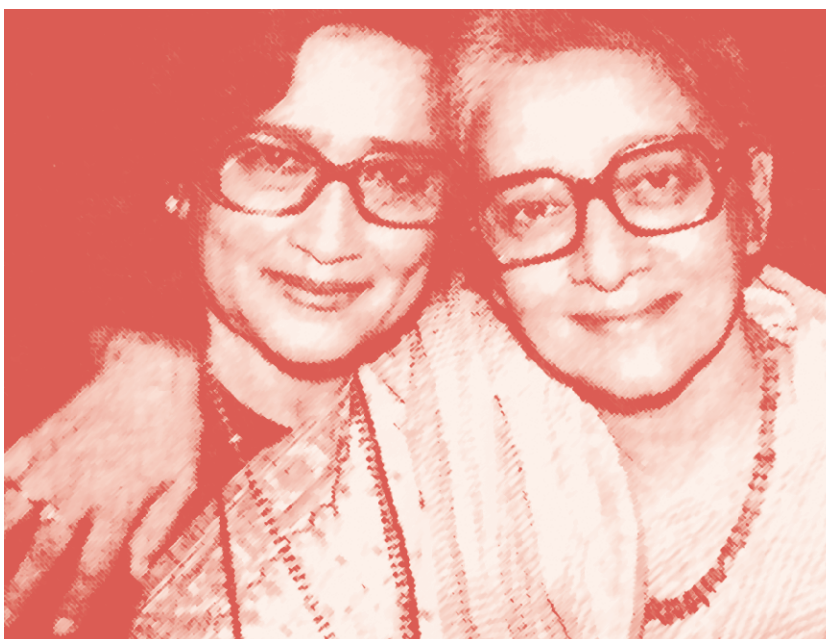
To Pankaj Mullick belongs the credit of popularizing Tagore's songs. It was Mullick who first brought it before the public, through public performances and radio programs. Before him, in Calcutta, the teaching, learning and performance of Tagore's songs had been limited to only a few Brahmo households and their gatherings.¹¹ It was in a bid to liberate Rabindrasangit beyond this coterie, that a series of institutions were formed by some of its stalwarts in the 1940s.

Geetabitan, Dakshinee, Rabitirtha

The first of these institutions was Geetabitan, founded in 1941. In the words of Smt. Jayati Chakrabarty (my teacher and that of my mother before me), who belonged to one of the earliest batches of graduates: "It was the first institution to systematically teach Rabindrasangit in a 5-year diploma course. The proper course could only start at age 12, before which young children were required to undergo 2+2 years of preparatory training". She herself was one of those who started very young, goaded by the enthusiasm of her father, and recalls how the nine years of study and practice there gave her a comprehensive insight into Tagore.

Two more institutions sprang up in the same decade in Calcutta—Dakshinee and Rabitirtha. Rabitirtha was founded by Suchitra Mitra and Dwijen Choudhury. Dakshinee was founded in 1948 by Shree Shubho Guhathakurtha to propagate a culture: *Rabindra Shikshsha*. While it had many elements common with Geetabitan—the 5-year diploma; extra preparatory years for children; compulsive training in the basics of Indian classical music, to enable students to understand the nuances of *ragas* and *taals*—in the teaching of Rabindrasangit, however, it maintained a distinct style of its own; and its high standard has also never fallen in the more than six decades of its existence. As a recent graduate, Brototi Dasgupta, confirms: "The school boasts of serious rigor in terms of discipline and dress code and though many would argue the redundancy of such rigor in a fast changing society, Dakshinee's student strength has been proudly recorded at 1200 plus."¹² It may be noted here that, apart from Rabindrasangit, Dakshinee also teaches *Rabindra-Nritya*, the special form of dance that Tagore used in his dance dramas, inspired chiefly by the Manipuri style of dance.

Below: Suchitra Mitra and Kanika Banerjee.



The famous four

For many, Suchitra Mitra is the face of Rabindrasangit; for others, it is her contemporary, Kanika Banerjee. Both learnt Rabindrasangit at Shantiniketan's *Sangit Bhavan*, under the tutelage of masters who had learnt Tagore's songs from Tagore himself—Shantidev Ghosh and Shailaja Ranjan Majumdar, among others. Suchitra emulated Ghosh's signature style of clear diction in singing; while Kanika (who was christened *Mohur* [Jewel] by Tagore), followed that of Majumdar. Hers was a melodious voice in which the contemplative songs of Tagore found its most beautiful expression. These two women gave birth to a new brand of artists, that of the performer-academic; for not only were they extraordinary performers, but they also taught Rabindrasangit as a subject of study, as a lecturer and eventually as a Professor and Head of a Music Department at a University—Kanika at Vishwa Bharati in Shantiniketan, and Suchitra at *Rabindra Bharati* in Calcutta.

In 1961, Tagore's centenary was celebrated with innumerable special functions and programs all over West Bengal. Among the artists who gained prominence during this time was Debarata Biswas (nicknamed 'George'), who introduced a deep baritone in Rabindrasangit! His vibrant, energetic renditions made him hugely popular in the 1960s, which was unfortunately cut short in the early 1970s when the Vishwa Bharati Music Board imposed restrictions on the style and manner of singing Rabindrasangit. The resulting trauma was movingly recorded in his autobiography, *Bratya Janer Ruddha Sangit* [The Stifled Music of the Outcast, 1978].

The fourth singer to make his mark in the golden era of Rabindrasangit was the incredibly popular Hemanta Mukherjee, who somewhat followed in the footsteps of Pankaj Mullick. His main claim to fame was that he was the voice of the Bengal matinee idol Uttam Kumar for decades—but this apart, he was a gifted music composer, who composed songs for several 'hit' Bengali and Hindi films. Like Suchitra and Debarata, he too had been a member of the IPTA (the Indian People's Theatre Association), and knew how to reach out to the people.

Bengali secret

Harish Trivedi once famously complained: "Rabindranath Tagore ... was arguably the greatest writer of modern India. Yet the precise nature of his literary greatness, and the evidence for it, has by and large remained a fairly well kept Bengali secret."¹³ Rabindrasangit has indeed been a fairly well kept Bengali secret till now; this article is a humble (and no doubt flawed) attempt to uncover and share a little of that secret in English.

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Notes

- 1 Thompson, E.P. 1948. 'Preface', *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, Oxford: OUP.
- 2 Quoted in Krishna Dutta & Andrew Robinson. 2000. *Rabindranath Tagore: The myriad-minded man*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co., p.360.
- 3 'Je rate mor duwar guli bhango jhore', *Gitobitan*: Vol I, 'Puja', Song 220. Kolkata: Viswa Bharati, p.97.
- 4 See note 2, p.359
- 5 *ibid*, p.360
- 6 'Ei lobhinu songo tobo', *Gitobitan*: Vol I, 'Puja', Song 516. Kolkata: Viswa Bharati, p.204. The author is very grateful to Prof. Fakrul Alam of Dhaka University for the translation of this song, and the next in note 8.
- 7 Ghosh, S. 1972. 'Rabindranath O Banglar Baul', in *Rabindrasangit Vichitra* [Rabindrasangit Miscellany], Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, p.100
- 8 'Amar hiyar majhe lukiyeh chhile', *Gitobitan*: Vol I, 'Puja', Song 50. Kolkata: Viswa Bharati, p.26
- 9 Sudhir Chakrabarty has argued that this is an important reason why Tagore's songs were not lost, unlike those by his other contemporaries—Atul Prasad, Rajanikanta Sen, and Dwijendralal Roy—because he had himself created the system to maintain it, through the active medium of teachers, students and a school. (Chakrabarty, S. 2010. 'Rabindrasangit—Amader Sarbanash o Sarboshho', in *Rabindranath Onekanto*, Kolkata: Patralekha, p.66.)
- 10 Ghosh, S. 1972. 'Rabindrasangit Samikhhah', in *Rabindrasangit Vichitra* [Rabindrasangit Miscellany], Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, pp.102-103.
- 11 Interview with Suchitra Mitra in 'Parabas' magazine—'Ek Bikeler Adda' [An Afternoon Conversation]. <http://tinyurl.com/oduev2m> (accessed August 2013).
- 12 The author would like to thank her mother Kalpana Roy, her teacher Jayati Chakrabarty, and her friend Brototi Dasgupta for sharing their experiences of Geetabitan and Dakshinee with her.
- 13 See Harish Trivedi's 1989 'Introduction' to E.P. Thompson's *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, Oxford: OUP.