



Appreciating the legend – a humble attempt

- Nandini Basu

When Satyajit Ray made the brilliant documentary on Gurudev, he titled it just “Rabindranath” because he felt that the greatness of Tagore could not be encompassed by any other title. I suppose that the problem which everyone faces when writing on Tagore is that he is so multifaceted that words fall short in describing his sheer genius. In this article, I have tried to string together some aspects of Tagore that I have found interesting.

The power of Tagore’s writing was felt across continents and among all sections of people. Susan Owen, the mother of the famous war poet Wilfred Owen, wrote to Tagore - “the day he said goodbye to me...he, my poet son, said those wonderful words of yours beginning with ‘when I go from hence, let this be my parting word.’ When his pocket book came back home-I found these words written in his dear writing with your name beneath.” (The line was from *The Gitanjali*, verse 96)

This power of writing is also evident when on the 15th of July, 1942 Janusz Korczak produced ‘The Post Office’ with ‘his children’ ignoring SS orders forbidding Jews to perform works by Aryan authors. When asked after the performance why he had chosen the play, Korczak declared that the play reinstated the fact that “eventually one had to learn to accept serenely the angel of death.” It will be noteworthy to mention here that the Tagore Shraddh ceremony began with a song composed by the deceased poet which he himself had intended to sing in the role of the fakir at a new production of ‘The Post Office’ after Amal’s death.

The other aspect of Tagore is his versatility. “The sheer volume and diversity of Tagore’s oeuvre in a creative life of over sixty years is enough to make one gasp.” (Krishna Dutt and Andrew Robinson) There are twenty-eight large volumes consisting of Tagore’s poetry, drama, operas, short stories, novels, essays and diaries and a similar number of (slimmer) volumes of letters. His songs number two and a half thousand (all set to music by him), his paintings and

drawings over two thousand!

Like pop stars, some of Tagore’s works were shrouded in controversy. To many Bengalis, Tagore’s ideas were too westernized. In the Bengali language paper of the Calcutta University’s matriculation exam of 1914, there was a passage from Rabindranath. The examinee was asked to re-write the passage in ‘chaste and elegant’ Bengali!

While appreciating certain aspects of British rule, Tagore was a patriot who believed in India’s spiritual values and was a part of the freedom movement. His genius was evident during the Anti-partition movement in Bengal in 1905 when, at his instance, people tied rakhis on each other symbolizing the unbroken spirit of the land. Tagore’s patriotic songs resounded everywhere and perhaps his finest hour was when he renounced his knighthood in 1919 in protest against the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre.

To a large extent, the greatness of Tagore’s words come from their sheer simplicity and universality. Yeats’ comments on the *Gitanjali* hold true for all of Tagore’s works. “What we admire in the *Gitanjali*, is that it is not encumbered with mythology.” It is not necessary to know the background of Tagore’s works to admire and appreciate their beauty. Yeats had also written that the *Gitanjali* is “the work of a supreme culture, yet they appear as much as the growth of the common soil.”

Above all, the strength and power of Tagore’s works come from his courage to face and uphold the truth. Rabindranath had once written to his niece, Indira, “In my life, I may have done many things that are unworthy with or without knowing but in my poetry, I have never uttered anything false; it is the sanctuary for the deepest truths I know.”

When words do come from such depths of truth, it is no wonder that Tagore’s power is felt so overwhelmingly even today. As Darwin’s granddaughter told a friend after meeting Tagore, “I can now imagine a powerful and gentle Christ, which I never could before.” □