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## Rabindranath Tagore: Polymath, Genius, Gurudev

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When one thinks of an individual with innumerable talents, one immediately remembers the creative genius, Rabindranath Tagore. To the new India and the world, Tagore is not merely a name, but much more than that. He touched our lives at more points than any other recent writer or thinker. Especially a poet and a writer of songs, Tagore extended his horizon much beyond that. He became a short-story writer, novelist, environmentalist, dramatist, composer of successful dance dramas, folklorist, satirist, feminist, a rhymer, social reformer, nationalist, historian, educational theorist and experimenter, painter, deep thinker on race relations and collaborator of a new age in human relationship and a ceaseless adventurer to the endless. While works of the other artists revolve around a single theme, Tagore goes global, extending from issues of his homeland to themes of universal appeal. These aspects of Tagore collectively contribute towards the making of the man. Perhaps this is why Tagore is also known as the “Voice of India”.

Tagore started writing from the tender age of seven. He used pseudonyms like Shasti Charan Debosharman and Bhanu Singho, especially during his early days of writings. He published his first set of poems, which was dedicated to his sister-in-law, Kadambari Debi, using the second pseudonym. His literary life extends over sixty years, comprising a series of novels, poems, plays, short-stories and songs. Apart from these, there are a number of English translations, articles written for journals, letters, written documents of lecture tours and travels of his collective experiences in Asia, America and Europe which were interesting areas that one can explore towards knowing about the writer’s multitudinous vision and dimension.

Tagore’s fascination for the countryside was eventually fulfilled at the age of eleven when he was moved to a riverside villa at Panihati when a fever epidemic started engulfing the city of Calcutta, his birthplace. A typical, idyllic countryside view was located just behind the village, which was a restricted area for children. The young child’s happiness knew no bounds on

learning about this truth. He secretly slipped into this area, surrounded by dense trees, ponds and leafy paths, being drawn by his secret love for nature. He witnessed a typical scene of pastoral life there; the villagers resting under the trees and children climbing them, people taking bath in the ponds, use of neem twigs for cleansing their teeth, village women fetching water from the wells, fishing rods and boats, cattle and stray dogs freely moving around the huts and the little playing with mud. For a sheltered child from an elite background, this unique vision made a profound impact in his writing. Most of his earlier stories are an inspiration from these experiences. 'Postmaster' is one such tale where Gurudev gives a vivid description of the natural beauty of Ulapur village. Similarly, 'Subha', 'The Ghat's Story', and 'Balai' deal with such themes. The third story brings out Tagore's intimate bonding with nature and was written in 1928 during the tree-planting festival at Shantiniketan.

The rural folklores of East Bengal, which were often related to him by his mother, Sarada Devi and great aunt, Shubhankari moved him deeply. Abdul Majhi, the retainer of East Bengal family estate of the Thakurs would also bring tales of improbable feats and encounters. It is interesting to learn that Tagore drew inspiration even from the household servants. Even though they kept the young Rabi confined to a room luring him with fairy-tales and folk-lores of East Bengal and stories of bandits, the child picked up these tales as themes for his future works. 'Tasher Desh' (The Land of Cards), 'A Fanciful Story' and 'The Story of a Mussalmani' are inspirations from the stories related to him. 'Tasher Desh' is an allegorical interpretation of nineteenth century Indian history, dedicated to the nationalist leader Subhash Chandra Basu (Bose). Both Tagore and Bose dreamt of an independent India, free from the clutches of devil dogmas and conservative ideology. 'A Fanciful Story' transports us to a fairy world of imagination while 'The Story of a Mussalmani' is an unpublished work of the author. Although it does not exist in a story form and is only a draft, a question arises as to how Tagore might have modified it when it was his last attempt at a short story only a month before his death. It is said that Tagore simply dictated it lying in his bed. Here, Tagore outrageously lashes out at the prejudice of society and mocks at its cowardice. He refutes the society that fails to protect its women but ironically insists on their purity and sanctity.

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Tagore had the opportunity to meet three 'foreigners' in his early age- a Punjabi servant Lenu, a Jewish perfume seller named Gabriel and an Afghan trader in baggy clothes with his sack of merchandise. The last among them undoubtedly formed the model for Rahamat in the novel laureate's story 'Kabuliwala'. One can even look at the narrator as the author's mouthpiece as the gap between the actual writer and the narrator-persona is very thin. The narrator looks at Rahamat from a father's point of view.

While Kobiguru deals with basic human emotions and man's relationship with man, projecting tender feelings of love, concern and protection of a father towards his daughter in 'Kabuliwala', the writer's feminist perspective cannot be ignored. 'The Exercise Book' is a reflection of this aspect of the writer, portraying his opposition to Hindu revivalism, child marriage and his respect for the fair sex. The story is set against Hindu revivalism of the late nineteenth century, a reactionary movement that aimed to prop up a decadent religious and social orthodoxy as well as the refutation of old customs and futile superstitions, Indian literature, to a large extent was oppressed by a rigid rhetoric that choked its life and loaded it with ornaments, becoming its fetters. Tagore went against this orthodoxy, which believed in the security of tombstones and in that finality, can only belong to the lifeless. He lifted the dead weight of ponderous forms through his writings, arousing our literature from her age-long sleep with the magic of his pen. Similarly, 'The Wife's Letter', 'Punishment', 'House Number One' and 'Woman Unknown' are tales about feminist issues.

Stories of Indian history, related to Tagore by his cousin Gunendranath, followed by the writer's visit to Ahmedabad in 1878 helped him develop a nascent sense of history. 'The Hungry Stone', 'The Inheritance' and 'The Golden Deer' were creative pieces conceived by Tagore during his stay at his cousin, Satyendranath's huge quarters of the Mughal Palace of Shahi Bagh. These large rooms enchanted him, and in some way, also haunted him with a sense of an eerie past, concerning with thoughts and alchemical fancy of *Yakshas* or *Jakhs*. To protect the ancient treasures of the household, a child was usually chosen as an erstwhile mortal and confined to a cellar as a guardian angel to protect the treasure. Again, 'Prayaschitta' (Penance) and 'The Royal Mark' are both an outcome of Tagore's eighteen months stay in Europe. The ploy used by the feeble-spirited anglicized Indian who, on one hand concealed their marriage in India and, on the

other, freely enjoyed the company of young, unmarried Englishwomen were severely criticized by the writer in the above mentioned works. Thus, Tagore's interest in art and music, Indian culture, caste and class complexities, human relationship, gender violence with respect to a woman's position in her social and domestic environs, and other political, social, religious, economic, nationalistic historical aspects are facets of his genius and make him a unique artist.

Tagore was never a recluse or dweller in an ivory tower. "A poet of the world am I", I wrote at eighty. He stands out as an artist of varied gifts and penetrating sympathy who shows himself as a world citizen *sarbabhauma, l'nomo universale*, one that will redeem the times. Therefore, his role as a public figure is definitely imposing, varied and significant. It is no wonder that he is called "Biswakabi Rabindranath". Tagore did not forget the grassroots of life or education, the people, the numb millions of villages. Long before others had thought of it, he had a blueprint of rural reconstruction at Sriniketan, a marvel of practical idealism in rural culture. His life and works, hence, were not merely an aesthetic adventure but also involve characteristic, enlarging moral choices in terms of an integrated and harmonious living. Tagore's founding of a school at Shantiniketan in 1901 was to impart education in fullness and to exploit a learner's creativity and innovative ideas. Thus, his aim was neither ascetic nor revivalist, but purely integrative. Schweitzer compared Tagore to Goethe. As Count Keyserling puts it, Tagore is very much greater than his world reputation and his position in India. To know him is to enlarge our awareness and possibilities of life.

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