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978-0-521-59018-1 - Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore

Edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In 1939, when Rabindranath Tagore was nearly eighty and a national institution, the coming Calcutta poet and critic Buddhadeva Bose went to see him in his setting at Shantiniketan and afterwards wrote this lively description for an Indian magazine:<sup>1</sup>

Shaded by a leafy mango tree, he was sitting at a little table covered with books and papers. Every dawn sees him there, and there, under the mango tree, he sits, works and sees people till the sun gets too hot. On the table were some volumes of Bengali poetry by younger poets (he was then working on an anthology of Bengali poetry which has since been published), and in his hands was a recent book of e. e. cummings. Vivacious, playful, irresistibly charming, this young man of eighty ragged us over cummings and modern poetry; and we felt it to be great fun rather than the oracular utterances of a prophet. And this, I think, is where most westerners are mistaken. An English journalist, who had been to Santiniketan has recently said in the *London Mercury* that Tagore never smiles and that his conversation is poor.<sup>2</sup> We cannot say how really it strikes a foreigner; but one need only look at that noble face, a face somewhere between Tennyson's and Tolstoy's creased with good-humoured smiles, and listen once to that rich, if feminine voice to know how mistaken those impressions are. Or is it that the incisive fineness of his conversation cannot be put across in any foreign language, depending as it does, for its effects, on the very idioms of the Bengali language . . . Tagore is always a word wizard, with his pen as well as with his tongue: brilliant talk flows from him as easily as water from a fountain; lightning-like, his wit flashes and sears the object of sarcasm. He is a star actor in his own way, for his voice and features can express every conceivable shade and tone of feeling. But he has very few gestures; rigorous discipline from childhood has made him a master of poise; he can sit for hours on end in exactly the same position, the red-shot, classical Oriental eyes alone serving to reflect the changing tones of thought and feeling. Minimum physical movement combined with a musical flow of intense words – this is Tagore as a speaker and talker.

The letters of Tagore, taken together, bring us nearer to this complex, compelling, mercurial personality – which attracted people as varied as Ezra Pound, Albert Einstein and Mahatma Gandhi – than any other part of his vast oeuvre of poetry, songs, drama, short stories, novels, memoirs, essays and paintings. His letters, in both Bengali and English, are some of his most alert writings: they also express his ideas in a more concise and vivid manner than many of his published writings, and show him struggling (and generally failing) to put these ideas into practice; and his unique sense of humour, which so easily evaporates in translations of his work, shines out of the more intimate correspondence.

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The letters run into many thousands (though not as many as Gandhi wrote), and that excludes the descriptive letters Tagore wrote on foreign visits that were deliberately written to be published as books of travel.<sup>3</sup> They span sixty years, from 1878 to the final months of Tagore's life in 1941. Almost all the significant ones written in Bengali have been published (though not translated) in the decades since his death, unlike those written in English, many of which remain virtually or wholly unknown, even to Tagore scholars; not even the prolific correspondence with Charles Freer Andrews, Tagore's closest English collaborator, is fully published (the fraction that is available was mangled by Andrews as editor of *Letters to a Friend*, so as to make it practically useless for scholarly purposes).<sup>4</sup> About half of the English letters in this book have not previously appeared in print.

In selecting a few hundred from all of Tagore's letters for publication, we have been guided principally by a desire to show as many facets of his experience, interests and ideas as possible. Thus there are letters on most aspects of the arts, eastern and western, letters about many of the places that Tagore visited between 1912 and the 1930s, and letters on the history of India and on Indian social, religious, educational, economic and political questions, including even a letter (to the mayor of Calcutta) recommending that the Calcutta Corporation support a Japanese judo expert whom Tagore had brought from Japan to Shantiniketan at his own expense – thereby becoming the pioneer of judo in India.<sup>5</sup> There are also many letters to the members of the Tagore family, dealing with matters that are personal yet which also shed much light on the other spheres of Rabindranath's activities, such as his attempts to direct his son and son-in-law to begin 'rural reconstruction' work on the Tagore estates in East Bengal (predating Gandhi's village development programme by over two decades), and his efforts to persuade his painter nephews Gaganendranath and Abanindranath (founder of the Bengal School) to travel outside India to Japan and broaden their artistic horizons.

His correspondents were predictably wide ranging, covering family members, estate workers and staff at Shantiniketan, Bengali litterateurs and writers such as Pramatha Chaudhuri, Sarat Chandra Chatterji [Chattopadhyay] and Dilip Kumar Roy, poets such as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and Robert Bridges, the artist William Rothenstein, the Tagore biographer and historian of India Edward J. Thompson, editors such as C. P. Scott, Harriet Monroe and Ramananda Chatterji [Chattopadhyay], thinkers such as Romain Rolland, Bertrand Russell and Brajendranath Seal, the scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, educationists such as Michael Sadler and Patrick Geddes, scholars of Indian religion and philology such as Kshiti Mohan Sen, Sylvain Lévi and Suniti Kumar Chatterji [Chattopadhyay], religious leaders such as Foss Westcott (metropolitan of India), the agricultural economist Leonard Elmhirst (who co-founded the Dartington Trust), politicians and statesman such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Benito Mussolini and Woodrow Wilson, as well as British viceroys, governors and other Indian government officials. In addition, many interesting letters were written to comparative unknowns, for example Hemanta Bala Ray, a Bengali woman from an orthodox Hindu *zamindari* family, to whom Rabindranath wrote 264 letters, including some penetrating comments on Hindu–Muslim relations.

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The Bengali letters, which we have translated ourselves, make up about a quarter of the book. Rabindranath's letters to his niece Indira, mostly written from the Tagore estates where he was the manager in the 1890s, are among his most celebrated letters, and we have chosen many of them; it is these letters that (as he told Yeats in 1918) 'will present to you pictures and ideas concerning me and my surroundings more vividly and truly than anything I have yet written'.<sup>6</sup> Instead of translating the letters in the form in which they were abridged by Tagore in 1912 for publication as *Chhinnapatra* (and later, in English translation, as *Glimpses of Bengal*), we have retained the original letters in the fullest available form.

In translating, we have aimed to make all the Bengali letters sound as fluent in English as they do in Bengali, without any of the stiltedness that, as Tagore himself well knew, tends to affect his own writing in English. We agree with Satyajit Ray, who remarked: 'I don't think Rabindranath ever wrote idiomatic English. To me it seemed that he was always translating from Bengali.'<sup>7</sup>

When, for instance, Tagore tells Edward J. Thompson in 1935, with characteristic irony, that he is suffering from his past English literary reputation, built upon what he now admits were poor translations of his poetry, 'which, as the saying is in our own language, proves itself as a living bear which originally offered its boon as a blanket', we can guess what he meant by using this Bengali proverb. That is, once upon a time (in Nobel prize days, twenty years previously), Rabindranath thought English was something he could slip around him like a blanket, but now, with the decline in his literary standing in English, he has realised that the language is more like a hair-shirt or straitjacket that he cannot take off.<sup>8</sup> But had Rabindranath been writing to Thompson in Bengali, rather than English, we, as translators, would probably have replaced the innocent-looking blanket that turned out to be a bear with something like a purring cat that while being stroked suddenly shows its claws. And we believe that Tagore would have required the change. He ruthlessly altered his original images when translating, where necessary, and he was more than capable of subtle wordplay in English, of which this book contains many examples. He once wrote to his niece (a letter not included here) that he had just received a telegram stating 'Missing gown lying post office' – which made him wonder idly to her (of course in Bengali), was the gown lying in the post office or was it really missing, with the post office lying about its disappearance?<sup>9</sup>

To turn to the content of the letters, it is, as might be expected, extraordinarily diverse, ranging from the miseries of the peasants on the Tagore estates in what is now Bangladesh, and Tagore's efforts to relieve their poverty, to the stresses and strains of fundraising for Shantiniketan in New York, where a furious Tagore felt compelled to read his poetry to millionaire lovers of mysticism. Indeed, the friction between cultures, between East and West – a dichotomy so much sharper in Tagore's day than in ours – is perhaps the only theme that is common to almost all the letters.

Consequently, rather than attempting to introduce our selection *en masse* with one long piece at the beginning of the book, or, alternatively, with shorter pieces spread through the book each introducing a group of letters, we have chosen to provide a separate introduction to almost every letter, along with comprehensive notes. Without such individual introductions, many of the letters would be virtually meaningless, even

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to Tagore scholars. Inevitably, some of the introductions are of necessity longer than the letters they introduce.

Nevertheless, we have grouped the letters into eighteen chronological sections, corresponding to phases in Tagore's life, such as 'Zamindar (1890–1897)' and 'International nationalist (1934–1936)', each of which has a very brief introduction giving merely a sketch of Tagore's activities, travels and concerns during the period in question. We recognise that there is an element of artifice in these divisions – after all, Tagore had many preoccupations other than politics in the period 1934–6 – but we believe the divisions both correspond with reality to a considerable extent and also serve to impose some order on what would otherwise be too disparate and overwhelming a mass of material for the reader to absorb. They have also helped us to some extent in winnowing all the letters written in each period of Tagore's multifarious life so as to make our selection.

It is no accident that the divisions resemble, though not exactly, the chapters of our biography of Tagore, *The Myriad-Minded Man*, published in 1995. We regard this book of letters as a companion to that book. This introduction, and indeed the book as a whole, aims to avoid repeating the material in the biography. Instead, readers will find regular citations of the biography, where appropriate (as well as of numerous other articles and books on Tagore, duly referenced in our notes and bibliography). Many of the English letters part-quoted in the biography – often for the first time in print – are here given in full; and so this book may be seen as offering the full evidence for the sometimes controversial statements we have made in the biography. For example, there are a number of letters here that show the way in which the demands of Shantiniketan took precedence over the needs of Tagore's family, with unhappy consequences for all concerned; others show clearly the ambivalence of Rabindranath towards Shantiniketan and its inmates once he had established the institution; and yet others demonstrate his contradictory attitude towards his western literary fame, symbolised by his repeated (and doubtful) claim that he did not relish foreign appreciation of his English translations from 1912. Whatever may be the reader's judgement of these letters, it is important that their evidence be made available for all to read.

At the conclusion of the introduction to our biography, we quoted a comment by Tagore in a short and appreciative review he wrote of a book by an Indian scholar writing on architecture. He remarked:

Ordinarily research scholars seem to ignore the fact that the past is of interest to us only in so far as it was *living* and that unless they discover it for us in such a way as to make us feel its life, we may admire them for their patience and industry but will not be the wiser for their labours. I have often felt sad that so much human talent and industry should disappear in the publication of matter where bones keep on rattling without forming for us an outline of the figure which once moved.<sup>10</sup>

There could scarcely be a more demanding human being for a biographer to attempt to bring to life than Rabindranath Tagore. We hope that this selection of his own, largely spontaneous, words will add up to more than mere rattling old bones; that it will be a fruitful contribution to a continuing scholarly effort in many countries to rebuild the reputation of a great writer who was one of the most fascinating figures ever to emerge from India.

*Introduction*

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*Notes*

- 1 'Rabindranath Tagore at home', *Hindusthan Standard*, 6 Aug. 1939 (first published in *India Monthly Magazine*).
- 2 Ranald Newson, 'Some recollections of Tagore', *London Mercury*, Dec. 1938, p. 186.
- 3 No one, so far as we are aware, has yet counted all the known letters of Tagore, and more turn up from time to time. They are scattered all over the world, but the majority are kept in either original or copy form at Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.
- 4 The only book of Tagore's English letters that has been adequately edited is his correspondence with William Rothenstein, elegantly published in 1972 as *Imperfect Encounter* (see Mary M. Lago (ed.), *Imperfect Encounter: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore, 1911–1941* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972)).
- 5 See letter 251.
- 6 See letter 131.
- 7 Ray to Andrew Robinson, 23 Dec. 1987.
- 8 See letter 282.
- 9 Tagore to Indira Devi Chaudhurani, 30 Baishakh 1300 [12 May 1893], *Glimpses of Bengal* (Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson trans.; London, 1991), p. 85/*Chhinnapatrabali* (1367 [1960]), p. 150.
- 10 'Dr P. K. Acharya on Indian architecture', *VBQ*, 1, No. 1, May–July 1935, p. 115.

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1 Rabindranath in England, c. 1879

## Youthful bravado (1879–1889)

### Introduction

Tagore's earliest existing letters were prompted by his first stay in Britain. He arrived there from India in October 1878 and remained until February 1880. Though he spent some months living with his elder brother Satyendranath, a civil servant, and his family, in Brighton and Torquay, much of his time was spent away from his family. The idea was that he should train as a barrister, but nothing came of it.

On return to Bengal, he began publishing in earnest his writing, including the letters written from Britain, which he would later call mere 'youthful bravado'. His first major volume of poetry appeared in mid-1882 and was welcomed by Bankim Chandra Chatterji [Chattopadhyay], the leading Bengali writer of the time. It was followed, in the period up to 1890, by more poetry, plays, songs, 'operas', a novel, stories and essays.

In the meantime, Rabindranath became a family man. He married Mrinalini in December 1883, and they produced a daughter, Madhurilata (Bela), in 1886, and a son, Rathindranath, in 1888. In the late 1880s, the family lived in different places in India for varying periods, but Tagore's base remained the family house at Jorasanko in north Calcutta, where he soon became the centre of artistic (especially musical) attention, helped by his talented elder brother, Jyotirindranath.

In April 1884, Kadambari, Jyotirindranath's wife, committed suicide. She had been Rabindranath's closest companion since he was a boy – many of the letters sent from Britain were meant for her – and her death was his first great loss. The experience helped to mature him as an artist.

### 1

#### *To Jyotirindranath Tagore<sup>1</sup>*

Rabindranath was only seventeen when he first went to England in 1878. Throughout his stay he wrote long and witty letters home describing English life and the life of Bengalis in England, comparing and contrasting the two; letters soon published, after editing by his elder brother Dwijendranath, in the Tagore family magazine *Bharati* and then, in 1881, in book form as *Yuop Prabashir Patra* (Letters from an Exile in Europe) – the first book to be written in colloquial, as opposed to literary, Bengali. It was 'an unlucky moment', the adult Rabindranath recalled in 1911, when writing his memoir of his early life:

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Now it is beyond my power to call them back. They were nothing but the outcome of youthful bravado. At that age the mind refuses to admit that its greatest cause for pride is in its power to understand, to accept, to respect; and that modesty is the best means of enlarging its domain. To admire and praise becomes a sign of weakness or surrender, and the desire to cry down and hurt and demolish with argument gives rise to a kind of intellectual fireworks. These attempts of mine to establish my superiority by revilement might have amused me today, had not their want of straightforwardness and common courtesies been too painful.<sup>2</sup>

Though the published letters were included in his collected works published in 1904, when Rabindranath republished the letters in 1936 as *Pashchatya Bhraman* (Western Journey), he further edited them very substantially. His abridged text was followed by Visva-Bharati until 1961, when the complete text of *Yurop Prabashir Patra* was republished.

Tagore was certainly correct in thinking the letters pointed: even today parts should make both English and Bengali readers wince. But they are also truthful, amusing and a unique record of the Anglo-Bengali cultural collision at the zenith of the British empire. They paint a most distinct picture of a sensitive young Bengali able to love English culture, especially English literature, quite independently of his feelings for Englishmen and women. As Rabi wryly remarks of an ordinary middle-aged English doctor whom he shocked by not knowing the purpose of a woman's muff: 'Dr M— must have thought, "It's quite absurd that someone who doesn't know what a muff is has read Shakespeare!"'<sup>3</sup>

But if he could be devastating about little Englanders and the artificial charms of Victorian Englishwomen, Rabi was even more critical of the Bengalis who sucked up to them. His letter selected here concerns this species, dubbed by Dwijendranath *ingabangas*, an almost untranslatable nickname meaning anglicised or England-worshipping Bengalis – anglomaniacs.<sup>4</sup>

Rabindranath's observations of the *ingabanga* appeared first in his letters from England – supplemented, as he admitted, by his fertile imagination. Later they entered his short stories too, as satirical characterisations (and later still his nephew, the artist Gaganendranath, produced a series of brilliant caricatures). Although pukka *ingabangas* were the product of their Victorian age – Rabindranath reckoned them 'almost extinct' in his preface to the revised 1936 edition of the letters from Europe – their descendants are recognisable in both India and Britain today.<sup>5</sup>

Following the example of Tagore himself in 1936, we have edited his letter – but not, as in his case, because we want to omit sharp criticisms, simply because the published letter in Bengali is very long and often needlessly repetitive.<sup>6</sup> (Excisions are indicated by three dots.) Furthermore, the original letter is lost; thus the available text is already an edited version. This is, however, the only letter in our selection of 346 letters that we have abridged.

[London?, UK]

[1879]<sup>7</sup>

[?]

By and by the ship arrives and docks at Southampton. The Bengali passengers have reached the shores of England. They set off for London. As they disembark from the



*Youthful bravado*

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train an English porter approaches them. Politely he enquires if he can be of service. As he takes down their luggage and ushers them into a carriage, the Bengali thinks to himself, How extraordinary! How polite the English are! That Englishmen could be so polite, he had no idea. He presses a whole shilling into the porter's hand. Never mind the cost, the newly arrived Bengali youth tells himself; the salaam of a white man was worth every penny of that shilling . . .

Before the Bengalis arrive in England, their friends who are already here have arranged rooms for them. As the Bengali enters his room, he sees a carpet on the floor, pictures hanging on the walls, a large mirror in its proper place, a sofa, stools and chairs, one or two glass flower vases, and to one side a baby piano. Good heavens! The Bengalis summon their friends: 'We aren't here as rich men, you know! My dear fellows, we haven't much cash on us, we can't afford to stay in rooms like these.' Their friends are highly amused, having completely forgotten their own precisely similar behaviour when *they* first arrived. Treating the new arrivals as throughgoing rice-eating rustics they tell them in voices full of experience, 'All rooms are like this over here.' This reminds the newcomers Bengalis of the rooms in our own country: damp, with a wooden cot covered by a wicker mat, here and there people puffing on hookahs, others lounging around a board game, their bodies bare to the waist, their shoes cast casually aside, while a cow lies tethered in the courtyard that has walls plastered in cow-dung cakes, and wet washing hangs drying over a verandah. For the first few days the Bengalis find themselves terribly embarrassed to sit on a chair or stool, lie on a bed, eat off a table or walk about a carpet. They sit very awkwardly on the sofas, fearful lest they make them dirty or damage them in any way. They imagine that the sofas have been put there for decoration, the owners surely cannot have intended them to be spoiled by use. But if that is their first impression of their rooms, there follows another impression, almost as immediate and even more significant.

In some smaller types of accommodation in England the figure called the 'landlord' still exists; but most Bengali lodgers must deal with a 'landlady'. Settling the rent, sorting out various problems, arranging food, is all down to the landlady. When my Bengali friends first stepped into their rooms, she quickly appeared, an Englishwoman waiting to greet them with the politest of 'good morning's. Hurriedly they returned the greeting in the most proper manner, and then stood struck dumb. And when they saw their various *ingabanga* friends strike up an easy conversation with the lady in question, their awkwardness turned to absolute awe. To think of it: they were talking to a real live memsahib, complete in shoes, hat and dress! Here was a sight to stir real respect in a Bengali heart. Would they ever acquire this courage shown by their *ingabanga* friends? Surely it was beyond the bounds of possibility.

Afterwards, having installed the newcomers, the *ingabanga* friends went off to their respective residences and spent the next few days making fun of Bengali ignorance – while the aforementioned landlady came each day to enquire, most politely, what my newly arrived friends liked to have, and what they did not like to have. My friends soon came to regard these occasions with real pleasure. One of them even told me that when he first ticked off this Englishwoman – ever so slightly – he felt thrilled with himself for the rest of the day. Notwithstanding, the sun did not rise in the West, mountains did not move and fire did not freeze that day . . .

To know the *ingabanga* – the England-worshipping Bengali – truly, one must observe

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him in three situations. One must see how he behaves with Englishmen; how he behaves with ordinary Bengalis; and how he behaves with fellow *ingabangas*. To see an *ingabanga* face to face with an Englishman is really a sight to gladden your eyes. The weight of courtesy in his words is like a burden making his shoulders droop; in debate he is the meekest and mildest of men; and if he is compelled to disagree, he will do so with an expression of extreme regret and with a thousand apologies. An *ingabanga* sitting with an Englishman, whether he be talking or listening, will appear in his every gesture and facial movement to be the acme of humility. But catch him with his own countrymen in his own sphere, and he will display genuine temper. One who has lived three years in England will regard himself as infinitely superior to one who has spent a mere one year here. Should the former type of resident happen to argue with the latter type, one may observe the 'three-year' man exert his prowess. Each word he utters, and each inflection he gives it, sounds like a dictum personally dictated to him by the lips of goddess Saraswati.<sup>8</sup> Anyone who dares to contradict him he will bluntly label 'mistaken', or even 'ignorant' – to his face . . .

Had you seen for yourself the thorough research these people put into which way up a knife or fork should be held when dining, your respect would surely be still further increased. What the currently fashionable cut of a jacket is, whether today's gentleman wears his trousers tight or loose, whether one should dance the waltz, the polka or the mazurka, and whether meat should follow fish or vice versa – these people know all these things with unerring accuracy. Their preoccupation with trivia – what is and is not 'done' – is far greater than that of the natives of this country. If you happen to use the wrong knife to eat fish, an Englishman would not think much of it; he would put it down to your being a foreigner. But if an *ingabanga* Bengali saw you, he would probably have to take smelling salts. Were you to drink champagne out of a sherry glass, he would stare at you aghast, as if your ignorant blunder had totally upset the world's tranquillity. And were you, God forbid, to wear a morning coat in the evening, had he a magistrate's power he would condemn you to solitary confinement . . .

There is one other special feature of the *ingabanga* I must tell you about. The majority of those who come here do not confess if they are married – because married men naturally command less attention from unmarried ladies. By pretending to be bachelors they can mix much more freely in society and have much more fun, otherwise their unmarried companions would never permit such goings on. There is a lot to be gained by declaring oneself unattached.

No doubt there are many *ingabanga* Bengalis who do not fit my description. I have written only of the general characteristics of the species as I have spotted them.

[?]

[Rabi?]

Source: *RR*, I, pp. 553–60. The original MS is lost.

1 Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849–1925): musician, composer, artist, poet, dramatist, translator into Bengali from Sanskrit, English and French: fifth son of Debendranath Tagore. See Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (London, 1995), pp. 38–9.

No addressee of this letter is given – none is given throughout *Yurop Prabashir Patra* – but Jyotirindranath was the likely recipient, or his wife Kadambari Devi (see letter 2). The dedication of the