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

Edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson

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Interest in the life and work of the Nobel prize-winning writer Rabindranath Tagore is now enjoying a revival after many years of neglect outside India. Tagore wrote thousands of letters in both Bengali and English. Most of the significant Bengali letters have been published in the half-century since his death, but not translated, while few of the noteworthy English letters are in print. Those English letters that are in print have appeared mainly in journals, magazines and newspapers that are unavailable to most scholars. They are also, generally speaking, inadequately presented. The Bengali letters are, of course, accessible only to scholars who read Bengali, and mostly lack adequate introductions and notes too.

This book, which consists of about 350 letters spanning Tagore's entire life, is the first to reveal the range of his letters to English readers. Individually introduced and comprehensively annotated, the letters have been selected to show as many facets of Tagore's experience, interests and ideas as possible, and to impart a new understanding of the complexity of his personality.

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Rabindranath Tagore, in Shantiniketan, 1938/9

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*Selected letters of*  
*Rabindranath Tagore*

Edited by

KRISHNA DUTTA and ANDREW ROBINSON

with a foreword by Amartya Sen



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*For Anita*  
*who also has Rabindranath 'in custody'*

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It is a long while since I have written to you but you have not been out of my thoughts. Your *Autobiography* especially has been a great pleasure. I wish you could give us the latter half – your thoughts on your own life work, and on the different movements of modern Bengal. The more is now written for Bengal, the more it would interest Europe.

W. B. Yeats to Rabindranath Tagore,  
London, 24 April 1918

A number of my Bengali letters written in my young days had been collected some years ago. I gave my permission to publish them when I was convinced that they could be of great help to explain my writings which appeared unintelligible to some part of my readers. My nephew . . . has translated these letters into English. They cover those very years which were most productive for me and therefore they act like a footpath in my life history, unconsciously laid by the treading of my thoughts. I feel sure these letters, when published, will present to you pictures and ideas concerning me and my surroundings more vividly and truly than anything I have yet written.

Rabindranath Tagore to W. B. Yeats,  
Shantiniketan, 17 June 1918

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## FOREWORD

Amartya Sen

If something is 'secret', I was told at Oxford, then it can be shared with only one person at a time. A letter, similarly, is an essay written for one person at a time. Most letters are meant to go no further; indeed had they all circulated, the world would have perished under the weight of stupendous boredom. However, many letters, not unlike Oxford secrets, are destined to become – sometimes even planned to become – common knowledge.

Rabindranath Tagore belonged to a tradition – and to an age – in which the art of letter writing for eventual public communication was in full bloom. While many of the letters in this book, selected by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, were intended only for the addressee, quite a few of them were clearly meant to be shared. The letters bring out the effectiveness of this special genre. Despite the eventual possibility of sharing, the form of a letter can give its content an immediacy and directness that would seem inappropriate in essays meant directly for 'all'. The reader of the eventually published letter has to take note of the contingency of the context, but the author does not have to build the context into the content of the letter itself (as would be demanded of an essay for publication in a general journal). We find here Rabindranath explaining and defending his beliefs and speculations with great care, in letters addressed mostly to people he cared about, whose general concerns provided the particular occasion for addressing one issue rather than another. We get a close and undetached account of the beliefs, commitments and hopes of one of the most creative writers of this century.

Like all such selections, this one too reflects a compromise between distinct interests and pursuits which would demand quite different selections. While some readers with particular interests might wish that more letters were included in some fields rather than others, we have here a wide-ranging selection that should serve as a good introduction to Tagore's general ideas for the uninitiated and yet offer something substantial even to the well initiated. There is no 'optimum subset' of letters uniquely deserving of priority in publication, and a compromise has to be made paying attention to range as well as depth and reach. The compromise reflected here serves this purpose well.

### **An assigned identity?**

Rabindranath saw himself primarily as a poet. To a great extent, that is also how others saw him; for example, the citation for his Nobel prize focused on his poetry. And yet



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he was a great short-story writer and novelist, a powerful author of essays and lectures, a composer whose songs reverberate around a lot of India and much of Bangladesh, and also an outstanding painter, whose pictures are now beginning to receive the acclaim that they have all along deserved. This breadth in the choice of medium is matched by his extensive interests in ideas and arguments. His essays have ranged over literature, politics, culture, social organisation, religious beliefs, philosophical claims, international relations, and a lot else.

Given this range, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the standard image of Tagore in the West is the recurrent attempt to see him in extremely narrow terms, as ‘the great mystic from the East’, with a putative message for the West, which some would welcome, others dislike, and still others find profoundly boring. To some extent, this Tagore was the West’s own creation, following a tradition of message-seeking from the East, particularly from India, which – as Hegel put it – had ‘existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans’. What had happened in the two previous centuries in the hands of Schlegel, Schelling, Herder, Schopenhauer and many others, with attributed wisdom from India first praised and then denounced, happened again – this time to Rabindranath. Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats and others, who had led the chorus of adoration of the almost unfathomable spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry, moved soon to firm neglect or even shrill denunciation.

Tagore himself played a somewhat bemused part in this ‘boom and bust’, accepting the massive praise with much surprise as well as pleasure, and then receiving the denunciations with even greater surprise and barely concealed pain. He had a deep respect for western intellectual circles, and for their commitment to fairness, even though from time to time he registered his protest at the crudeness of the excited treatment he was receiving (as he wrote to C. F. Andrews in 1920: ‘These people . . . are like drunkards who are afraid of their lucid intervals’).<sup>1</sup> And he did think that in the Indian cultural traditions there was wisdom of real importance, including universalism, toleration and the need for directness in seeking God (an idea that is plentifully present in *Gitanjali*, the poems that first caught the western imagination).

Rabindranath also thought, especially in the context of the brutalities of the First World War, that the co-existence of many cultures and many contradictory beliefs in India’s past did have something to offer both to contemporary India and to the world about living with each other despite differences. But he had many other things to say, and while he said very practical things, in plain English, about nationalism, war and peace, cross-cultural education, the role of toleration, the need for openness and so on, the listening in the West was firmly tuned to more other-worldly themes. Sometimes when people came to hear him on one of these grander, transcendental themes, and got instead lectures on right political behaviour, there was, as E. P. Thompson reports, some resentment, particularly of his criticism of contemporary politics, ‘at \$700 a scold’.<sup>2</sup>

**Letters and themes**

Some of the letters tell us about the themes that Rabindranath wanted to talk about in his international tours, and sometimes express his frustration at not being heard.

Others deal with different issues more linked to preoccupations at home, in India. His attitude to the nationalist movements included sympathy and commitment as well as deep criticism of narrowness and chauvinism. His insistence on the need to be both strongly local and strongly global – at the same time – is a persistent theme that influenced his practical work in politics, education, social reform and literature, and this theme as well as its implications get a good airing in the letters published here. His forceful criticism as well as deep admiration of the British also receive much attention in the letters. Above all, the image of the single-minded Tagore created by his early admirers in the West gets handsomely buried under the massive expressions of his interests, commitments, speculations and proposals on an astonishing variety of subjects.

A collection of letters cannot, however, give a representative view of an author's work, especially in the case of a person whose poetry is as important as Tagore's is. The letters are inevitably more geared to prose than to poetry, and to non-fiction over fiction. While readers will find a few things of interest in what Tagore himself thought of his poetry, novels and short stories, and how he explained his inspirations and objectives, it is on deliberative subjects that the letters provide the greatest insight. In a brief foreword such as this, it would be futile to try to cover, even catalogue, all the themes that Tagore takes up in these letters. Instead, I shall choose a small number of subjects in which, I believe, Rabindranath's ideas remain particularly relevant today.

### **On nationalism**

Tagore was strongly involved in protesting against the Raj on a number of occasions, and his insistence on the need for Indian independence was firmly rooted. His letter of 1919 to the viceroy, requesting that he should be relieved of his knighthood, in protest against the Amritsar massacre, includes an analysis of the brutal nature of the alien rule of India.<sup>3</sup> Political leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru expressed great appreciation for what Tagore did to strengthen the struggle for independence.<sup>4</sup>

And yet Rabindranath persistently rebelled against the sectarian forms that Indian nationalist movements took, and this made him withdraw, again and again, from an active role in the contemporary political movements. For example, while he took a leading part in the agitations against the British decision to partition Bengal in 1905 – a movement that was very important in the emergence of the nationalist struggle later on – he felt compelled to withdraw from it as he saw the forces of resistance turn chauvinist and even lead to violent action against particular groups within the country. His attitude to Mahatma Gandhi's 'noncooperation' movement remained partly – but firmly – critical, and he resented the 'patriotism' of the movement, while wanting to support its stress on self-reliance.

Tagore's censure of patriotism has been a persistent theme in his writings. As early as 1908, he put his position succinctly in a letter defending himself against criticism from the wife (Abala Bose) of a great Indian scientist (Jagadish Chandra Bose): 'Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over

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humanity as long as I live.<sup>5</sup> In his immensely successful novel *Ghare Baire (The Home and the World)*, Nikhil expresses what Rabindranath clearly stood for: 'I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it.'<sup>6</sup>

Rabindranath's dual attitude to nationalism is well illustrated by his reaction to nationalism in Japan. He saw the need to build the self-confidence of a defeated and humiliated people (as in the case of India), and of people left behind by developments elsewhere (as in the case of Japan before its new emergence). He noted at the very beginning of his lecture on 'Nationalism in Japan', given in Japan in 1916, that 'the worst form of bondage is the bondage of dejection, which keeps men hopelessly chained in loss of faith in themselves'. He expressed great admiration for the fact that Japan 'in giant strides left centuries of inaction behind, overtaking the present time in its foremost achievement'. This was inspirational for other nations outside the West, and it 'has broken the spell under which we lay in torpor for ages, taking it to be the normal condition of certain races living in certain geographical limits'.<sup>7</sup>

But then Tagore went on to criticise the emergence of strong nationalism in Japan and its new role as a possible imperialist. As E. P. Thompson notes, 'Tagore's outspoken criticisms did not please Japanese audiences and the welcome given to him on first arrival soon cooled.'<sup>8</sup> Twenty-one years later, in 1937, when Tagore received a letter from an anti-British Indian revolutionary in Japan requesting support for efforts for Indian independence in warlike Japan, Tagore returned to the same theme, with fresh evidence of what he had feared earlier. He replied to Rash Behari Bose:

Your cable has caused me many restless hours, for it hurts me very much to have to ignore your appeal. I wish you had asked for my cooperation in a cause against which my spirit did not protest. I know, in making this appeal, you counted on my great regard for the Japanese for, I, along with the rest of Asia, did once admire and look up to Japan and did once fondly hope that in Japan Asia had at last discovered its challenge to the West, that Japan's new strength would be consecrated in safeguarding the culture of the East against alien interests. But Japan has not taken long to betray that rising hope and repudiate all that seemed significant in her wonderful, and, to us symbolic, awakening, and has now become itself a worse menace to the defenceless peoples of the East.<sup>9</sup>

### India and Indianness

Tagore's 'dual' attitude to nationalism – supporting its emphasis on self-respect but rejecting its patriotism – was not an easy one to get across, even in India. His criticism of Japan and of Britain were received with easy understanding in India, but when similar criticisms were made of India and Indians, there were many attempts to see Rabindranath as a lukewarm Indian. But Tagore remained deeply committed to his Indianness, while rejecting both patriotism and the advocacy of cultural isolation.

Isaiah Berlin summarises Tagore's complex position on Indian nationalism in these words:

Tagore stood fast on the narrow causeway, and did not betray his vision of the difficult truth. He condemned romantic overattachment to the past, what he called the tying of

India to the past 'like a sacrificial goat tethered to a post', and he accused men who displayed it – they seemed to him reactionary – of not knowing what true political freedom was, pointing out that it is from English thinkers and English books that the very notion of political liberty was derived. But against cosmopolitanism he maintained that the English stood on their own feet, and so must Indians. In 1917 he once more denounced the danger of 'leaving everything to the unalterable will of the Master', be he Brahmin or Englishman.<sup>10</sup>

This duality is well reflected also in Tagore's attitude to cultural diversity. He wanted Indians to learn what was going on elsewhere, how others lived, what they valued, and so on, while remaining interested and involved in their own culture and heritage. Indeed, in his educational writings this synthesis is strongly stressed. It can also be found in his advice to Indian students abroad. For example, he wrote the following to his son-in-law Nagendranath in 1907 when he had gone to America to study agriculture:

To get on familiar terms with the local people is a part of your education. To know only agriculture is not enough; you must know America too. Of course if, in the process of knowing America, one begins to lose one's identity and falls into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian, it is preferable to stay in a locked room.<sup>11</sup>

Despite his great pride in Indian traditions and culture, Rabindranath was often deeply critical of many things happening in India. Towards the end of his life he was particularly saddened by the fact that India's traditional problems (including poverty and hunger) were being supplemented by politically organised communal violence. His letter to Leonard Elmhirst written in December 1939 expresses his concerns:

But what about India? It does not need a defeatist to feel deeply anxious about the future of millions who with all their innate culture and their peaceful traditions are being simultaneously subjected to hunger, disease, exploitations foreign and indigenous, and the seething discontents of communalism. Our people do not possess the vitality that you have in Europe, and the crisis, even before this war started in the West, has become acute in India. Needless to say, interested groups led by ambition and outside instigation, are today using the communal motive for destructive political ends.<sup>12</sup>

### Traditionalism, Gandhi and Tagore

Tagore's dualist position applied to the issue of tradition and modernity as well. Isaiah Berlin, once again, captures Tagore's position well when he describes Rabindranath as 'choosing the difficult middle path, drifting neither to the Scylla of radical modernism, nor the Charybdis of proud and gloomy traditionalism'.<sup>13</sup> This description can be supplemented by noting that Tagore's position involves something more than just avoiding each extreme, and includes combining a non-extreme and non-exclusive version of both traditionalism and modernism within oneself. Tagore expresses the tyranny of being bound to the past in his amusing yet profoundly serious short story, 'Kartar Bhoot' (The Ghost of the Leader), where the wishes of a respected but dead leader make present lives impossibly restrained.

The issue of traditionalism was a subject of some tension with Mahatma Gandhi. Tagore had the greatest admiration for Gandhi as a person and as a political leader,

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but also harboured some scepticism of his traditionalism (in addition to disagreeing on nationalism). Many illustrations of his admiration as well as reservation can be found in the letters included in this selection.

Tagore's 1938 essay on 'Gandhi the man', included here in appendix 3, shows the combination well. The admiration for Mahatma Gandhi is at the profoundest level. What he describes as 'the significant fact about Gandhiji' finds the following expression in Tagore's words: 'Great as he is as a politician, as an organiser, as a leader of men, as a moral reformer, he is greater than all these as a man, because none of these aspects and activities limits his humanity. They are rather inspired and sustained by it.'<sup>14</sup> And yet there is an equally profound division between the two. Here is Tagore's view of what he could not agree with:

We who often glorify our tendency to ignore reason, installing in its place blind faith, valuing it as spiritual, are ever paying for its cost with the obscuration of our mind and destiny. I blamed Mahatmaji for exploiting this irrational force of credulity in our people, which might have had a quick result in a superstructure, while sapping the foundation. Thus began my estimate of Mahatmaji, as the guide of our nation, and it is fortunate for me that it did not end there.<sup>15</sup>

But while it 'did not end there', that difference of vision was a powerful divider of the respective attitudes of Gandhi and Tagore on a variety of issues.

Rabindranath remained unconvinced of the merit of Gandhiji's attempt at making spinning at home (with the *charka* – the primitive spinning wheel) an important part of India's self-realization. 'The *charka* does not require anyone to think; one simply turns the wheel of the antiquated invention endlessly, using the minimum of judgment and stamina.' He could not see how the search for 'ways to liberate the country' can be helped by 'the ideology of the *charka*'.<sup>16</sup>

Tagore was more gentle regarding his difference with Gandhiji on the latter's attitude to sexual life.

[Gandhiji] condemns sexual life as inconsistent with the moral progress of man, and has a horror of sex as great as that of the author of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, but, unlike Tolstoy, he betrays no abhorrence of the sex that tempts his kind. In fact, his tenderness for women is one of the noblest and most consistent traits of his character, and he counts among the women of his country some of his best and truest comrades in the great movement he is leading.<sup>17</sup>

An occasion on which Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore rather severely clashed with each other, which is the subject of appendix 2 of this book, involved their totally different attitudes to science. A devastating earthquake in Bihar, which killed many people, occurred in January 1934. Gandhi, who was then deeply involved in the fight against untouchability, decided to turn this tragic event into a positive move. He described the earthquake as 'divine chastisement sent by God for our sins' – in particular the sins of untouchability. Tagore, who was equally committed to the removal of untouchability, protested vehemently against this interpretation of an event that had caused suffering and death to so many innocent people, and he also hated the implicit epistemology of seeing earthquakes as an ethical phenomenon.

In the exchange that followed on this subject with Gandhiji, Tagore expressed his dismay at this association of 'ethical principles with cosmic phenomena'. He also wondered how, if Gandhi were right, so many atrocities could have occurred in the past without precipitating any natural catastrophe:

Though we cannot point out any period of human history that is free from iniquities of the darkest kind, we still find citadels of malevolence yet remain unshaken, that the factories that cruelly thrive upon abject poverty and the ignorance of the famished cultivators, or prison-houses in all parts of the world where a penal system is pursued, which most often is a special form of licensed criminality, still stand firm. It only shows that the law of gravitation does not in the least respond to the stupendous load of callousness that accumulates till the moral foundations of our society begin to show dangerous cracks and civilisations are undermined.<sup>18</sup>

### **Interpretational epistemology**

While Tagore was totally opposed not only to ignoring modern science in trying to understand physical phenomena, and particularly critical of giving ethical failures a role in explaining natural catastrophes, his views on epistemology were interestingly heterodox. The report of his conversation with Einstein, included here in appendix 1, brings out how insistent Tagore was in interpreting truth through observations and reflective concepts. In this framework, assertions about truth in the absence of anyone to observe or perceive or conceptualize it appeared to Tagore to be deeply problematic. When Einstein asks, 'If there were no human beings any more, the Apollo Belvedere no longer would be beautiful?', Tagore asserts, 'No.' Going further – and into much more interesting territory – Einstein says, 'I agree with regard to this conception of beauty, but not with regard to truth.' Tagore's response is: 'Why not? Truth is realised through men?'<sup>19</sup>

This is, alas, not the occasion to discuss this engaging issue further. We could ask for clarification as to the sense in which 'realisation' is being used. Some would compare Tagore's position with certain recent philosophical works on the nature of reality, particularly Hilary Putnam's argument that 'truth depends on conceptual schemes and it is nonetheless "real truth"'.<sup>20</sup> Tagore's speculations on these issues, which were invariably interesting, were never systematically followed.

### **Educational commitments**

The dispute with Mahatma Gandhi on the Bihar earthquake touched on a subject that was closest to Tagore's passions and commitments: the importance of being educated in science as well as literature and the humanities. Much of Rabindranath's life was spent in developing the school he had founded at Santiniketan. The '\$700 a scold' to which E. P. Thompson had referred (in describing Tagore's lectures in America) were accepted by Tagore on behalf of the school, which was perpetually short of money.

Tagore attempted to reflect his dual emphases, mentioned earlier, in the educational

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arrangements at Santiniketan. There were strong elements of nationalism in the focus on Indian traditions, including classics, and in the use of Bengali rather than English as the medium of instruction, and at the same time, there were many courses on western culture and traditions, and facilities also for studying China, Japan and the Middle East. Tagore was happy that many foreigners came to Santiniketan and that the fusion of studies did seem to work. In October 1920, he wrote to C. F. Andrews: 'Now I know more clearly than ever before that Shantiniketan belongs to all the world and we shall have to be worthy of this great fact.'<sup>21</sup>

I am personally rather partial to seeing Tagore as an educationist, having been educated myself at Santiniketan. There was something totally remarkable about the ease with which discussions in the school could move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical western thought and to China, Japan and elsewhere. The celebration of *variety* is also in sharp contrast with the cultural conservatism and separatism that has tended to grip India from time to time. Tagore's own vision of the contemporary world, with its give and take, has close parallels with the inclusive vision presented by the great film director Satyajit Ray, an outstanding alumnus of Santiniketan.<sup>22</sup>

**Freedom of mind**

I end with a final remark on the importance of freedom in the broadest sense in Rabindranath Tagore's thinking. His attitude to politics and culture, nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernity, and cross-cultural education, can all be seen in the light of his strong attachment to the importance of living and reasoning in freedom. His support for nationalist movements came from that commitment – against the unfreedom of an alien rule – and so did his reservations about patriotism, which can narrow the freedom with which one can accept ideas from the whole world and have commitments towards people who are distant as well as those who are near.

In a little-remembered interview, given by Tagore to *Izvestia* in 1930, he criticised the unfreedom that he saw in Russia, despite his admiration for many other things happening there, including educational expansion and economic development (the English translation of his *Letters from Russia* was banned by the British Raj largely because he had compared favourably Russian policy – especially educational policy – towards Soviet Asia with British policy in India):

I must ask you: Are you doing your ideal a service by arousing in the minds of those under your training anger, class-hatred, and revengefulness against those whom you consider to be your enemies? . . . Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth; terror hopelessly kills it . . . For the sake of humanity I hope you may never create a vicious force of violence, which will go on weaving an interminable chain of violence and cruelty . . . You have tried to destroy many of the other evils of [the czarist] period. Why not try to destroy this one also.<sup>23</sup>

This critique remains valuable – sadly – even today, for the world in which we live. It is in the defence of freedom and fearless reasoning that we can find the lasting voice of Rabindranath Tagore.

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*Notes*

- 1 See p. 246.
- 2 E. P. Thompson, 'Introduction', in Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London, 1991), p. 11.
- 3 See pp. 223–4. See also RT's letters to C. F. Andrews around this time, pp. 219–22.
- 4 See for example Nehru's description of RT in *The Discovery of India* (Delhi, 1946; centenary edn, 1989), pp. 340–1.
- 5 See p. 72.
- 6 *The Home and the World* (London, 1919), p. 22/RR, VIII, p. 157. Martha Nussbaum initiates her wide-ranging critique of patriotism (in a debate that is joined by Kwame Anthonie Appiah, Sissela Bok, Judith Butler, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hilary Putnam, Elaine Scarry, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer and others) by quoting this passage from *The Home and the World*. She goes on to say: 'I believe, as do Tagore and his character Nikhil, that this emphasis on patriotic pride is both morally dangerous and, ultimately, subversive of some of the worthy goals patriotism sets out to serve – for example, the goal of national unity in devotion to worthy moral ideas of justice and equality' (Martha C. Nussbaum et al., *For Love of Country*, Boston, 1996, pp. 3–4).
- 7 Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 17–18.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 9 See pp. 485–6.
- 10 Isaiah Berlin, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the consciousness of nationality', in his *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (Henry Hardy ed.; London, 1996), p. 265.
- 11 See p. 67.
- 12 See p. 515. Since the term 'communalism' used in India may not be readily understood, I should explain that the reference is to sectarian conduct and violence between members of different religious communities, such as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.
- 13 Berlin, *Sense of Reality*, pp. 260–1.
- 14 See p. 539.
- 15 See pp. 538–9.
- 16 See p. 365.
- 17 See p. 539.
- 18 See p. 537.
- 19 See p. 531.
- 20 Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, Ill., 1987). See also Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York, 1989).
- 21 See p. 240.
- 22 See Satyajit Ray, *Our Films Their Films* (New Delhi, 1976). I have tried to discuss these issues in my Satyajit Ray Memorial Lecture, 'Our Culture, Their Culture', *New Republic*, 1 April 1996.
- 23 The interview (in English) was published in the *Manchester Guardian* and is reproduced in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (London, 1995), p. 297. It was not published in *Izvestia* until 1988.



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This book has grown out of at least three other books. In 1990, we retranslated *Glimpses of Bengal*, Rabindranath Tagore's vibrant letters to his niece, and in 1991 we edited and published the correspondence of Tagore and Leonard K. Elmhirst, the founder of Dartington. At the same time, we were researching Tagore's life for our biography, *The Myriad-Minded Man*. Burying ourselves in the wonderful collections of the Tagore archives at Rabindra Bhavan, in the beautiful setting of Shantiniketan, we discovered that Tagore's letters, particularly his English letters, were a relatively untapped resource. We also turned up a number of significant letters in other, non-Indian archives that were not at all familiar. Some of these letters found their way into quotations in the biography, but a great many important ones did not. Having finished writing the biography, it was clear to us that a selection of these letters – both those written in English and those written in Bengali – ought to be made available to a wider circle than simply scholars devoted to Tagore.

After surviving various pitfalls in both Britain and India, the project received a welcome from Gordon Johnson, general editor of *The New Cambridge History of India* and chairman of the Cambridge University Press Syndicate. His comment that the publication of Tagore's letters would help to 'unwrap' a figure whose true importance has been unjustly obscured by poor translations and his earlier cult reputation echoed our own feeling. As E. P. Thompson, another advocate of the project, observed in 1993 just before his death: 'The West is still, after half a century, groping in the half-light to discern the features of Tagore's genius.' We hope that this book will serve to increase the light level.

In Bengal, we are grateful to the authorities of Visva-Bharati, Tagore's university, for giving permission to reproduce the letters, in particular to the director of the publishing department, Ashoke Mukhopadhyay. The generous assistance of Amartya Sen, whose family has close links with Tagore and Shantiniketan, was invaluable in this regard.

Many people have been of help in answering the detailed queries that inevitably arise in editing a book of letters, either because they knew the answer or because they could put us in touch with someone who did. Nirad C. Chaudhuri heads our list of debts: not only could we draw upon his unique knowledge of Bengali and western literature of Tagore's time, we also benefited from his formidable memory for Bengali life in the first half of this century. Despite his great age, he never failed to respond to questions with prompt and entertaining letters.

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After Satyajit Ray finished his deep and stirring documentary film, *Rabindranath Tagore*, made for the 1961 Tagore birth centenary, he wrote a letter to a film-maker friend in Sri Lanka: '*Tagore* was a back-breaking chore with research, scenario, shooting, editing each an exhausting and time-consuming process, and the whole taking up twice as long as a normal feature.' Having finished editing this selection of Tagore's letters, we can sympathise. We also feel a bit like Deven, devotee of the great, dying Urdu poet Nur in that poignant and comic novel, *In Custody*, by Anita Desai – to whom this book is dedicated. Deven 'had imagined he was taking Nur's poetry into safe custody, and not realised that if he was to be the custodian of Nur's genius, then Nur would become his custodian and place him in custody too. This alliance could be considered an unendurable burden – or else a shining honour. Both demanded an equal strength.' Working on Rabindranath Tagore over the past ten and more years has been both an honour and a burden for us. This, we expect, is our last book on him.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

Any editor of Tagore's writing in English is faced with the problem of whether to leave his text entirely as Tagore wrote it or instead to correct his slips of grammar and syntax, so as to bring out his meaning better, in the manner of his early editors, beginning with W. B. Yeats. With some reservations, we have adopted the latter approach – but we have altered Tagore's original *only* where the English is unclear or ambiguous, not where his grammatical slip, such as a dropped definite article or a slightly wrong preposition, makes no difference to the sense. Changes are indicated by square brackets, except for cuts and changes in punctuation, which are not indicated.

None of the letters has been abridged, except for letter 1 (see p. 8 for our reasons). However, Tagore himself edited his letters to his niece Indira, and we have been obliged to follow the fullest available Bengali text. Other letters contain occasional omissions or obscurities, which we have indicated with three dots.

Spellings of non-Indian words have been standardised throughout the book, and so have the spellings of non-Indian names. The spelling of Indian words and names in the English letters presents more of a problem. While the personal names have been standardised, i.e. the name of any one individual, e.g. Subhash Chandra Bose, is spelt the same way wherever it appears, the place names have been left as Tagore spelt them, with their modern standard form added afterwards in square brackets, where this differs significantly from the old spelling, e.g. Chandernagore [Chandannagar]. Place names in the Bengali letters have been converted into their modern standard form, e.g. Bardhaman, not Burdwan. Since there is no agreed standard form for Shantiniketan/Santiniketan, we have used Shantiniketan in our own text, but left the spelling used by Tagore in his letter (he used both spellings of the place serendipitously).

The transliteration of Bengali words and names in English is a tricky and unsatisfactory business. We have spelt them all without scholarly but cumbersome diacritical marks, and have tried instead to use a spelling that reproduces the sound not the orthography of Bengali. In the case of 's', since almost every 's' in Bengali is pronounced 'sh', rather than employing the conventional but confusing 's' and 'sh' to represent the three Bengali letters for 's', we have transliterated all three letters as 'sh' – except where there is an established spelling, as in the word sari, the name of the Tagore house Jorasanko, or the name of Tagore's brother, Satyendranath.

### Salutations

The translation of salutations at the beginning and end of letters is difficult, because they generally have a customary meaning different from their literal meaning, which also alters over time. We have therefore not translated Tagore's salutations, with the occasional exception. He used a wide variety, many of them Sanskritic, making their translation even more problematic than usual. However, their literal meanings and/or close English equivalents are given below in alphabetical order:

<i>Anugata</i>	Obediently
<i>Apnader</i>	Yours
<i>Apnar</i>	Yours
<i>Apnar sneher</i>	Yours affectionately
<i>Ashirbbadak</i>	With my blessing
<i>Bahumanbhajaneshu</i>	To one most revered
<i>Bhabadiya</i>	Yours ever
<i>Bhai</i>	Brother
<i>Bhai Chhota Bou</i>	My dear little wife
<i>Bhai Dada</i>	My dear elder brother
<i>Bhai Meja Bouthan</i>	My dear elder sister-in-law
<i>Bhai Meja Dada</i>	My dear elder brother
<i>Binayshambhashanpurbbak nibedan</i>	With cordial and humble submission
<i>Briddha</i>	Old girl
<i>Ekanta shubhanudhyayi</i>	Sincere well-wisher
<i>Kabi bandhu</i>	My poet friend
<i>Kalyaniyashu</i>	To her who deserves my good wishes
<i>Kalyaniyeshu</i>	To him who deserves my good wishes
<i>Pratinamashkar nibedan</i>	With cordial and humble submission
<i>Pritishambhashanametat</i>	With cordial greetings
<i>Priya bandhu</i>	Dear friend
<i>Shraddhashpadeshu</i>	My revered friend
<i>Shubhakangkshi</i>	One who wishes you well
<i>Shubhanudhyayi</i>	Well-wisher
<i>Shuhridwar</i>	My excellent friend
<i>Shuhrittameshu</i>	My great-hearted friend
<i>Snehanurakta</i>	Yours affectionately
<i>Snehashakta</i>	Yours affectionately
<i>Sneher</i>	Affectionately
<i>Tomader</i>	Yours
<i>Tomar</i>	Your
<i>Tomar sneher</i>	Your affectionate

## ABBREVIATIONS

Rabindranath Tagore is abbreviated to RT throughout the notes on the letters, while the following abbreviations are used for books and journals:

<i>CMG</i>	<i>Calcutta Municipal Gazette</i> (Tagore Memorial Special Supplement), 13 Sept. 1941
<i>CP</i>	<i>Chithipatra</i> (letters)
<i>CPB</i>	<i>Chhinnapatrabali</i> (letters)
<i>CWMG</i>	<i>Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>Gitabitan</i> (collected songs of RT)
<i>MR</i>	<i>Modern Review</i> (Calcutta monthly)
<i>My Rem</i>	<i>My Reminiscences</i> (memoirs of RT)
<i>RR</i>	<i>Rabindra Rachanabali</i> (collected works of RT)
<i>RR (AS)</i>	<i>Rabindra Rachanabali (Achalita Shangraha)</i> (addenda to collected works)
<i>TUM</i>	<i>Towards Universal Man</i> (essays)
<i>VBN</i>	<i>Visva-Bharati News</i>
<i>VBP</i>	<i>Visva-Bharati Patrika</i>
<i>VBQ</i>	<i>Visva-Bharati Quarterly</i>

The abbreviations for the manuscript sources, given in square brackets, e.g. [London], are listed in the bibliography on p. 541.