

Gitanjali, Tagore & London

Jawhar Sircar

On the 16 th June 1912, Rabindranath Tagore reached London aftersailing for three weeks. He had utilized the journey to complete the last lotof his translations and was relieved that he had finally made it. His disappointment for not being permitted to travel in March of that year, on health grounds was thus overcome.

As Edward Thompson reported ^[1], Tagore had recounted to him that he had been compelled after March, to take rest at picturesque Silaidahaon the mighty river, Padma, in the present-day Bangladesh. “I simply whiled away time”, said Tagore, “translating the Gitanjali songs. I felt sure my translations were only schoolboy exercises”.

As many of us know, it is these “school boy exercises” in translating his poems from Bengali to English that would soon make him the first Asian, indeed the first ‘coloured man’ to win the coveted Nobel Prize. But very few people know that neither his award nor the Gitanjali would have seen the light of the day, had it not been for the honesty of the English people and the efficiency of the London Tube. His son, Rathindranath, has written that both his father and he were so engrossed in their first experience of travelling by the ‘underground’ train, from Charing Cross station, that they completely forgot to pick up their attaché case. It contained a lot of valuable papers which included the manuscripts of English translation of his poems, that would later be published as Gitanjali and the Gardener. It is only the next day when Rabindranath asked his son for the manuscripts, that they realized that the leather case was missing!

“With my heart in my mouth”, wrote Rathindranath, the son, “I hastened to the Left Luggage Office. One can imagine my relief, when at last I discovered the lost property there”.^[2]

We have other interesting stories about Tagore, London and the Nobel Prize. “The chief significance of Mr. Tagore’s triumph”, wrote The Birmingham Post is “that it marks the culmination of the development of an offshoot of English literature” ^[3]. There were some murmurs as Thomas Hardy had not been awarded the Nobel Prize, and in Germany, there was a lot of disappointment about a famous German missing the prize. The Daily News and Leader of 14 November, 1914, felt that Tagore was an easy and uncontroversial choice because “the great themes of the arts are the same for the Orient as for the Occident” ^[4].

While many in England were surprised at the eloquence, imagery and aesthetics of Tagore’s poetry, even after “it’s necessary loss in translation”, some others saw the distinct stamp of a ‘Christian ethic’ in the work. Infact, William Canton had commented that it was “impossible to accept the poems as Hindu pure and simple, unless Indian religion had been grossly misrepresented”. For

Canton, they were “essentially Christian in their feeling”.

Soon the imperial discourse took over, and The Spectator of 14 thFebruary 1914 stated “unfortunately, Tagore does not acknowledge his debt to Christianity” and asserted “that India has nothing to learn from Europe on the spiritual side”. Tagore’s claim that he was influenced by the ancient Vedas was condemned as his “inexclusive ingratitude to his debt to Western teaching”.

This reached a peak when Valentine Chirolan, the Calcutta based correspondent for The Times, mentioned quite acidly that it was ‘Yeats’ magic’ of translation that got Tagore the Nobel Prize. It is well known that the Brahmo Samaj of Tagore's family had much in common with Christian Unitarianism, but Tagore strove to rise above religions: he may not have succeeded fully. But, let us not dwell on the past, and the critical.

Tagore has, indeed, acknowledged more than once, the contribution of England in the shaping of his world view, and in enriching his mind. In fact, one of the first things that Rabindranath did upon reaching home from England was to play Scottish ballad-music in his teenage composition, Balmiki Pratibha, a dance drama. He visited England several times and felt perfectly at home, because intense criticism was something that the poet had long learned to live with: both at home, and overseas.

References

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