

Rabindranath Tagore and the English Language

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore India's cultural ambassador and poet laureate grew up at a time when the Tagore family was very creative and intellectually active in Bengal. Tagore records in his autobiography his distaste and dislike for the English language as a boy and also classrooms and rote learning. During his teens he was influenced by the writings of the Romantics, and he became receptive to western influences. He translated the Gitanjali from its original Bengali to English in 1912 and was amazed at the manner in which it was received by the western world. A series of letters reveal his uneasiness as well as his command over the English language. But then Tagore was definitely a creative artist and his contribution to Indian English Writing is remarkable and noteworthy.

Keywords: Tagore, English, language, influence, creative

Reverentially remembered as Gurudev, widely acclaimed as India's cultural ambassador, Rabindranath Tagore was a poet of international repute. He was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize for his collection of poems Gitanjali, which is a bouquet of metaphors at the feet of the Lord. Born on the 7th May 1861, he was the fourteenth child of the spiritually inclined Maharishi Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi, and the grandson of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, one of the most successful Bengali entrepreneurs of his time. In a sense he grew up as an only child, allowed to inhabit a secure but solitary space in a household that was busy in more ways than one, given that the Tagore family was the most creative and intellectually active at the time in Bengal. Tagore had developed a different sensibility that culminated later in a poetry of lyric utterance which was at variance with the epic and grand style of his predecessors.

The present paper explores the initial aversion that Tagore had toward the English language and later he was so influenced by the language that he created a corpus contributing to the wealth of Indian English writing. Tagore's poems launched his international career and contributed to the myth in the West that Tagore was a poet who wrote in English.

In his autobiography Jiban Smriti (written in 1911 and

translated into English as My Reminiscences, 1917), Tagore recounts the strong dislike he felt as a boy, for private tutorials, classrooms and rote-learning. He hated English lessons intensely. In his memoirs, Tagore writes of his earliest encounters with that language upon being admitted, at a tender age into the Norman School. He recollects a song he had learnt in class, which was there transformed into the childhood pidgin of a Bengali boy. The bafflement, agony and energy of cultural confusion and intermingling is very well captured in the boy's consciousness thus:

Kalokee pullokee singill mellaling mellaling mellaling.

Tagore informs the boredom and terror he felt as a boy, learning English describing the trepidation with which he and his cousins waited in rainy weather to see if the English tutor Aghore Babu's black umbrella would appear and says several hard things about the language itself.

How well do I remember the day our tutor tried to impress on us the attractiveness of the English language. With this object he recited to us with great unctious some lines -- prose or poetry we could not tell - out of an English book. It had a most unlooked for effect on us. We laughed so immoderately that he dismissed us for the evening (118).

Resistance to the language continued; to Mc Culloch's Course of Reading Tagore recalls the following response: Providence, out of pity of mankind has instilled a soporific charm into all tedious things. No sooner did our English lessons begin than our heads began to nod.' All of this was of course his boyhood experience of English for his sensibility was actually shaped by the writings of the Romantics, and his great receptivity, especially as a composer, to western influences. When Tagore was twelve or thirteen, he read for the first time the great Vaishnava poets, Chandidas and Vidyapati, and was moved by their poems, although, as his biographer J. Kripalani points out, the Brahmoism that Tagore had grown up with had little in common with the world of these devotional songs. He even wrote a sequence of poems called Bhanusingher Padabali under the pseudonym Bhanusingha, in which he attempted to capture in Brajbhasha, something of the

music of the older texts.

Tagore had completed *Jiban Smriti*, in which he had made those cutting and jocular remarks about English and the English lessons of his childhood, in 1911. In 1912 he translated the *Gitanjali* he had once found tedious and ridiculous. Amazed at the success of his poems in 1913, the year he was awarded the Nobel Prize, Tagore wrote a letter to his niece Indira Devi in which there is a note of hesitancy regarding the language:

You have alluded to the English translation of the *Gitanjali*, I cannot imagine to this day how people came to like it so much. That I cannot write English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it (3).

He goes on to say: 'But believe me, I did not undertake this task in a spirit of reckless bravado, I simply felt an urge to recapture through the medium of another language the feelings and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in the days gone by' (3-4).

He seems confident enough that the act of translating into English would enable him to "recapture" his "feelings and sentiments"; this comports uneasily with the claim that he feels incapable of responding to a polite social note in that language. However, Tagore continued to deliver his humane, universalist message in the form of lectures and essays, of which a substantial number are in English.

In the long introduction to his 2011 edition of *Gitanjali*, William Radice translates a subsequent portion of this letter:

In the English language there are all these slippery things like articles, prepositions, "shall" versus "will": they can't be got right with common sense—they have to be learned. I have the notion that they're all living somewhere in my "subliminal consciousness" like worms underground. When I let go of the rudder and sit down to write with my eyes shut, they all come creeping out of the dark to do their stuff—but if I look at them in the light of full consciousness, they wriggle off again all higgledy-piggledy—so in the end I feel that I can't rely on them at all. That's why it's still true to say that I don't know English (Letter 82, 141).

What Tagore is saying here is that he is self-conscious about his English. As long as he doesn't think about it, he manages to wield the language fluently enough; as soon as he begins to reason his way to a conscious understanding of the rules of the language, he loses his way. However, his fluency in the language was never

raised as an issue in any of the social interactions he had with English speakers in India, the UK, and the US. Radice discusses the enthusiastic accounts Tagore's audience in London gave of the 1912 evening where he first read out his own translations at a *soirée* arranged by the painter William Rothenstein. None of the accounts feels the need to make any sort of allowance for Tagore's English; they all suggest that Tagore held his own perfectly well in that language.

Tagore's letters in English read just fine as well. For example, Radice quotes one to Thomas Sturge Moore. Tagore bemoans the poor job he has done with his own translations:

I am convinced that I myself in my translations have done a grave injustice to my own work. My English is like a frail boat—and to save it from an utter disaster I had to jettison the most important part of its cargo. But the cargo being a living one it has been mutilated: which is a literary crime that carries its own punishment (Letter 171, 273).

When E. P. Thompson kept suggesting that he would like to translate some of his works, Tagore responded initially by saying that he liked the idea and wittily confessed his failings in English thus: "You know I began to pay court to your language when I was fifty. It was pretty late for me ever to hope to win her heart" (Letter 162, 254).

Tagore's speeches on various occasions also show a better than adequate command of the English language. In 1917, during a tour of the US, he delivered a lecture on "Nationalism in India". The lecture was written specifically for the occasion, and therefore originally in English. A well-known passage from the essay is thus:

Many people in this country ask me what is happening as to the caste distinctions in India. But when this question is asked me, it is usually done with a superior air. And I feel tempted to put the same question to our American critics with a slight modification, 'What have you done with the Red Indian and the Negro?' For you have not got over your attitude of caste toward them. You have used violent methods to keep aloof from other races, but until you have solved the question here in America, you have no right to question India (II, 428).

The passage is eloquently argued and does not suggest that the writer is struggling to express himself in the English language. But it is in a letter to James Drummond Anderson, a lecturer in Bengali at Cambridge with whom he carried out a correspondence for almost a decade based on great mutual respect that Tagore suggests unequivocally for once that he actually had enjoyed

grappling with the English language in translating his poems. Commenting on "the wonderful power of English prose" and its "magic" qualities, Tagore confides in Anderson that "the clearness, strength and suggestive music of well-balanced English sentences" made it a "delightful task" for him to "mould" his Bengali poems into English prose forms (Letter 121, 196).

As his confidence in his ability to write in English grew, Tagore attempted experiments in the language that are noteworthy. The volume *Thoughts from Tagore* (1921), for example, consists mostly of brief meditations on various topics. He tries to tackle as concisely as possible some of his favorite themes such as nature and life, God and man, power and egoism and art and music. Tagore's other notable work in English prose, *The Religion of Man* (1931) is based on lectures delivered by him in 1930 at Manchester College, Oxford.

Hence it can be concluded that Tagore was definitely a creative artist in the best of his English works, be it in prose or verse. Paradoxically, it is his English, the language of his public and international persona, that is

shaped by his cultural confusion, personal drives, inspirations and limitations more naturally than his Bengali which the English-speaking world can rediscover and estimate the extent of his achievement as a major thinker and important writer of English.

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