

Rabindranath Tagore first visited Germany in 1921 when his popularity there was at its height. By the time he returned in 1926 and then in 1930, the 'Tagore-wave' had dramatically receded as the nascent Weimar Republic lurched its way through seemingly anarchic social, economic and political upheavals towards its end. Martin Kämpchen study of Tagore's reception in Germany focuses on four Germans who played a role at various stages during his visits to Germany and who were key mediators between Tagore and his German audience: the philosopher Hermann Keyserling, the publisher Kurt Wolff, Helene Meyer-Franck who became Tagore's translator, and her husband Heinrich Meyer-Benfey, a professor of literature who wrote interpretations of Tagore's work. Kämpchen attempts, through this study, to highlight certain basic attitudes expressed in Germany towards Tagore as a cultural icon. While doing so, he locates these four admirers of Tagore against a backdrop of shifting popular opinion, of both appreciation and rejection.

The first and longest chapter deals with Hermann Keyserling, a leading figure amongst those German writers who were attracted to India during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Keyserling met Tagore in Calcutta in 1912, then in London in 1913 and finally during Tagore's highly publicised trip through Germany in May-June 1921. He projected himself as the poet's friend and guide and carried on a correspondence with him till 1938, three years before Tagore's death.

Kämpchen rightly sees Keyserling as a representative of an orientalist discourse which saw India and the East as the antithesis of the West. The predominant form of this discourse in Germany had inherited its characteristic features from German Romanticism which was responsible for the first wave of interest in India during the initial half of the nineteenth century. It romanticised India and saw in it the possibility of a radical renewal of the West. This mode of looking at the world is also characteristic of Keyserling's hugely popular *Travel Diary of a Philosopher* (1918), the first part of which deals with his journey through India. Kämpchen points out that of all the literature written during the second wave of German intellectual interest in India, only two books have survived: Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha* and Keyserling's *Travel Diary*.

The author suggests three reasons for the friendship between Keyserling and Tagore. Firstly, both men regarded themselves as representing the West and the East respectively. Secondly, both sought a synthesis of

Book Review

Tagore in Germany: Myth and Reality

RABINDRANATH TAGORE IN GERMANY:
FOUR RESPONSES TO A CULTURAL ICON

Martin Kämpchen.

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the West and the East. And thirdly, both attempted to realise their ideas through the establishment of educational institutions, Keyserling through his *School of Wisdom* at Darmstadt and Tagore through his school for children and his international university, the *Visva-Bharati* at Shantiniketan. Despite these common aims, however, Keyserling and Tagore differed fundamentally. Unlike Keyserling, Tagore's conception of his own role as a representative of the East was marked by self-doubt and irony. Moreover, as Kämpchen notes, Keyserling had no social or political objectives, whereas Tagore's idea of an East-West synthesis was rooted in his critique of India's colonial subjection, oppressive social structure and in his universalist concerns and vision. In fact, Keyserling had little real interest in India; he conceived the East-West synthesis as a source of spiritual rejuvenation for himself and for the West.

The differences between Keyserling and Tagore are most vividly illustrated in the comparison made by the author of Keyserling's *School of Wisdom* and Tagore's *Visva-Bharati*. While both were professedly based on an idea of East-West synthesis, certain differences are striking. The *School of Wisdom* was only open to select intellectuals, those predestined to be leaders of the new age of spiritual renewal. It was not merely elitist in access; it was also hierarchical and authoritarian in its conception and detached from its natural and social environment. As against this, *Visva-Bharati* was open to whoever wished to study there, aimed at liberating the students' independent creative abilities, and emphasised the interconnectedness of education with nature and social objectives.

In June 1921, the *School of Wisdom* hosted a Tagore-Week that evidently became such a sensation that it is recalled every year in Darmstadt. Kämpchen gives an account of this week through descriptions of the various programmes, the leading personalities involved, and the enthusiasm and scepticism which it invited. Through this account of Keyserling's assumed role as the high priest of the exotic figure from East, there also emerges a Tagore distinctly

discomfited by his German admirer's overbearing enthusiasm and clearly resistant to being monopolised or used unscrupulously. Keyserling's style also invited the criticism of other writers who were attracted to Tagore. Two facts that Kämpchen records perhaps deserve greater attention. A newspaper report appearing the day after the first evening programme chose to criticise Tagore with the charge that Social Democrats and women were in the majority in the audience. And on the last day Tagore insisted on visiting a group of workers in the Labour Union House despite the initial resistance from Keyserling. Kämpchen's somewhat casual reference to these aspects of Tagore's visit raises questions which his study does not attempt to answer.

It is perhaps worth noting that the second wave of German intellectual interest in India had its roots in the growing sense of crisis in Western civilisation that reached its peak with the unprecedented devastation during the First World War and Germany's humiliating defeat. The quest for a romanticised 'spiritual' India and the political radicalisation both of the working class and of significant sections of the intelligentsia were two responses to this crisis. Lukács' scathing though misplaced criticism of Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*) cannot be fairly assessed without an understanding of this crisis. In this context, the interest of 'Social Democrats', women and workers in Tagore might well give evidence of appreciative responses quite different from that of Keyserling.

The second chapter of Kämpchen's study focuses on Kurt Wolff, the publisher who introduced Tagore to the German readers. Wolff published *Gitanjali* in 1914, a year after Tagore received the Nobel Prize. This was followed by several other works of Tagore's, particularly in the period following the First World War when Tagore was seen both as a messenger of peace in a war-ravaged world and specifically in Germany as one who extended brotherhood and solidarity to a people humiliated by defeat and harsh reparations. During this period Wolff seems to have benefited by publishing Tagore. The prestige and

acclaim that this brought him apparently helped him to sell some of the other writers he had patronised including some significant expressionist writers. But the interest in Tagore waned rapidly as the German economy first stabilised in 1924 and the Wolff publishing house itself went into dissolution as the world economic crisis of 1929 hit Germany.

Apart from Tagore's writings, Wolff's inclination for things Eastern was limited to a volume on the Sermons of the Buddha. Unlike Keyserling who had a philosophical conception of the need for some kind of East-West synthesis, Wolff patronised the new forms of writing in German literature of his times. His importance as a German publisher is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that he was the first to publish the writings of Franz Kafka and, in the decades after the Second World War, the one who brought out Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*.

As Kämpchen describes it, both Kurt Wolff and Hermann Keyserling had business interests, albeit different ones, in promoting Tagore during his first visit to Germany, the one to advertise his publishing house and the other to win support for his *School of Wisdom*. It seems that neither of them was actually much interested in or impressed by Tagore as a poet though Wolff found it worth noting that the poetry was easy to translate. They were charmed rather by Tagore's charismatic personality and saw in it a key to pursuing very different goals.

Of Jewish descent, Kurt Wolff fled Germany in 1933, underwent internment in several French internment camps and finally sought exile in the US from where he returned to Europe only in 1959. In a radio essay on his association with Tagore presented two decades after Tagore's death, Wolff ascribed Tagore's popularity to an interest in Eastern themes at a time of crisis in Western civilisation and drew a link with the "seductive appeal of young Communist Russia to the intelligentsia." Kämpchen not only finds this linking surprising and unusual but also argues that Tagore had, "somewhat naively, fallen for the Soviet Russian version of socialism" since Tagore's utopian vision based on "Indian spiritual idealism" and that of Communism could not have anything in common. This argument is itself surprising since Kämpchen elsewhere notes Tagore's social critique and objectives. Neither is it born out by Tagore's *Letters from Russia* or his *Interview with Izvestia*.

It is a curious fact that most of Tagore's translators were women. While three of them are only named, Kämpchen gives some details of the lives of the first translator, Marie-Luise

Gothein and the major one, Helene Meyer-Franck. Growing up at a time when women were not expected to aspire to a university education or a role in public life, both apparently lived and worked largely in the shadow of their husbands. Nevertheless, they seem to belong to a generation of middle-class women that sought for avenues of emancipation, however limited, in intellectual activity. It seems that Marie-Luise Gothein independently discovered Tagore, translated his *Gitanjali*, and sent the manuscript to Wolff's publishing house for consideration. While it may be unclear whether the motives behind the eventual publication of the manuscript were in any way influenced by the providential announcement of the Nobel Prize, there seems to be no doubt about Gothein's genuine enthusiasm for Tagore's poetry. The same may be said even more forcefully about Meyer-Franck.

The third and final chapter of the study looks at both Helene Meyer-Franck and her husband Heinrich Meyer-Benfey since, as Kämpchen points out, they worked as a team. Both of them learnt Bengali and had plans for some time to move to Shantiniketan. These plans were scotched when the British Government refused to grant them visas. Though largely neglected by Tagore scholars in Germany and

India, Meyer-Franck was not only Tagore's major translator but also the first one to translate directly from the Bengali original. Meyer-Benfey, a philologist and literary historian of considerable repute, might have been put in the shade by Keyserling's flamboyant publicity, but, as Kämpchen explains, his contribution as a Tagore scholar is more than that of anyone else.

Though Kämpchen does not attach any significance to it, Helene Meyer-Franck's first encounter with Tagore's writing was in 1920 with the essay "The Spirit of Japan" and the poem "Sunset of the Century," both of which she immediately translated. The poem with its powerful, apocalyptic but universalist critique of civilisation that is unmistakably not just Western has nothing in it to particularly endear those who would wish to see Tagore as a representative of an Eastern idealism as against a Western materialism. Yet it marks the moment of Meyer-Franck's initial and spontaneous attraction to Tagore's poetry.

What one misses in Kämpchen's study is any discussion of the responses to the form or style of Tagore's writing rather than on views that he held or were attributed to him. One stray remark made by the director of production in Wolff's publishing house gestures unintentionally in this

direction: "The poems were so good and peculiar..." (emphasis added). Evidently, Meyer-Franck was so drawn to what was 'peculiar' to Tagore's writing that she decided to learn Bengali even despite her husband's discouragement. Kämpchen has shown critical appreciation of the fact that this first translator of Tagore from the original Bengali attempted to recreate not only the content but also the form that is inseparable from its "full emotional appeal." However, one would have liked to find some discussion of the literary qualities of Tagore's writing that attracted the German reader at a time when German writers were engaged in intense literary experimentation.

Heinrich Meyer-Benfey was evidently as intense an admirer of Tagore as his wife and wrote the first full-length book about him. He also published the eight volume *Collected Works* along with his wife. Kämpchen contrasts his sober language and balanced appraisal to Keyserling's superlative praise. Kämpchen ascribes this combination of emotional intensity and intellectual sobriety to the depth of Meyer-Benfey's scholarship, and in particular to the fact that Meyer-Benfey was the only person with any Indological training to write on Tagore.

One might add that though Kämpchen legitimately criticises perceptions that stereotype the Occident and the Orient, he himself at times lapses into formulations that are typical of such perceptions. He tends moreover to emphasise in his presentation of Tagore concepts such as harmony and interdependence between East and West and to somewhat underplay the passion and anger in Tagore's social critique as well as his internationalism and universalist concerns that so sharply contrast with the cultural relativism of Keyserling.

The study is evidently based on a great deal of documentary research including letters, newspaper reports, systematic and stray references in the writings of a vast number of people in Germany who met, read or merely heard about Tagore. The author has honestly admitted where he was unable to check the validity of any statement. Written in a lucid language that does not get cluttered despite the large amount of unknown information that it carries, Kämpchen's study gives fresh insights as well as new impulses for further investigation of Germany's encounter with Tagore.

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Simmering between the modernist and postmodernist postures, the poems selected by E.V. Ramakrishnan for *The Tree of Tongues* capture a predominant mood of resistance and anger as much as anguish. The tree stands steadfast on its deep roots, emerging, as it were, from the same mood of protest as evidenced in the medieval poetry of each of the four tongues recorded in this volume. The title of the book is in itself a rich metaphor that draws its meanings from the mythic and the grand narrative of the Malayalam poem by K. Satchidanandan quoted in its English translation in the very beginning:

And the goddess frowned
The goddess lifted the sword
And she chopped off the root

The tongue tree had a gash
The gash spurted blood
The blood sprouted leaves
A thousand tongue leaves
Each leaf put forth truth
All those buried truths were out

Each poem in this collection projects an effort to unravel some buried truth, be it in the insularity of a private consciousness or within the much larger social domain where the personal too becomes the political. Subaltern voices find their much deserving space in this volume, giving vent to suppressed and erstwhile

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The Blossom of Wounded Voices

THE TREE OF TONGUES.

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silenced feelings. "My poetry is a sharp stabbing knife," says Jayant Parmar, the Gujarati poet. Namdeo Dhasal locates an "empire of darkness" in his poem "A Notebook of Poems" in Marathi. While reviewing this volume, Vasantha Surya asks in desperation: "What has happened to poetry? Is Keats being paraphrased? Unbeauty is truth and truth unbeauty!" In poem after poem, this collection throws up images which are surreal and at times even grotesque. There are poems replete with graphic descriptions that can arouse disgust. Where is beauty then to be located in these poems? I believe that the success of most of these poems lies in perceiving beauty in the moments of truth and awareness yielded by them in flashes. On the face of it, they might appear so ugly. Kakkad's poem "Behold These Sheep on the Road," translated by E.V. Ramakrishnan into

a tight and neat poetic idiom, is an appropriate example demonstrating the beauty of a dark vision:

Behold these sheep worming their way
along this unending road, bearing
the butcher's seal on their haunches
like the legacy of a coat of arms

Jostling and kicking each other
mating in the open
teeming and spawning
drifting in dust and din....

With hunger foaming at the mouth
with lust squirming in their loins
crowding and pushing....

As the sheep cease to feel and we cease to feel them, the poet asks the question at the end of the poem, "Do we feel ourselves anymore?"

There is no question of any lofty aloofness in this poetry as found in the poems of the "High Modernists" -

the poets of the earlier generation of modernists. However, a deep sense of loneliness and a pervasive social indifference seem to be at the root of much of the suffering articulated in these poems. The four languages represented in this volume scan a fairly large domain of India, even though there would be so many more different voices emerging in the many other languages.

What this volume tells us effectively is that the poet in India in the post-1960's has come out of his/her privatised self to build connections with the 'other' on the street. Much of the subversive reality suddenly finds voice, thus "making it new." *Making it New: Modernism in the Poetry of Malayalam, Hindi and Marathi* is in fact the title of E.V. Ramakrishnan's earlier book to which *The Tree of Tongues* comes as a companion volume. This does not of course mean that the poems were written later; rather, the poems collected for this volume were written far earlier. The editor modestly and rightly says, "Poetry is not written to illustrate critical arguments." In fact, the strength of E.V. Ramakrishnan's critical responses lies in the very fact that his arguments evolve from within the poetry written in the languages of his study.

The Tree of Tongues is also valuable as an autonomous book meant for