

# Rabindranath Tagore on the Heritage of Buddha

UMA DAS GUPTA

It is true even if it be strange that those who have some sense and sensibility of the Buddhist world of peace and harmony have found almost an instinctive likeness in Tagore's Santiniketan, home to his renowned experimental school and international university. We can recall Tagore's English biographer, the historian Edward Thompson, who was visiting Santiniketan frequently during the years 1910-1913 while he was teaching at the Bankura Wesleyan Mission School in Bengal. In a letter of 25 September 1937 Thompson wrote to Tagore,

I think of you often as I first saw you, under the shefali bushes of autumn at Santiniketan. I have been working on a story about the first days of Buddhism, and you have been continuously in my mind. To me it is increasingly clear that what the world needs is to take both Buddha's and Christ's teaching – the pity and tenderness of Buddhism supplies what Christianity lacks, in a certain 'hardboiledness' (perhaps the fault of the Christian nations). The subtle and many coloured beauty of your won wonderful life interpret Buddhism as nothing else does, and I am glad that I have known you.<sup>1</sup>

Edward Thompson had then just written a story on the Buddha titled *The Youngest Disciple* which he 'set' in Santiniketan. Thus he wrote again on 8 January 1938,

I shall be sending you later a properly bound copy of *The Youngest Disciple*. But I cannot resist doing myself the pleasure of sending you proofs, for I want you to know at the earliest moment... that a great deal of Santiniketan, as I remember it in those far off days, has gone into the book.<sup>2</sup>

There is also a record of a more recent visitor to Visva-Bharati, the renowned Buddhist scholar from Japan, Hajime Nakamura, expressing the same sentiment of being reminded of the Buddhist spirit when writing about Tagore and Santiniketan. Nakamura wrote in 1997,

Whenever I went to Santiniketan, I got the impression that the spirit of the Buddha underlies the various multifaceted activities of Tagore.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, a study of Rabindranath Tagore's life and work leaves no room for doubt about his own great attraction for the heritage of Buddha. In this essay, I shall try to set out how this attraction developed starting with the historical backdrop and including Tagore's family background. There were three important movements taking place in these times: literary, religious, political. We shall also take into account the prevailing commitment to Buddhism in Bengal in those times.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the period from the late nineteenth century leading up to the first world war we find that many leading thinkers in the East and the West shared a disenchantment over the West's aggressive nationalism. Tagore was perhaps among the world's most eloquent critics of nationalism in his time. He argued consistently that nationalism reflected the greed and violence of Western civilization leading to dreadful consequences for the Asian societies which were uncritically adopting the same methods. China was an exception, being rather a victim of aggression. He related China's indifference to greed to her unique spirituality. He held sacred the historical memory of the old relationship between China and India which originated with the passage of Buddhism from India to China. He wrote:

When the Lord Buddha realized humanity in a grand synthesis of unity, his message went forth to China as a draught from the fountain of immortality.<sup>4</sup>

In the eighty years of Tagore's life the British Indian encounter came close to a clash of cultures. This was averted by adjustments at the various levels of Indian life. Inevitably, because of the colonial situation, the representatives of British culture dominated the interaction. The outcome was that cultural leadership

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Uma Das Gupta is National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla

became as important as political leadership in helping Indians face the conflicting interests of the times. Tagore and his family contributed substantially to that leadership by making culture the basis of their service to humanity outside the political movement. They started from the Upanishads in defining a universal Indian culture. The family across the generations was influenced not only by the Upanishads but also by classical Sanskrit literature, by Buddhism, by Sufism, by the mystic tradition of the medieval saint-poets like Kabir, Nanak, and Chaitanya. Tagore also found a kindred spirit in the West's ideas of humanism to his vision of India's ancient history and ideals.<sup>5</sup>

### FAMILY BACKGROUND AND THE TIMES

The Tagore family lived through varied fortunes and different phases of history. Rabindranath's grandfather Dwarkanath (1794-1846) was a leading Indian merchant of his time who traded independently with the British and was given the title of Prince by his countrymen. He was a close friend of his most distinguished contemporary, the social and religious reformer Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). Dwarkanath's son, Debendranath (1817-1905), who was Rabindranath's father, was in contrast a man of the high Hindu tradition of the Upanishads and was given the title of Maharshi by his countrymen. Debendranath was profoundly influenced by the monotheism of Rammohun Roy and gave leadership to this movement for the reform of Hindu orthodoxy which developed into the Brahmo Samaj. They broke with the timeless Hindu social and sacerdotal laws along with all the forms of Hindu ritual and idolatry. For this the family suffered ostracism and social indignities. In those times this was considered a drastic change in the life style of a rich and aristocratic Hindu family.<sup>6</sup>

Tagore thus grew up in a family which had to live its own life. That made him seek guidance in his own inner standard of judgment. He grew up face-to-face with the new culture of a colonial state and a Western-style education that touched every sphere of Bengali life, from governance to personal living. This was the period when the national movement coincided with a neo-Hindu revival in Bengal. Personally, Tagore was repelled by the obscurantism of this revivalist Hindu movement and wrote some very satirical pieces of prose and poetry about its leaders and their politics during 1882-1888. Yet, for a very brief period, even he was touched by the wave of Hindu revivalism towards a remedy for the cultural dislocation of his times. Tagore's hope was that a revival of the Hindu *samaj* would bring unity to his country's

diverse people. He wrote about this fully in his seminal essay of 1904, *Swadeshi Samaj* (Our own state and society). But he was soon in for a rude shock.

The Swadeshi Movement against the Partition of Bengal was launched just at this time in 1904-1905. Tagore joined the movement with great energy but withdrew from it on the outbreak of communal violence. His hope for a truly religious and benevolent Hindu society was shattered. He withdrew also from every single national committee in a single day. He was shocked that Muslims were being attacked in the name of *swadeshi* and distressed by the threats of disruption of a united India fanned by religious reaction. Given his and his family's integrity he did not fall in with the current trends of Bengal politics. It is therefore not surprising that Tagore's faith in his own country was founded on a distinctive culture transcending all barriers of time and place, peoples and ethnicities.<sup>7</sup> He argued his position in the following words:

To India has been given her race problem from the beginning of history – races ethnologically different have in this country come into close contact. This fact has been and still continues to be the most important one in our history. It is our mission to face it and prove our humanity by dealing with it in fullest truth.<sup>8</sup>

Tagore did not claim that India's historic race problem had ever been solved, but what he valued was that there had been a continuing endeavour towards unity over the ages. He referred to that endeavour as his country's *sadhana*. He saw an ideal of unity in this history of living within the differences. He saw its truth and pressed for the idea that such a goal could become a transcendence for India's, even Asia's, contribution to the New Age. He spelled it out in one of his lectures in China in 1924,

Let what seems to be a barrier become a path and let us unite, not in spite of our differences, but through them...Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living.<sup>9</sup>

Tagore thus pledged never to join a political movement again after his experience of the Swadeshi Movement. He retired to Santiniketan where he had founded a school for an alternative model of education. He also turned to the hands-on-work of educating the Hindu and Muslim tenants in his family's agricultural estates in eastern Bengal where his father had sent him as manager of the estates during the 1890s. There, he saw at first hand the miserable state of the Bengal peasants and decided to put all his energy into education and rural reconstruction. He wrote,

I believe that all human problems find their fundamental

solution in education. I know that all the evils, almost without exception, from which my land suffers are solely owing to the utter lack of education of the people.

Poverty, pestilence, communal fights and industrial backwardness make our path of life narrow and perilous owing to the meagerness of education.<sup>10</sup>

### TAGORE'S INTERPRETATION OF INDIA'S HISTORY

Tagore's faith in the unity of man and the unity of races was close to what he believed to be the essence of Buddhism. His point of reference was to the *Brahma-vidya* or the religion of universal love. He wrote comprehensively on the evolution of India's civilization from the Vedic to the Buddhist periods in his long essay titled *A Vision of India's History*. There he takes us through the epic age of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to that of the mystic saints of medieval India. In doing this he strung together the past attempts at unity in the racial strife between the Aryans and non-Aryans. He believed there was an ideological war between Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, with the Brahmins standing for the orthodox or the static, and the Kshatriyas standing for movement and creative self-expression. He argued that it was the Brahmins who clung to the rituals that differentiated between classes and castes and clans. They were worshippers of the original deities of the Indo-Aryan tribe, the Sun and Fire which represented various elements of the ritualism of sacrifices. The Kshatriyas on the other hand moved on rather to overcome obstacles, natural and human, in the path of expansion and inclusion.<sup>11</sup> In Tagore's analysis the Kshatriyas stood for *Brahma-vidya* or the religion of universal love which was a moral quality he attributed to the Buddha.

Tagore deduced that the teachings from the Buddha help us to understand what Buddha described as *Brahmavihara*, that is 'living in the infinite'. He explained that Buddha's idea of the infinite was not the idea of an unbounded cosmic activity, but an infinite whose meaning is in the positive ideal of goodness and love, which cannot be anything else but human. By being charitable, good and loving, you do not need to look for the infinite in rocks and stars but find the infinite revealed in man. This was the ideal of salvation that Tagore found in the Buddhist practices of tolerance, compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Tagore drew from the Buddha's teachings in the following passages to support his idea:

'[The Buddha said] Do not deceive each other, do not despise anybody anywhere, never in anger wish anyone to suffer through your body, words or thoughts. Like a mother maintaining her only son with her own life, keep thy immeasurable loving thought for all creatures.

'[The Buddha said] Above thee, below thee, on all sides of thee, keep on all the world thy sympathy and immeasurable loving thought which is without obstruction, without any wish to injure, without enmity.

'[The Buddha said] To be dwelling in such contemplation while standing, walking, sitting or lying down, until sleep overcomes thee, is called living in Brahma.'<sup>12</sup>

### BACKDROP OF BUDDHIST CULTURE IN BENGAL

As mentioned earlier Tagore grew up with almost an inherited commitment to Buddhism in his family and in his environment, also by way of how they related it to some aspects of the Brahmo Reform Movement. As early as 1859 Maharshi Debendranath along with his second son, Satyendranath, and his Brahmo friend and colleague, Keshab Chandra Sen, travelled to Ceylon and were impressed by the Buddhist practices of the Sinhalese people. Keshab Chandra Sen's brother, Krishna Bihari Sen was the author of *Buddhadevacharita* which was serially published in the Tagore family journal *Sadhana* during 1891-92. There, Krishna Bihari Sen clearly stated: "Brahmoism is a protest against caste, idolatry and superstitions, and a rise and progress of rationalism in the East. It started with the spirit of Buddhism..."<sup>13</sup> At these times other works on the Buddha and Buddhism followed such as the *Buddhadevacharita and Bauddhadharmer Sankshipta Bibaran* (1883) from the Brahmo Samaj leader Krishna Kumar Mitra.

Around this time there was a flowering of Buddhist Studies in the Western world through the works of Friedrich Max Muller, Rhys Davids and Edwin Arnold. This in turn influenced the Bengal intelligentsia who were becoming seriously committed to Buddhist thought and practices. Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* based on the life of Buddha, and published in 1879, became a seminal text to them. The Mahabodhi Society, the Buddhist Text Society and the Bengal Buddhist Association were all established in Calcutta in 1891 and 1892. The historian Rajendralal Mitra was publishing works like *Buddha Gaya – the Hermitage of Sakyamuni* (1878) and *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* (1882). Another Bengali historian, Ramdas Sen, wrote *Modern Buddhist Researches* and *Buddhadeva* both of which were posthumously published in 1891. In his treatise *Samya* (1879) the great Bengali litterateur, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, held up the Buddha as a great liberator from the injustices of the Vedic caste system. The drama *Buddhadeva-charita* was first performed in 1885 by the famous actor and playwright, Girish Chandra Ghosh, which took Calcutta by storm. The poem "Amitabha" which was an invocation



of the Buddha by the patriot and poet Nabin Chandra Sen became popular.<sup>14</sup> Modern Bengali journals like *Prabasi* and *Bangadarshan* were carrying scholarly articles on Buddhist Studies. Among the contributors were Vidusekhar Sastri and Sarat Chandra Ray, both teachers of the Santiniketan school, and Tagore himself.

#### WHAT TAGORE WROTE ON THE HERITAGE OF THE BUDDHA AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE MODERN AGE

There were two key premises in Tagore's goal for an inclusive humanism. One, where he argued that history reveals how man's self-realization has taken him beyond the material into the wider world of universal humanity.<sup>15</sup> The other, where he held that a country is not merely a piece of geographical territory, it is an idea, a mentality.<sup>16</sup> He attached the greatest significance to the fact that countries had come closer in the New Age through radical changes in transport and communication. But he was equally emphatic that the psychological barriers have persisted and that was obstructing the unity of man. He argued therefore that the mentality of the world had to be changed. One of his key ideas for world change was for a meeting of the races by the study of each other's history — what we could call, in today's terms of reference, a geo-civilisational meeting. He endeavoured to do this at his Santiniketan school and international university named Visva-Bharati. There he offered India's hospitality to the world at a centre for understanding of cultures with a mission to counteract the cult of nationalism. He blamed the West for this cult but did not support its response in his own country.

Starting from 1916-17 he travelled to thirty countries in five continents, America, Europe and Russia, Asia and the Middle East with this invitation for a civilizational meeting of the races at his rural Santiniketan. No matter how meagre were his resources at Santiniketan he was committed to an inclusive humanism as the basis for world change and believed that Santiniketan would make his visitors happy by its heartfelt hospitality. In explaining his ideal he wrote,

The civilizations evolved in India or China, Persia or Judaea, Greece or Rome were like several mountain peaks having different altitude, temperature, flora and fauna, but belonging to the same chain of hills. There were no absolute barriers of communication between them; their foundation was the same in affecting the meteorology of an atmosphere which is common to us all.<sup>17</sup>

With Visva-Bharati's inauguration in 1921, doors were thrown open to men and women from anywhere to

collaborate in intellectual companionship and social action without opposing interests and beyond national boundaries. The assumption was that the work of philosophers historians and artists and scientists, even that of the saints, was for the whole of mankind even if it had originated in a single nation. The challenge was that change at the local level would show the way to world change.

To Tagore the passage of Buddhism from India to China and its spread to Asia was one such example from history. He pointed out that the sources of Indian thought and culture remain half-known due to our lack of intimacy with Buddhist literature. With this conviction he called upon the youths of our country to dedicate themselves to the restoration of the Buddhist heritage.<sup>18</sup> He built on the inclusive humanism of the Buddhist heritage at Santiniketan. He wrote many ballads and dramas using Buddhist legends for his Santiniketan boys and girls to perform and present not only in Santiniketan, which they did, but also to audiences elsewhere in the country. Through them he wanted to exemplify the compassion of Buddhism in contrast to the orthodoxy of Brahmanical rituals.

The earliest of these works was Tagore's drama *Malini* (1896). There is an account of what inspired this drama in a conversation between him and the noted folklorist Kshitimohan Sen which is included in Sen's *Diaries*.<sup>19</sup> The story is that Tagore had a dream one night about two friends who rebelled against a tyrant king. One of the two friends reported this to the king who issued a death sentence to the other for treason. When the Brahmins were invoking the Goddess's wrath against the Buddhists, *devakanya* Malini appeared before them as the force of compassion. She won over all with her tender feelings. Tagore must have read about a similar tale in 'The Story of Malini' in Rajendralal Mitra's *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* taken from the *Mahavastu Avadana* of Buddhist literature. Among the two most famous of Tagore's dramas from Buddhist themes are *Natir Puja* and also his narrative poem from the same storyline, *Pujarini*, written in 1899. In *Natir Puja* the story is that the Buddha had once preached in the palace gardens of King Bimbisar of Magadh. The king had become a devotee and had directed the princesses of his household to place their offerings at the Buddha's seat. When Bimbisar was succeeded by his son Ajatasatru, the worship of the Buddha was prohibited in the kingdom and made punishable by a death sentence. A palace dancing girl by the name of Srimati defied this order and on the full moon day of *Vaisakh* she offered obeisance to the Buddha with a celebratory dance and courted death. Srimati's death is a symbolic story of martyrdom for the country of which

there are some rare instances in history. This story of 'sacrifice' was Tagore's way of depicting the socio-political upheaval that took place in India around Buddhism and its liberal ideals of which he was an ardent admirer.<sup>20</sup>

The other drama related to the Buddhist lore, *Chandalika* was written in 1933 to highlight the pain of untouchability. *Chandalika* was first presented as a *geeti natya*, a play with songs, and turned into a dance-drama in 1938. This story was based on the legend of *Sardulakarna Avadana* and creatively used by Tagore to educate audiences against untouchability. In the story Bhikshu Ananda found himself thirsty when returning from a Vihara and begged for water from a girl toiling by the wayside who was a *chandala* or an 'untouchable' in the Hindu caste system. Tagore's name for her was Prakriti or Nature. Prakriti hesitated to give the Bhikshu water explaining that it would be sinful for her to do so because of her lowly origin. Bhikshu Ananda told her not to degrade herself as she was like any other human being. The utterance gave Prakriti a dignity and confidence she had never known. She not only gave him water to quench his thirst but also craved for his love when he had left on his way. She made her mother cast a magic-spell on the Bhikshu so that he would respond to her 'longing' for him. In the legend Ananda was salvaged by the Buddha's blessings. In Tagore's drama the legend was designed to focus on the cruelty of the caste system and of untouchability.<sup>21</sup> He and Mahatma Gandhiji saw its performance together in Santiniketan.

The narrative poems and dramas that he created from Buddhist legends acquired a unique and innovative place in Bengali literature and also in Indian literature. It was as if he was on a journey of rediscovery of the values from the Buddhist period in India's history. His poem to the Buddha was also an expression of that journey.

*The Blessed Name*

Bring to this country once again

the blessed name

which made the land of thy birth sacred

to all distant lands!

Let thy great awakening under the Bodhi-tree

be fulfilled,

sweeping away the veil of unreason

and let, at the end of an oblivious night,

freshly blossom out in India

*thy remembrance.*<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

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3. Hajime Nakamura, 'Foreword', 11 February 1991, in S.B.Barua, *Studies in Tagore and Buddhist Culture*, Calcutta: Sahitya Parisad, 1991.[Hereafter, *Buddhist Culture*]
4. Uma Das Gupta ed., *Oxford India Tagore: Selected Writings on Education and Nationalism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009, p.195.
5. Uma Das Gupta., *Rabindranath Tagore A Biography*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 6. [Hereafter, *Tagore Biography*]
6. Ibid., pp.1-3.
7. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Autobiographical', in *Talks in China*, ed., Sisir Kumar Das, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1999, pp. 29-32.
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9. Sisir Kumar Das ed., *Rabindranath Tagore: Talks in China*, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1999, p.51.
10. Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters from Russia*, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960, p.208.
11. Rabindranath Tagore, *A Vision of India's History*, Sisir Kumar Das ed., *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, III, Reprint, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002, pp. 439-58.
12. S.B.Barua, *Studies in Tagore and Buddhist Culture*, Calcutta: Sahitya Parisad, 1991, pp.5, 2. [Hereafter, *Buddhist Culture*].
13. Ibid., pp.4-5.
14. Ibid., pp.10-12.
15. Rabindranath Tagore, *Manusher Dharma*, RR, 20, Reprint, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1967, p.373. Translation mine.
16. Ibid., p.379.
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18. Rabindranath Tagore, "Dhammapada", RR, 4, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1965, p. 461. Translation mine.
19. *Desh*, Sahitya Sankhya 1394(1987), pp.142-43. Also see, 'Story of Malini' in *The Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* by Rajendralal Mitra, p.118, as cited in *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, 16, 'Grantha-Parichay', Calcutta: Government. of West Bengal, 2001, p.658. [Hereafter, *Rabindra-Rachanabali* 16]
20. *Buddhist Culture*, p. 55.
21. *The Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* by Rajendralal Mitra, p.219, as cited in *Rabindra-Rachanabali* 16, pp.770-72.
22. Rabindranath Tagore, *Poems*, Reprint, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 2003, no. 91, p.135. Bengali original, "Buddhadev-er Protiti", in *Parisesh*, 1932.