

TOUCHED BY A DIVINE AFFLATUS: THE LIFE, WORKS, AND IDEOLOGY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

(A brief outline of the talk by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mohammad A Quayum on 13 August 1998)

Tagore was born on 7 May 1861 in a rich and culturally prominent family in Calcutta, Bengal. His father Debendranath Tagore was a renowned religious reformer. Tagore was the fourteenth child in a family of fifteen. All the members of his family were blessed with rare endowments in literature, music, art, philosophy, and mathematics. However, Tagore came to excel and overshadow them all. Named after the sun (rabi in Bengali, derived from Sanskrit ravi, means the sun), he truly lived up to his name. Like the sun he shed light and warmth ceaselessly

more than 1000 poems and more than 2000 songs (of which he wrote both the lyrics and the music). Moreover, he wrote nearly two dozen plays, eight novels, eight or more volumes of short stories, and a mass of prose on literary, social, religious, political and cultural issues. He was also the founder of a university, the Visva-Bharati, which Tagore declared, "like a vessel carries the cargo of my life's best treasure."

Tagore received many accolades in his illustrious life. Of them, the most outstanding was the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He was also knighted by King George V of England in 1915. Furthermore, he received an honorary doctorate from Oxford University in 1940, for which the Oxford traveled to the poet's doorstep instead of the poet traveling to Oxford.

It can be said about Tagore that he almost single-handedly brought about a revival in Bengali literature, culture, and consciousness. He was also a pioneer of the Indian Renaissance. For his contribution to the revitalization of Indian culture and psyche, he came to be reckoned "a supreme symbol of India's culture and spirit." However, Tagore was too much of a colossus to be confined either to Bengal or to India. He belonged to Asia and he belonged to the world. His message, as Jawaharlal Nehru commented in a personal letter to a biographer of Tagore, "was [not] narrowly national. [It was meant] for the world." Explaining Tagore's contribution to the world, the scientist Albert Einstein said, "[He] served mankind all through [his] long and fruitful life, spreading everywhere a gentle and free thought in a manner [of Indian] Seers."

Tagore was essentially a messenger of peace, non-violence, and brotherhood of mankind across races and religions. He believed in the principles of Universalism and Religion of Man, that there will be time when all the races and religions of the world, sacrificing their narrow differences, will come to live harmoniously together. He derived many of his teachings from the Hindu scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads; yet, like Mahatma Gandhi, he was opposed to religious fanaticism, and even provided severest of criticisms against Hindu social institutions and religious practices that encouraged superstition and inequality and tolerated injustice in society. Explaining his principle of religious unity, for example, Tagore once said, "We must go beyond all narrow bounds and look towards the day when Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed will become one."



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upon his people and vitalized the mental and moral soil of his land. Tagore's reputation, especially in the West, lies preeminently in his poetic achievements. He was a poet of baffling, breathtaking creativity. He had written about 7,000 lines of verse even before he was eighteen. Tagore's genius, however, was multifaceted; he was a darling of versatility. A poet, he was also an actor, a playwright, producer, musician, painter, educationist, cultural reformer, philosopher, novelist, short story writer, and a critic of life and literature. Altogether Tagore wrote