

Life and Achievements of Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore was born on May 6, 1861, in a rich, highly educated and aristocratic Brahmin family in Calcutta. His father *Maharsi* [great sage] Debendranath Tagore was a philosopher and religious leader, and founder of *Adi-Bramha-Samaj* [original spiritual society] in Calcutta. As the seventh son of his parents, he missed the company and care of a too busy mother who had to look after a large extended family and a father who was a frequent traveler. Though his parents were wealthy, their life-style was very simple. So this lonely young boy grew up under the strict and loveless supervision of paid attendants; consequently, his young mind turned to nature as the only companion, and he used to observe it as much as he could. This love of nature and attachment to it lasted throughout his entire life. Though he attended conventional school, his actual education was conducted at home; he studied languages [Bengali, English and Sanskrit], sciences including anatomy and physiology, music, and even wrestling in home. At this stage of life his poetic genius began to bloom.

In 1873, he and his brother celebrated their "*Upanayan*" [sacred thread ceremony], essential for a Brahmin boy and after this his father took him to *Shanti-Niketan* [abode of peace], Bolpur -- an *Asram* [hermitage] built for his spiritual and philosophical researches in the rural Bengal, about 150 km. west of Calcutta. This is the first time the young boy came in close contact with his father as well as was in communication with nature and in the liberating shelter of blue sky. From there they went to the Himalayas where his father taught him languages, astronomy and other disciplines of knowledge in open nature. After a few months of sojourn there, he was sent back to Calcutta, and on March 8, 1874, his mother, Sarada Devi died. When he was only fourteen his long poem was published in a renowned Bengali monthly.

In 1878, before his older brother, Satyendranath Tagore, took him to England for higher study, three of his books of poems were already published. During his stay in England, he studied not only Shakespeare, Milton, Byron and poets of other languages like Goethe, Dante, Petrarch and Tasso, he wrote commentaries and translated Victor Hugo, Shelly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson and others which were published regularly in *Bharati*, a Bengali monthly in Calcutta. He learnt Western music, and Irish folk songs attracted him most.

After his return to India, he stayed for some time, with his other older brother Jyotirindranath Tagore who was a scholar and researcher of Indian as well as Western music; they together made various musical experiments. Throughout his life Tagore had written and composed almost 2500 songs including four musical playlets and three dance-dramas and invented numerous meters and thus creating a new class of music. By this time, he had in his credit, five books of poems, one novel, three musical playlets and a series of essays and letters published and he was

recognized as a rising and promising poet in the literary circle which included the famous novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

On December 9, 1884, he married Mrinalini Devi and in 1885, he had to endure another blow of loss by the sudden demise of his sister-in-law Kadambini Devi, wife of Jyotirindranath Tagore. She was not only like a mother to a motherless boy, but also an inspirer and appreciator of his poetic imaginations and creativity and an intimate friend. In 1890, his father asked him to take charge of their estate, and he went to the head-quarters at Shelaidaha in rural Bengal, where he became extremely popular because of his compassionate attitude towards his subjects who were primarily poor peasants. There, in a house-boat, he started writing short stories with themes chosen from every-day life of rural Bengal. Here the ideas of collective farming and new way of mass education crept in his imagination, which he materialized in his later life. In this stage of his life he also edited some Bengali periodicals. By the end of the century, he had in his credit fourteen books of poems, thirteen books of drama of different types, one novel, sixty four short stories, nine books of essays and letters, and some editorials.

In December 22, 1901, he started a school in ancient Indian *Gurukul* style [teacher's family - pupils live as members of the teacher's family] in his father's *Asram* at *Shanti-Niketan*. He wanted to bring in freedom of thought amidst the discipline of the hermitage and openness of nature; the classes were held in outdoor except on the rainy days. His wife, Mrinalini Devi, donated all her jewelry in the school fund; but in November 1902, she passed away. He wrote two books of poems, one in her memory and another to entertain his motherless children. For the treatment of his ailing second daughter, Renuka, he left *Shanti-Niketan* and went to Almora, on the Himalayas; in 1904, she died and after three years, in 1907 his younger son, Shamindranath, followed. In the mean time, in January 1905, he lost his father.

In 1905, the then Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon proclaimed partition of Bengal which caused tremendous political uproar in Bengal. Tagore lead the agitation with passive and peaceful resistance and the partition was prevented. During this period he wrote most of his patriotic songs which became extremely popular. In 1947, free India proudly adopted one of Tagore's patriotic songs as the National Anthem; the anthem of Bangladesh, a neighboring state created later, also comes from the same pen. In 1908, he retired from turbulent politics and went back to the peaceful refuge of *Shanti-Niketan*. In 1910, he encouraged his only son, Rathindranath to marry a young and talented widow, Pratima Devi to patronize and popularize a social reform like widow marriage, which is still not very customary in India.

In 1912, due to indisposition, he postponed his journey to England and went to Shelaidaha for rest. There he started to translate selected poems and songs from *Gitanjali* [song offerings] and other books; the rest of them were completed on the way to England. He translated a few poems and published those

that appeared in a Calcutta periodical *The Modern Review* beforehand. The India Society of England printed the English version of *Gitanjali*. After a brief stay in England and U.S.A., he returned to India in September 1913. In November 15, 1913, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He was the first Asian to receive this prestigious mark of international recognition. The University of Calcutta adorned him with a honorary doctorate degree. He was knighted in 1914, upon recommendation of the then British Government of India. The English *Gitanjali* charmed Western public so deeply that it ran into several editions before the first edition of original Bengali *Gitanjali* was finished. The famous British war-poet Wilfred Owen was so intensely impressed with *Gitanjali* that he used to carry one [poem XCVI] of the *Gitanjali* poems always in his pocket, which was revealed after his fall in World War I.

In 1914, he attached *Sriniketan* [seat of prosperity], a wing of agricultural and rural economic development to *Shanti-Niketan*. There he introduced two very important moves like collective farming and reservation and restoration of forest as "*Vana-Mahotsab*" [festival of forest]; later after independence, the Government of India adopted these concepts nationwide. In 1915, Mr. M. K. Gandhi and his Phoenix party of followers from Durban, found shelter for a short time in *Shanti-Niketan* and their relationship lasted lifelong in spite of some differences. In May 1916, he traveled to Japan and the U.S.A. and delivered lectures on different topics. In 1918, his oldest daughter, Bela died.

In April 13, 1919, province of Punjab was declared to be under military rule and all public meetings were forbidden. On the same day some 10,000 innocent and unarmed men, women and children, possibly unaware of the fact, gathered in protest of Rowlatt Act, one for suppression of terrorism, in an enclosed park, Jalianwala Bug. The army chief General Dyer freely fired on the crowd; almost 380 people died and another 1,000 were injured. He also bombarded the nearby villages from air. This incident was hidden for some time from public knowledge. When it was exposed, Tagore openly condemned this gruesome act of brutal massacre. In his historic letter to the then Viceroy of India, Lord Chelmsford, he requested to be relieved of his title of knighthood. His request was not granted, but since then he stopped using this title.

In May 1920, he visited Great Britain, France, Holland, the United States, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Czechoslovakia, and lectured everywhere on different topics.

In December 22, 1921, *Viswa-Bharati* [an international university] was founded at *Shanti Niketan*, with the aim of union of the civilizations of East and West. As an educator he preached freedom of thought and tried to make schooling a pleasant phase of life. He tried with his limited resources to spread education among vast multitude.

In 1924, he was invited to Malaya, China, Japan and Peru; but due to ill health he could not attend Peru's centenary celebration of independence, and returned from Italy. In 1926, he visited Thailand and Indo-China. In 1929, he went to Malaya, China, Japan, Canada and Indo-China.

Tagore started his career as an artist quite late. During his Western tour in 1930, when he delivered his Hibbert Lectures at Oxford, the Western world was acquainted with another aspect of his artistic expressions. His drawings and paintings were exhibited in Paris, Birmingham, London, Berlin, Desden, Munich, Copenhagen, Moskow, New York and Boston. The Tagore Memorial museum at *Shanti-Niketan* has a collection of 1800 drawings and paintings. Some more exist in various public and private collections in India and abroad; the total may exceed 2000, dated generally between 1925 and 1939.

In 1932, the poet visited Iran in response to an earlier invitation and was given a red-carpet welcome. In 1932, his only grandchild, Nitindranath, the son of his youngest daughter, Mrs. Mira Devi, died while studying in Germany. In April and October 1937, Tagore appealed to the conscience of mankind, to save the civilization from impending threat of barbarism and imperialism of the Fascists. On August 7, 1940, Oxford University conferred honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in absentia.

In his 80 years of life he had in his credit, 51 books of poems, 46 plays [of which four are musical, three are dance-dramas, six are symbolic ones], 14 novels, 9 collections of letters, 9 collections of essay, 94 short stories, 2500 songs, more than 2000 drawings and paintings and an international university which he regarded as his brain child and where a great many scholars from all over the world gathered around his attractive personality. In addition to those he wrote five original books of essays in English and translated nineteen of his books in English. He traveled all over the world number of times and met with almost all the dignitaries of his time in India and abroad including Helen Keller, Goerge Bernard Shaw, Albert Einstein, H. G. Wells, Romain Rolland and educators like Madame Montessori and John Dewey. *Gitanjali* and his other writings have been translated in almost all major languages around the world.

This great poet of all times, a lover of life, continued his creativity till the last moment of his consciousness. He died in Calcutta on August 7, 1941, leaving a huge legacy for the posterity.