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RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S LOVE FOR GOD AND THE WORLD AND GERMAN ROMANTICISM
A talk by Dr. Martin Käpchen, Tagore scholar, translator and author

Followed by
RABINDRA SANGEET
Presented by Debashish and Rohini Raychaudhuri, the only "Father-Daughter Duo of Bengali Music"

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Rabindranath Tagore's Love for God and the World – and German Romanticism

by Martin Kämpchen

In an essay[1] on Rabindranath Tagore the Indian psycho-analyst Sudhir Kakar remarked that "unity" was the all-pervasive theme in the poet's work. Kakar explained that Tagore's yearning for unity made itself felt in two quite opposite moods typical of Rabindranath. One is *rapture*, enthusiasm, ecstasy – indeed a mood expressed in many of his poems, particularly in his religious poems. The second is *melancholy*. Both, rapture and melancholy, possess a quality of the *infinite*, of *unity*, viewed from opposite angles.

[1] The typescript of the essay was made available to me by Sudhir Kakar.

The tension between these opposite moods produces the creative fervour Rabindranath needed to write a poem or a song.

Let me broaden this equation. Rabindranath's yearning for the infinite, for unity is, to my mind, but one pole of his creative being. The second pole is his yearning for absorbing and enjoying the world with his senses. Rabindranath is torn between that yearning for the infinite – and the need for the contemplation of nature and the "world" through his senses. It is the mark of Tagore's greatness that he did not relinquish himself to any one pull. He did not become an ascetic poet by denying the world. Nor did he choose to become a hedonistic writer who worships sensual pleasures, or a writer who is solely busy with social issues. Both these extremes have their famous examples in the realm of literature.

Rather, Rabindranath opted to want God as much as he wanted the world, the Infinite as much as the Limited. Throughout his life, this tension gave him sufficient "food" for his creative urges to unfold. This complex tension between a life of world-affirmation and a life of ascetic world-abnegation is age-old, and yet it has the stamp of a modern dilemma.

I recount some defining moments in Rabindranath's life which are variations of his life's theme, the struggle between wanting God and wanting "the world". Rabindranath has not written an autobiography. But throughout his life he has authored autobiographical essays and he has written two books which cover certain periods of his life. One is *chelebelā*, "Boyhood Days", which the poet wrote in 1940, a year before his death, and covers the period until he went to England as an adolescent. The eighty-year-old Poet looks back on his childhood with such humour and generosity, with such magnanimous charm and detached wisdom that, to me, it easily becomes one of the loveliest books I read of Rabindranath. He examines the roots of his future flowering as a poet and philosopher without becoming analytical or terse.

If we read *chelebelā* attentively, we already witness the struggle to open up the world and oppose others who try to limit his experience of the world. The young Rabi felt

closed-in and lonely. Although the house at Jorasanko, in Kolkata, brimmed over with people – with family members, servants, tuition masters, and hangers-on –, Rabi felt lonely and fled into his own fantasy world. Let us listen to him:

> My chief holiday resort was the unfenced roof of the outer apartment. From my earliest childhood till I was grown up, many varied days were spent on that roof in many moods and thoughts. [...] When I went on to the roof my mind strode proudly over prostrate Calcutta to where the last blue of the sky mingled with the last green of the earth; my eye fell on the roofs of countless houses, of all shapes and sizes, high and low, with the shaggy tops of trees in between.[2]

Let me add two brief quotations from the poet's early life, this time from Rabindranath's second autobiographical book, *jibansmriti,* ("Reminiscences"), published in 1912 when the poet was 51 years old. He wrote that

> it was forbidden to us to leave the house. Even inside the house we could not wander anywhere we wanted. Therefore I saw the unbound nature only from my hiding place. There was a Something which stretched out endlessly, that was called the outer world which was denied to me, although its forms and sounds and scents touched me through various cracks of doors and windows unexpectedly. [...] The world was unbound, I was captive – nothing could unite us. Therefore its attraction was all the stronger.[3]

And the second quotation from "Reminiscences" is:

> Looking back on my childhood, I above all realize that the world and life were filled with mystery. Daily I expected step after step something fantastic to happen which would reveal itself in who-knows-which ways. [...] I remember how deeply related the

[2] Rabindranath Tagore: *My Boyhood Days*. Translated by Marjorie Sykes. Visva-Bharati, Calcutta 1986, p. 52 f.
[3] Rabindranath Tagore: *jībansmriti*. In: rabīndra racanābalī vol.17, p. 270. – All translations which follow are by the author.

> earth was to me in those days. The earth, water, trees, the sky – everything spoke to me, and I could not remain indifferent.[4]

When describing his boyhood, Rabindranath had recourse to a typical thought process which he followed until the poems of his last year. We see a peculiar play or interaction between the Limited and the Limitless. Rabindranath feels captive within a limited space, be it in the house from which he cannot escape or on the roof which again provides no path on which he could move beyond it. Yet, this limited space is not all closed up, it allows sensual contact with the Limitless which Rabindranath calls the "outer world" or "the Unbound". The boy Rabi can *hear* and above all *see* the Limitless from his house or from the roof. This sensual contact allows him to have a clue, an indication of the nature of the Limitless which then gives him an opportunity to imagine and to fantasize. Hence, both in the physical world, as well as in the realm of imagination the Limited and the Limitless touch each other and interact.

Rabindranath tells us how he used to sit in a ramshackle, unused palanquin under the staircase of his family house and dream up various adventurous journeys into fairy tale countries replete with giants and dangerous dragons. These trips of his youth were continued until he became of age, when they were substituted by real trips across India and across the oceans to real continents and countries.

Even when Rabindranath simply wanted to praise nature, its beauty and grandeur, he is quite unable to do so without seeking recourse to the language of Transcendence, that is, the Limitless. Two sentences which he wrote in a letter in 1891 have inspired me ever since I read them first. They are:

> I love the earth which lies quietly at my feet so much that I wish to embrace its whole immensity, with its trees and leaves, its rivers and fields, its noises and silences, its

[4] *ibid*. p.274 f.

> mornings and evenings, with these my arms. I ask myself whether we will ever receive from heaven the treasures with which the earth entrusts us.[5]

In other words, the richness and fullness of nature in all its materiality is compared to – heaven! This seems to be the only comparison worthy of the greatness of nature.

When the twelve-year old boy Rabi first visited Santiniketan together with his father Debendranath, he already expressed the sentiments of a true poet. They reached the train station Bolpur near Santiniketan in the evening while the daylight was already fading. Rabi did not want to have his first experience of rural Bengal in dimming light. So – as he writes in his "Reminiscences" –

> when I climbed to the palanquin, I closed my eyes tight. I wanted that only on the following morning the entire landscape of Bolpur would unfold in front of my wide awake eyes. Had I recognized this or that detail imperfectly in the evening dusk, it would have destroyed the full joy of the experience on the next day.[6]

Here we see the impulse to maximise joy (*ānanda*) by creating the appropriate environment for it. Nature is first fashioned in its materiality like an orchid which is groomed and cultivated until it reveals its perfect beauty. Then this experience is being evoked in memoirs, travelogues and especially in poetry. There is indeed an element of artificiality in this method. One is never quite sure where the plain description of nature ends and when the work of the poet begins conjuring up images and emotions. But that is exactly what Rabindranath's genius is all about: He creates a *new world of experience* which is all his own. Here the work of the Supreme Creator and of the poet-creator mingle and mix inextricably. He lets us into his own world like a magician. Once inside, it is difficult, almost impossible, to view the world again as we did before. It is

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[5] *chinnapatra* no.18. Visva-Bharati, Kolkata 1319, p. 52 – letter from Kaligram, January 1891.
[6] *jībansmriti*. p. 311f.

impossible to forget or discard the world Rabindranath has evoked in front of our inner eye.

So far, we have witnessed the boy Rabi being inspired by nature; he discovered Transcendence by contemplating the material world. This movement from the material to the spiritual can also be reversed, although for a poet and artist, such a movement from the material to the spiritual, from the concrete to the abstract, will ever be the most organic. There has been one key experience in Rabindranath's adolescence when he witnessed a sudden flash of spiritual illumination *first*, which then deeply affected the manner in which he saw the outer world. In his "Reminiscences", Rabindranath tells us of this incidence which happened in Kolkata on the roof of his house when the poet was twenty-one years old. He wrote:

> At that moment, the sun was about to rise through the leaves of the trees. While I continued to observe this, it appeared to me as if in *one* moment a veil fell from my eyes. I saw the world bathed in a wonderful brilliance and waves of joy and beauty ascending on all sides. My heart was covered by thick layers of sadness which the universal light pierced in one moment und illuminated my whole inner being. [...]
>
> While I was standing on the veranda, the gait, the shapes, the graceful countenance of each labourer, whoever passed by, seemed to be extraordinarily wonderful. It was as if they all moved like the playful waves on the ocean of the universe. From childhood onwards I had merely seen with my eyes. Now I began looking with my entire consciousness.[7]

Here, the initial incident was a spiritual experience which filled Rabindranath's mind. With this experience, he was able to view the outside world in a dramatically different manner than before. The spiritual vision flowed outside, so to speak, and flooded the world. This mystical experience was to stay with Rabindranath for "seven or eight days".

[7] *jībansmriti*, p. 396-398.

"Everyone", continued Rabindranath, "even those who bored me, seemed to lose their outer barrier of personality; and I was full of gladness, full of love, for every person and every tiniest thing."[8]

After this, Rabindranath wrote one of his significant early poems, "Awakening of the Waterfall" (*nirjharer swapnabangha*) where he describes in rhythmical cadences how a waterfall gushes down breaking the rocks that held it captive. Here, his spiritual experience receives its adequate expression in a forceful poetic vision of a phenomenon in outer nature.

We are aware of the deeply ingrained ascetic tradition of Hinduism. According to traditional philosophy, the monk, the *sanyāsī*, is the "ideal man" who alone fully meets the requirements of *dharma*. The respect, nay, veneration accorded to monks, to gurus shows us how strong this tradition continues to run in the general population. Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Aurobindo are upholders of that asceticism. Rabindranath, however, is not! Although he had a seriously ascetical father, Debendranath Tagore, he himself broke with that tradition. Yet strangely, the *image* Rabindranath created of himself – the man with long hair and a flowing beard, wearing a Sufi cap and wide gowns – conforms to the image of a venerable ascetic. Also his beautiful, but unsmiling, face carries the severity and gravity of an ascetic. Quite befittingly, he was and still is called "Gurudev" in Santiniketan and Bengal.

However, many of his poems speak a different language. In them, he makes light of asceticism. At the age of almost forty, already a mature writer and poet, he published the humorous poem *pratijñā* ("Decision")[9] in which he lamented: I do not want to be an ascetic – a *tāpas* – unless I find a *tāpasvinī* – a lady ascetic – to keep me company. With this "unless", he jokingly subverts the entire objective of asceticism.

[8] Rabindranath Tagore: *My life in my words*. Selected and edited with an introduction by Uma Das Gupta. Penguin India, New Delhi 2006, p. 84 ("Rabindranath to C. F. Andrews, in conversation, September 1912").
[9] from *ksanikā* (1900).

Or let us take the poem *bairāgja* ("Renunciation")[10] which is a narrative poem telling us the story of a family man who feels the urge to secretly leave his wife and child in order to "find God" in an ascetical life. Again and again he asks himself who and what keeps him bound to his family life. Where is God? – Again and again God answers, "*I* keep you here" with your family, "I am *next* to you". But the man has no ears to hear God's replies. The poem ends with this lament "Sighing deeply God says, 'He wants to leave me, where is he going?'"

Best-known among these anti-asceticism poems is *gītāñjali 119.* The Poet appeals us to leave *bhajan, pūjan, sādhan* – or in the Poet's own translation:

[10] from *caitāli* (1896).

> Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
>
> He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil! [...][11]

In the poetry of Tagore's later life, the rejection of asceticism and the promotion of a world-affirmative view become more subtle and intricate. To show this, I quote from one more poem, it is number 19 from the collection *balākā*, written in 1915.

> How deeply have I loved the world,
> again and again with each new life.
> With my whole life I keep the world in my embrace.
> Mornings and evenings,
> light and darkness
> flow into unison in my mind.
> At long last
> my life and my earth have
> become one.

This is an evocation of Tagore's love of the world. The poem ends with bringing this love of the world and love of God together into a unity. The last lines assert that the fulfillment of "pure and true" "desire" and of the "deepest renunciation" meet and form a "secret unity". In this way alone the spiritual and material balance of the universe would be maintained. What a bold thought! What a bold realization! These are Tagore's final lines:

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[11] *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Volume one: Poems. Edited by Sisir Kumar Das. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi 1994, p.46.

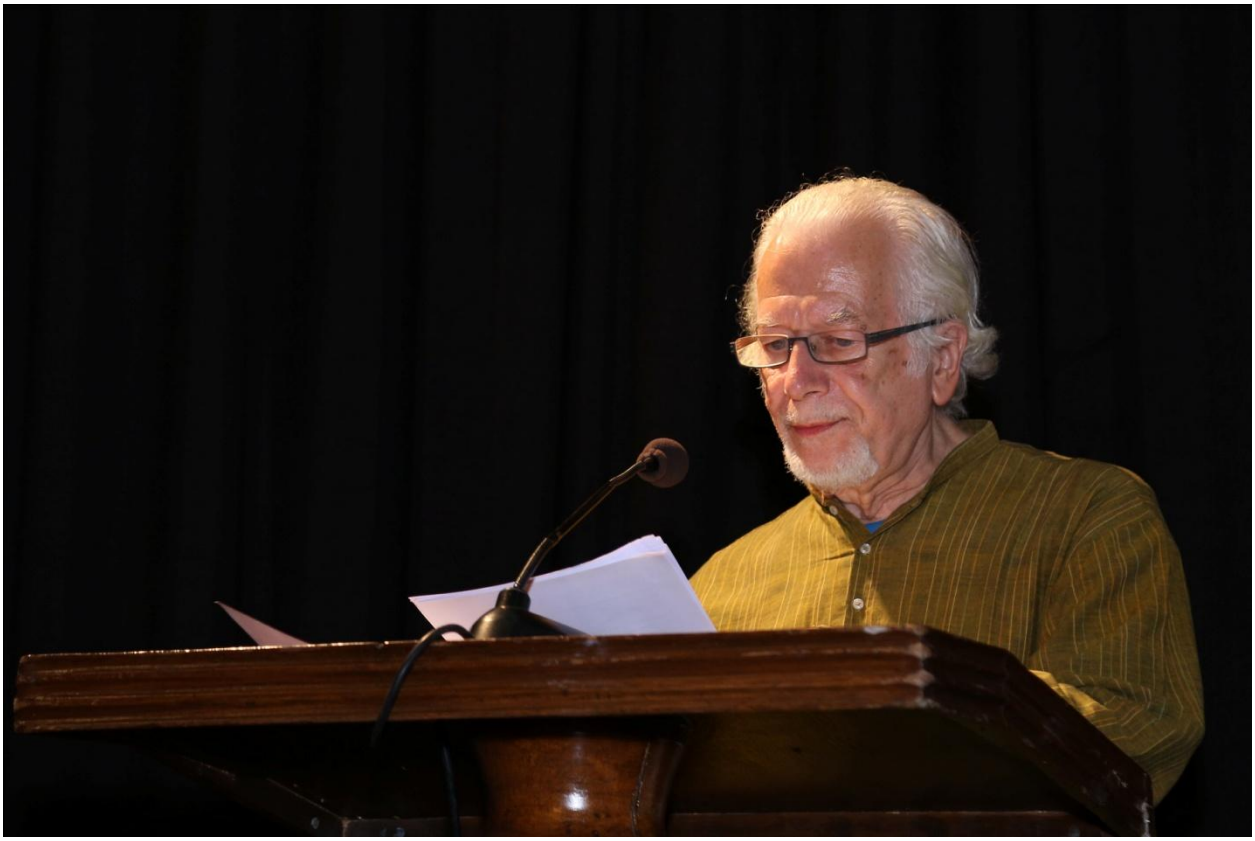
As my deepest desire
    is pure and true,
so is my deepest renunciation
    honest and firm.
In the midst of both, however, lives a secret unity.
How else could the universe
    so long so serenely
bear such an enormous strain.

Here Rabindranath suggests that Renunciation and Desire of the world can be kept in a balance because there pre-exists a secret union of the two. Hence, tilting this balance either towards Renunciation and or to Desire would result in a terrible discord which the world would not be able to bear. So, the ascetical and the sensual depend on each other, love of God and love of the world are balancing each other, enforcing and upholding a secret unity.

Rabindranath Tagore and German Romanticism

It is remarkable that the German response to Rabindranath Tagore has been quite different from those of other countries. It is unique because of Germany's history of Romanticism. While England's response to Rabindranath is intertwined with England's colonial ambitions and policies ruling over India, for Germany, no such political angle influenced the image of India. Rabindranath was viewed as a poet in the romantic tradition and therefore could be easily integrated into the German universe of romantic emotions and ideas.

Even before German scholars and writers could set foot on India, the "Idea of India" had caught hold of the imagination of German Romantics. German Romanticism as a cultural and literary epoch held sway over German life in the first few decades of the



19th century, approximately between 1800 and 1830. All that was known of India then were some of the scriptures and myths in often unsatisfactory translations. Landmark treatises which set the trend were written by cultural historians, namely Johann Gottfried Herder and August Wilhelm Schlegel. Without ever visiting India, they discovered India, or "the Orient", as the "cradle of pure humanity" (*Wiege reiner Menschlichkeit*) where "childlike" men and women thrived in close communion with nature and with the transcendental worlds. According to Herder, India constituted a "pastoral idyll with a favourable climate and a patriarchal social structure; the ancient scriptures and architecture were seen as divine revelation" (Gerhard Koch).

During the entire 19th century, India remained an idealised country which was viewed as an alternative to the prevailing conditions in Europe. Europe was in the grip of

modernisation: In academic life the natural sciences blossomed, in philosophy it was rationalism, and public life became gradually dominated by the Industrial Revolution. These signs of a new era were viewed with fearful scepticism and nostalgia. An entire world-view was about to crumble into history. In this context, the India of the Romantics in the first half of the 19th century was the projection of an imagined life of beauty and wholeness which constituted the emotional response to their disenchantment with the present life-situation.

How does this connect with Rabindranath Tagore? – When he entered the scene in Germany, that is in 1921, his popular success had its origin in two factors. One was that the poet arrived in Germany at a time when the German population was particularly vulnerable. It was soon after the First World War which left Germany as a vanquished nation. This led not only to serious political and financial consequences, but also to a deep social and cultural crisis. The population felt humiliated and was looking beyond its boundaries for a healing touch. In his speeches, Rabindranath expressed his sympathy for the German nation's dilemma and extolled its cultural proximity to Indian philosophy. Germany began to accept in Tagore the "Messiah" it was looking for to give consolation and encouragement and to attempt a renewal of the spirit and of the idealism that is part of Romantic German culture.

The second factor is that Rabindranath Tagore's own affirmative approach to God and to the world merged with German Romanticism. Let me cite two iconic German poems to demonstrate this proximity. The first poem is by Josef von Eichendorff – the best-known and, let me say, the most positive and happiest German poet of the Romantic Age. The four-line poem was penned in 1835 and has become famous for invoking the essence of German Romanticism.

Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen,
die da träumen fort und fort,
und die Welt hebt an zu singen,
triffst du nur das Zauberwort

A song sleeps in all things,
which dream on and on;
the world stirs and sings,
if only you find the magic word.

This poem looks at the spiritual and the material world in quite the same way as Rabindranath Tagore has done, rejecting neither the material nor the spiritual – but fusing both. The material world ("all things") is not inert, it is not locked in an unending dream. Rather, the material world begins to vibrate, it comes alive, it – infused by the spirit – begins to "sing". What is the condition for the material and the spiritual to melt into each other? The poem tells it to us in its final line: *triffst du nur das Zauberwort* – "if only you find the magic word". Translated literally, the German is even more precise: "if only you *hit upon* the magic word". That is to say, it needs a poet to infuse the material with the spiritual. This reflects an exalted opinion of the vocation of the poet, the *kabi*. The poet's magic word alone is capable of bringing together the material and the spiritual, the world and God!

At the end of my lecture I cannot restrain myself to invoke the one German poet and writer with whom Tagore has been compared again and again. I mean Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. On various occasions Tagore was extolled as the "Goethe of India". During the final years of Goethe's long life which coincided with the Romantic Age, he created a four-line poem in which Goethe, known to be a passionate lover of all good things in the world, invoked that same unity of the Outside World and the Divine in a beautiful simile. The Outside World is represented by the Sun which our senses can behold. Likewise however, we are able to behold the Divine. Why? Because, Goethe suggests, the Divine is embedded within our human soul. In this interplay between the World and the Divine both are revered as positive forces.

Wär nicht das Auge sonnenhaft,
Die Sonne könnt es nie erblicken;
Läg nicht in uns des Gottes eigne Kraft,
Wie könnt uns Göttliches entzücken?
[*Zahme Xenien*, chapter 3]

If our eyes were not sun-like,
how could they ever see the sun.
If God's force was not within us,
how could things divine enthrall us.

The history of Rabindranath Tagore's reception in Germany is a topic I have described and discussed in a long list of essays and in several books in English, German and Bengali. Simultaneously, I have in the course of the last almost thirty years translated and published a dozen books containing translations of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry from Bengali to German. They came out in various editions – as books with literary publishers, with religious publishers, as small-format gift books, as large-format hard-bound photography books, as paperbacks… These poetry translations have been read by professional actors at radio-stations and for several compact disks. Only last week a publisher of calendars took my permission to quote a few lines from my translation of a Tagore poem. Besides, I have given dozens and dozens of poetry-readings throughout German-speaking countries. Justifiably, we may speak of a modest Tagore revival in the German-speaking world.

Why would Rabindranath Tagore experience a revival of interest at this time? True, only now the authentic spirit of his poetry can be tasted in direct translations from Bengali. This has never happened before as the popular earlier translations were from English. But is there no other reason pertaining to the content of these poems?

I like to think that it is exactly this fusion of the love of the World and the love of God which attracts a German public. Religious emotions are no longer *en vogue* in that

country. An open invocation of or a discussion about God is not quite in fashion. The exhibition of sentimental emotions, especially of religious emotions, has become widely unacceptable – it is supposed to be not "*cool*". Yet, there lurks in us, I know, that hidden desire to reach out to the Divine. Therefore, the need for another voice which comes from outside, is palpable. This voice must refrain from the language of the churches and the language of patriotism. It should be a language which may be saturated in spiritual emotions but that does not abandon the experience and the enjoyment of the senses. Here, I think, Rabindranath Tagore fills a gap and should be able to fill it more and more.

martin.kaempchen2013@gmail.com
www.martin-kaempchen.com

Martin Kämpchen was born in 1948 in Boppard/Germany. He did his University studies in Vienna, Paris (Ph.D. in German Literature), later in Chennai and Santiniketan (Ph.D. in Comparative Religion). He lives in India since 1973, first as a lecturer of German in Kolkata, then as a free-lance writer, translator and journalist. He has translated the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore from Bengali to German, written on Tagore's relationship with Germany and edited Tagore's correspondence with his German translator, Helene Meyer-Franck. As the Tagore Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla until recently, Kämpchen has researched a book on Tagore's relationship with the German educator Paul Geheeb.
Martin Kämpchen contributes on Indian culture to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and writes for *The Statesman* and *The Telegraph* in Kolkata. As an exponent of Indo-German cultural exchange, he has written numerous books and delivers lectures in Germany and India.