

## International Tagore Conference

### *Rabindranath Tagore's Spirituality: Artistic, Educational and Political Expressions*

Co-convened by Professor Bashabi Fraser, Joint Director, Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs), Edinburgh Napier University and Neill Walker, Director, The Edinburgh International Centre for Spirituality and Peace

8 November 2014

Venue: Augustine United Church, 41 George IV Bridge, Edinburgh, EH1 1EL.

#### Abstracts

(1) **Keynote address on 'The formation of Tagore's spirituality and the evidence of it in his artistic endeavour'**

Prof Indra Nath Choudhuri (Tagore Chair, Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs), Edinburgh Napier University)

#### **Abstract**

While analyzing Tagore's notion of spirituality the paper proposes to discuss the issue in the light of Upanishadic approach to spirituality; how does it differ from Gandhi's notion of spirituality and how Einstein and Tagore deal with the issue of truth and beauty – the two important constituents of spirituality and where Tagore presents his innovative ideas about spirituality.

Is spirituality to be situated against materialism and also different from religion? The term 'spiritual' as distinct from 'religious' is first encountered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Spirituality places little importance on religious dogma or belief system, but is concerned with growing into and experiencing the Divine consciousness. This is the meaning of *adhyatma*, the Sanskrit word for spirituality. In Tagore's notion of renunciation the harmonious blending of worldliness with renunciation is the inbuilt unity principle in it and is the key to our understanding of his notion of spirituality.

In the paper two issues are taken up:

- 1) whether Tagore's quest was a cognitive quest for an understanding of ultimate reality with Truth, consciousness and joy as its main fundamental expositions as one finds in the Upanishads or was it a spiritual quest where Infinite is defined with reference to humanity with truth, love and joy as its predominant essence.
- 2) In this spiritual quest did Tagore avoid worldly materialistic life or he created a synthesis between finite and infinite to become complete in our selves.

Tagore is a mystic, romantic than religious poet like Dante or medieval religious poets. True mysticism calls for an effort to understand the quest for a hidden truth and an aspiration to realize the 'Great Beyond'; it is the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental realm.

Let us be very clear here that Tagore believed in unity of the infinite with finite but not in the Vedantic oneness where self, the finite loses itself completely in the Infinite.

Tagore replaces Upanishadic concept of oneness by a more personal and intimate relationship between the divine and the human and created his concept of Jivan Devata (the god of life) which evolves in three stages, i) as the 'beloved lady'; ii) as his inner being (*antaraatma*); and ultimately, iii) Goddess of life who is the Infinite Being and gives his core spiritual message as enumerated in Gitanjali :

'The Infinite wants the finite's intimate comradeship  
And the finite wishes to lose itself in the Infinite.'

Tagore thereafter reveals the core content of spirituality and that is joy because the soul which is the unifying principle in me finds its perfection in its unity realizing ourselves outside us.

Tagore says that true spirituality is calmly balanced in strength, in the correlation of the within and the without.

In simple terminology it is a balance between worldliness and renunciation. Then he says freedom i.e. freeing oneself from all kind of worldly entanglement or in other words, the knowledge of truth is not possible without submission to law. Law here is *rita*, the worldly or the cosmic law and this law also controls action of a person who does all to live in this world. The spirit, atman or Brahman is bound by this truth and also free from it in its joy. We are bound by worldliness as well as we are also bound by our desire to renounce this world and have the feel of blissfulness. The state of blissfulness or transcendental luminosity is the ultimate in spirituality.

The transcendental luminosity leads man to final deliverance and realization that spirituality is nothing but love for humanity.

This is the most enlightening message which Tagore offers to the people of the world.

## **1. (2) Tagore's School and Methodology: Classrooms Without Walls**

Dr Tom Kane, Dept of Management, Work and Organisation, Stirling Management School  
University of Stirling (t.b.kane@stir.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

The 32 years, spanning Tagore's ages from 30 to 62, saw Tagore integrate his poetic sensibilities with an evolving educational methodology. During those revolutionary years, from 1891 to 1923, Tagore, developed and implemented educational models steadily, starting with his first primary school and nursery in Silalaidaha in 1891: a school for children in a rural community. Then, with his move to the estate of Santiniketan in 1901, we see the establishment of the rural school as a modern ashram. His work in educational systems, culminated in his colleges, with the establishment of Visva Bharati at Santiniketan in 1921 and the establishment and inclusion into the college of the Institute for Rural Reconstruction, Sriniketan, in 1923.

In this session we will examine some of the spiritual, scientific, political and cultural influences on the poet's thinking as he developed his educational vision of classrooms without walls. We will also explore the significance of his poetic sensibilities on the educational methodology.

(3) **Dr Chris Marsh**, Trustee, Plants For A Future, Multidisciplinary scholar with specialisation in Tagore Studies

**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to consider the relevance of Tagore's spirituality to the challenges we face in the world today. Tagore wrote to his friend Charlie Andrews in 1921 that he had realised that his *Sadhana* talks were helpful to Western readers, and hence his mission was 'to work towards the true union of East and West'. The spiritual worldview Tagore brought to the West from 1912 onwards has been defined by Bengali scholars as 'the integration of man and nature and God'. In order to bring Tagore's message nearer to our time, I have translated this concept into modern terms: 'Deep Ecology, Deep Anthropology and Political Theology', themes which run through the texts of the lectures he gave on his foreign tours. Tagore warned that the machine age would be disastrous for planet and people but he seemed to offer no solution. In his addresses to his own people, Tagore urged a return to traditional village based society, and he described his practical experiments in rural reconstruction as 'what has been my life's work'. There is a movement for world change which resembles Tagore's life's work, the Transition Movement which was founded in 2006 as a response to the threats of Climate Change and Peak Oil. The aim is to reduce demand for fossil fuel energy by working towards local self-reliance and resilience, but apathy and denial may prevent Transition interesting more than a concerned minority of environmentalist and socialists. It is not easy to interest people concerned about the present crisis in a spiritual guru who has been dead for over seventy years. Tagore predicted that the dehumanising and destructive modern systems would come to an end, making way for a new dawn. There are signs of national and international power and control weakening, which may be disastrous or an opportunity for re-localisation, for taking responsibility for looking after ourselves and the environment directly through community involvement and decision-making.

(4) **Tagore's Spirituality from the Perspective of Gender Analysis**

Dr Blanka Knotková-Čapková, Associate Professor, Metropolitan University Prague and Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic

**Abstract**

This paper would like to focus on several selected concepts of spirituality in Tagore's poetry. As examples, especially poems from *Gitanjali*, *Caitali* and *Gitabitan* will be referred to. Methodologically, the paper represents a qualitative research, not a quantitative one, so it is not going to generate comprehensive conclusions, applicable on Tagore's poetry as a whole. I will apply gender analysis (taking gender as the main analytical category). From that perspective, the paper will be structured along the following issues:

1) How is the concept of God (the Godly being or principle) constructed in Tagore's poems from the gender point of view? What figurations can be found there? Is the concept of the divine – from the perspectives of language/grammar, gender archetypes and gender stereotypes – drawn as abstract and genderly neutral, or is it genderly conditioned, or is there a combination of both the possibilities? Is there any remarkable difference between Tagore's

poems in English and those in Bengali, as reflected e.g. by his *Gitanjali*? If there is any, how can that difference be interpreted?

2) Are the human beings somehow spiritualized or associated with spirituality, and if so, is there any remarkable difference between male and female characters? How do such conceptualizations permeate with other genres, like e.g. love poetry?

3) Are there imaginary poetic characters which would connote obvious and typologized gender definitions? Do they embody any mythological display?

### **(5) “Atmosphere” as key to Rabindranath Tagore’s spiritual education**

Dr Christine Kupfer, Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs), Edinburgh Napier University

#### **Abstract**

Conventional religious education focuses on the transmission of content. Not so Tagore, who, in the school he founded, shifted the focus from teaching content to creating the conditions that help intensifying children’s connection with the world. For Tagore, the foundation for spiritual development are laid in childhood and can be fostered through an appropriate atmosphere that allows children to unconsciously absorb values and develop spiritually. The concept “atmosphere” seems imprecise, yet when compared with current and recent developments in education, philosophy and the social sciences (including plural spherologies and habitography) proves to be a useful category for improving education as well as a valuable analytical tool for social situations in general.

### **(6) Keynote address: Linking the themes raised to Scotland - to Scots that Tagore had contact with, and to Scotland today**

Prof Murdo Macdonald, Professor of History of Scottish Art at the University of Dundee

#### **Abstract**

In this address I’ll be looking at Tagore’s links with the Scot Patrick Geddes, not least from the perspective of the visual art of cultural revival. Geddes, like Tagore, was a very internationally minded cultural thinker, and in order to illuminate the links between them, I will explore links with two other equally internationally minded cultural nationalist figures, the Irishwoman Margaret Noble, better known as Sister Nivedita, and the historian of art and ideas Ananada Coomaraswamy. The lives of all four of these figures exemplify educational and political expression driven by spiritual commitment.

**‘The contribution of Tagore's spirituality to his action at home and in the world and to his outlook on world affairs’**

(7) **Dr Dipannita Datta**, teaches English at the Centre for Book Publishing, University of Calcutta and Translation studies; the Centre for Translation, Jadavpur University

**Abstract**

‘Spirituality’ is an unavoidable constant in all genres of Rabindranath’s work. Any study on Rabindranath is likely to remain incomplete without an engagement with the deeper understanding of ‘spirituality’ or the ways he saw ‘spirituality’ as an inseparable element in all walks of his life at home and in the world. Leave alone the place of spirituality in his undogmatic defence of religion, in the unalterable difference of cosmopolitan ethics and his fine understanding of aesthetics. Even to have a grasp on his deliberations on science and technology, or, even his political thoughts, an engagement with his thoughts on ‘spirituality’ is necessary. It is with this limited understanding, I will analyze how far his involvement with ‘spirituality’ influenced his own sphere of work ‘at home and in the world’. The ‘spirituality’ perspectives can, I argue, be seen as transcending national borders. In this reading ‘spirituality’ is not simply a matter of the past mystical representation, but examples of agency; for Rabindranath actively seeks to complicate certain dimensions of his position as a poet and it is essential to see this artistic thought on the part of the poet through the prism of his outlook and concrete actions in ‘world affairs’.

**(8) Keynote address: The humanist spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore**

Professor Kitty Scoular Datta, former Professor and Head of the Department of English, Jadavpur University; The Open University  
‘The Development of Tagore’s Spirituality in his Poetry and Prose’

**Abstract**

This paper concentrates on how the growth of Rabindranath’s spiritual awareness is gradually revealed in his poetry from 1882 onwards and in his prose lectures and novels, especially *Gora* and *Chaturanga*. His sense of divine presence in the natural world and in the heart (*jivan devata*) is related to his social consciousness and his moderation, and transcended the ordinary thinking of his strife-ridden times, in East and West, to present a continuing challenge to both religions and secularity in the post-colonial world.

