

Chapter 2 Tagore and Okakura Tenshin

“Modern Renaissance man” Tagore

Tagore was not merely a poet but also a great, multi-talented genius. During his eighty years' lifetime, he acquired profound knowledge widely covering music, novels, children's literature, musical plays, art, education, thought, politics, philosophy, nature, religion, human rights, Oriental thought, farmers' economy, history of the ancient Indian world, international exchanges and founding of a school. He was versed in various fields of human activities and contributed widely and deeply to each field. He was an omnipotent genius, well deserved to be called “Modern Renaissance man.” Above all, Tagore wrote as many as 1500 “Tagore songs.” They are loved by people to this day and two of them were chosen as Indian and Bangladeshi national anthems.

As a Bengali, I am proud of Tagore from the bottom of my heart and confident that no one else in the world has had as profound knowledge and thought as Tagore. His thought and action have global expanse and universal value, far beyond India and Asia. Therefore, not only the Bengalese but also the entire Indian Continent call Tagore with the highest and deepest respect, *gurudebo*, in education, equal to God, and *kobigul* (the poet of poets) and *bishokobi* (number one poet of the world).

Tagore was born in 1861 in Calcutta in West Bengal under the British rule and died in 1941 soon after the Greater East Asian War broke out.

The Tagores were a very wealthy family, having succeeded in various businesses, including trading with Britain for generations. Since his grandfather's generation, they had also been ardently working for the modernization of India.

At the Tagore house, many Bengali poets, musicians, literary men, painters, and religionists were invited, and various plays, musical performances and recitations of poems were held. Tagore's brothers, sisters and relatives were also talented in literature, music and painting and created great works in those fields.

Tagore was brought up in such rich and favorable environment and obtained both modern learning and traditional Indian education. He studied in London, the British capital, and the difference between the Occidental and Oriental civilizations, their merits and demerits led Tagore to his universal thinking. Since 1890 onwards, Tagore followed his father's request and was entrusted with the management of the family's land and fortunes in East Bengal. Tagore must have been greatly fascinated and influenced

by the rich natural environment of Bangladesh, especially the grand, majestic river and the sun rising and setting in the river's horizon, far more than by learning through books. It is purely because of the beautiful nature that Bangladesh has produced many poets, musicians, and visual creators. Tagore describes East Bengal's beauty:

If you don't come here, you can't imagine how mysteriously beautiful the earth is, and how vast the life and deep thoughts are. In the evening, as I sat in silence in my boat when the water was still, the shore was faint, and the glow of the setting sun at the end of the sky was gradually fading, the silent, half-closed nature, I felt it touched my whole body and mind, generously, expansively, and softly. What peace, what love, what greatness, what boundless compassionate sorrow. From this inhabited mustard field to that deserted world of stars, every inch of space was filled with a myriad of marvelous minds. I was sitting there alone in a world of unfulfilled minds.

(“Occasional Letter dated October 1, 1891”)

In 1901, Tagore established a school at a place called Santiniketan in West Bengal, which was at that time a barren land with hardly any plants. At first, he had many difficulties, including financial ones. He cultivated the barren land and planted trees himself. Unfortunately, then Tagore's wife died of hardship and worries. The establishment of this school was Tagore's dream-come-true, for he was determined to implement ideal education, believing that for children especially, teaching nature and rooting in the earth is most needed. This school eventually developed into the Visva-Bharati University, a public central university.

As mentioned later, Tagore invited to his school at Santiniketan Hori Shitoku, who visited India with Okakura Tenshin, in 1902 and after 1905, Katsuta Shokin of Nihon Bijutsuin (Japan Visual Arts Academy) and Sano Jinnosuke, a judo wrestler, just to mention a few.

Tenshin's influence over Bengal Renaissance

Tagore and his contemporary Bengali intellectuals started a movement called “Bengal Renaissance,” aiming to restore their own tradition and culture which had been denied under the British colonial rule. Around the end of the 19th century and onwards, painter Oponindranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore's relative, and painters Gogonendranath Tagore, Nondo Rul Posh, Osito Kumaru Hardul tried to create a new painting trend with the theme of Indian indigenous Hindu art and Indian people themselves. Tenshin's influence over them was boundlessly important. In 1903, Tenshin sent Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso to India for art exchanges between Japan and India. Besides, Katsuta Shokin and Arai Kanpo visited India, which resulted in mutual influence between them and the artists in Bengal. Yokoyama Taikan in particular has left masterpieces depicting the scenery of the

sacred Ganges River, people living along the river and Hindu culture, which are now Japan's precious cultural assets.

Besides painters, Tagore invited many other talented people in various fields like Judo, Kado (flower arrangement), Sado (tea ceremony), Japanese painting, wooden architectural technology, and gardening from Japan to India and Okakura Tenshin profoundly cooperated with Tagore in these efforts. The first foreign student at Tagore's school was Hori Shitoku from Japan, who had visited India with Tenshin. Hori remained in India and studied at the school, which symbolically indicated how deeply Okakura Tenshin and Tagore bonded together with each other. Unfortunately, Hori died young from illness in India. At that time Tagore asked Tenshin to send a Judo teacher to train Indians mentally and physically. At his request, Sano Jinnosuke of Keio University went to India in 1905 and taught Judo and Japanese at Tagore's school. By the way, Omita Sen, mother of Amartya Sen, who was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998, was taught by Sano Jinnosuke. Tagore made much of Judo as an art of self-defense for women.

Okakura Tenshin held a meeting at the Tokyo Imperial University to report his experience in India immediately after he returned home to Japan from his first visit and spoke about India and his encounter with Tagore. At the meeting there were about seventy professors and intellectuals in various fields, including the President of the Tokyo Imperial University. This tells what a remarkable role Tenshin played in realizing the first cultural and political exchange and cooperation between Japan and India.

We need to emphasize here that in 1905, fearing the rising trend of cultural restoration and national movement, the British Governor General in India implemented a forcible policy of the division of Bengal without any advance notice. This was a policy to divide the designated "Bengal District" of the combined present Indian West Bengal, Bangladesh, Odisha, Bihar and Assam into two parts to be ruled as such. This clearly meant harsher oppression and control. Millions of people stood up in Bengal against this policy at that time.

Tagore participated in this opposition movement and one of the leaders of this anti-division movement was an activist called Aurobindo Ghose. The opposition movement lasted until the decision to create the Bengal District was withdrawn. At that time, Ghose was a radical who dared to take whatever measures were needed to fight against the British. Eventually, he was sent to prison and turned to the new Yoga movement. Ghose met Tenshin in 1902.

In my opinion, it was Okakura Tenshin who set the Indian independence movement on fire. Since

Ideals of the East was published in English, many young Bengali intellectuals read this book and were greatly influenced. According to some sources and statements, it is verified that Tenshin's two-time visits to India had a wide impact on the Indian independence fighters' views on culture, thought, politics and other aspects.

Tenshin visited India a second time in 1912 to see with his own eyes how India had changed since his first visit there. By that time, Tenshin's health had already seriously deteriorated and he died in September 1913, the next year, without learning about Tagore's Nobel Prize. There was no record regarding how Tenshin felt about India ten years after his first visit.

However, an impressive event occurred. Tenshin met in Calcutta a female Bengali poet, writer, and social activist named Priyamvada Devi. She was related to Tagore. The two fell in love platonically and after Tenshin returned to Japan, they kept exchanging letters. In India at that time, a woman, whether Hindu or Muslim, was hardly allowed to act socially. However, Tagore had no such prejudice and had Ms. Priyamvada edit a magazine and she in return donated her private fortunes to the management of Tagore's school on cooperative terms.

Through Tagore's personal relationship, Tenshin met this wonderful woman. Their letters have been kept respectively in Japan and India to this day.

Tagore's Nobel Prize in Literature and GITANJALI

Tagore had published many books of poetry until then and in 1913 he was presented for the first time as an Asian, a Bengali in British colonial India, with the Nobel Prize in Literature. At the time when it was generally believed that the Western civilization was the best in the world, an Asian's Nobel Prize made an enormous impact on the world. He received the Noble Prize for *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*), collected poems written in Bengali.

All the poems in the collection are accompanied by music composed by Tagore and they are popularly sung in India today. Tagore was 52 years old then. Let me introduce the following, one of the most famous poems in *Gitanjali*:

**On the shores of Bharat,
Where men of all races have come together,
Awake, O my Mind!
Standing here with outstretched arms,
I send my salutations to the God of Humanity,**

And in solemn chant sing His praises.
At whose call no none knows,
Came floating streams of men
And merged into the sea of *Bharat*.
The Aryan, the Non-Aryan, the Dravidian,
The Huns, the Pathans and the Moghuls—
They have all merged here into one body.
Today the West has opened its doors,
And from thence come gifts.
Giving and taking,
All will be welcome on the shores of *Bharat*.
Where men of all races have come together.

In mad exultation, singing songs of victory,
Have they come, crossing deserts and mountains;
They all dwell within me
And in my blood echo their varied melodies.
O Terrible one!
Let the heavens resound with your music;
Even those, whom in disdain we kept apart,
Will gather round thee, O *Bharat*,
Where men of all races have come together.
Here one day in the hearts of men
The message of the One resounded.
In the fire of *Tapasya* all differences were forgotten,
And the many forged into one.
Round that fire of sacrifice,
We all have to meet with bowed heads
And unite—
On the shores of *Bharat*,
Where men of all races have come together.

In that fire,

**The blood-shot flame of suffering is aglow.
O mind, bear this suffering
And hear the call of the one.
Conquer all shame, all fear,
And let vanish all humiliations.
What great life will emerge
At the end of the days of suffering!
The night ends,
The great Mother is awake
On the shores of Bharat,
Where men of all races have come together.**

**Come, O Aryan and Non-Aryan,
Hindu and Moslem,
Come, O English and you Christian,
Come, O Brahmin,
Purify your mind and claps the hands of all;
Come, O downtrodden,
And let vanish all burdens of your humiliation.
Tarry not, but come you all
To anoint the Mother,
On the shores of *Bharat*,
Where men of all races have come together.**

Tagore's Nobel Prize made a great impact on Japan, too. Not only intellectuals and artists, but also people in general came to be interested in Tagore and wanted to meet him and listen to him. In response to people's requests, the Japanese Government worked to organize Tagore's visit to Japan, but due to political reasons, the visit did not take place at the time.

At that time the Anglo-Japanese Alliance had been concluded and it was not easy at all for Tagore, a person considered dangerous to Britain, to be granted a visit to Japan, where Okakura Tenshin and other Pro-Asianist intellectuals and activists were acting for their cause.

However, Tagore's poems were translated into Japanese from the English edition and his other books

were introduced to Japan one after another. Tagore had such immense impact because it was international common sense that if anyone from Asia was to be celebrated with the Nobel Prize, it would be a literary man or a scientist from Japan, the only advanced country in Asia. In reality, however, an almost unknown Indian under the British colonial rule won the first Nobel Prize in Asia.

Tagore's visit to Japan and the beginning of new Indo-Japan relationship

And finally, in 1916, Tagore's visit to Japan came true. Shibusawa Eiichi, the then Chairman of the Japan-India Association established in 1903, sent a letter of invitation to Tagore. After their first meeting, Shibusawa came to see Tagore every time Tagore visited Japan, which indicates how respectful to Tagore Shibusawa was. Tagore stayed for nearly three months from the end of May to the end of September at entrepreneur Hara Tomitaro's Sankei-en residence in Yokohama and visited the students at Karuizawa, a resort town, following the invitation by Naruse Jinzo, who had established Japan Women's University. In addition, at Izura in Ibaraki Prefecture, Tagore met Okakura Tenshin's bereaved family, went to Rokkakudo-hall, built by Tenshin as the center for his international activities, and left memorial writing there. A grand reception was held at Ueno Kan'ei-ji Temple by artist Yokoyama Taikan, poet Noguchi Yonejiro, Tokyo Imperial University professor and founder of Musashino University Takakusu Junjiro, scholar on Buddhism and priest Kawaguchi Ekai, judo wrestler Sano Jinnosuke, Buddhism scholar Kimura Nichiki, and others. About 300 notables, including Prime Minister Okuma Shigenobu, and the President of the Tokyo Imperial University, attended the reception. Welcome of this scale and fever was the first in the Japanese modern history.

I want to point out here that when it comes to speaking of Tagore in Japan, there is a trend to overly emphasize that during his stay in Japan, Tagore criticized Japanese nationalism and the government's military policy. However, what Tagore critically pointed out was that as symbolized in his criticism of "nationalism", Japan lost its historical tradition amid the rapid modernization process and took after Western modernization and imperialism. His clearest view was stated in passages of serial lectures he gave in 1916 in the United States after his visit to Japan, "Nationalism in the West," "Nationalism in Japan," and "Nationalism in India." The following is a passage in "Nationalism in Japan."

What is dangerous for Japan is, not the imitation of the outer features of the West, but the acceptance of the motive force of the Western nationalism as her own. Her social ideals are already showing signs of defeat at the hands of politics. I can see her motto, taken from science, "Survival of the Fittest," writ large at the entrance of her present-day history—the motto whose meaning is, "Help yourself, and never heed what it costs to others."

"I am quite sure that there are men in your country who are not in sympathy with your inherited ideals; whose object is to gain, and not to grow. They are loud in their boast that they have

modernized Japan.”

(“Nationalism”)

Tagore thought that Western nationalism was characterized as conquest and struggle and mechanization of human beings and criticized the way this Western trend affected Japan. His criticism seems to be too severe in my view, as a fellow Bengali with Tagore.

Japan from the end of Edo Bakufu government, Meiji Restoration to the early twentieth century, when Tagore’s lectures were held, was in the world where amid the imperialism and competitive power struggles, for each country to maintain its independence, there was no other way but to strengthen the country’s military power, industries, and potentials through modernization. Japan was no exception and resourceless Japan had no other choice but to expand overseas in order to keep its national foundation.

Victories in the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War liberated Asian peoples from Qing’s sovereignty and the European and American colonial regime and opened the road to modernization. Thus, the wars were certainly meaningful in a sense. In this respect, Tagore’s criticism against modernization and Japan as a country cannot have helped but invite repulsive reaction from Japanese intellectuals at the time for being too idealistic.

As Okakura Tenshin radically criticized Japan during the Meiji period for the trend to worship Europe and the United States and at the same time to deny Japanese tradition, Tagore’s warning that Japan might have lost its own merits in the midst of the modernization process had better be taken as a valuable suggestion to Japan.

In 1907, during a rally held in Chittagong, a port town in East Bengal, Tagore called to Indian youths to wake up from sleep, referring to Japan’s victory over the whites in the Russo-Japanese War. Probably, Japan’s annexation of Korea might have changed Tagore’s recognition of Japan.

To Japan, the Korean Peninsula was the key to its national defense and there was threat of Russia’s southward advance. Considering the situation at that time, I don’t think it is fair to see Japan’s position in parallel with Western Powers’ colonial control.

However, we must not forget that when it comes to Japan’s merits, Tagore always evaluated them as highly as ever.

“The Japanese have acquired a whole kingdom of beauty. The Japanese cherish everything they see, and they never neglect it.” “The sense of beauty that was seen among the good-natured and those with a real sense of humor is growing and reaching all people in this country.”

“Traveler to Japan”

“The Japanese make their own worship offerings to beauty, inside and outside their homes, and everywhere.” I have never seen such wholehearted respect for beauty anywhere else. No other nation has learned in such careful manner how to approach beauty while preserving purity.”

“On Personality”

“Because of centuries-old customs, the Japanese do not finish any job somehow in a just-fine attitude. To them, work is aesthetic, and they work with a completely focused mind. All you can see is that the Japanese are learning to establish their state of mind throughout all of their work. This is what meditation is all about.”

“Japan as Zen Meditation”

Tagore went to the United States after his first visit to Japan. In February 1917, the next year, he revisited Japan on his way home. His third visit to Japan was in June 1924, and his fourth was in March 1929. After his fourth visit he planned to go to the United States and Canada, but owing to some trouble, he returned to Japan again and stayed in Japan in May through June, 1929.

With respect to exchanges between Tagore and Japan, we must not forget one memorable encounter between Tagore and Wada Tomiko, a student at Japan Women’s University. While working as an interpreter and translator for Tagore, she devoted her lifetime to studying Tagore’s thought with profound knowledge and respect and thus played a great role in spreading the recognition of Tagore in Japan. After she married, she, Koura Tomi by name, closely communicated with Tagore in Japan and the United States. She wrote about her encounter with Tagore in his late years in India in 1935 in her autobiography. On that occasion, Tagore fondly talked about his memorable experiences in Japan, and told people around him how much he wished he could visit Japan again and write poems at Karuizawa, his favorite town. In 1981, Ms. Koura Tomi, with other voluntary members, erected a statue of Tagore at Karuizawa, a dear place to Tagore. On the bronze statue, Japanese words meaning “No Wars for Humans” were inscribed.

What Tagore left in Japan

In 1941, immediately before World War II broke out, Tagore died at the age of eighty. But the close bond between Japan and India built by Tagore and Okakura Tenshin never perished. In 1957, at the

call of Shimonaka Yasaburo, founder of Heibon-sha, it was decided to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of Tagore's birth. Many intellectuals, one after another, expressed their prospective participation in the celebration. Entrepreneur Okura Kunihiko, who once welcomed Tagore to Japan, was eager to take part in the celebration and led the preparations for the anniversary. Tagore Memorial Society was established by contemporary leaders in culture, literature, education, religion and financial world and they planned various ceremonies, seminars, showing of films, music and stage performances, exhibition of Tagore's paintings, lectures on Bengali, study class on Tagore and so on. Voluminous sources and materials related to Tagore were collected and memorial publications were issued.

Other activities went on, including studies on literature and thought of Tagore, India and Bengal by Nara Tsuyoshi, Azuma Kazuo, Azuma Keiko, Usuda Masayuki, Onish Masayuki, Suzuki Kikuko, Nishioka Naoki, Niwa Kyoko, Watanabe Kazuhiro and others.

Among them, the most prominent scholar on Tagore is Azuma Kazuo, former professor emeritus at Tsukuba University, whose books are often quoted in this book. He learned Bengali from Professor Watanabe Teruhiro at Tokyo University and became a visiting professor at Visva Bharati University in Bengal, India, in 1967 and studied intently Tagore's literature and systematically translated Tagore's works, while teaching the Japanese language and culture for three years and a half. After returning to Japan, he established the Japan-India Tagore Association and held seminars and symposiums, inviting eminent intellectuals as guest speakers through his personal connections in India.

The biggest achievement of this association is the publication of Tagore's complete works in Japanese with the cooperative efforts of Nakamura Hajime, Koura Tomi and others. In addition, Professor Azuma built "Japan Academy" at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1994. Moreover, in 2007, he established "India-Japan Cultural Center, Rabindranath—Okakura House" in Calcutta in cooperation with the West Bengal Government. In recognition of his endeavors and contribution for many years, the West Bengal Government gave Professor Azuma "Tagore Award", and Visva-Bharati University decorated him with the honorable title of "Desiccottom (Supreme People's Merits)." Domestically, in 2008, Professor Azuma was decorated with "The Order of the Sacred Treasure, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon" by the Japanese Government. Professor Azuma passed away in 2011, but his achievements will be forever marked in histories of Japan, India, and Bangladesh.

I would like to close this chapter by quoting what Tagore spoke about the influence Okakura Tenshin had on India and Tenshin's great thought at his lecture given during his visit to Japan in 1924.

“Some Years ago I had the real meeting with Japan when a great original mind, from these shores came in our midst. He was our guest for a long time and he had immense inspirations for the young generation of Bengal in those days which immediately preceded a period of a sudden ebullition of national self-assertion in our country.”

“I am glad to confess to you today that one of the inspirations which acted towards the awakening of spirit in Bengal had its source in that great man, Okakura, and I am especially grateful that this wonderful period of our modern history had its association with Japan.”

(On Oriental Culture and Japan’s Mission, Talks in Japan by Rabindranath Tagore)