

THE NALANDA-SRIWIJAYA CENTRE,  
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore,  
commemorates the 150th anniversary of  
World Poet Rabindranath Tagore

*Tagore's Asian Voyages*



SELECTED SPEECHES AND WRITINGS ON  
RABINDRANATH TAGORE



The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, pursues research on historical interactions among Asian societies and civilisations. It serves as a forum for comprehensive study of the ways in which Asian polities and societies have interacted over time through religious, cultural, and economic exchanges and diasporic networks. The Centre also offers innovative strategies for examining the manifestations of hybridity, convergence and mutual learning in a globalising Asia.

<http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg/>





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# Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Projects

## Research Projects

The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre pursues a range of research projects within the following areas:

1. **Comparative Diasporas:** This project mainly focuses on the study of Chinese and Indian diasporas in diverse cultural and geographical settings. It will seek to understand the interactions, mutual perceptions, issues of identity, and roles of Chinese and Indian immigrant communities in history and in the contemporary world.
2. **China and India Viewed from the Southeast: A Place of Mediation:** As one of the hinges of world commerce, whose polities were relatively open, cosmopolitan, maritime and trade-dependent, Southeast Asia has always been a place where China and India learned about each other, and where the rest of the world learned about them. This project will compare historically the way the ideas and institutions of the two imperial centres were projected to Southeast Asia, and understood, modified, and passed on to others there.
3. **Comparative Study of Religious Networks in Asia:** This project pursues comparative studies of the historical spread of Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian networks across Asia, the role these religions played in facilitating trading activities, and the ways in which they created cultural links among Asian societies.
4. **Perceptions of Asia:** Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura Kakuzo, Lim Boon Keng, Liang Qichao, José Rizal, Manhae and Benoy Kumar Sarkar had an imagination of Asia as an abstract entity, transcending the imperial and national frontiers etched by colonial powers. This project explores the intellectual, cultural and political conversations across Asia conducted by these intellectuals.
5. **Maritime Asia:** This is a wide-ranging project which incorporates studies of maritime technologies, maritime trade and commercial networks, shipwrecks, and early maritime connections throughout Asia. The importance of the sea in the history of many Asian societies has not been fully recognised and the project will bring a higher profile to this aspect of Asian history.

6. **India-China Interactions during the Late Qing and Republican Periods:** The interactions between India and China during the colonial period have attracted limited attention. This project focuses on the writings of Kang Youwei and Ma Jianzhong from China and Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Ramnath Biswas from India, which have not yet been translated or researched, in exploring cross-cultural interactions between India and China from 1800 to 1949.
7. **Web Projects:** The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre uses its website to mount a range of related materials as global resources for the study of intra-Asian historical interactions. This includes bibliographies, guides, working papers, translations, and integrated projects. We are working with the West Bengal State Archives to identify and digitize materials relevant to Southeast Asia and China-India relations.



## Lecture Series

The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre hosts three lecture series focusing on intra-Asian interactions: The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Lecture Series, the lectures of which take place within ISEAS; the Asian Civilisations Museum-Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre Lecture Series, which is co-organised by Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum and the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, and the lectures of which are held at the Asian Civilisations Museum; and the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre-Singapore Buddhist Lodge Lecture Series (in Mandarin), which is held at the Singapore Buddhist Lodge:

1. **Nalanda-Sriwijaya Lecture Series**
  - Inaugural lecture: "The Buddhist-Hindu Divide in Premodern Southeast Asia," by John Miksic (23 April 2009)
2. **ACM-NSC Lecture Series**
  - Inaugural lecture: "Why Buddhism and Not Hinduism: Re-examining the Successful Transmission of Buddhism to China," by Tansen Sen (4 June 2009)
3. **NSC-Singapore Buddhist Lodge Lecture Series (in Mandarin)**
  - Inaugural lecture: "The Beliefs and Practices of Buddhism among the Chinese Community in Kolkata, India," by Zhang Xing (10 October 2009)

For details of these and subsequent lectures, please see:  
<http://www.nsc.iseas.edu.sg>

## Archaeology Unit

The Centre's Archaeology Unit was established in April 2010. Comprising Professor John Miksic and Mr Lim Chen Sian, the Unit is Singapore's first formal archaeological unit. It pursues archaeological excavations in Singapore, as well as in Java, Sumatra and mainland Southeast Asia. Major attention is assigned to sites associated with the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The Unit intends to develop an archaeological field school for Southeast Asia. Current archaeological initiatives are: pre-development rescue excavations in Singapore focusing on the 14th-century settlement of Temasek, and investigations at a 10th century religious complex in Central Java.

# Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre marks 150 years of Tagore's birth with a range of events

RABINDRANATH TAGORE (7 May 1861 – 7 August 1941), the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, is an icon of intra-Asian interactions and of the Pan-Asian movement. He was also an avid traveller, criss-crossing the Indian Ocean several times in the early twentieth century. Tagore made his first trip beyond India in 1878, when he travelled to Britain to study. But his more influential voyages were to be to the countries of Asia after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913, beginning in 1916 with a visit to Burma and in 1922 when he travelled to Sri Lanka. Longer visits to China and Japan in 1924, Singapore, Malaya, Indonesia and Thailand in 1927, and China, Japan and Indo-China in 1929 were interspersed with further visits to Sri Lanka and, in addition, to many countries in the Middle East and Europe. The ways in which Tagore was received and reacted to during his Asian voyages varied enormously, with some in his audiences considering him a “seer and patriarch”, or even a saint with “a great and tender soul”, while others rejected him as a “petrified fossil” who would maintain the oppression of enslaved peoples by “preaching to them patience and apathy”. The materialist radicals and revolutionaries of China, in particular, were vehement in their denunciation of their visitor, who claimed to be intent on saving the spirituality of the East from the materialism of the West.

To mark the 150th anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore's birth, the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies has organised several events during the past two years. A series of four conferences examining Tagore's travels in Asia and the wider impact of his ideas on Asia was the main highlight of these events. These conferences were organised in collaboration with Harvard University, Peking University, and the

Netaji Research Bureau in Kolkata. The first of these conferences took place in November 2009 at Harvard University, USA, on the theme “Ideas of Asia in Tagore and his Times”. Speakers included Professors Homi Bhaba, Tan Chung, Kris Manjapra, and Saranindranath Tagore. There was also a concert by Pramita Mallick, a leading exponent of the music of Rabindranath Tagore.

The second conference in this series took place in Singapore in May 2011, following the theme of “An Age in Motion: The Asian Voyages of Rabindranath Tagore”. By bringing together scholars to discuss the Asian voyages of Tagore from both his own viewpoints and those of the officials, scholars, writers and artists with whom he interacted during these voyages, the conference elucidated the Tagore phenomena during the 1910s and 1920s. Cultural events at the conference included songs by Prabuddha Raha and a dance performance by Kalamandalam.

The Institute of Oriental Studies at Peking University hosted the third conference in August 2010. Entitled “Understanding Tagore: New Perspective and Research”, the conference included a range of papers from Chinese scholars examining diverse aspects of the Tagore phenomenon, as well as lectures by globally-prominent Tagore scholars such as Sugata Bose. Tagore's experiences in China and Japan were a special aspect of the presentations at this gathering

The final conference in this series was held in Kolkata in December 2010. Hosted by the Netaji Research Bureau and the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art, the conference was entitled “A Different Universalism: the Global Vision of Rabindranath Tagore and his Contemporaries.” The conference brought together scholars from a variety

of disciplines and continents to explore the intellectual, cultural and political conversations conducted by Tagore and his contemporaries to articulate a global vision in the age of colonial empire and anti-colonial nationalism. It also examined the modern intellectual history of Asia as well as theories of universalism, cosmopolitanism and internationalism. Speakers at the conference included Minister George Yeo and Professors Wang Gungwu, Prasenjit Duara and Fakhrul Alam.

In addition to the above events, in January 2011 the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre also co-organized the inaugural lecture of the Singapore Consortium for India-China Dialogue, where the Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao outlined the important role and legacy of Rabindranath Tagore in India-China relations. And recently, the Centre co-sponsored the performance of Tagore's moving play *Daak Ghar* (Post Office).

As we prepare for the publication of the papers presented at the above-mentioned conferences, this booklet, which brings together some of the talks organised or co-organised by the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, serves as a tribute to the Nobel Laureate who played a significant role in promoting intra-Asian understanding and interactions. Taking Tagore's Pan-Asiatic zeal as our aspiration, the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre strives to promote the study of cross-cultural connectivities and interactions through its various research projects, lecture series, publications, and cultural events.

**TANSEN SEN**  
**Head, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre**  
**Institute of Southeast Asian Studies**  
**Singapore**

# Tagore's Asian Voyages 1927

“You have before you one of the world’s greatest men.”

– C.H. Woolfe, Acting Colonial Secretary, introducing Tagore at Singapore’s Victoria Theatre on 25th July, 1927



## Singapore

**12 July** Tagore left Calcutta.

**14 July** Arrived in Madras. Stayed a few hours before leaving on the French steamer *Amboise*.

### 20 July, Wednesday

Rabindranath Tagore arrived in Singapore onboard the *Amboise*. A very large crowd greeted Gurudev at Tanjong Pagar led by Mr. R.J. Farrer, President of the Municipal Commissioners, and chairman of the reception committee. He was garlanded by Mr. K.K. Pathy on behalf of the Hindu Association. A musical chant in honour of the Poet was rendered by the Indian ladies present. The poet then proceeded to Government House as the guest of Sir Hugh and Lady Clifford till 22 July, and thereafter was the guest of Mr. M.A. Namazie at his Siglap residence.

**July 21, Thursday** Tagore attended a reception given by the Straits Chinese at the Garden Club at Raffles Square. A large gathering of prominent members of the community, including Dr. Lim Boon Keng, OBE, were present. Gurudev gave a speech about India and China, and how Indian students needed to study Chinese history in order to understand their own.

**July 22, Friday** Gave a public address at Victoria Theatre about international friendship and the unity of mankind. The Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford, introduced him as “the greatest poet that the East had produced in living memory”.

**July 23, Saturday** Garden party at Mr. M.A. Namazie’s bungalow. The reception was held under the auspices of the Indian



Indian Association reception at Mr. Namazie’s bungalow.

Association. He was garlanded by the President of the Association, Mr. Ali Khan Surattee. Several hundred guests were present, and probably for the first time in Singapore loudspeakers were installed by the Standard Telephone and Cable Company to enable all those present to hear the poet speak. Tagore spoke about the glorious past of India and the need for his countrymen to support the ideals of Visva-Bharati.

#### July 24, Sunday

Delivered an address to the Chinese community at Palace Gay Theatre. The Acting Chinese Consul General presided, and Tagore's speech was translated into Chinese. Tagore spoke of the cultural fellowship between Chinese and Indians. An "At Home" was given by Mr. M.A. Namazie at his bungalow.

#### July 25 Monday

Address at Victoria Theatre to a large gathering of school children and teachers. Mr. C.H. Woolfe, the Acting Colonial Secretary, presided. He introduced Tagore thus: "You have before you one of the world's greatest men."

#### July 26, Tuesday

Farewell luncheon given by Mr. Granville Roberts, editor of the 'Malaya Tribune'. Those present included the Consuls General for Germany, America and France, and the German Consul in Colombo.

Left from Johnston's Pier for his journey to Malacca.

## Malacca

#### July 27, Wednesday

Arrived in Malacca by the steamer *S.S. Larut*. Met on board by Mr. G.C. Dodd and Mr. S.C. Goho of the Tagore Reception Committee. Mr. N.N. Pitchay JP, President of the Indo-Ceylonese Association, garlanded him. Tagore stayed with Mr. Chan Kang Swi. Lunch with the Resident Councillor Mr. Crichton at the Residency. Gave a public lecture at St. Francis Institution on education. An amount of \$3500 was raised by the public for Visva-Bharati.

## Muar

#### July 28, Thursday

4:15pm. Arrived in Muar by car from Malacca. Was welcomed by the Chinese community at Chung Hua School. Public meeting held at a local Chinese theatre. Tagore gave a speech that was translated into Chinese and Tamil.

## Malacca

#### July 29, Friday

An "At Home" was given by the Indo-Ceylonese Association at the Chinese Volunteer Club. Public Lecture at St.

Francis' Institution, where 2,000 people assembled to hear him. Mr. Crichton gave an introductory speech. Tagore gave a lecture, and said he had come to "claim their sympathy and cooperation" for what he had made "his life's work".

## Kuala Lumpur

#### July 30, Saturday

Arrived in KL by the mail train. He was received by Mr. Lok Chow Thy and Mr. J. Lornie, the British Resident of Selangor.

#### July 31, Sunday

Public reception at the Town Hall. Tagore was garlanded by Mr. M. Cumarasamy.

#### August 2, Tuesday

Attended a variety show at the Chinese Theatre Hall, which had performances by various Chinese Associations, presided by Chief Secretary Mr. W. Peel. Tagore gave a recital of some passages from his works.

#### August 3, Wednesday

Gave a lecture at Chunghua Theatre about Visva-Bharati, which was followed by some variety entertainment to raise funds.

## August 4, Thursday

Gave a speech on India and China at the Millionaires Club, Weld Hill. Mr. Chong Yoke Choy and other 40 well-known towkays of KL were present. Address at Victoria Institution, presided over by Mr. J. Lornie. Tagore spoke on the unity of the human race and read poems from 'The Crescent Moon'.

## Klang

### August 5, Friday

Gave an interview to the 'Malay Mail'. At the Anglo-Chinese School, he was asked to read his poems instead of a lecture. Tagore remarked: "Klang is the only town in Malaya where I am recognised as a poet". He recited from 'The Crescent Moon'. The Chinese community gave an "At Home" where he spoke of uniting the cultures of India and China in service of the whole world.

## Ipoh

### August 7, Sunday

Garlanded at Ipoh train station by Mr. Leong Sin Nam. Stayed at the Astana.

### August 8, Monday

Tagore gave the inaugural address at the Annual Conference of the Malayan Teachers' Association on the topic

of education. Public reception in Tagore's honour at the Ipoh Town Hall, which was presided over by towkay Leong Sin Nam.

### August 9-10

Tagore visited the Yuk Choy Public School, Gopeng Road, Gave an address on education. Visited Chinese Cave Temple.

## Telok Anson

### August 11, Thursday

Address of welcome by Mr. Mohamed Fahir.

## Kuala Kangsar

### August 12, Friday

Arrived by car enroute to Taiping. Greeted by the President of the reception committee, Mr. Louis Thivy, JP.

## Taiping

### August 12-13

Greeted by the Resident of Perak, Mr. H.W. Thomson.

## Penang

### August 13, Saturday

Arrived by train. Greeted by Mr. H.C. Bathurst, Deputy Controller of Labour.

## August 14, Sunday

Laid the foundation stone of the new Hu Yew Seah building in Madras Lane. The Hu Yew Seah Chinese Club gave a public reception at which the leading members of every community were present. Tagore spoke about his visit to China, and how Asia was a birthplace of the great religions of the world. Lecture at Chung Ling High School, where the headmasters and schoolteachers of the various Chinese schools in Penang were assembled.

### August 15, Monday

Met Chinese schoolchildren at Chong Ling High School. Public lecture on "Nationalism" at the Empire Theatre Hall chaired by Mr. R. Scott, the Resident Councillor. Tagore spoke about Visva-Bharati, and how India must understand Chinese culture and history. The Indian community of Penang hosted a dinner for Tagore.

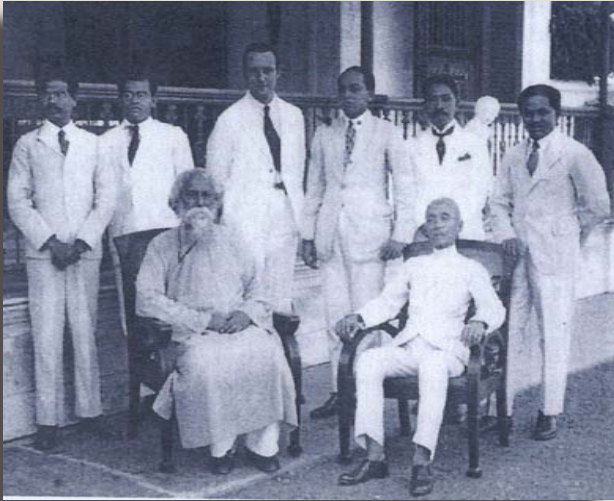
### August 16, Tuesday

Gave a lecture described by Suniti Chatterji as the "best public lecture of the poet in Malaya". Took a trip around the island before leaving in the afternoon on the *SS Kuala* for Belawan, Medan. Before he left, Tagore gave the 'Straits Echo' a message and wrote a letter of thanks to the 'Malacca Observer'.

**(Itinerary researched and compiled by Angela Oon)**



# Surabaya, Bali, Borobudur



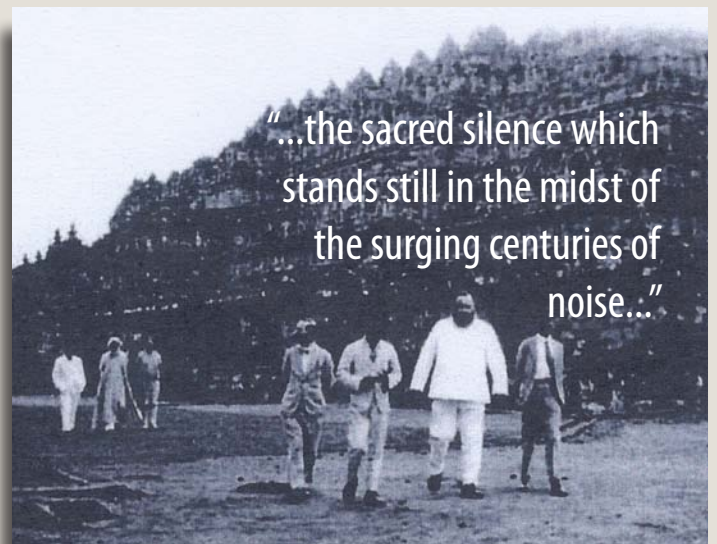
Soerabaja (Surabaya): Rabindranath and Mangkoenegoro VI; Surendranath, Suniti, Blake, Soejone, Singha, Dhiren. September 1927.



With the Raja of Karangasem (Bali). Tagore is wearing an embroidered shawl gifted by the Raja. 28 August 1927.



Rabindranath and companions in Djogjakarta, Java, 1927.



Borobudur, 1927. With Sunitikumar Chatterjee, Mrs. Blake, Samuel Koperberg, Dhiendrakrishna, Dr Callenfels and Surendranath Kar.

# China 1924, 1929

“When the invitation from China reached me I felt that it was an invitation to India herself and as her humble son, I must accept it. India is poor, she has no material wealth, no political power, no military success to boast of. It shows that she has still something to give to the world...”



With Rabindranath are eminent historians Kalidas Nag and Kshitimohan Sen; artist Nandalal Bose; philanthropist, agronomist and educationist Leonard Elmhirst; nurse Miss Gretchen Green (in hat). Poet Xu Zhimo (Hsu Chih-mo) is on the right of Elmhirst. On Tagore's right is interpreter Lin Huiyin.



Above: With Liang Qichao. Left: Tagore with Gu Hongming in Beijing. Literary figures, from Maugham to Akutagawa were all drawn to scholar Gu when they were in China.



Above: With Emperor Puyi in the Forbidden City. Tagore was the first foreigner, after the Emperor's tutor Sir Reginald Johnston, to be invited into the inner sanctum of the palace reserved for the "Son of Heaven".  
Right: With poets and scholars in Beijing, 1924.



“

Tagore was a visionary, always forward-looking. In one of his lectures in China in 1924, he said, "I hope that some dreamer will spring from among you and preach a message of love and therewith, overcoming all differences, bridge the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages". These were powerful words addressed to both the peoples of China and India, calling upon them to build a deeper mutual understanding.

– Indian Foreign Secretary  
Nirupama Rao

”

Chinese poet Xu Zhimo, who became a very close friend of Tagore's, was asked by the Lecture Association in Beijing to accompany the poet during his stay in China and act as interpreter when necessary. Xu Zhimo was overjoyed to be able to wait upon 'one of the greatest spirits the world has ever seen.'

He wrote to Rabindranath: "I am supposed to interpret your speeches. But to interpret for a great Poet! One might as well try to transcribe the grand roars of a Niagara or the passionate songs of a nightingale..."

# Rabindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism

Keynote Address  
by Sugata Bose,  
Gardiner Professor  
of History, Harvard  
University, at the  
Conference “An  
Age in Motion:  
The Asian Voyages  
of Rabindranath  
Tagore”, 11-13 May  
2010, Singapore



(L-R) Tansen Sen, K Kesavapany and Sugata Bose at the conference “An Age in Motion: The Asian Voyages of Rabindranath Tagore” organized by the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

A WORLD-HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATION is under way in the early twenty-first century as Asia recovers the global position it had lost in the late eighteenth century. Yet the idea of Asia and a spirit of Asian universalism were alive and articulated in a variety of registers during the period of European imperial domination. Rabindranath Tagore was one of the most creative exponents of an Asia-sense in the early twentieth century. “Each country of Asia will solve its own historical problems according to its strength, nature and need,” Tagore said during a visit to Iran in 1932, “but the lamp that they will each carry on their path to progress will converge to illuminate the common ray of knowledge...it is only when the light of the spirit glows that the bond of humanity becomes true.”<sup>1</sup>

On February 10, 1937, Tagore composed his poem on another continent, “Africa”, towards the end of his long and creative life in literature. Even more than the empathy for Africa’s history of ‘blood and tears’, what marked the poem was

a searing sarcasm directed at the false universalist claims of an unnamed Europe. Even as the ‘barbaric greed of the civilized’ put on naked display their ‘shameless inhumanity’, church bells rang out in neighbourhoods across the ocean in the name of a benign God, children played in their mother’s laps, and poets sang paeans to beauty.<sup>2</sup> The sanctimonious hypocrisy of the colonizer stood in stark opposition to the wretched abjection of the colonised.

In my book *A Hundred Horizons* I had claimed that Tagore was an eloquent proponent of a universalist aspiration, albeit a universalism with a difference.<sup>3</sup> This specific claim was part of a larger contention that modern history could be interpreted - not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially - as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms. The colonised did not simply erect defensive walls around their notions of cultural difference. They were keen to be players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute

to the shaping of a global future. Their cosmopolitanism flowed not from the stratosphere of abstract reason, but from the fertile ground of local knowledge and learning in the vernacular.

Universalism, cosmopolitanism and internationalism are words and concepts jostling for interpretive space in new global, interregional and transnational histories. Different universalism in my connotation of the phrase shares significant common ground with the meaning of vernacular cosmopolitanism as evoked by Homi Bhabha or local cosmopolitanism as enunciated by Engseng Ho or rooted cosmopolitanism as described by Anthony Appiah while diverging in subtle points of emphasis.<sup>4</sup> Both notions of universalism with a difference and cosmopolitanisms springing from vernacular roots are dramatically at odds with the dominant discourse and debates within the charmed circle of contemporary British and North American analytical philosophy.

Champions of cosmopolitanism who

see detached reason as its only source display a visceral distaste for patriotism, confusing it with the narrowest forms of particularism. Colourless cosmopolitanism is assigned a high moral ground; colourful patriotism is deemed to be seductive but devoid of any ethical content.<sup>5</sup> A figure like Rabindranath Tagore can be annexed to this version of cosmopolitanism only by denuding him of much of his poetry and music and all of his passion and moral philosophy. Tagore undoubtedly was a powerful critic of worshipping the Nation as God and was horrified by the crimes committed by modern nation-states. Yet he loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial stance. He simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists. It is not without reason that Mahatma Gandhi in his obituary comment on Rabindranath Tagore in 1941 lauded the poet as 'an ardent nationalist'.<sup>6</sup> The large ethical claims made by votaries of a brand of cosmopolitanism that is dogmatically opposed to patriotism need to be put to the test on the ground of the history of colonial empires. Cosmopolitanism would serve as a weak pillar of any theory of human justice if it ruled out as illegitimate most modes of anti-colonial resistance. Fortunately for the idea, that was not the dominant kind of cosmopolitanism that animated the colonized world in the age of global empire. There were various forms of patriotism perfectly compatible with a cosmopolitan attitude that transcended the lines of particular cultural differences.

Within the terms of the Anglophone philosophical debate the opposition to cosmopolitanism based on abstract universal reason is articulated by proponents of reason embedded in inherited traditions.<sup>7</sup> A useful enough corrective to the excesses of colorless cosmopolitanism, this intellectual position falters because of its insistence on the bounded and implicitly unchanging nature of inheritances from the past. It fails to bring to light the dynamic process of creating and recreating traditions as well as the flows between cultures and the fluidity of cultural boundaries. The history of colorful cosmopolitanism rather than the legacy of the deadweight of traditions might be a better antidote to the philosophical hubris of the votaries of colorless cosmopolitanism.<sup>8</sup>

In order to contest the universalist

boasts of Europe, it is important on both conceptual and empirical grounds to recover the universalist aspirations emanating from the colonized world. For scholars of literature or textual traditions an evocation of cosmopolitanism in the sense of generous exchange beyond narrow particularisms, qualified by the linguistic and cultural specificity of the vernacular, may be a sufficiently deft semantic move. For modern historians, however, universalism animates a field of power that can hardly be abandoned; it can only be inflected by the countervailing energy of difference.

The spirit of different universalism that appealed to anti-colonial nationalists may have been water-borne across the Indian ocean, but was never quite defined by an expanse of water. It is best in this context not to exaggerate the contradiction between oceans and continents that has crept into some of the scholarly literature. The myth of continents has been subjected to a powerful indictment with some justice as a meta-geographical concept hopelessly tainted by the hubris of European imperialism.<sup>9</sup> The idea of Asia, however, or of Africa, I might venture to add, was not a singular one and had almost as many variations as it had individual authors. More important, it was certainly at variance with the concrete expression of Asia invented by nineteenth-century European geographers and cartographers as part of what has been debunked as the modern myth of continents. There were strands within Asian thought-worlds that merely inverted and did not undermine the Europe-Asia dichotomy, being content to invest the latter with a higher order of value and virtue. That forms a less interesting dimension of the modern tug-of-war between Europe and Asia. Far more fascinating was the imagination of Asia as an abstract entity transcending the imperial and national frontiers being etched by colonial powers on to the physical and mental maps of the colonized, and thereby serving as a prism to refract the light of universal humanity.

The *Swadeshi* (own country) cultural milieu of early twentieth-century India, despite its interest in rejuvenating indigenous traditions, was not wholly inward-looking; its protagonists were curious about innovations in different parts of the globe and felt comfortable within everwidening concentric circles of Bengali

Tagore undoubtedly was a powerful critic of worshipping the Nation as God and was horrified by the crimes committed by modern nation-states. Yet he loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial stance. He simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists.

patriotism, Indian nationalism, and Asian universalism. Aspiring to reconcile a sense of nationality with a common humanity, they were not prepared to let colonial borders constrict their imaginations. The spirit of Asian universalism was brought to India by two turn-of-the-century ideologues—Okakura Kakuzo and Sister Nivedita. Once Sister Nivedita introduced Okakura to the Tagore clan, a formidable cultural bridge was established between East and South Asia. Japanese artists Taikan Yokoyama and Shunso Hishida soon followed Okakura's trail to Calcutta.

While the First World War raged in Europe and the Middle East, Rabindranath Tagore set off on a global oceanic voyage from Calcutta on May 3, 1916, aboard the Japanese ship *Tosamaru*. Traveling on this easterly route for the first time in his life, Tagore encountered a mighty storm in the Bay of Bengal that left no

**He did not want Indian patriots to imitate the monstrous features of European nationalism... Tagore's critique of nationalism, however, was perfectly compatible with his anti-colonialism and his patriotic poetry.**

dividing line between the clouds and the waves. Someone seemed to have opened the blue lid of the ocean and countless demons had emerged from below wrapped in grey coils of smoke, as in the Arabian nights, and were shooting up to the sky. After four days at sea the appearance of birds in the sky signaled that land was near. If the ocean was the domain of dance, its shores heralded a realm of music. As the ship moved up the Irrawady towards Rangoon, Tagore observed the row of kerosene-oil factories with tall chimneys along its

banks as if Burma was lying on its back and smoking a cigar. Closer to the city, the long line of jetties were clinging to the body of Burma like so many hideous, giant, iron leeches. Other than the Shwe Dagon temple, Tagore did not find anything in the city that was distinctively Burmese. He lamented the cruelty of the goddess of commerce. 'This city has not grown like a tree from the soil of the country,' he wrote, 'this city floats like foam on the tides of time...Well, I have seen Rangoon, but it is mere visual acquaintance, there is no recognition of Burma in this seeing...the city is an abstraction...'<sup>10</sup>

From Burma the *Tosamaru* traveled further east towards Penang, Singapore and Hongkong. The poet felt a sense of joy observing the strength and skill of Chinese labourers working at the port in Hong Kong and made an uncannily accurate prophecy about the future balance of power in the world. 'The nations which now own the world's resources,' Tagore argued, 'fear the rise of China, and wish to postpone the day of that rise.' It was in the midst of another frightening storm in the South China Sea on May 21, 1916, that Tagore composed his song *-Bhuban Jora Ashankhani-* asking the Almighty to spread his seat of universality in the individual's heart:

Your universe-encompassing prayer  
mat  
Spread it out in the core of my heart.  
The night's stars, the day's sun, all  
the shades of darkness and light,  
All your messages that fill the sky –  
Let them find their abode in my  
heart.  
May the lute of the universe  
Fill the depths of my soul with all its  
tunes.  
All the intensity of grief and joy, the  
flower's touch, the storm's touch –  
  
Let your compassionate, auspicious,  
generous hands  
Bring into the core of my heart.

On May 29, 1916, the *Tosamaru* reached the Japanese port of Kobe. Tagore's three-month sojourn in Japan represented the fulfillment not just of a personal quest, but the search for an Asian universalism that had begun at the turn of the twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore's direct encounter with the power and scale of art in

Japan during his 1916 visit to that country led him to urge Indian artists to look east in order to pioneer a fresh departure from the Swadeshi corpus of ideals. Tagore was as impressed by Japanese visual arts as he was unimpressed by Japan's tendency to imitate the worst elements of European nationalistic imperialism. It was only after rebuking Japan on that count that Tagore undertook the long Pacific crossing to North America on September 7, 1916. He then traveled from the west coast to the east speaking out against nationalism during the Presidential election season of 1916. He did not want Indian patriots to imitate the monstrous features of European nationalism and the territorially bounded model of the nation-state. Tagore's critique of nationalism, however, was perfectly compatible with his anti-colonialism and his patriotic poetry.

In 1924 Tagore traveled once more by sea to Burma, China, and Japan. The poet's entourage on his travels typically included a small but formidable team of intellectuals and artists. Mukul Dey was the artist who had accompanied Rabindranath to Japan in 1916; it would be the linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay and painter Surendranath Kar's turn on a voyage to Southeast Asia in 1927; and the poet Amiya Kumar Chakravarty and writer Kedar Nath Chattopadhyay would go with the Tagore to Iran and Iraq in 1932. On the 1924 journey to East Asia, Rabindranath's companions from Santiniketan were Nandalal Bose, the painter, and Kshitimohan Sen, an erudite scholar of Sanskrit and comparative religion (grandfather of Amartya Sen), and Kalidas Nag. Young Chinese actors of the Crescent Moon Society performed his play *Chitra* in English on Tagore's birthday, May 8, 1924, at the Peking Normal University. On this trip Tagore preached the virtues of close interaction among Asian cultures. Stung by the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (sometimes referred to as the Orientals Exclusion Act) in the United States, some of Tagore's admirers even established an Asiatic Association in Shanghai to foster solidarity among all Asians. In Japan, Nandalal had the privilege of being hosted by Rabindranath's friend, the artist who had visited India, Taikan, and he was introduced to masterpieces of Japanese art.

It was as an intellectual pilgrim that in

# Tagore's moment in the Malay peninsula gave him a chance to have a conversation with the Chinese literati. The Chinese had named the Indian poet Chu Chen-tan (Thunder and Sunlight of India) based on the following equations: Rabi=Tan=Morning Sun, Indra=Chen=Thunder, India=Thien-chu=Heavenly Kingdom (an ancient Chinese name for India).

July 1927 the poet traveled east from Madras on the French ship *Amboise*. 'India's learning had once spread outside India,' Tagore wrote to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis on July 15, 1927, '[b]ut the people outside accepted it...We have embarked on this pilgrimage to see the signs of the history of India's entry into the universal.'<sup>11</sup> His only motive in making this journey was 'to collect source materials there for the history of India and to establish a permanent arrangement for research in this field.'<sup>12</sup>

The *Amboise* arrived at Singapore on July 20, 1927. All the arrangements for Tagore's tour of the Malay peninsula had been made by Ariam Williams (Aryanayakam), a Tamil Christian scholar of divinity who originally hailed from the Jaffna peninsula of Ceylon. The poet's stopover in the Malay peninsula afforded an opportunity for a rapturous welcome by Indian and Ceylon Tamils as well as Gujarati Khojas and Baniyas. The reception given to the poet by the Indian Association in Singapore attracted a large number of ordinary Indians – small traders, motor-car drivers, security guards from a variety of communities including Sikh, Pathan and Punjabi Muslims; Tamil Hindus and Muslims; and Gujarati Bhatias, Khojas and Bohras. Tagore's gracious host in Singapore was an Iranian businessman, Mohammed Ali Namazi, who had come to Southeast Asia via Madras. Suniti Chattopadhyay was struck by the admiration in which this Shia Muslim family held 'Hindu civilisation' and found himself arbitrating in intrafamily debates on the precise nature and direction of the 'Aryan' link between Iranians and 'the Brahman and Kshatriya castes' of India.<sup>13</sup>

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(ThunderandSunlightofIndia)basedonthe following equations: Rabi=Tan=Morning Sun, Indra=Chen=Thunder, India=Thien-chu=Heavenly Kingdom (an ancient Chinese name for India). Among the Malay Chinese Tagore interacted with was the barrister Song Ong Siang who had authored a book titled *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1919* in 1923. Another was Dr Lim Boon Keng who had recently completed an English translation of *The Li-Siao: an elegy on encountering sorrows* by the fourth century B.C. Chinese poet Qu Yuan. Tagore was much enchanted by the life, work and death of Qu, who had in the end drowned himself in the Mi-Lo river in Hunan. Once Lim sent him a copy of his manuscript, Tagore wrote a foreword for the book in Penang.<sup>14</sup>

A trip to the Malay peninsula was unthinkable without including a visit to Malacca. From Malacca the sea presented a serene spectacle. The ocean beach was spread out in front of the poet in the shape of a half moon. The colour of the shallow waters made the sea look as if it was clad in the earth's saffron end of a *sari*. On the left were coconut trees leaning on one another for support.<sup>15</sup> A group of Punjabi Hindu, Muslim and Sikh men came to pay their homage to the poet in Malacca. According to the Muslim, Tagore was not only a poet of the highest caliber but by the grace of Khudatallah had also attained *tassawuf* or enlightenment of a Sufi mystic. But the idyll was soon to be rudely disturbed. Subbaya Naidu came to Malacca to tell Tagore about the dismal condition of Indian labourers on the rubber plantations. Some of the British rubber barons seemed unhappy with the Indian poet's 'triumphal progress' through the Malay peninsula. On August 2, 1927, the *Malay Tribune* published an editorial on 'Dr Tagore's Politics' which was a blistering

attack on the poet for something he had purportedly written in the *Shanghai Times*. Tagore was quoted as having said: 'Asia prepare her weapons in her armouries for a target which is bound to be the heart of Europe'. The poet had actually written or said nothing to the Chinese paper. When he had visited China in 1924, he had been greatly disturbed to see the brutal use of Sikh armed police against the Chinese in Shanghai and written a Bengali article protesting against the British practice of using Indian troops overseas. An English translation of the article was published in the *Modern Review* in early 1927, which then was recycled in garbled form in the *Shanghai Times* and the *Malay Tribune*. An energetic young Tamil scholar in Malaya noticed the distortions and the Indian paper *Malayan Daily Express* published a strong rejoinder under the title 'Anti-Tagore Bubble Pricked: An Object Lesson in Dishonest Journalism'.

On August 16 Tagore set off from Penang on board the *Kuala* for Singapore on his way to the Dutch East Indies. He had always been less enthused by Indian military conquests in Southeast Asia than by the processes of cultural interaction facilitated by 'Hindu Brahmanas' and 'Buddhist Shramanas'. As the *Plancius* journeyed from Singapore across the Straits of Malacca towards Batavia, Tagore wrote his poem 'Srivijayalakshmi' celebrating the renewal of a bond after a thousand-year separation.<sup>16</sup> The Srivijaya empire had given its patronage to the Buddhist university at Nalanda and enjoyed friendly ties with the Pala kingdom of Bengal; both had suffered military defeat at the hands of the Cholas of south India in the 1020s. A leading Javanese poet Doetadilaga (Timboel) composed a long and classical response to Tagore's poem: "Remember how we never could believe in days past that our love would know separation;

perfect was our harmony, one our thought, one our soul and one our body, - the unity of God and creature nigh. Verily I saw in you my elder brother guiding me in the ways of the world, teaching me scripture, tongue and behavior, and all that we need to exist.”<sup>17</sup>

A full exploration of Java had to wait until a pilgrimage had been made to Bali.<sup>18</sup> Tagore was soon to discover how ‘Hindu’ religious sentiment and ritual pervaded life in Bali, but in very distinctive form. During a silent drive with the ‘king’ of Karengasem a gap in the surrounding forest revealed the blue ocean. The king at once uttered the Sanskrit word *samudra* (ocean). Seeing that Tagore was astonished and thrilled, he gave further synonyms for ocean - *sagara*, *abdhi*, *jaladhya*. He then recited: *saptasamudra* (the seven seas), *saptaparvata* (the seven mountains), *saptavana* (the seven forests), *sapta-akash* (the seven skies)’. Having given a rather difficult Sanskrit word *adri* for mountain, he then rattled off: ‘Sumeru, Himalaya, Vindhya, Malaya, Hrishyamuka’ - all names of Indian mountains. At one place a small river was flowing below the mountain. The king muttered on: ‘Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada, Godavari, Kaveri, Saraswati’ - names of key rivers in north and south India. Tagore reflected: ‘In our history *Bharatvarsha* (India) had realised its geographical unity in a special way.’ That mode of imagining the unity of natural and sacred space had crossed the great eastern ocean to reach distant islands. Tagore also noted that neither the names of the Indus and the five rivers of the Punjab nor that of the Brahmaputra flowing through Assam figured in Balinese vocabulary. He concluded that these regions were not culturally part of the ancient India that had spread its influence across the Bay of Bengal at a particular moment in history.<sup>19</sup>

Upon arriving at the palace, Tagore and his companions found four Brahman priests worshipping Buddha, Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu.<sup>20</sup> The next day some Brahman pandits arrived with a set of coconut-leaf manuscripts - one of them the ‘Bhishmaparva’ (chapter on Bhishma) of the *Mahabharata*. Arjuna was their ideal man. But there were subtle variations. Shikhandi, the half-man and half-woman, who rode on Arjuna’s chariot to undermine Bhishma’s ability to fight, had turned in the

**He was amazed by the extent to which stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata suffused the dance and drama of the Muslim Javanese. The islands known as the Dutch Indies could be more appropriately named, according to Tagore, as ‘Vyas Indies’.**

Balinese version into Srikanti, Arjuna’s wife. The differences in the Southeast Asian versions of the great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* enabled Tagore through comparative study to advance some very insightful interpretations of plain-forest tension as well as issues of race and gender that animate these stories. In the Malay world Ram and Sita were portrayed as brother and sister who were married. Tagore tended to accept this version as the original, something that had been suppressed in later renderings within India. Such an interpretation sustained Tagore’s point about marriage as metaphor in the epics – in this case, Sita and Ram representing the line etched by the plough and the green of the newly sprouting crop respectively, both children of mother earth and yet bound in wedlock.<sup>21</sup> If Malay literature had recreated the Indian epics as their own, Balinese dance depicted tales related in the Indian Puranas. But the ‘Hindu’ ethos of the island was no bar to Arab Muslims, Gujarati Khoja Muslims and Chinese merchants conducting trade.<sup>22</sup> After his departure from the island Rabindranath wrote one of his most beautiful poems, *Bali* which was later renamed more generically *Sagarika* (Sea Maiden) of which the opening verse read:

*Sagara jale sinan kori sajala elo chule bashiachhile upala-upakule. Shithila peetabash matir pare kutilarekha lutilo*

*charipash.*  
*Nirabaran bakshe taba, nirabharan dehe*  
*chikan sona-likhan usha ankia dilo snehe.*  
*Makarachura mukutkhani pori lalatpare*  
*dhanukbaan dhor dakhin kare danranu raj-beshi*  
*Kahinu “ami eshechhi pardeshi”.*  
(Having bathed in the sea with your wet tresses  
you sat on the rocky beach.  
Your loose yellow robe  
drew a forbidding line around you on the earth.  
On your uncovered breasts and unadorned body  
the morning sun painted a gentle golden hue.  
With a *makara*-crested crown on my forehead  
bow and arrow in hand  
I appeared royally adorned  
And said, “I have come from another land”.)

Tagore’s pleasure in discovering India in Bali was disturbed only by news of the appearance of Katherine Mayo’s best-selling pot-boiler *Mother India*. Sitting on a hilltop at Munduk, Tagore wrote an angry denunciation of the book that was published in *The Manchester Guardian* and later reprinted in the American Rev. J. T. Sunderland’s book *India in Bondage*. From Bali Tagore travelled to Surabaya on the predominantly Muslim island of Java. It was sugar from here, he wrote in one of his letters, that now went into the *sandesh* (Bengali sweet) made by the famous confectioner, Bhim Chandra Nag, of the Bowbazaar area in Calcutta. Hosted by the family of the seventh Monkonegoro of Suryakarta, he was amazed by the extent to which stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* suffused the dance and drama of the Muslim Javanese. The islands known as the Dutch Indies could be more appropriately named, according to Tagore, as ‘Vyas Indies’. One evening the theme of the dance would be the fight between Indrajit, the educated demon-prince of Lanka, and Hanuman, the monkey; on another the sultan’s brother would himself play the role of Ghatotkacha, a *Mahabharata* character, who had undergone considerable creative transformation in the Javanese variant of the epic. The verandah of the raja’s home



was decorated with beautiful silk scrolls on which events of the *Ramayana* were painted. The poet inaugurated a new road in Suryakarta, called Tagaro Straat. The temple ruins at Prambanan reminded him of Bhubaneswar in Orissa. In Yogyakarta Tagore was a guest of the Paku-alam. The Sultan's daughters danced and the entire family got together to perform the story of the killing of the great bird Jatayu in the *Ramayana*. Tagore lamented the lack of more comparative studies of the epic. 'One day some German scholar will do this work,' he wrote. 'After that by protesting against or substantiating that thesis we will earn Ph.D's in the university.'<sup>23</sup>

A visit to the great Saiva-Buddhist temple complex of Borobodur proved to be something of an anti-climax. Tagore found it to be big in scale but not in majesty,<sup>24</sup> but he was rather more generous in his assessment in his poem *Borobodur*. On the ship *Maier* travelling from Java to Singapore Tagore wrote what was to become one of his most popular songs:

*Sakaruna benu bajaye ke jai, bideshi naye  
tahari ragini lagilo gaye.*<sup>25</sup>  
(Who goes playing that plaintive  
flute on a foreign boat  
I can feel the touch of that melody.)

Another very well-known song *She Din Dujane* was composed in Southeast Asia at this time. As he witnessed a tropical storm gathering on the horizon in Penang, he wrote the rousing song – *Kharabayu boy bege charidik chhay meghe*. But it had been a hectic trip. Recalling Coleridge's lines about water everywhere in the ocean but not a drop to drink, Tagore felt he was drifting in the ocean of time and yet could not snatch even an iota of it.<sup>26</sup>

Tagore pursued the Buddhist connection further in Siam on the way back. In Bangkok Tagore met the prince of Chantabun who had published multiple volumes of the Pali *Tripitaka* in Thai script. His poem *Siam* composed on October 11, 1927, gave a final expression to Tagore's search for a greater India:

*Aji ami tare dekhi labo  
Bharater je mahima  
Tyag kori ashiachhe apon  
anganseema  
arghya dibo tare*

*Bharat bahire taba dware.*<sup>27</sup>

(Today I will bear witness  
to India's glory  
that transcended its own boundaries  
I will pay it homage  
outside India at your door.)

Despite Tagore's obvious pride in 'India's entry into the universal', three features of his perspective on Southeast Asia from the Indian Ocean deserve attention. First, Tagore makes a rather self-conscious attempt to downplay the episodes of military aggression in an attempt to highlight the theme of cultural exchange. This form of strategic essentialising gives a partial view of the historical relations between the two regions, but seems clearly designed as a prescription for models that ought to be eschewed or followed in the present and the future. Second, Tagore does not treat India as a monolith in discussing the ways in which cultural influences radiated out of the subcontinent to reach the shores of Southeast Asia. By contrast, there is a story of regional differentiation within India that is told along with an attempt at periodising the spread of such influence. The thousand-year old tie with Srivijaya was clearly one fostered by the Palas of Bengal and not by India as a whole. The attempt to date the forging of particular links across the eastern Indian Ocean is based on a study of the regionally differentiated literatures, cultural practices and histories of India. Third, the Southeast Asian negotiations with Indian cultural forms and products are regarded throughout by Tagore as a creative process conducted by active historical agents. There is no sense of hierarchy, for

example, in analysing the many versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. 'India's true history reflected in the many stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* will be seen more clearly,' he writes, 'when we are able to compare with the texts that are to found here [in Southeast Asia].'<sup>28</sup>

The idea of Asia and the spirit of Asian universalism were in important ways products of cosmopolitan thought zones created by passages across the Indian Ocean. In this sense, the continent and the ocean were not necessarily in an adversarial relationship but provided different contours of inter-regional arenas animated by flows of ideas and culture. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, writing in the *Modern Review* in the 1910s, stressed both sea-lanes and land-routes in creating what he called an 'Asia-sense'.<sup>29</sup> By the 1920s most contributors to the same journal were more enamored of the oceanic connections that spread Indian cultural influences to Southeast Asia. I have sought to make a distinction between two strands of cultural imperialism and a more generous universalism that shaped early twentieth-century discourses on this subject. During the modern age it has been a constant struggle not to allow universalist aspirations of the colonized to degenerate into universalist boasts and cosmopolitanism be replaced by bigotry. The tussle goes on in new post-colonial settings. The outcome is yet uncertain, but the ethical choice before us seems clear enough.

Malaya and Java were great Muslim societies under European colonial subjugation. It was his desire to see

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Dr Amartya Sen speaking on "A Different Universalism" at the international Tagore Conference at the Netaji Research Bureau, Kolkata, India.

Muslim countries with Muslim sovereigns that led Tagore to board a Dutch aeroplane to travel to Iran and Iraq in April 1932.<sup>30</sup>

Tagore's essay *Parashye* (In Persia) is much more than a diary or a travelogue by an acute observer of cultures. It is the closest thing to a real history among Tagore's writings based not just on philosophical musings but fairly solid empirical research. In Iran, Tagore was not just any poet, but a poet of the east. 'For the Persians, Tagore wrote, 'my identity has another special feature. I am Indo-Aryan...I have a blood relationship with them.'<sup>31</sup> Word had also spread that Tagore had certain affinities with romantic and devotional Persian poets and it was the brotherhood of Sufi poets, which eventually turned out to be the more emotionally charged aspect of the relationship. European race theory took second place to Indo-Persian poetry as the ground for commonality. Shades of Aryanism were drowned in the depths of Sufism. There was absolutely no occasion, Tagore asserted, when the Persians made him feel that they belonged to another society or religious community.<sup>32</sup>

With his main identity established as a poet and an honorary Sufi, the highlight

of his visit turned out to be the encounter with Saadi and Hafiz in Shiraz. Tagore had made Hafiz's acquaintance as a boy through his father's translations from the Persian. Hafiz had also been a favourite of the nineteenth-century Bengali social reformer Raja Rammohun Roy who quoted the Sufi poet to good effect in his *Tuhfat-ul-Muahuddin*. Overwhelmed by an effusive welcoming address with references to Saadi's soul wafting in the air and Hafiz's satisfied smile being reflected in the joy of his countrymen, Tagore pointed out that the only weight on his side of the scale was that he was present in Iran in person. Hafiz had received an invitation in the fourteenth century from Ghiasuddin Azam Shah, the third Ilyasshahi sultan of Bengal, but if Persian traditions are to be believed his ship had been forced to turn back. Bengalis generally believed that Hafiz responded to the Ilyasshahi invitation with a poem about Bengalis having taken to crunching sugar now that they had tasted it in the form of Hafiz's Persian poetry.

At a reception in a carpeted garden surrounding Saadi's grave Tagore claimed kinship with the Sufi poets and composers of yesteryears; it was just that he used the

language of the modern age. At Hafiz's graveside the custodian of the cemetery brought out a large square volume of Hafiz's diwan and asked Tagore to open it with a wish and his eyes shut. He had been agonizing about the blindness and prejudice that went by the name of religion and wanted India to be free of this terrible affliction. "Will the tavern's door be flung open," Tagore read when he opened his eyes, 'and with it the tangled knots of life unfasten? Even if vain religious bigots keep it shut, have faith, that by God's will, the door will open.'<sup>33</sup> On that glorious morning the *musafir* (traveller) had a vision of Hafiz's smiling eyes beckoning him from another distant spring. Tagore had no doubt that he and Hafiz were long-lost friends who had in the same tavern together filled many cups of wine.<sup>34</sup>

Tagore was entranced by the gardens and mosques of Isfahan. He visited the Masjid-e-Shah started by Shah Abbas and the neighboring Masjid-e-Chahar-e-bagh. He also crossed the bridge to see the Armenian church and related how Shah Abbas had brought the Armenians from Russia and what made them migrate to India during the reign of Nadir Shah.

Not surprisingly, Tagore compared Shah Abbas with India's Akbar.<sup>35</sup>

During his two weeks in Tehran, he participated in as many as eighteen public functions. Persian music continued to intrigue him with its elements of sameness and difference in relation to north Indian classical music. On the violin Tagore was often played melodies, which sounded like the morning ragas Bhairon, Ramkeli and even the pure Bhairavi. The poet's 71st birthday on May 6, 1932, was celebrated with great fanfare in Tehran. In return for all the bouquets, Tagore gave a gift in the form of a poem titled 'Iran':

Iran, all the roses in thy garden  
and all their lover birds  
have acclaimed the birthday  
of the poet of a far away shore  
and mingled their voices in a paean  
of rejoicing...  
And in return I bind this wreath of  
my verse  
on thy forehead, and cry: Victory  
to Iran!

The next day he met Iran's parliamentary leaders and the poet who had translated some of his poems. He received from them an exquisitely produced volume of the poetry of Anwari.<sup>36</sup>

The journey towards the Iraqi border took Tagore through Kazbin, Hamadan, Kirmanshah, Behistun and Takibustan. The poet saw the various sights that had so enthralled visitors for centuries, including Darius's carvings on the mountainside in Behistun and the glorious sculpture of the Sassanid age in Takibustan.<sup>37</sup> From his hotel room in Baghdad Tagore could see the wooden bridge over the Tigris built by General Stanley Maude, which the 28th Punjabis, 53rd Sikhs, 67th Punjabis and the 2nd and 4th Gurkhas had crossed in March 1917.<sup>38</sup> A conversation with the Christian chaplain attached to the British air force in Iraq, which was engaged in a ferocious bombing campaign against Iraqi villagers, led Tagore to reflect on the shift from sea power to air power in human history. He could see that it was extremely easy to kill the desert dwellers from the air. The humanity of those who could be killed from afar with impunity was not especially apparent to the killers who were not at serious risk of facing retaliation. When the priest affiliated with the Iraqi air force asked him for a message, Tagore wrote:

From the beginning of our days  
man has imagined the seat of  
divinity in the upper air from which  
comes light and blows the breath  
of life for all creatures on this  
earth. The peace of its dawn, the  
splendour of its sunset, the voice  
of eternity in its starry silence have  
inspired countless generations of  
men with an ineffable presence  
of the infinite urging their minds  
away from the sordid interests of  
daily life...If in an evil moment man's  
cruel history should spread its black  
wings to invade that land of divine  
dreams with its cannibalistic greed  
and fratricidal ferocity then God's  
curse will certainly descend upon  
us for that hideous desecration and  
the last curtain will be rung down  
upon the world of Man for whom  
God feels ashamed.<sup>39</sup>

In a very early poem Rabindranath had wished he were an Arab bedouin. One day in Iraq he fulfilled his childhood fancy by visiting a bedouin tent. He was first served coffee - thick, bitter, black Arabic coffee. Then followed a gargantuan meal to the accompaniment of delicate music. Tagore and his male companions were deprived of the pleasure of watching a dance by the bedouin women, which only Tagore's daughter-in-law could enjoy and report on. But he was treated to a war dance by the men with whirling sticks, knives, guns and swords. Tagore was just reflecting on how different his life nurtured by the rivers of Bengal was from the struggle for existence in the desert, when the bedouin chief startled him with the language of universal humanity. "Our Prophet has taught us," the chief said, "that he is a true Muslim from whom no fellow human-being fears any harm."<sup>40</sup>

In late May 1932 the intellectuals of Baghdad organised a civic reception in Tagore's honour. An old poet recited his poetry in a sonorous voice, which sounded to Tagore like tumultuous waves on the ocean. Once the flow of Arabic poetry had ebbed, Tagore spoke about Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. He invited his hosts to resend their message with its universalist ideal in the sacred name of their Prophet once more across the Arabian Sea so that India could be saved from communitarian narrow-mindedness, inhuman intolerance and the degradation of liberal religion and put on the high road to unity and freedom. I can do no

better than conclude with the aspirational quality of a different universalism that was perhaps best expressed by Tagore in a poem-painting signed "Baghdad May 24 1932". It can be read and heard today as an exhortation to people across the globe to awaken and weave together communities and fragments into a larger and more generous pattern of human history:

*Abasan Holo Rati  
Nibaiya Phelo Kalima-Molin  
Gharer Koner Bati.  
Nikhiler Alo Purba Akashe  
Jwalilo Punyadine  
Eksathe Jara Chalibe Tahara  
Sakalere Nik Chine.*

The night has ended.  
Put out the light of the lamp  
of thine own narrow corner  
smudged with smoke.  
The great morning which is for all  
appears in the East.  
Let its light reveal us  
to each other  
who walk on  
the same  
path of pilgrimage.<sup>41</sup>

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Parashye*, pp. 480-488, 511-520.

<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Africa*.

<sup>3</sup> Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 267-270.

<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004); Engsang Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism* in Joshua Cohen (ed.), *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp.4-17.

<sup>6</sup> Gopal Gandhi (ed.), *A Frank Friendship: Gandhi and Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2008), p. 336.

<sup>7</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Must We Choose Between Patriotism and Universal Reason?* in Cohen (ed.) *For Love of Country*, pp. 91-97.

<sup>8</sup> My concept of colourful cosmopolitanism is to be distinguished from Nico Slate's notion of coloured cosmopolitanism

The idea of Asia and the spirit of Asian universalism were in important ways products of cosmopolitan thought zones created by passages across the Indian Ocean. In this sense, the continent and the ocean were not necessarily in an adversarial relationship but provided different contours of inter-regional arenas animated by flows of ideas and culture.

to describe solidarity among coloured peoples of the world. See Slate's essay in this volume. Colourful cosmopolitanism is meant to evoke a kind of cosmopolitanism that springs from vernacular roots and is compatible with the best traditions of ant-colonial nationalism. There is nothing "partial" about colourful cosmopolitanism, contrary to Appiah's imposition of this limitation on rooted cosmopolitanism.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Japane-Parashye*, pp. 14, 17-25.

<sup>11</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, 1st Sraban, Bengali 1334, 15th July 1927, in Rabindranath Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra* (Letters of a Traveller to Java) in *Rabindra Rachanabali* Vol. 19 (Calcutta, 1957)

<sup>12</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Ramananda Chattopadhyay, 28 May, 1927, cited in Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajibani*, Vol. 3, (3rd Edition, Calcutta, 1991), p. 312.

<sup>13</sup> Chattopadhyay, *Dweepmaya Bharat*, pp. 61-69. Susan Bayly has recently pointed out the connections between British ideas about caste and ethnological race science in the later nineteenth century. See her *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 2000). It is not yet fully appreciated the extent to which Indian and Iranian intellectuals, Hindu and Muslim alike, imbibed and internalised nineteenth-century European theories about the Aryan race. Ayesha Jalal shows how the great Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal described Indian Muslims as having combined 'the sterling qualities of their Semitic father and the softness of their Aryan mother'. See her *Self and Sovereignty: the Muslim Individual and the Community of Islam in South Asia since c. 1850* (London: Routledge, 2001). The Aryan issue is discussed further in the

section below.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86, 124-126, 235-238.

<sup>15</sup> Tagore, *Java Jatrir Diary*, p. 467.

<sup>16</sup> See Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajibani*, Vol. 3, pp. 314, 323.

<sup>17</sup> Chattopadhyay, *Dweepmaya Bharat*, pp. 690-694.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 259-261, 272.

<sup>19</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Mira Devi, 31 August 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp. 483-489

<sup>20</sup> The king himself, however, held that the rituals were inconsequential by comparison with the ultimate goal of striving for nirvana (salvation). See Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, *Gleanings' in Maha-Bodhi* 40, 8 (August 1932), 383-84.

<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, 1 August 1927 in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp.472-474.

<sup>22</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Rathindranath Tagore, 7 September 1927 and to Amiya Chakravarti, 9 September 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp. 489-501.

<sup>23</sup> See Rabindranath Tagore's letters to Pratima Devi, 14 September 1927, 17 September 1927; to Amiya Chakravarti, 17 September 1927; to Rathindranath Tagore, 19 September 1927; to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, 20 September 1927; to Pratima Devi, 26 September 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp. 501-519.

<sup>24</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Mira Devi, 26 September 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, pp. 19-521.

<sup>25</sup> Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajibani* Vol. 3, pp. 330-331.

<sup>26</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Amiya Chakravarti, 2 October 1927 in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, p. 526.

<sup>27</sup> Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindrajibani*, Vol. 3, p. 332.

<sup>28</sup> Rabindranath Tagore to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, 1 August 1927, in Tagore, *Java Jatrir Patra*, p. 474.

<sup>29</sup> See Kris Manjappa, *The Mirrored World*, (Harvard University Ph.D. dissertation,

2007).

<sup>30</sup> He also wanted one of the Muslim sovereigns to endow the Chair in Persian Studies at his university in Shantiniketan. Reza Shah Pahlavi obliged. My pilgrimage would have been incomplete without this visit, - especially when this ancient [Persian] people has been reborn and is feeling an irresistible urge of creative activity and moving to complete fulfilment of the grandeur and freedom of a positive self-expression. It is a source of inspiration in my life. This evening of my life has been filled to the brim. (Rabindranath Tagore in *Parashye* (In Persia) in *Rabindra Rachanabali* Vol. 22 and cited in J.N. Sarkar, *Tagore and Iran: A few side-lights on Tagore's Discovery of Persia in Indo-Iranica* (39, 1-4, 1986), pp. 81-82).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Buvad aya kih dar-i-maykadahha bi-gushayand*

*Girah az kar-i-furu bastah-i ma bi-gushayand*

*Agar az bahr-i dil-i zahid-i khuvudbin bastand*

*Dil qavvidar kih bahr-i Khuda bi-gushayand.*

I am grateful to Sunil Sharma of Widener Library, Harvard University, for locating the original Persian lines for me. Tagore had rendered 'tavern's door' as 'heaven's door' (swargadwar) in Bengali.

<sup>34</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Parashye*, pp. 457-461.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 469-480.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 480-488, 511-520.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 488-493.

<sup>38</sup> On the Indian troops' entry in Baghdad, see 'The War Diaries of the Mesopotamian Campaign', L/MIL/17/5/3789 (India Office Records, British Library).


<sup>39</sup> Tagore, *Parashye*, p. 440.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 499-502.

<sup>41</sup> Tagore, *Parashye*, pp. 495-496; Rabindranath Tagore, *Sphulinga in Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 27 (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1965), p. 3.

# Rabindranath Tagore's Vision of India and China: A 21st Century Perspective

India's Foreign Secretary, Ms Nirupama Rao, delivered the inaugural lecture of the Singapore Consortium for India-China Dialogue on 13th January, 2011. Excerpts.



Prof Wang Gungwu, Ms Nirupama Rao and Prof Prasenjit Duara (seated left to right) listen to Ambassador K. Kesavapany's welcome address.

THERE IS A HEIGHTENED FOCUS on Rabindranath Tagore today, as we engage in preparations to celebrate the 150th anniversary of his birth. This year it will also be 87 years since Tagore made his memorable visit to China. He went to China with a message of love and brotherhood that he felt symbolized the essence of the ties between the two countries. From all we know, his visit captured the imagination of Chinese intellectual elite, some of whom were overcome with admiration for his eloquence and passionate espousal of the civilizational strength of the East, while others especially young students in some of the Chinese leading universities, drawing directly from the ideology of the May 4, 1919 movement, were vehement in their rejection of Tagore's critique of modern civilization.

Even before his arrival in China in April 1924, Tagore was already a celebrated figure in that country. Chen Duxiu, one of the founding fathers of the Communist Party of China translated Tagore's prize-winning anthology, *Gitanjali* as early as 1915. Guo Moruo, who was a writer of Tagore's status in China in the early decades of the People's Republic of China, was deeply influenced by Tagore when he was studying in Japan from

1914 to 1920.

It was during Tagore's stay in China that the renowned Chinese scholar, Liang Qichao, presented him the Chinese name, 'Zhu Zhendan' which translates as "thunder of the oriental dawn". Tagore was deeply touched.

He truly believed in the mutually beneficial interactive relationship between the two great civilizations of China and India. He passionately advocated the reopening of the path between the two countries that had become obscured through the centuries. His international university, 'Visva-Bharati', played a pioneering role in development of Chinese studies in India. The establishment of the first Sino-Indian Cultural Society, and then, 'Cheena Bhavana' (Chinese Department) at Santiniketan were corner stones for this cause. Scholars, teachers like Tan Yun-shan, who led Cheena Bhavan for many years, contributed greatly to modern India's understanding of Chinese civilization and her modern development.

The late Ji Xianlin, Padma Bhushan and doyen of Indologists in China, observed that Tagore was an icon of Sino-Indian friendship both in India and China. Ji Xianlin, much in the spirit of Tagore, authored the eloquent words, "China

Tagore said in his final lecture in China, "I have made friends." However, this was not just friendship between the poet and his fans in China, it was in many ways symbolic of the renewal of friendship between India and China and awakening of their potential.

and India have stood simultaneously on the Asian continent. Their neighbourliness is created by Heaven and constructed by Earth.”

Our first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was greatly inspired by Tagore’s desire for India-China fraternity. He believed in the strong civilizational links between the two countries that had drawn them to each other in historical times. This civilizational link also inspired the ‘Panchsheel’ or the five principles of co-existence. It is also to be noted that for the last many years, Tagore and Nehru have been regarded as among fifty foreigners who have contributed most in shaping China’s modern development.

Tagore was a visionary, always forward-looking. In one of his lectures in China in 1924, he said, “I hope that some dreamer will spring from among you and preach a message of love and therewith overcoming all differences bridge the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages”. These were powerful words addressed to both the peoples of China and India, calling them upon them to build a deeper mutual understanding. In speaking of the need for “eternally revealing a joyous relationship unforeseen”, he sought to promote the cause of China-India understanding, envisioning the ascent of India and China to a higher platform of civilizational leadership and fraternal partnership since they together comprise 40% of humanity. In his view there was no fundamental contradiction between the two countries whose civilizations stressed the concept of harmonious development in the spirit of ‘vasudhaiva kutumbakam’ (the world is one family) and ‘shijie datong’ (world in grand harmony).

Prof Wang Bangwei of the Peking University, calls Tagore an Indian sage, an Asian sage and a world sage. Many Chinese shared the sense of pride and glory as Eastern people when Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 but it took time for the Chinese to understand Tagore and his thoughts. In Prof. Wang’s words, “After several decades the vitality of his thoughts is being ascertained. We in the past had respected Tagore but also misunderstood him. Respect was all right but the misunderstanding was due to complex causes. Now it is time to re-open the issues, understand them afresh”. While Chinese scholars are aware of the great personalities of Indian history like the Buddha, Gandhi and Tagore, Akbar and Ashoka, they do acknowledge the need for China to pay greater attention to the study of India.

It was Tagore’s vision of eternal partnership



HE Nirupama Rao receives a token of appreciation from ISEAS Chairman Prof Wang Gungwu.

**Instinctively, he reflected the spirit of an Asia which had traditionally lived in peace, pursuing the traffic of ideas, the peaceful absorption of different religions without proselytisation, and trade and commerce across oceans that were not polarized but were neutral – literally zones of peace and a common economic space.**

between India and China that inspired the vision of India-China friendship in the 50s in the last century. Prof. Tan Chung, son of Tan Yun Shan, has coined a phrase ‘geo-civilizational paradigm’ to describe the relationship between India and China.

What is perhaps now well known is that apart from admiration for China, Tagore deeply felt the plight of the Chinese people. When he was all but 20 in 1881, he authored an essay vehemently denouncing the opium trade which had been imposed on China since that opium was mostly being grown in British India. He called this essay ‘Chine Maraner Byabasay’ or the ‘Commerce of Killing people in China’. He expressed similar feelings of sympathy after the Japanese invasion of China writing to his friend, a Japanese poet, Yone Noguchi, that “the reports of Chinese suffering batter against my heart”.

There is an impression in certain quarters that Tagore was a traditionalist. He was far from being one since he supported science and scientific modes of thinking. But outside India, as Prof. Amartya Sen has pointed out, he felt the need for the world to pay greater attention to the thinking of the East. And it was not as if Chinese intellectuals who leaned to the Left disliked Tagore. As I mentioned earlier Chen

Du Xiu, one of the founding fathers of the Community Party of China was himself one translator of the works of Tagore. In fact, it has been seen that Tagore expressed the essence of globalization which is the “core inner instinct” that seeks to express the interconnectedness and interdependence of our world.

I believe that Tagore’s focus on Asia’s unique identity is of particular relevance today as we seek to promote peace, stability and prosperity in Asia. Instinctively, he reflected the spirit of an Asia which had traditionally lived in peace, pursuing the traffic of ideas, the peaceful absorption of different religions without proselytisation, and trade and commerce across oceans that were not polarized but were neutral – literally zones of peace and a common economic space. This was an approach defined by secularism and a complementariness of interests. This balanced commercial equilibrium was enhanced by the concept of spiritual unity. One has only to visit the caves of Ajanta or see the murals of Dunhuang in China to see the capturing through the eye of the artist of this vision of unity – with their depiction of various nationalities thronging royal processions or expressing their grief before a dying Buddha. In the 8th century, an Indian astronomer named Gautama Siddhartha, was named the President of the Board of Astronomy of China.

This tolerance and openness, lack of prejudice toward foreigners and outsiders, the spirit of enterprise and the absence of trade barriers, was unprecedented in the history of the world. I believe this is what Tagore meant when he said that we should have our past as a rough guide for the future.

When Tagore visited China, both India and China were in the throes of their own and distinct revolution. In some sense, Tagore, with his poet's love of beauty remained unaware of the visceral repugnance among the intellectual elites of China for Confucianism and traditional culture in a politically charged atmosphere. His vision was long-term and civilisational rather than ephemeral, approximating the millennium-long cultural contacts between India and China, in which he found a worthy model for sustenance of the Asian way of harmony and coexistence. This is why he interpreted the invitation to him to visit China as an invitation from China to India rather than to an individual, and 'accepted it as a humble son of India'.

In this sense, Tagore neither sought to perpetuate the political or social status quo of China nor impose the self-negating values of India, as his critics in China at that time alleged. Instead, Tagore's was an effort to shift the attention of both India and China from the West, whose power and prestige at that point were at their zenith but also produced war and turmoil, to each other as well as to their past glory and their harmonious contacts. Instead of taking a deprecatory view of their civilization -- aided by the then prevailing western critic of the Orient, Tagore wanted India and China as fountainheads of ancient civilizations to take pride in their rich heritage and draw from their past to build a future of friendly contacts. While aware of somewhat unidirectional past contacts between them in the religious realm, Tagore did not attempt to persuade China to accept another wave of cultural influence from India. He merely asked China to join him in his experiment of building institutions based on the "ideal of the spiritual unity of all races".

At the same time, the import of Tagore's influence for the revival of India-China relations should not be underestimated, because it had waned after the Song dynasty and especially following the advent of the Europeans. It is significant that all exchanges between India and China with lasting impact till this point were by religious personages. Tagore was the first thinker of modern India to be invited by the thinking elites of China, along with the likes of John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, as the Chinese grappled with the question of

China's place in a modern world. In India, which was also facing pulls and pressures of different kinds, Tagore similarly sought to revive the spirit of unity with China and enhance understanding of this important country by pioneering modern studies of China and building on contacts with noted Chinese personalities.

Even if Tagore's outreach to China did not evoke the intended response during or immediately following his visit, his approach looks prophetic with the passage of time. At that point in time, Tagore said in his final lecture in China, "I have done what was possible --- I have made friends." However, this was not just friendship between the poet and his fans in China, it was in many ways symbolic of the renewal of friendship between India and China and awakening of their potential. For instance, India and China were to launch the Panchsheel initiative exactly three decades later, drawing upon their civilisational values. The tenacity of these principles in the modern world of complex diplomacy and realpolitik shows that what is ancient need not be antiquated. Both India and China are today arguably more modern and confident in outlook than in Tagore's days, although India, with its tradition of gradualism, is often accused of lagging in its drive towards modernity. Be that as it may, both India and China today have the maturity to admire our past, including the past of our contacts, without getting overwhelmed or swamped under its weight. Our effort, as a pan-Asia initiative under the East Asian Summit-process, to resurrect the glory of Nalanda, is a pointer in that direction. The vision of Asian unity conceived by Tagore nearly a century ago, is close to getting realized in the process of community-building in our region.

There has been some criticism that Tagore did not offer any practical solutions to the problem of the day. One could equally argue that Tagore was a visionary who thought ahead of his times and the true relevance of his thoughts were not appreciated in his era. For instance, early on he foresaw the onset of globalization. On several occasions, he had mentioned that the most important fact of the present age was that all the races have come together and we are confronted with two alternatives. The problem is whether different groups of people can go on fighting with one another or find out some true basis for reconciliation and mutual help; and whether it will be interminable competition or cooperation. There is a striking parallel in how leaders of India and China have publicly articulated that there are areas of cooperation as well as those of competition between us, and that there is sufficient space

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Tagore's vision of sustainability on a global scale, his cosmopolitanism, and his humanism, are of immense relevance today when we stress the values of inclusive development, and environmental sustainability as also education that creates individuals who transcend national boundaries to become citizens of the world.

in the world for both countries to satisfy their development aspirations and to cooperate during this process.

Tagore also pointed that in our earlier history, when the geographical limits of each country and also the facilities of communication were small, this problem of cooperation versus competition was comparatively small in dimension. Again in the context of people having come close together, Tagore mentioned that their differences in language, tradition and degrees of strength are so apparent that "our first meeting has only recognized these differences and in the place of geographical barriers it has thereupon set up the barriers of mutual understanding". Again speaking on Asia, he said "When we in Asia talk about re-adjustment in response to the world situation today, we forget that it should be directed to a future of new ideals and not to the mere shifting about of the methods of the past." We are today indeed grappling with these very ideas as we try to address the issue of a strategic security and cooperative framework for Asia.

Since the venue of this talk is Singapore, I cannot but help thinking of how the most evocative visualization of the synergy between India and China has often sprung from our friends in South-east Asia. And here, Singapore has played a leading role. It was in Singapore that Tan Yun-shan met Tagore and from where he resolved to follow Tagore to Santiniketan when Cheena Bhavana was being set up. It is from our friends in Singapore that we often hear the most incisive commentary and comparative analyses of modern China and India. And, it is probably here in Singapore that you are able to best understand the imperative of closer dialogue and peaceful interaction between India and China.

Tagore's encounter with China did not culminate with his trip there in 1924. The idea of India and the idea of China – civilizations that could never perish – were guiding principles for leaders like Nehru. Until the unfortunate border conflict of 1962, the concept of fraternal partnership between India and China had never been questioned. The estrangement of the sixties and early seventies expressed an aberration that went against the grain of the inspirational words of Tagore and his belief in the geo-civilizational paradigm of India-China relations. The scholar Patricia Uberoi speaks of the post-Westphalian compact where the institution of the nation-state is defined by territorial boundedness. She writes how "with this come notions of centre and periphery, mainland and margins, and the justified use of force in their defence". Perhaps, as she says, Tagore would have thought of frontier zones as "revolving doors- as creative spaces where civilizations meet, and not as the trouble spots of contemporary geo-politics". It is that ideal of global sustainability that Tagore would have spoken to – where regional cooperation across territorial boundaries strengthens connectivities and diminishes the salience of protracted contest and conflict. Similarly the notion of intercultural give and take between India and China contradicts the theory of any clash of civilizations. This is a useful model for Asia as we see it resurgent once again, and we seek open, transparent, balanced and equitable dialogue structures and patterns of cooperation among all the regions of our continent.

Tagore's vision of sustainability on a global scale, his cosmopolitanism, and his humanism, are of immense relevance today when we stress the values of inclusive development, and environmental sustainability as also education that creates individuals who transcend national

boundaries to become citizens of the world.

Last May, I was present at Shanghai when the President of India, unveiled a bronze statue of Tagore at the crossing of Nanchang Road and Maoming Road very close to the spot where Tagore had stayed at the house of the young poet Xu Zhimo during a brief transit through Shanghai on his onward journey to Japan and North America in 1929. The event was a recognition of the enormous contribution made by Tagore in resurrecting the traditional friendship between India and China. Last month during the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao to India, the Indian Government announced that the study of the Chinese language would be introduced into the curriculum of secondary schools across the country. Tagore would have been overjoyed by this resolve to promote the scientific study of China through its language.

In many ways the Nalanda University project, which arises out of the decisions reached at the East Asia Summit, is an expression of this spirit. The road to Nalanda, giver of education and knowledge, echoes with the muffled footsteps of that period of shared history between India and China when the traditions of Buddhist pilgrimage and quest of scholarship defined the reaching out of these two countries to each other. In fact, the lore of the Tang Dynasty monk's "Journey to the West" is like a trail leading to Nalanda. The tradition of Nalanda not only included monks like Faxian, Xuanzang and Yijing, but also other monks and scholars, prominently among them Kumarajiva, who is claimed by both India and China as their own worthy son.

In our own century, the 21st, the Government of India has sought to revive Nalanda as a centre of cultural exchange and scholarship between East, Southeast and South Asia. The Nalanda



There is an impression in certain quarters that Tagore was a traditionalist. He was far from being one since he supported science and scientific modes of thinking. But outside India, as Prof. Amartya Sen has pointed out, he felt the need for the world to pay greater attention to the thinking of the East.

Mentor Group headed by Dr. Amartya Sen has been working to realize the vision of a truly global university, a holistic mix of the old and the new, of the past, the present and the future. Again, Tagore's happiness at this development would have been spontaneous. It is the modern day Xuanzangs and Bodhidharmas in both our countries and indeed in the rest of Asia that this University will target – so that this ancient rendezvous comes alive once again with all its attendant relevance and meaning. We are deeply appreciative of the fact that the Singapore Buddhist community is to make a financial contribution for the library of Nalanda University amounting to US\$5 million. Last month, Premier Wen Jiabao announced a contribution of US\$1 million for the Nalanda University.

Tagore's vision of India and China was founded on the realization that the true depths of the relationship between the two countries are embedded in the cultural interaction of yore between the two countries, in the mutual quest for ideas and innovation, trade, science, and in the culture of debate. Let us not forget how the halls of Nalanda resounded with the intense debates of scholars and monks defending their interpretations of the Buddhist canon- and here the India versus China or China versus India context was not a conflicted one, but one in which there was a healthy competition embellished by the space which each side gave the other. I believe these forefathers of ours in both countries had grasped the essence of the geo-civilizational paradigm that Tan Chung speaks of.

Tagore was ultimately a breaker of barriers, and in that sense he is very much of the 21st century. His appeal should cut across any nationalism that is narrowly defined or circumscribed by a limited appreciation of the ebb and flow of the tides of history. That sanity and rationality should prevail in the debates and encounters of countries like India and China is a principle that nobody can find exception about. Tagore's nationalism did not come in the way of the widest internationalism. This is a message for the youth of China and of India. Let their relationship flourish in the *amrakunj* – the mango grove – like the one at Santiniketan, a field of inspiration, with their personalities developing in harmony with the environment around them. Perhaps the theme of the *amrakunj* should define 2011 which is the Year of India-China Exchange!

Last month, during his visit to Delhi, Premier Wen Jiabao spoke to a cross-section of media and cultural and academic personalities on how to improve perceptions of Indians and

Chinese about each other. A number of interesting observations were made. Professor Manoranjan Mohanty, the eminent Indian sinologist, spoke of the two countries establishing Panchsheel centres for cultural, educational, economic and technological cooperation. One participant described the urgency of the need for changes in perceptions of each other and the gap that needs to be bridged. One of our film makers proposed joint ventures in film making which would resolve the alienation caused by 1962. One Chinese participant described Nalanda and Tagore as important icons for India and China. Yet another Chinese participant underlined the need for people from the two countries to understand each other directly rather than through the western prism, in an echo of Tagore! What came through was the need for an inclusive and plural approach given the multi-ethnic nature of both societies. The need for the two countries to evolve as hubs of creativity, in addition to being engines of economic growth, was stressed by Premier Wen. Rediscovering their civilizational ties not only on the basis of historical traditions but in the contemporary context through youth and technology was essential.

India and China share what is termed as a strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity today. Their relations have, in the last decade particularly, grown increasingly multi-faceted. These two big economies of Asia are interacting closely with each other, both in terms of bilateral trade, but also on issues concerning the global economic situation. The two governments have decided to institute a strategic economic dialogue as a measure of the increasing complexity and sophistication of their dialogue on economic issues.

It is a truism that between two such large countries such as ours, relations will be complex and with continuing areas of divergence. The challenge remains to build more convergence and common ground. I believe that the ballast must come from deeper dialogue which is defined by greater transparency, understanding the relevance and import of the words of thinkers like Tagore, realizing that a conflicted or contest-ridden relationship between India and China can do neither any good, that peace and stability for an Asian century flows from the enduring strength of a well-functioning interaction between these two countries. The concept of 'Zhongguo-Yin Da Tong' – or 'Great Harmony between India and China' can describe the future of our relations, if we use not only our complementarities in development and economic growth but also our great strengths in cultural and civilizational values, thus emerging as hubs of creativity and innovation, to create a fitting new paradigm for the India-China equation.

# Realising Tagore's Dream For Good Relations between India and China

Speech by George Yeo, then Singapore Minister For Foreign Affairs, at the conference "A Different Universalism: The Global Vision of Rabindranath Tagore and his Contemporaries" held in Kolkata, India, on 20 December 2010



## The Chinese Temple in Sarnath

1. In the early 30's, a Chinese Buddhist monk from Beijing, Ven Dao Jie (道阶), while on a pilgrimage to India, resolved to rebuild a dilapidated Chinese temple in Sarnath that was established with the patronage of the Chinese Emperor in the 8th century during the Tang Dynasty. Unfortunately, he died before he could do it. Together with his disciple Ven De Yu (德玉) from Sichuan, a Singapore businessman Lee Choon Seng (李俊承) supported by Tan Yun Shan (谭云山) whom he knew well, decided to carry out this task. Lee Choon Seng donated the land for the building of the Buddhist Lodge in Singapore and was the first Chairman of the Singapore Buddhist Federation. He engaged an English engineer A. H. King to help in the restoration which was completed around 1939 and which is the temple we see today in Sarnath. The temple is located next to the Deer Park where the Buddha gave his first sermon, and turned the Dharmacakra or Falun (法轮) for the first time. Tan Yun Shan was very likely the man who got Rabindranath Tagore to write the preface for the opening of the renovated temple.

2. Tagore wrote:

"The glorious history of the spiritual communication between China and India once raised its memorial on the sacred spot near Benares where Lord Buddha had proclaimed to his first five disciples his message of the emancipation of self in love. The architectural record of the two peoples' mingling of souls perished in course of time and its memory has

lain obscure since then for series of obvious centuries. To-day when we feel deep in our heart the stir of a new awakening, let us rejoice in the fact that an attempt is being made to reconstruct the monastery in Sarnath originally established by a Chinese Emperor of Tang Dynasty 1300 years ago. Numerous are the monuments built to perpetuate the memory of injuries inflicted by one murdering race upon another, but let us, once for all, for the sake of humanity, restore one memorial of a generous past to remind us of an ancient meeting of countries in Asia for the exchange of love, for the establishment of spiritual comradeship among nations separated by a vast distance in geography and race."

3. As we recall and celebrate the lifework of Tagore on his 150th birth anniversary, a recurring theme is his dream of pan-Asian solidarity, of friendship between India and China. This is an epic story of contact between two civilizations about which a new chapter is being opened today.

## India-China Relations

4. Separated by the high Himalayas, the great deserts of Central Asia and the archipelagic waters of Southeast Asia, the history of contact between South and East Asia has been largely peaceful. The 1962 border war was an aberration which has left a scar in India.

5. Among ordinary Indians and Chinese, while each may have prejudices about the other, there is nevertheless a deep respect of each

other as an ancient people stemming from long historical contact through the overland and maritime silk routes. The gift of South Asian Buddhism to East Asia, for example, has become a part of East Asian folklore. By the first half of the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism became one of the main religions in China and spread to Korea and Japan. Great libraries in the imperial capital, Chang'an, now Xi'an, were overseen by South Asian monks. The influence of South Asia on East Asia was both direct and subtle. Monks did not travel on their own. Whether overland or by sea, they travelled along trade routes opened and sustained by others. In a return favour, it was through the records of Chinese Buddhist monks that India during the British Raj re-discovered many aspects of its own Buddhist heritage. But it was not only Buddhism, every aspect of life was enriched by economic and cultural exchange including art, music and the sciences. This was an exchange which began in the early mists of history and continues till today.

6. In this century, the nature of the exchange between India and China is of the greatest importance. The re-emergence of these two huge civilizational polities on the global stage, still only at the beginning stages, is already altering the shape of global politics and economics. It is only a matter of time before China and India again become the two biggest economies in the world because of the sheer size of their populations. How India and China manage their relations in the coming years and decades will decide the big issue of war and peace in Asia. Without making light of the

challenges, if these two countries have the wisdom to cooperate and resolve disputes in a peaceful way, bilaterally and internationally, Asia will be completely transformed and with it the rest of the world.

7. Unlike Europe which has no single dominant pole, China is historically the pole in East Asia and India the pole in South Asia. If China and India enjoy good relations, not only will East and South Asia benefit, the regions in between, Southeast Asia and Central Asia, will also benefit. That's two thirds of the world. Tagore's dream of pan-Asia was based not on political or economic dominance of one part of Asia or a single set of values forced on everyone but on friendship and cooperation which celebrates our common humanity and respects the natural diversity of human society. Tagore's dream should be the dream of all Asians. If we realize his dream, we will bequeath to future generations a much better world. The signs are not unhelpful.

### Tagore, Santiniketan, Nalanda, Bengal and Singapore

8. The celebration of Tagore's life is one such manifestation. This conference is the fourth in a series which began in Harvard and continued in Singapore and Beijing. Tagore's works in China are the most translated after Shakespeare. A major effort is now underway to re-translate Tagore directly from Bengali to Chinese as previous translations were through English or Hindi translations. In May this year, President Pratibha Patil unveiled a statue of Tagore in the centre of Shanghai while on a state visit to China.

9. Tagore visited China three times in the 1920s and made a profound impact on Chinese intellectuals. One of them, Tan Yun Shan, whom Tagore met in Singapore, was

invited by him to build the Cheena Bhavan in Santiniketan which we visited yesterday. Representing Nehru who was ill at that time, Indira Gandhi opened the Bhavan in 1937 with the words: "May the Chinese Hall be a symbol of living contact between China and India". Chiang Kai-shek visited it in 1942 and Zhou Enlai in 1957. Unfortunately, following the border war in 1962, bilateral relations took a sudden chill. When Tan Yun Shan died in 1983, Indira Gandhi paid this tribute to him: "Gurudeva and my father had affection and regards for him. He identified himself with Santiniketan and contributed immensely to a better understanding between the civilizations of India and China".

10. The revival of Nalanda as a secular university is part of this larger movement to re-establish an inter-connected Asia which had been compartmentalised by Western powers into colonies and buffer states. It is a project which has captured the mood of the times and was endorsed by the Leaders of the East Asia Summit recently. Established by a special Act of the Indian Parliament in August this year, Nalanda University is conceived as an international university which will engage a much wider region, indeed, of the entire global community. As envisaged by the Japanese member of the Mentors Group, Dr Ikuo Hirayama, who passed away last year, Nalanda should dedicate itself to the cause of peace. It is a cause all of us support.

11. That Bengalis play a disproportionate role in this effort should not be surprising, by which I refer to Amartya Sen, Sugata Bose and Tansen Sen. If you allow me, I would like to consider myself as an honorary Bengali too because Singapore was founded from Bengal as a daughter city of Kolkota. Tan Yun Shan and his son, Tan Chung (譚中), had close links with Singapore and Malaya. It was in Singapore

that Subhas Chandra Bose established the Indian National Army. Reflecting on this, if we consider the region drained by the lower Ganges as larger Bengal, then the links between Bengal and the Buddha, between Bengal and Southeast Asia, between Bengal and China, follow naturally. A celebration of Tagore's life cannot be dissociated from the soil which gave birth to him which is the reason why all of us are here today.

### Living In Harmony With All Existence

12. Much has been made of the rivalry between China and India in recent months, some of which no doubt in the interest of third parties. The border remains in dispute. The media on both sides tend to sensationalise problems. Indian and Chinese leaders, however, are mindful that good bilateral relations are necessary for each to develop. Already China is India's biggest trading partner, as Qing China was for British India in the 19th century. PM Manmohan Singh was right to say that each is too big to be contained by the other and the world is big enough for both to develop. As a member of the Nalanda Mentors Group, I was cheered that when China's PM Wen Jiabao met PM Manmohan Singh in Hanoi during the East Asia Summit in October, he invited the Mentors Group to meet in China where the great monk, Xuan Zang, began his journey. In his recent visit to India from 15 to 17 December 2010, PM Wen included in his official delegation the Chinese member of the Nalanda Members Group Prof Wang Bangwei. China's strong support of the Nalanda revival and of Tagore's cause is a good sign.

13. We need a sense of history, of how much our forebears have benefited and learnt from one another. Without this humility and a profound respect for the contribution of others to our own well-being, we will suffer hubris and make terrible mistakes. It will be good if scholars from all over Asia and beyond come together to research, compile and present how much Indians, Chinese and others have learnt from one another in different fields over the centuries. What Joseph Needham did for Science and Civilization in China, we should try to do for the history of contact between South and East Asia. It will be good if the new Nalanda University is associated with such an undertaking. Tagore said: "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence". This is also the spirit of the Buddha and the spirit of Nalanda, and should be our common spirit.

PHOTO COURTESY NETAJI RESEARCH BUREAU, KOLKATA



# A Jilted City, Nobel Laureates and a Surge of Memories – All in One Tagorean Day



‘Surrounded by luminaries, I try my best to hide behind Ambassador Pany.’

Front row, left to right: K Kesavapany, Sugata Bose, George Yeo, Wang Gungwu. Back row, left to right: Asad-ul Iqbal Latif, Prasenjit Duara, Tansen Sen, Wang Bangwei

## BY ASAD-UL IQBAL LATIF

KOLKATA IN DECEMBER is a city of conferences. An international conference on Rabindranath Tagore, held there in mid-December last year, stood out nevertheless. It was the fourth and concluding parley in a series of meetings that had begun at Harvard and travelled to Singapore and Beijing. The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) at ISEAS had organised the Singapore leg of the conferences. The final conference, organised by the Netaji Research Bureau and the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art, took place as a build-up to the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore – Bengal’s favourite literary son, India’s national poet, and the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Present at the finale was Minister George Yeo, ISEAS Chairman Prof Wang Gungwu, ISEAS Director Ambassador K Kesavapany, NSC Head Prof Tansen Sen, myself and others.

The day before the conference began, a group of about two dozen participants visited Santiniketan, a town in West Bengal’s Birbhum district that houses Viswa-Bharati University, which Tagore set up. The university and his own presence at Santiniketan turned a provincial town into a major place of secular pilgrimage for those interested in advancing world understanding through scholarship, art and literature. The itinerant participants, drawn from China, Japan, the United States, Singapore and India itself, cheerfully followed the almost-century-long Tagore trail to Santiniketan. For many, it was the first trip. For me, it was a brief return to a place that I had first visited as a teenager in the 1970s, long before I had arrived in Singapore in 1984.

As the coach for Santiniketan left the Taj Bengal Hotel in Kolkata, I heard the police pilot car turn on the siren. This was in honour of Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo, who was travelling

to Santiniketan before delivering the keynote speech at the conference. Kolkata’s traffic, as adversarial as its politics, parted magically, and the coach took off on the nearly 200-km-long trip to Santiniketan. A convoy of back-up cars followed the coach as it sped along. I glowed in the borrowed glory of the dignitaries with whom I was sharing the journey.

The companionship of the police brought back memories of my years as a journalist with *The Statesman* newspaper in Kolkata. Once, in the early 1980s, protesting junior doctors had confined a senior hospital official to his room, in a pressure tactic called a *gherao*, to extract concessions from the government. The police were sent in to break up the *gherao*, in the course of which a six-foot-tall plainclothes policeman wielding a baton chased away the journalists trying to cover the event. It was not a nice way to make friends with the media. But here I was now, enjoying the hospitality of the

same police force and remembering the same doctors, many of whom were as proficient at reciting Tagore (and quoting Marx) as they were at performing a tracheostomy and organising a *gherao*. There is almost nothing in Kolkata from which you can take out Tagore. Even the sewers begin to sing the moment two lovers remember a line of his.

I tried to hum a Tagore song, but could not, for my heart was heavy with the faded claims of the city that I had left more than 25 years ago. Jilted streets and rebuffed localities accosted me. "You've left me for Orchard Road, haven't you? Cheat!" College Street said. She spoke fiercely, as if I had been in love with her. I had. "That is nothing," Park Circus interjected accusingly. "He grew up here. Now he is growing old without me. But look, I am still young without him." Mercifully, the route to Santiniketan by-passed these roads and places; otherwise, they would have plucked me from the very coach. As we passed through Hooghly district, my ancestral home, too, remained out of sight. However, it glanced at me reproachfully over the same fields where the fathers of today's farmers had tilled the familial soil when I had been a child. "Won't you come in at least for a cup of tea?"

my grandfather's house taunted me. "Or am I too humble for the distinguished company you are in?" I could take it no more. "It is you who pushed me away, you who rejected me, you whose spacious lives and roaming loves had no room for me," I cried. "How dare you mock me now?" I shouted, looking them directly in the eye. It was a noiseless shout but it woke me up. I had been dozing.

My mood improved considerably when we arrived in Santiniketan.

Our group was ushered into the residence of another Bengali Nobel laureate, the economist Amartya Sen of Harvard, who has written on Tagore with fellow-traveller's grasp of Indian reality. Professor Sen welcomed us to his sprawling lawn, where we sat in a Socratic circle, ate Bengali savoury shingara and drank tea and coffee. Engaging us in conversation that was banter one moment and heavy the next, he moved effortlessly from anecdotes of family history that lay spread across the great house, to the academic mysteries of Harvard, to the altogether different urgency of the situation in Myanmar. Professor Sen's passionate

commitment to the life of the mind, and the conversational energy and verve with which he conveyed it, held us spellbound for the better part of the hour, till it was time to move unwillingly on to our other appointments.

At Cheena Bhavana, ancient history put recent history in its dyspeptic place. A bibliophile's paradise, the centre exudes an almost physical craving for the cultural closeness that China and India displayed in the long centuries preceding their short-lived war of 1962. The dusty smell of the elderly books evoked the earthy steps of those who had sought to bring the two civilizations closer. We moved closer to the soul of the great poet, an avid international traveller himself, during our visit to the Tagore Museum. The photographs and other artefacts housed there are simple enough for a child to understand and profound enough for her to grow up on. I am not growing up but growing old, but I felt embarrassingly young as we headed out of the building for lunch and the return journey to Kolkata. I had retraced a part of my life in the course of a Tagorean day.

You can take a Bengali out of Tagore's Bengal: You cannot take Bengal's Tagore out of him.

## "The period I spent at Visva-Bharati was the best in my scholastic career"

**A message from Dr Lin Wo-Chiang, President, Tagore Society, Singapore which appeared in the Tagore Centenary Volume in 1961.**



Gurudev, as he is known throughout the world, set out as a pilgrim in 1924, and again in 1927, visiting Malaya, Indonesia, Indo-China and the Far East. It was during one of these sojourns that I had the rare privilege of meeting him in person. It was really a memorable occasion in my life to fall at the feet of so distinguished a person. I was so inspired by his personality and the fund of knowledge in him that I proceeded to Visva-Bharati to take charge of the Cheena Bhavan. This opportunity afforded me the chance to avail myself of his scholarly guidance. The period I spent at Visva-Bharati was the best in my scholastic career.

The experience obtained by me at this residential college, situated as it is in a country setting, gaining personal contacts with distinguished scholars from all lands, under the direct inspiration and guidance of this great teacher, was a 'godsend' to me in the vast field of knowledge, bearing practical values in life viewed in the light of the eternal theme of spiritual thought, namely to seek, know and realise – "the One in the Many".

It is indeed very gratifying that an increasing number of Malaysians in all walks of life patronise the Tagore Society, Singapore, to emulate and propagate the cherished aims of Gurudev.



## Celebrating 150 years of Rabindranath Tagore



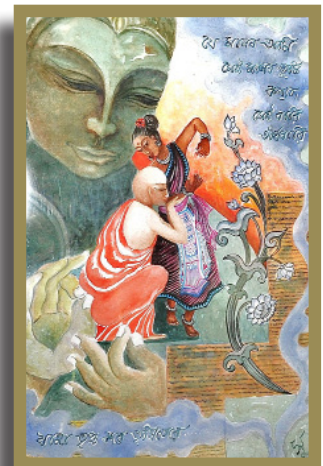
Tagore Unveiled. From left: HE Dr. T.C.A. Raghavan, High Commissioner of India in Singapore; Ambassador K. Kesavapany, Director ISEAS; Mr. S.M. Krishna, Honourable Minister of External Affairs, Government of India; Prof. Wang Gungwu, Chairman, ISEAS; Mr. Gopinath Pillai, Ambassador-at-Large, and Prof. Saranindranath Tagore, National University of Singapore. Presented to the upcoming Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), the bust will remain at the ISEAS Library till the inauguration of the IHC.



On 26th June, 1927, the farewell luncheon for Rabindranath Tagore in Singapore was attended by Consuls General for Germany, America and France. In 2011 the unveiling ceremony was also attended by ambassadors from various countries.

“ From time to time something calls me from beyond the ocean, and my wings flutter...”

– Rabindranath Tagore on his longing for travel



Above: Sudeshna Dasgupta and Ambarish Ghosh from the band Crossroads Traffic singing a medley of Tagore songs in Bengali, Hindi and English.

The programme included an exhibition of photographs, primarily from Tagore’s Asian voyages, put together by the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre.

Right: Ameerali Jumabhoy explains some of the displays to the Honourable Minister. The Jumabhoyes were very close to the Namazies who were Tagore’s hosts in Singapore.

Above right: A painting by Sudakshina Ghosh inspired by Tagore’s ‘Chandalika’.



STOPPING TO  
PAY HOMAGE



Mr. Jawhar Sircar, Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, garlanding the bust of Rabindranath Tagore during his visit to the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre on 10th May, 2011.

# Rabindranath Tagore – Poet, Patriot and Internationalist

Message by Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister, State of Singapore. This appeared in the Tagore Centenary Volume brought out by the Singapore Tagore Centenary Celebration Committee in 1961.

Rabindranath Tagore has said – “The growth and decay of civilisation is not the gain or loss of external possession but of internal wealth. That civilisation is more advanced which has more accentuated the greatness and responsibility of human life and it may be said without fear of challenge that in the absence of such accentuation, civilisation loses its glory.”

Tagore lived up to his dictum. It is universally acknowledged that his life and work added to the treasures accumulated by the human spirit through the ages with poetic productions of great beauty and insight. His noble personality towered over the passions, hatreds and strife which disfigured civilisation in his lifetime, and continue to disfigure it today.

Asians remember with pride the occasion when the great Indian poet renounced, in noble and stirring accents, his British knighthood in protest against brutal British repression in the Punjab in 1919. “The time has come,” wrote the poet to Lord Chelmsford, “when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation, and I for my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who, for all their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings.”

A creative master of Bengali prose and poetry, Tagore wrote almost as well in English. From his English translations of his Bengali works, we get intimations of the beauty and excellence of the Bengali originals.

Great men bequeath their treasures not just to their own nation, but to the whole world. Tagore is a great man by any standard. We in Singapore join with pleasure in this year’s worldwide centenary celebration of Rabindranath Tagore. We would also do well to take the opportunity to remind ourselves of Tagore’s message that the quality of our lives and of our civilisation depends more on the internal wealth that we can accumulate than on external possessions.

Let us not forget in our day-to-day lives and mundane preoccupations that man in his habitation of this earth has accululated a wealth of deep and abiding beauty. These are the things which make civilisation worth preserving, and world peace worth achieving

We would also do well to take the opportunity to remind ourselves of Tagore’s message that the quality of our lives and of our civilisation depends more on the internal wealth that we can accumulate than on external possessions.



## “Tagore belongs to Asia and the world”

“The greatness of Tagore is not confined to India; he belongs to Asia and the world. The wide range of his thought, his emphasis on the dignity and soul of man, his understanding of human frailty had an influence which has reached far beyond the boundaries of his own lifetime, and is still an enriching source of inspiration to mankind.

– Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, Prime Minister, Federation of Malaya in a message to commemorate the centenary of Tagore in 1961

“It is indeed an honour for me to present Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore’s bust to the Indian Heritage Centre on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of the great poet, thinker, philosopher and educationist. While embarking on his voyage to the Southeast Asian countries in 1927, Gurudev Tagore said: “We have embarked on a pilgrimage to India beyond its modern political boundaries, to see the signs of the history of India’s entry into the universal”.

The objective of Tagore’s voyage was to explore India’s millennia-old cultural and historical links with Southeast Asia, with humanistic ideas, religious values, music, philosophy and culture. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies is indeed the most appropriate place to hold today’s event. The final destination of the bust will be the Indian Heritage Centre and I am grateful to all those associated with it for this wonderful initiative.

– Mr SM Krishna, Minister of External Affairs, Government of India, 5th May, 2011

“A bust of Rabindranath Tagore has been installed to initiate the celebrations in Singapore of the poet’s 150th birth anniversary. This was supported by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), the Tagore Society and many others. The initiative was greatly expedited by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) which despatched a bronze bust, commissioned from noted sculptor Gautam Pal. The presence in Singapore of the External Affairs Minister of India Shri S.M. Krishna and a beautifully organised ceremony by the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre led to an evocative morning function during which the bust was unveiled on the 5th of May, 2011.

We are grateful to our many friends in Singapore for the help they have provided in this endeavour.”

– HE Dr TCA Raghavan, High Commissioner of India in Singapore, 5th May, 2011

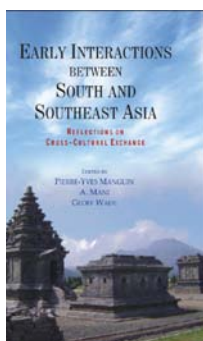
“One of the areas of research at the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at this Institute is the issue of connectivities within Asia, in both the pre-modern and modern eras. As part of its research, the Centre organised a well-attended conference on the Asian travels of the great Indian poet, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore embodies the sense of a culture that is profoundly Indian, Asian and universal at the same time. His inclusive vision of Asia, in particular, is being brought to life today by geopolitical and economic shifts that are moving Asia closer to the centrestage of history.

Thus, when High Commissioner Raghavan said that the Government of India was willing to present a bust of the poet, I was overjoyed, particularly since Tagore had visited Singapore in 1927. It is appropriate that this bust be housed at the Indian Heritage Centre. However, since the Centre will be set up only in two to three years, ISEAS is more than willing to house the poet’s bust in the meantime in our Library. It is extremely kind of His Excellency, Minister Krishna, to be with us today to unveil Tagore’s bust. It will be a strong reminder of the enduring links between India and Singapore.”

– Ambassador K Kesavapany, Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 5th May, 2011

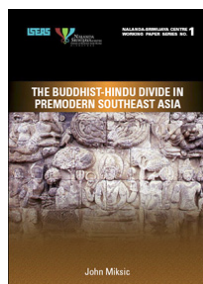
# Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Publications

## NALANDA-SRIWIJAYA SERIES



### ***Early Interactions Between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange***

Editors: Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade



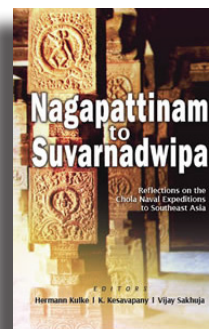
### ***The Buddhist-Hindu Divide in Premodern Southeast Asia***

by John Miksic

To assist in disseminating the research results of projects related to the Centre's interests, a Nalanda-Sriwijaya Series has been initiated. The first volume under this series is entitled *Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia*. A second volume with the title *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange* is forthcoming.

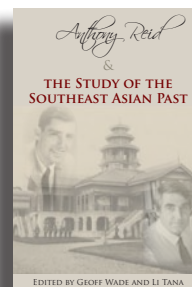
The Centre has also launched the NSC Research Series, which provides NSC fellows with an avenue to present the outcome of their research undertaken and supported by the Centre. The first volume under this series is entitled *Preserving Cultural Identity through Education: The Schools of the Chinese Community in Calcutta, India* by Zhang Xing.

A web-based publication series is a further element of the Centre's publishing programme. Entitled the NSC Working Paper Series, this series provides an avenue for swift publication and wide dissemination of research conducted or presented within the Centre, and of studies engaging fields of enquiry of relevance to the Centre. The first paper of this series is John Miksic's *The Buddhist-Hindu Divide in Premodern Southeast Asia*.



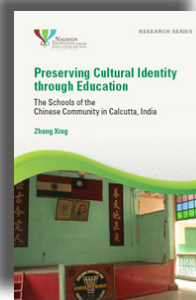
### ***Nagapattinam to Suvarnadwipa: Reflections on the Chola Naval Expeditions to Southeast Asia***

Editors: Hermann Kulke, K. Kesavapany, Vijay Sakhuja



### ***Anthony Reid and the Study of the Southeast Asian Past***

Editors: Geoff Wade and Li Tana



### ***Preserving Cultural Identity through Education: The Schools of the Chinese Community in Calcutta, India***

by Zhang Xing

SOME OF THE EVENTS ORGANISED BY THE NALANDA-SRIWIJAYA CENTRE

**Rabindranath Tagore's Vision of India and China: A 21st Century Perspective**



Inaugural Lecture of the Singapore Consortium for India-China Dialogue

13 Jan 2011  
Thursday 4pm - 6pm  
The Ballroom  
Raffles Hotel, Singapore

**Speaker: HE Nirupama Rao, Foreign Secretary of India**

Eight decades ago, Rabindranath Tagore outlined a vision of relations between India and China that stressed the fact that there was a geo-civilisational underpinning that marked the interaction between the two countries. Since the mid-twentieth century, that relationship has been defined along contours very different to the definitions of Tagore. Can the geo-civilisational imprimatur to this relationship be erased? What is the larger vision that should guide it? The world recognises the reality of two of Asia's giants re-emerging and regaining the strengths they possessed through much of history. The relationship between the two countries encompasses elements of competition and collaboration. Can the strategic imperatives of each country's outlook be re-set to promote a deepened dialogue that is marked by greater transparency? Can the cultural convergences outlined by Tagore's vision still resonate between these two great Asian civilisations? Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao's talk will attempt to place the narrative of civilisational synergy between India and China in the context of their 21st century relationship.

To register, email [betty@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:betty@iseas.edu.sg)



NIRUPAMA MENON RAO is an Indian Foreign Service officer currently serving as Foreign Secretary of India. She previously served as Minister of Press Affairs in Washington, Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow, Joint Secretary (East Asia), the first woman spokesperson of the External Affairs Ministry, Chief of Personnel, Ambassador to Peru, High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, and as the Ambassador to China. She is also a poet and has written a book of poetry entitled *Rain Rising*. Her poems have been translated into Chinese and Russian.

The Singapore Consortium for India-China Dialogue is an alliance of research institutions comprising the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, the National University of Singapore, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and the Nanyang Technological University which are engaged in joint deliberation and debate on issues relating to the respective roles of India and China regionally and globally and the relationships between these two countries.



Tagore's Asian Voyages

A REDISCOVERY THROUGH LECTURES, MUSIC, POETRY AND DANCE  
11-13 MAY, 2010

NALANDA-SRIWIJAYA CENTRE  
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES,  
SINGAPORE



**Tagore Society and the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre**  
celebrate Rabindranath Tagore's 149th birth anniversary with an evening of music.

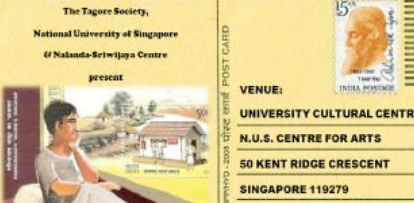
May 11th, 2010. 7.30pm. By Invitation only  
DBS Auditorium, 6 Shenton Way, S 068809

**RABINDRA SANGEET by PRABUDDHA RAHA**

This cultural programme is part of a larger conference on Tagore, May 11-13, organised by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies - "Tagore's Asian Voyages: A Rediscovery through Lectures, Poetry, Music and Dance".  
Details on [www.iseas.edu.sg/msd](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/msd)

Prabuddha Raha is one of the rising stars of Rabindra Sangeet today. Filmmaker Aparna Sen picked him to playback for the film 'Paromitar Chini'. An alumnus of Dakshinesh, his disc include creative Aparna Sen, R...

The Tagore Society,  
National University of Singapore  
& Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre  
present



**Rabindranath Tagore's THE POST OFFICE**  
DIRECTED BY NIKHILESH KHEDIA

**VENUE:**  
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**17 APRIL + 3 pm**

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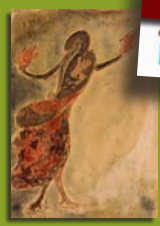
**Colours of the Seasons**

Tagore Society, High Commission of India, NUS and the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre  
are commemorating the 149th anniversary of Tagore's birth with a very special evening of music and dance by

**Kalamandalam of Kolkata**

13 May, 2010 at 8pm  
University Cultural Centre Theatre, 50 Kent Ridge Crescent, S 119279

**Ritu Rôngo - Colours of the Seasons**  
is a presentation of Tagore's songs on the seasons in the various different dance styles of Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Mohiniattam and more.



This cultural programme is part of a larger conference on Tagore, May 11-13, organised by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies - "An Age in Motion: The Asian Voyages of Rabindranath Tagore".  
Details on [www.iseas.edu.sg/msd](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/msd)

"Dancing Woman" - A painting by Tagore, National Gallery of Modern Art

**India-China Dialogue**  
Image and Perceptions: The Role of Media in India-China Relations  
July 2-5, 2010

Seminar Room 3-1, Level 3, Manasseh Meyer  
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy  
469C Bukit Timah Road, Singapore 259772

Email [lkyspppl@nus.edu.sg](mailto:lkyspppl@nus.edu.sg)  
or call Siti Rozilawati (6516 4203)

Co-organised by ISEAS, Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre, NUS, and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.



Co-organised by Tagore Society, the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, and the Office of the Deputy President (Research and Technology), NUS

Tickets: \$20, available at SISTIC. Call +65 6348 5555 or book online through [www.sistic.com](http://www.sistic.com)  
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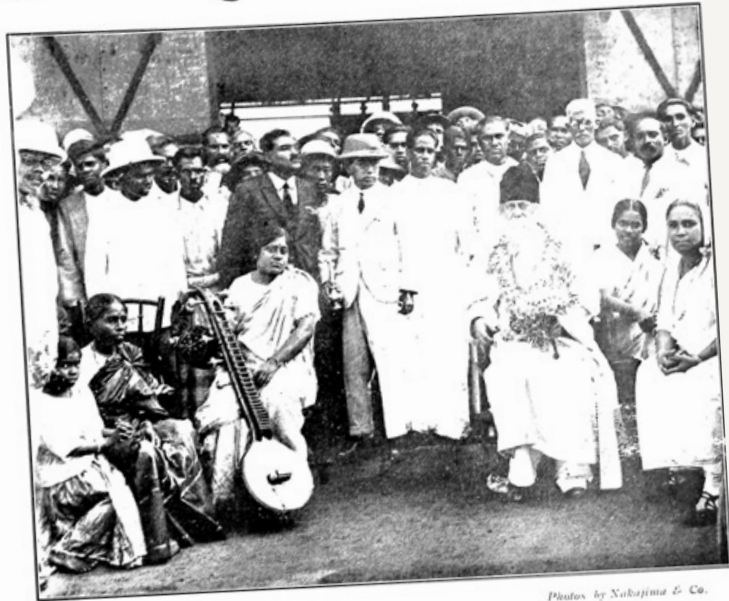
July 28, 1927

SUPPLEMENT TO THE STRAITS BUDGET

## Dr. Rabindranath Tagore in Singapore.



Dr. R. Tagore garlanded.



Group photograph taken at Tanjong Pagar wharf upon Dr. Tagore's arrival on July 20.  
*Photos by Nakajima & Co.*