

TAGORE LOOKS EAST



Rabindranath Tagore in Indonesia, 1927

Sukanta Chaudhuri

TAGORE LOOKS EAST

Sukanta Chaudhuri

Sukanta Chaudhuri is an internationally renowned scholar of Renaissance English literature and of the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. He taught at Presidency College in Kolkata from 1973 to 1991 and at Jadavpur University from 1991 till his retirement in 2010. He is now Professor Emeritus at the latter institution. Chaudhuri works in the fields of European Renaissance studies, translation, and textual studies. His last major monograph is *The Metaphysics of Text* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Chaudhuri has translated extensively from Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Sukumar Ray, Rajshekhar Bose and other classical Bengali writers, and many modern Bengali poets. He is also General Editor of the *Oxford Tagore Translations*. Email: sukantac@gmail.com

The NSC Working Paper Series is published electronically by the **Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre** of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

NSC Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

ISSN: 2529-7287

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner:

Sukanta Chaudhuri, Tagore Looks East, **Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre** Working Paper No 2 (May 2011), http://nsc.iseas.edu.sg/documents/working_papers/nscwps002.pdf

NSC WPS Editors:

Geoff Wade

Joyce Zaide

Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Editorial Committee:

Jayati Bhattacharya

Geoff Wade

Lucy Liu

Joyce Zaide

Tansen Sen

The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper Series has been established to provide 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 Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies**

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614

TELEPHONE : (+65) 6870 4559

FAX : (+65) 6775 6264

E-MAIL : nsc@iseas.edu.sg

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

FACEBOOK : [facebook.com/nalandasriwijayacentre](https://www.facebook.com/nalandasriwijayacentre)

Tagore Looks East

Sukanta Chaudhuri

On 18 October 1927, Rabindranath Tagore was traveling down a wooded road in Penang at the end of a four-month tour of the region now constituting Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Despite the warmth and reverence with which he was greeted everywhere, he seems to have grown a little weary at this prolonged absence from home, for he talks about being in *parabas*, a sojourn in an alien land. But suddenly, from the trees lining the road, he hears the familiar call of the koel bird. It is a call he has heard all his life: it evokes in particular his childhood visit to a country house at Peneti overlooking the river Ganga.¹ In an instant, the foreign setting is absorbed into a familiar landscape of the mind.

The bird-call excites his sense of kinship with nature; but it has another association as well. The koel's song is a traditional accoutrement of Indian love-poetry since classical times. Like the European nightingale, but more loudly and almost raucously, the male koel sings through the night at the height of spring: his ardour has strong romantic and erotic associations. In this poem too, the message conveyed to the poet through the call is "You are my beloved", *Tumi amar priya*.² Who is the lover who speaks these words?

I will return to this poem, entitled "Chirantan" (The Eternal)³ and included in the 1932 collection *Parishesh (Remainders)*. First, let me provide some background.

On 14 July 1927, Rabindranath sailed from Madras (now Chennai) for Singapore, reaching there on 19 July, with some distinguished traveling companions. One of them, the linguist Sunitikumar Chatterjee, wrote a detailed travelogue, the salient words in whose title are *Dwipamay bharat* ("An India Made of Islands", or "An India Full of Islands"). We also have the poet's own account in *Javajatrir patra (The Letters of a Traveller to Java)*, published in journals (all but one in *Bichitra*) and then collected in the 1929 volume *Jatri (The Traveller)*. He finally took the boat home from Penang on 19 October, reaching Kolkata on 27 October 1927.

¹ *Jibansmriti*, "Bahire jatra": *Rabindra-rachanabali*, first Visva-Bharati edn., Kolkata, 1939-, vol.17, p. 289.

² All translations from Bengali are my own unless otherwise stated.

³ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol. 15, p.205.

Barring a few discordant notes, the tour was a triumphal progress, though a busy and stressful one. Rabindranath lectured extensively, and made many impromptu statements and responses to endless ceremonies of welcome. These records have not been fully compiled. A few speeches, originally published in a special number of *The Indians of Singapore* and reprinted in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (1927), are included in the supplementary volume of the monumental *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*.

The hectic programme explains the amazing paucity of Rabindranath's poetic output during the tour. He composed only 18 poems and songs (17 if we count a two-part poem as a single item) in nearly as many weeks — perhaps the thinnest output of any stage of his productive life.⁴ It is also significant that of these 18 poems, 13 were written on board ship and two on railway trains. Those may have been the only times when he had the leisure and tranquility for poetic composition. By the evidence of Sunitikumar's account and the poet's own letters, he was continually distracted and exhausted by his packed tour schedule. We may be thankful for those 18 pieces.

Moreover, the poems were not published as a group. Though many pieces appeared in journals soon after composition, only three were included in Tagore's next volume of poems, *Mahua* (1929), while the rest had to wait another three years till *Parishesh* (*Remnants*, 1932). In both volumes, they are scattered among innumerable pieces written before and after. The circumstances of publication distract us from viewing the poems as a group. In any case, about half of them show little affinity of theme: they either treat of his travels in a purely formal way, or have no apparent connection at all.

However, at least seven or eight pieces are closely related to his travels: sometimes openly, sometimes in hidden but therefore more significant ways. I wish to look at these poems as a deeper and fuller record of Rabindranath's mental engagement with Southeast Asia than his public statements may afford.

⁴ During his return voyage, he also wrote the first stanza of the poem “Jayi” (“The Victor”) and presented a handwritten copy to the captain of his ship. However, the poem was completed and published only in 1935 in the volume *Bithika*.

Why did Rabindranath undertake the trip? His immediate purpose was to raise funds for Visva-Bharati, his perennially impoverished ashram and educational centre at Santiniketan. He was met with a generous response, especially (as may be expected) from the Indian community of the region. Another purpose motivated the Indian businessmen — chiefly of the Marwari community, like Ghanashyamdas Birla and Narayandas Bijoria — who financed the trip. They were interested in reviving India's links with Southeast Asia through the Hindu and Buddhist religions. Crucially, Rabindranath himself evinces the same interest, though in subtler and more complex form. As Sunitikumar Chatterjee writes: “Rabindranath's chief objective in undertaking [this] tour was to see for himself how India had made *javadwip* ['Java', but here covering the entire East Indies and Straits region] its own, and to understand something of the culture of *javadwip*.”⁵

The directly spiritual aspect of the quest is obviously simpler and more predictable, but it takes an unusual course. On 23 September 1927, Rabindranath wrote a poem on his experience of Borobudur.⁶ In a letter to his daughter Mira incorporated in *Jatri*, he admits frankly that he did not care for the architecture of Borobudur: it seemed to him to have no proportion or integral form, being merely a site for amassing hundreds of disjunct items of Buddhist lore and iconography.⁷ That dedication to the Buddhist ideal inspires the more positive note of the poem “Borobudur”.

The first point that strikes him about Borobudur as a shrine to the Buddhist spirit is its situation: readily blending with the surrounding forests and farmland in a great text inscribed across the structure, images and adornment, that could be read with joy by all people in all ages. The island of Java holds this inscription to its heart, the mountains raise it to the skies, while the farmer sows and harvests rice by the nearby river. Through all the changes and shadow-play of time, it sounds the same mantra: “We have resort to the Buddha”, *Buddher sharan lailam*.

Today, laments the poet, people cannot read this writing. It is viewed uncomprehendingly by hordes of mere tourists. More fundamentally, in today's world:

⁵ Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, *Rabindra-sangame dwipamay bharat o shyam-desh*, 2nd edn., Kolkata: Prakash-Bhaban, Aswin 1371 (Sept. 1964), rpt. Baishakh 1387 (May 1980), p. 282.

⁶ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 277.

⁷ Letter 19: *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.19, p. 520.

The soul, crazed by greed, knows no peace, the heart has withered with pride. The earth quakes beneath the joyless rush of speeding desire, faster and faster in its headlong hunt for prey, across this road and that, reaching nowhere. The flames of all-devouring hunger demand endless accumulation as sacrificial offering.

Salvation can come only by renewed recourse to the Buddha's mantra, reposing eternally amidst that bank of silent stone.

Of course there is a political and economic dimension to this endless cycle of destruction: It is caused by the greed and pride of the Western ethos of acquisition and intolerance, but it is phrased here in terms of drawing on private morality. On 11 October, sitting in the Phya Thai Palace Hotel in Bangkok, the poet writes about “Siam: At First Sight” (“Siam: pratham darshane”)⁸ in a comparable, but more politically and pragmatically oriented celebration of the Buddha's doctrine. He greets Siam as a land impregnated with the living ethos of Buddhism, the “deathless message” (*amritabani*) of self-sacrifice, free ebullient utterance and freedom from the impoverishment of self-interest. Towards the end of this long poem, the poet observes that this doctrine has deserted its original home in India to find a home for its “living image” in the “green and vital heart” of Siam — like a river that arose from ancient India, as from the Himalayas, to flow into Siam: a holy Ganga of the spirit, superior to the actual Ganga confined to the subcontinent.

The really important part of the poem, to my mind, is what comes in between: there, he defines the Buddha's ideal in more detail. Expectedly, he calls it an absorbed spiritual striving (*sadhana*) for ultimate release. Less readily assimilable to the concept of *nirvana* is what follows: the Buddha's utterance

knows no end to its process of creation, but offers ever-new guidance down the path of new ages; its contemplation lights up ever-new fields of knowledge.

The Buddha sits serenely in the lotus posture amidst a “noble temple of life”, built up through the ages by the union of hearts.

⁸ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 279.

In other words, the concept of *nirvana* is being reworked into an active ideal of engagement and progress, towards a union of humanity on a foundation of love and justice. It is not a private ethos leading to a state of disengagement but a public, indeed universal ideal of activity, a source of political unity, peace and human uplift. Withdrawal is replaced by engagement: the spiritual ideal becomes a humane and, in the best sense of the term, political agenda.

Rabindranath has consistently turned to the Buddha's teachings in that hope, most famously manifested in the celebrated song “Himsay unmatta prithvi” (“The world is crazed with violence”)⁹ written earlier that very year, on 5 March 1927. Tellingly, in the collection *Parishesh*, the address to Siam, preceded by the poem “Borobudur”, is followed by a farewell to Siam and then by a short piece “To the Buddha” (“Buddhadeber prati”)¹⁰ in much the same vein. However, it was written four years later — on 24 October 1931 at Darjeeling — to commemorate the setting-up of a Buddhist monastery at Sarnath.

In this context, let us return to the poem “The Eternal” with which I began. After drinking in the song of the koel, the poet says:

Alongside this, there is unceasing violence. The knife of deceit cuts through the ribs to extract the heart of simple faith. Scheming laughter brings about tangled destruction. In hopeless grief, I see a universal human horror set human habitations on fire with the flame of destruction. The world is trapped in a mesh of greed. Who will save blind humanity, that has forgotten its own true self?¹¹

Here — at the end of the poet's trip — the moral message is resoundingly linked to political commentary. For some 30 years at least, Rabindranath had increasingly condemned, in prose and verse, the violent militarist nationalism of the West, whose competitive and destructive greed had spawned the further evil of colonialism. This is a major theme of the first letter in *Javajatrir patra*, written to Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis

⁹ *Gitanitan*, revised 1-vol. edn., Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, Poush 1380/1973-4, p. 169.

¹⁰ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 283.

¹¹ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, pp. 205-6.

(wife of Tagore's associate and sometime secretary, the physicist and statistician Prashantachandra Mahalanobis) on the voyage from Chennai to Singapore.

The trouble begins when petty man begins to purloin the ingredients to create great man. When the infinite power of human desire starts to course down a narrow channel, it breaks its banks and creates a flood of destruction. ... If humanity dies out on earth, it will die out for this reason: it learnt the truth but not the application of truth. It obtained the power of the gods but not the divinity.¹²

He keeps up this lament to the end. Four months before his death, in the middle of the Second World War, his essay “Crisis in Civilization” (“Sabhyatar Samkat”, published almost simultaneously in Bengali and English) laments how:

the demon of barbarity has given up all pretence and has emerged with unconcealed fangs, ready to tear up humanity in an orgy of devastation. ... The spirit of violence which perhaps lay dormant in the psychology of the West, has at last roused itself and desecrates the spirit of Man.¹³

The idiom of utterance is the same across a whole spectrum of writings, and there is no doubt that these lines in “The Eternal” incorporate it.

In this poem there is nothing explicitly mentioned about the Buddha, or indeed about the culture and ethos of Asia. Its message comes from a deeper source, nature itself, but surely also from a beneficent humanity lived in a setting of nature — in his childhood haunts in India as on the wooded road in Penang or, we may add, in the fields and forests he describes as surrounding Borobudur. It is the same message of peace and love: “The peace that was the first of all things, and that will reign at the end of all things”, a peace through which his ineffable and eternal beloved (*asim kaler anirbachaniya*) tells him “I love you.”¹⁴

¹² Letter 1: *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.19, p. 455.

¹³ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vols.1-3 ed. Sisir Kumar Das, vol.4 ed. Nityapriya Ghosh, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994-2007, vol.3, p. 726.

¹⁴ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 206.

On the one hand, it is a spiritual message, emanating from Asia and most specifically (at least in this context) associated with the Buddha. On the other, it is a profoundly political message that, Rabindranath holds, can rescue the world from the madness of greed, violence and subjugation to which Western nationalism and colonialism have reduced it. At the same time, it is a message of a complexly defined love. To this challenging love motif I will now turn.

On 16 July 1927 — that is to say, while still on board ship from Chennai to Singapore — he wrote a poem called “Dinante” (“At Close of Day”).¹⁵ It is cast as a love-poem, expressing a profound, intimate bond between two lovers who have not found visible union. “You did not take me outwardly,” says the speaker to an unspecified beloved, “but what I had to give you inwardly has found its path to your feet.” The two lovers live on opposite shores; but her shadow falls across his heart, her words are set to his tune in a composite song, the evening star shines to him with the look of her eyes. His thoughts flow unwittingly on the tide to her far shore; and in an image we shall meet again, the veena that did not make music in her temple sounds silently in her footsteps.

We need not read this as anything more than a love-poem, in a vein not uncommon in the poet: an apparently thwarted love that finds deeper fulfilment in a hidden exchange of hearts. But the same images, and the same romantic situation, recur in poems written over the next three months which obviously carry further meaning. In retrospect, we may agree to read this poem as the address of a poet from South Asia to the lands of Southeast Asia, the lost links with whom he has set out to restore.

The motif is clearer in another poem, “Ahvan” (“The Call”),¹⁶ written three days later on 19 July even as the poet's ship was docking at Singapore port. Here, it is the remote partner who feels the stronger yearning. It seems to be the male lover: he is cast in the image of both Krishna attracting Radha, and Shiva attracting Parvati. He has prepared a seat for his beloved, playing the flute like Krishna to attract her, and then, like Shiva, sounding a fearsome drum.

¹⁵ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 107.

¹⁶ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p.185.

On the one hand, the beloved's call is infused in the objects and forces of nature: the wind, the dewy grass, the murmuring river. That is the flute-music. On the other hand, there is the awesome drum-beat in a different key:

You call me to where humanity is afflicted and insulted, where light fades in the fearful heart, where the prisoner weeps in his cell. You sound your drum where the earth is sundered and stone foundations shaken, where the dust-smothered flame shakes the soil, where a single instant cuts through the bonds of many ages.

Afflicted humanity is a constant theme in Rabindranath's poetry, but it seems to have been specially prominent during this phase of his sensibility. Certainly, some of his most eloquent expressions of the theme occur around this time, and are incorporated in the same volume, *Parishesh*. The famous poem “Prashna” (“The Question”),¹⁷ though composed in early 1932 — more than four years after the tour of Southeast Asia — is placed in the volume shortly after “Ahvan”, and immediately after the poem “Durdine” (“In Troubled Times”), an impassioned lament for the suffering and injustice of the times. The latter he wrote on 26 October 1927 at the very end of the Southeast Asian voyage, as his returning ship was approaching Kolkata port. Immediately before “Durdine” comes a poem addressed to the political prisoners in Buxa Fort, evoking very similar images to those in “The Call”: imprisoned humanity, seedlings piercing the soil, the destructive dance of Shiva.

In *Parishesh*, Rabindranath is weaving together poems of different dates and occasions in a connected socio-political discourse. In such a context (as indeed by the evidence of its own text), “The Call” ceases to be a mere love-poem and becomes a political statement that we may link to others, implicit and explicit, made during his subsequent tour.

The politics behind the love-narrative are very clear, and joyfully simple, in a poem called “Shribijaylakshmi”¹⁸ composed on 19 August 1927 on the ship bearing him from Singapore to Java. The reference, of course, is to the kingdom of Shriwijaya once extending over much of the East Indies. In this poem, love is an obvious figure or

¹⁷ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 196.

¹⁸ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 275.

metaphor for the historical and cultural ties between India and Southeast Asia, especially the spread of Hinduism.

You and I were united in this place, who knows how many ages ago. Our languages were linked, so were our hearts.

When the conch-shell was blowing in the temple beside the Ganga, your words mingled with the sound. Vishnu and Durga spoke in my ear, “We want to be worshipped on the unknown shore.” The Mandakini stretched out its hand to the eastern ocean and said, “Let us go there.”

The poets of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, Valmiki and Vyasa, also yearn to be carried eastward. (*Javajatrir patra* has much to say about the importance of the *Mahabharata*, in particular, in Indonesian Hindu culture.) So, finally, does “the heart of my homeland”.

Who is speaking here? At one level, of course, the poet in person. At another, however, it is India in her historic role, for the narrative spans centuries. The speaker sets up a loving home with his beloved in those eastern lands: they build a stone house (Borobudur? Or Angkor Wat, though Rabindranath did not visit it?) and share a common seat. But then comes a parting, a time of stormy nights, overlaying dust, obliterated memories: solitary, tired and empty-handed, the lover returns home. For many years, the Bay of Bengal never told the speaker of the past history it knew.

There is a symbolic geography at work here, as in the poem “Siam: At First Sight”. The Mandakini, one of the tributaries of the Ganga, flows towards the Bay of Bengal; but the “eastern ocean” of this poem seems to lie still farther east. Rabindranath conceives of a geography of the mind that integrates the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia. In a letter to his daughter Mira (*Javajatrir patra*, letter 10),¹⁹ he describes how the Raja of “Karem-Asam” (Karang-Asem) in Bali suddenly points to the landscape and begins uttering Sanskrit words for natural features, and the names of Indian rivers: “Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada, Godavari, Kaveri, Saraswati”. The man did not know Sanskrit, nor had he been to India, but the traditions of his own island had preserved the mental landscape of a total culture embracing the whole of South and Southeast Asia.

¹⁹ Letter 10: *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol. 19, p.485; cf. *Rabindra-sangame dwipamay bharat* p. 346.

In the poem “Shribijaylakshmi”, the poet goes on to say how after a thousand years, he has again heard the call from across the ocean, and come on a love-tryst with a dancing heart. He still sees on his beloved's hand the *rakhi* or love-band he fastened long ago; the fragments of their shared language lie strewn along his path. So

I have recognized you today: may you recognize me, and admit as your own this new-found old love.²⁰

The historical allegory is obvious. It needs pointing out only because, in its light, we can more readily accept the historical and political motive underlying a romantic design in other poems where it may not be so obvious.

I have considered some of these poems already, but before I take up the last and most complex, let us look at the only two songs that Rabindranath composed on this tour. The later of these, “Sedin dujane dulechhinu bane” (“That day, we two swung in the woods”), was written near the end of the tour on 17 October on the train between Bangkok and Penang, from where the poet would take ship to Kolkata. It is a love-song in which the lover recalls how he and his beloved rode together on a swing, re-enacting the famous *jhulan* of Radha and Krishna.²¹ Rabindranath worked this poem into his musical drama *Shapmochan (Lifting of the Curse)*. But in the immediate context, we can see this meeting of lovers, too, as the union of India and Southeast Asia — especially as the poet talks about an imminent parting and the subsequent sense of loss and absence (*biraha*), exhorting the beloved never to untie the *rakhi* he has fastened on her wrist.

The earlier song, composed on 2 October on board ship between Java and Singapore, has other concerns. It begins: “Who goes by on a foreign boat, playing a sweet sad flute?” (“Sakarun benu bajaye ke jay bideshi naye”).²² The morning raga, laden with autumn dew, carries the ineffable pain of separation from a distant beloved; it lights up the sojourn in an alien land (*bijanaprabas*) with the picture of a village bride going to fetch

²⁰ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p. 276.

²¹ *Gitabitan*, p. 346.

²² *Gitabitan*, p. 371.

water from the deserted stream. The romantic tune heard in an alien land links up with one of the most familiar poetic, or poetized, settings of Bengal.

A woman on a “foreign boat”, or more precisely a woman from a foreign land, dwelling across the seas or sailing upon them, is a recurrent figure through Rabindranath's work. A celebrated instance occurs in the rather early “Niruddesh Jatra” (“Journey without End”: 11 December 1893),²³ where the woman is a kind of *femme fatale* luring the poet onto her golden boat only, it seems, to desert him finally. Another well-known early occurrence (11 September 1895) is in a song used by Satyajit Ray in his film *Charulata*: “Ami chini go chini tomare / ogo bideshini” (“I know you, woman from a foreign land”).²⁴ Here the canvas is much wider: universal nature, in fact. The poet has seen this woman on — indeed merged in — autumn mornings and spring nights, as also in his heart. He has heard her song waft through the skies. Now at last he has arrived in the novel country where she dwells; he stands as a guest at her door.

Even this is not the full load of nuances borne by this short song. In his memoirs (*Jiban-smriti*),²⁵ Rabindranath states how this figure of the foreign woman, more specifically in the 1895 song, was suggested by a line from the baul songs, product of Bengal's deepest soil, which he loved and popularized: “Who has decked you up as a woman from a foreign land?” In other words, the beloved (no doubt a manifestation of the divine) is here specifically *not* a foreign woman, merely appearing such in a passing manifestation. In Ray's film *Charulata*, Amal addresses the song to his sister-in-law with whom he is in love — an exotic creature in his eyes, yet living in the inner sanctum of the same house as himself. So also in the song written on the boat to Singapore, the tune of the foreign flute raises the most intimate images of home: homeland and alien land, the home and the world, are one.

The figure of the foreign woman illumines the last poem I wish to talk about: a poem also written on board ship between Java and Singapore on 1 October. However, it enshrines the poet's memories of Bali and was, in fact, first entitled “Bali”. The fact that the population of Bali is predominantly Hindu is germane to the poem's political and

²³ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.3, p. 150.

²⁴ *Gitabitan*, p. 306.

²⁵ *Jiban-smriti*, “Gansambandhe prabandha” (“An Essay on Music”): *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.17 p.389.

historical allegory. “For Indians”, wrote Sunitikumar Chatterjee, “Bali is like a place of pilgrimage. We felt at every step that to obtain a partial view of ancient India, it was necessary to pay a visit to Bali.”²⁶ He also talks of the golden-age innocence and simplicity of Balinese society, though threatened by invasion from the outside world of commerce, tourism, showbiz and consumerism.

To outward view, the poem “Bali” contains nothing either political or historical. If one did not know the circumstances of composition, one would be hard put to explain the title. It is a romantic fantasy — almost, one might say, a fairy tale. Its title was soon changed to “Sagarika” (“Woman of the Sea”) and it is now invariably known by that name.²⁷ It was included in the collection *Mahua*, which carried only two other poems written on this trip. All these facts have obscured the connection of “Woman of the Sea” with the poet’s eastward trip. Finally, the poem has been detached from its context simply by virtue of its popularity and poetic excellence. Except for the two songs, all the other pieces written on this trip are little-known items. “Woman of the Sea” however, is widely read and quoted; it is anthologized in the popular collection *Sanchayita*, the first access point for Rabindranath’s poems for most Bengalis. It may rank among his hundred most popular pieces.

The poem starts with a woman sitting by the sea, surely modeled on the actual Balinese women whose unselfconsciously bared breasts bemuse the poet in *Javajatrir patra*.²⁸ As Sunitikumar notes, the very colours of her discarded garments, yellow and blue, are those commonly worn by Balinese women.²⁹ There follows a kind of fairytale with the poet-speaker coming as a prince from afar, disembarking from his voyage to woo this princess, and finally worshipping the gods and spending time together. The gods they worship are Shiva and Parvati; their own union reflects that of those deities, as does the play of light on the waters:

Light and shadow — Shiva and consort!— rocked upon the sea.³⁰

²⁶ *Rabindra-sangame dwipamay bharat*, p. 302.

²⁷ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.15, p.47.

²⁸ Letter 11, to Rathindranath Tagore: *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.19, p. 489.

²⁹ *Rabindra-sangame dwipamay bharat*, p. 317.

³⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri, Oxford Tagore Translations, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 264.

The year was 1927. Rabindranath was long past the phase of romantic fairytales, insofar as he ever indulged in them. This one too does not last — or does it? The prince leaves his beloved and voyages forth again, but suffers shipwreck. He comes back to his beloved, stripped of his pomp and ornaments:

I bear my veena alone:
Look at me: is this a face you've known?³¹

“Woman of the Sea” can be read as a self-contained romantic fantasy. However, a comparison with “Shribijaylakshmi” confirms what we know from external sources: the prince is India, while the princess is Bali or, more generally, “greater” India. The poem allegorizes, at a much more hermetic level than “Shribijaylakshmi”, the ancient union of India with lands farther east in a cultural and religious union. We may compare, in particular, the parallels with the poem “The Call”: the distant lovers (though here, it is the man who travels to his beloved), the flute-music recalling Krishna, the more prominent allusions to Shiva. The worship of Shiva holds out another clue, for Indonesian Hindus, as Rabindranath notes in *Javajatrir patra*, were Shaivites.³² Now, after turmoil and separation, India has come again to woo these eastern lands without bow, arrows or golden crown — military or economic power, we may say — but still bearing the gift of music, no doubt a figure of spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic activity. We may recall the image of the veena in “Close of Day”.

Once pointed out and confirmed with external evidence, all this is readily granted. It becomes plainer still if one considers a stanza in the original version of the poem entitled “Bali”, in the journal *Prabasi* (Poush 1334); a stanza omitted in later volume-form publication under the title “Sagarika”. This stanza was not part of Rabindranath's original draft. Sunitikumar tells us how on reading the draft, he suggested to the poet that he had not taken enough note of the deeper absorption of Indian spirituality by the Balinese. Rabindranath admitted the point, and added the following stanza:

The next day, when the sun arose in fresh colours above the bamboo grove, I
stood silently outside your courtyard and heard you gravely chanting the hymn

³¹ Ibid., p. 265.

³² Letter 16, to Rathindranath Tagore: *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.19, p. 514.

you had imbibed: the scripture of liberation that we had earlier read together, our hands joined, turning our minds to the feet of the great Yogi [i.e., Shiva].³³

But the romantic narrative holds yet more complex resonances. More than thirty-one years earlier, in March 1896, Rabindranath had written a bizarre, compelling poem called “Sindhupare”,³⁴ where the speaker is mysteriously called from sleep on a winter night. He rides with a veiled female figure through an obscure and sinister landscape to a pavilion by the sea, and is there married to her without seeing her face. When at last, at his appeal, she reveals it, he is amazed:

I saw her face, and started: to her feet I dropped.

“Are you here too, lord of my life?” I cried, and wept.³⁵

The *jibandebata* (lord of life) is a recurrent figure all through Rabindranath's poetry: sometimes male, sometimes female, both source and object of love in a way that blends romance and even eroticism with mystic devotion. One common manifestation is as a woman from a foreign land, the transfigured *femme fatale* I described earlier. The figure can be traced back from “Beside the Sea” to “Voyage without End”, though there it is not identified explicitly with the *jibandebata*. In a forward direction, it links up with the princess by the shore in “Woman of the Sea”.

If we accept this interpretation — and it seems to follow naturally from the evidence — the Hindu heritage that Rabindranath discovers in Southeast Asia is not confined to formal religion or cultural practice: it melds with his deepest personal, quasi-mystical plane of being. The voyage to “greater India” becomes an expansion of that being, a private spiritual quest. But not exclusively such, needless to say. We have seen the public and historical dimension of that voyage of discovery. The poet's encounter with the East may be deeply personal, but it is also public, representative: he is the poet of India. He is mediating a total cultural legacy not only in his individual identity, but through his poetic persona. As he put it modestly in a lecture to the Chinese community of Singapore on 24 July 1927:

³³ Rabindra-sangame dwipamay bharaṭ, pp. 361, 627.

³⁴ *Rabindra-rachanabali*, vol.4, p. 114.

³⁵ *Selected Poems*, p.117.

The fact of physical birth in a mere corner of a household in a particular country, gives a man the right to claim the entire country as his own. The poet though born in a corner of Calcutta, has been, by the mere fact, given the right to call the whole of India his own land.³⁶

It is not merely a geographical whole but the Indian spirit as a total entity, as actualized in the specificities of an individual, a locale and an age.

The small body of poems written on this eastern voyage presents, in simple and accessible form, the profound conception of national identity and international integration seen *in extenso* across Rabindranath's vast range of writings. The political aspect of this global encounter is secondary, even marginal: it operates essentially through an engagement of the mind as expressed in social values and practices. It unfolds through history and touches upon the mystical. It embraces universal humanity and — why should we shy from the word? — universal love. It is the reverse of the divisive and destructive nationalism of the West.

We commonly see Gandhi's political agenda as the outwork of a total ethos, a holistic social and spiritual ideal. On a contemplative plane, Rabindranath affords a comparable, indeed intellectually a more complex and articulated ideal, which he saw, with whatever justification, as best enshrined in the Indian historical and spiritual order. Southeast Asia was the arena where that order had been made real in ancient times. His voyage to the region was a journey not only in space but in time, a voyage of the mind. His writings recording that voyage reflect his total engagement with India, the world and the self.

³⁶ *English Writings*, vol.4, p. 562.