

Freedom

Rabindranath Tagore
Translated himself

Published in *Gitanjali*
1910

Freedom from fear is the freedom
I claim for you my motherland!
Freedom from the burden of the ages, bending your head,
breaking your back, blinding your eyes to the beckoning
call of the future;
Freedom from the shackles of slumber wherewith
you fasten yourself in night's stillness,
mistrusting the star that speaks of truth's adventurous paths;
freedom from the anarchy of destiny
whole sails are weakly yielded to the blind uncertain winds,
and the helm to a hand ever rigid and cold as death.
Freedom from the insult of dwelling in a puppet's world,
where movements are started through brainless wires,
repeated through mindless habits,
where figures wait with patience and obedience for the
master of show,
to be stirred into a mimicry of life.

Rabindranath Tagore: Biography

The Nobel Foundation

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Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, which was a new religious sect in nineteenth-century Bengal and which attempted a revival of the ultimate monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the *Upanishads*. He was educated at home; and although at seventeen he was sent to England for formal schooling, he did not finish his studies there. In his mature years, in addition to his many-sided literary activities, he managed the family estates, a project which brought him into close touch with common humanity and increased his interest in social reforms. He also started an experimental school at Shantiniketan where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education. From time to time he participated in the Indian nationalist movement, though in his own non-sentimental and visionary way; and Gandhi, the political father of modern India, was his devoted friend. Tagore was knighted by the ruling British Government in 1915, but within a few years he resigned the honour as a protest against British policies in India.

Tagore had early success as a writer in his native Bengal. With his translations of some of his poems he became rapidly known in the West. In fact, his fame attained a luminous height, taking him across continents on lecture tours and tours of friendship. For the world he became the voice of India's spiritual heritage; and for India, especially for Bengal, he became a great living institution.

Although Tagore wrote successfully in all literary genres, he was first of all a poet. Among his fifty and odd volumes of poetry are *Manasi* (1890) [The Ideal One], *Sonar Tari* (1894) [The Golden Boat], *Gitanjali* (1910) [Song Offerings], *Gitimalya* (1914)

[Wreath of Songs], and *Balaka* (1916) [The Flight of Cranes]. The English renderings of his poetry, which include *The Gardener* (1913), *Fruit-Gathering* (1916), and *The Fugitive* (1921), do not generally correspond to particular volumes in the original Bengali; and in spite of its title, *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* (1912), the most acclaimed of them, contains poems from other works besides its namesake. Tagore's major plays are *Raja* (1910) [*The King of the Dark Chamber*], *Dakghar* (1912) [*The Post Office*], *Achalayatan* (1912) [The Immovable], *Muktadhara* (1922) [The Waterfall], and *Raktakaravi* (1926) [Red Oleanders]. He is the author of several volumes of short stories and a number of novels, among them *Gora* (1910), *Ghare-Baire* (1916) [*The Home and the World*], and *Yogayog* (1929) [Crosscurrents]. Besides these, he wrote musical dramas, dance dramas, essays of all types, travel diaries, and two autobiographies, one in his middle years and the other shortly before his death in 1941. Tagore also left numerous drawings and paintings, and songs for which he wrote the music himself.

This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and first published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel*. It was later edited and republished in *Nobel Lectures*.

Rabindranath Tagore died on August 7, 1941.

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Rabindranath Tagore's Love of Freedom Evident in His Works

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Rabindranath Tagore lived 80 years, from 1861 to 1941, leaving his mark on both centuries. There is a central theme to the Poet Laureate's works and that is his love of freedom.

Rabindranath Tagore lived 80 years, from 1861 to 1941, leaving his mark on both centuries. His oeuvre is massive, spanning over 2000 songs, over 3000 poems, over 2000 paintings and drawings, 90 short stories, dozens of novels and plays and dance-dramas, innumerable essays, creation of his educational experiments in Santiniketan and Sriniketan, engagement in debates on national and international issues, and so on. One may well ask: Is there a central theme in Tagore, or even a small set of themes? This is an important question because if there is, we must not lose sight of it when contemplating the vast range of his outputs. I do believe there is a central theme, and that his love of freedom, and non-conformity, which is evident in his works.

We see he never accepted a strait jacket that curbed his thinking or his creativity. Let us place him in his context. Unlike America, the Indian subcontinent was already an old civilization when he was born. Primarily based on villages and small towns, it had evolved through successive phases of hegemony by rulers belonging to different religions—Hindu, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. While there had been brilliant periods of intellectual achievements and innovations in

governance, it is fair to say that the bulk of the population lived unquestioningly under rules derived from traditions and superstitions.

Rammohan Roy was the first to challenge the inherited orthodoxy at the turn of the 18th century in Bengal. A friend of Rabindranath's grandfather, he championed liberal social and educational reforms. In an attempt to start with a clean slate, he proposed a new monotheistic religious movement called the Brahmo Samaj, which defined Hinduism through its ancient philosophical roots instead of the various traditional practices extant at that time. Debendranath Tagore, the father of Rabindranath, followed Rammohan, and initiated the Adi Brahmo Samaj, which, among other things, discontinued image or idol worship.

Rabindranath grew up with 13 siblings in a freedom-loving and creative atmosphere. He rejected traditional schools, but he was intensely active with his own studies and his own writing. He researched both Eastern and Western thought and examined in detail the discussions on social and religious issues that took place in Bengal and India, and in the West. Let us not forget that the immolation of widows was "abolished" not long before Tagore's birth in 1861, and the first remarriage for a widow was in 1868. And in America, that was the time of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation

The abolition of slavery had to be followed by a century of

struggle before Blacks would effectively acquire equal rights. We note also that women did not get voting rights in America until 1918, and a decade later in England. The reformist religious movement in Bengal had its counterpart on the broader canvas of 19th century Europe, because there too a renaissance was taking place. French philosopher Auguste Comte sought to establish a secular religion which would be closely regulated along Catholic lines. John Stuart Mill also felt the need for a new mega-religion. And Karl Marx famously likened religions to opium for the masses.

At the age of 30, Rabindranath went to manage the family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and saw first-hand the abject poverty and backwardness of the peasantry, including the Muslim peasants who were at the bottom of the heap. He was aware of the divisiveness of the Hindu caste system but now he also saw the hideous and divisive face of communalism. He became acquainted with the Bauls of Bengal—minstrels who wandered through the village. They led a simple and independent life, with a secular philosophy that he liked, and preferred over the grandiose ideas of Comte and his followers. He also adopted their music for some of his musical compositions. He developed a concept called the Jeevan Debota (God of life), which was similar to the moner manush (man in the heart) of the Bauls. These concepts essentially state that each person has an inner sense of divinity which inspires and guides him or her.

A man should develop that sense in his unique way; there is no need for intermediation by others, such as by an established church. There was also a gradual transition away from Brahmoism. This then is the background to his famous poem of 1901, which celebrates Freedom. In it he presents a dream for his country, and indeed for any country. It is comparable in its aspirations to Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, and

Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg. In the decades that followed there were many occasions for Tagore to clarify his concepts further. In a poem in 1910, he suggests that his country should welcome Aryans and non-Aryans, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians.

This of course is the heart of the song he wrote the following year which has since been adopted as the national anthem. His best-known novel, *Gora*, also came out in 1910. It narrates how his protagonist Gora goes from being a fundamentalist Hindu to being a champion of a free country without religious or social divisions. In a poignant moment at the end, Gora requests his maid, an 'untouchable' to bring him a glass of water. This was also the theme of the drama *Chandalika* written in 1927. Tagore had anticipated Gandhi, well before Gandhi returned to India in 1915. Gandhi, and later Nehru, accepted Tagore's reading of Indian history, and his plea for an inclusive society and country.

Tagore and Gandhi frequently differed on particular issues, but these differences were often of a tactical nature. Tagore used his inclusive approach to national identity to examine the conduct of Japan and other countries in the West, in his essays on Nationalism published in 1916. The result was a strong condemnation of what he saw as aggressive imperialism at that time. The reader will no doubt recognize that all the issues which engaged Tagore are still with us, despite the remarkable progress seen in India, and the world since he died 70 years ago.

That is why his messages are still relevant, and their importance undiminished.

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