Significance of the environment in the songs of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract:

Born in a family of fourteen siblings Rabindranath Tagore spent a lot of time alone though not lonely. From his childhood he had been a lover of nature. The large expanse of meadows in Santiniketan, the wide stretches of the river Padma at Shelidah skirted by the murmuring rows of coconut palms made him feel that he was part of a universal oneness. Tagore’s philosophy behind his school in Santiniketan was to enable his students to relate to the environment. With an unorthodox approach to education he encouraged them to walk barefooted to feel the dust under their feet and experience the touch and feel of trees which they could climb. Rabindranath’s model was the forest dwellings of ancient times – the tapoban – which Kalidasa had immortalised in his epic works. Most of Tagore’s Gitanjali\textsuperscript{1} songs were composed in Santiniketan and spoke of a deep spiritual presence in nature’s harmony amidst the diverse moods of the seasons. To celebrate the environment Tagore organised several festivals in Santiniketan and composed songs especially for them such as Basant Utsav (for spring), Barsha Mangal (for the monsoons), Sharad Utsav (for autumn) and Ritu Ranga (for all the seasons). He also introduced the colourful festival of tree planting (Briksa ropan) from a Bali dance tradition.\textsuperscript{2} Harvest was celebrated with Halakarshan when agricultural fields were symbolically ploughed. In the school song ‘Santiniketan’, students sang of their communion with nature, nurtured by groves and protected by an embracing sky.

\textsuperscript{1} Rabindranath Tagore, \textit{Gitanjali, (Song Offerings)} A collection of prose translations made by the author from the original Bengali, with an introduction by W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan & Co London, 1961). It was first published in 1911 – which won Tagore the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

\textsuperscript{2} Reba Som, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song} (U.K.: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 100 – 101.
**Keywords:** Environment, Songs, Rabindranath Tagore.

Born in a family of fourteen siblings Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) spent a lot of time alone though not lonely. Raised in an atmosphere where freedom of ideas was cherished by his artistic, musical and literary brothers and sisters, Rabindranath could nurture unconventional thoughts and give free rein to his creative imagination. He recalled as a child how the row of coconut trees by the garden wall with their branches beckoning the rising sun on the horizon gave him a sense of companionship as if he lived in their world. As an eleven year old, Rabindranath accompanied his family to a garden home in Peneti to escape the outbreak of plague in the city of Calcutta. He felt like a caged bird set free, witnessing for the first time the glorious sunsets and sunrises on the water front. He was to write in his memoirs, how each day-break came to him as a gilt edged envelope, inviting him to unknown delights.

Over the years it was a mature Rabindranath who delved into the meaning of these simple delights of childhood and came to a spiritual understanding of the environment. The turning point in Tagore's life came in 1890 when he was asked by his father Debendranath Tagore to look after their ancestral estates in east Bengal and locate himself in Shelidah. Tagore was at a loose end at the time. His father's ambition to train him to be a barrister by sending him to London had been unsuccessful. His closeness to Kadambari Devi, the wife of his elder brother Jyotirindranath, who had been a childhood playmate to Rabindranath and later as an adolescent, an admirer of him and his literary qualities, made the patriarch uncomfortable. Rabindranath was married off to ten year old Bhabatarini (later renamed Mrinalini) in 1883. Six months later Kadambari committed suicide. This was a blow from which the Poet never fully recovered.

In Shelidah, on the banks of the majestic river Padma, Tagore found the time to heal his soul. In the decade that he spent in and around Shelidah, Tagore was able to establish a communion with nature. The environment grew on him while the rural society fascinated him. In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in Stockholm in 1921 Tagore recalled how his stay at Shelidah had made him aware of the deep spiritual energy in nature. He said:

> when I was about 25 years I used to live in utmost seclusion in the solitude of an obscure Bengal village by the river Ganges in a boat-house. The wild ducks which came during the time of autumn from the Himalayan lakes were my only living companions, and in that solitude I seem to have drunk in the open space like wine overflowing with sunshine, and the murmur of the river used to speak to me and tell me the secrets of nature.

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3 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Creative Unity’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Two*, ed. by Sisir K. Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 497

4 Rabindranath Tagore, *My Reminiscences*. Transl. Surendranath Tagore (Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2003), p. 53.

5 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three*, ed. by Sisir K. Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 961.
Tagore came to recognise that he was part of a universal oneness. Recalling a certain day in Shahjadpur in his riverine estate Tagore wrote that his view from the window captured on a wide canvas, the dark monsoon sky, the anchored boats bobbing up and down with the tide, the loud cheer of young boys playing on the water front. He felt intuitively that he was an intrinsic part of this experience. He sensed a feeling of freedom. Although alone he was not lonely for he could sense the presence of an eternal companion that lay within him and conversed with him incessantly. This was his realisation of a *jeevan devata*, the god that dwelt within him, on which Tagore was to elaborate later in 1930 in his Hibbert lectures at Oxford University on the Religion of Man. As he absorbed the beauty of his environment in Shelidah, Tagore felt for the first time the pulse of a rural society. To the Bengali bhadralok city dwellers, the villager had long been dismissed as illiterate, unrefined and therefore chhotolok (lower class). Tagore discovered a fine rhythm in village life with simple human values on which he based many of his famous short stories. He was also amazed to discover the community of itinerant rural singers, the bauls, whose message of *moner manush* or man of the mind was akin to his own concept of *jeevan devata*. He spent long hours conversing with bauls, discussing their philosophy and hearing their music. Many of Tagore's songs bear the deep influence of baul music and philosophy and have come to be known as Rabindra-baul. Above all, Tagore introduced folk music into the musical concerts of the urban elite in the city for the first time.

The closeness with the environment and the communion with nature that Tagore experienced in his decade long stay in Shelidah, led to his resolve to open a school in rural settings along the lines of the old forest ashrams or hermitages celebrated by Kalidasa. True education he felt could only come with the realisation that there was a creative unity that linked man with the environment and nature. The hermitage in Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* overshadowed the King's palace in creating the ideal environment for nurturing the soul. Such forest ashrams were run by great teachers devoid of book learning. They were neither schools nor monasteries in the modern sense of the word. ‘Students were brought up not in the academic atmosphere of scholarship or in the maimed life of monastic seclusion but in the atmosphere of living aspiration.’

This was the ideal behind Tagore’s ashrama school in Santiniketan and later his Visva Bharati University. His own unsuccessful experience with formal education had led him to abandon school after class five. He had found the structured school routine soul killing for:

> all of a sudden I found my world vanishing from around me, giving place to wooden benches and straight walls staring at me with the blank stare of the blind.

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6 Santidev Ghosh, ‘Rabindranath O Banglar Baul’, in *Rabindrasangeet Bichitra* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1993), p. 95.
7 Postmaster, Samapti, Chhuti etc
8 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Personality’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Two*, ed. by Sisir K. Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 395.
9 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Personality’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Two*, p. 390.
He was to realise that ‘the highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence.’ All of Tagore’s wisdom and learning was self-realised. He now sought to create an atmosphere where he could take on the role of an unconventional teacher allowing students freedom to explore their environment and discover themselves. They could walk bare-feet to feel the dust under their soles and climb trees to get the feel of the bark and foliage. Santiniketan seemed to Tagore the ideal environment for students to imbibe the spirit of their surroundings. At a distance of a hundred miles from Calcutta Santiniketan was a spot selected by his father Maharshi Debendranath several years ago. It was devoid of vegetation and open all round to the edge of the horizon. In 1901 Tagore’s days in Shelidah came to an end when he relinquished charge of the Tagore estates and came with his family, which had now expanded to five children, to stay at Santiniketan.

Rabindranath created his school around the only green life he found there – a cluster of tall saal trees and a shady mango grove. It was in the open space all around that could best be appreciated the dramatic change of seasons. Tagore observed that the sense of space, deeply valued by Japanese and Chinese painters, brought with it not a feeling of emptiness but of freedom. To open a school in such pristine settings was a gamble that Tagore took. As he explained to his Santiniketan students years later, it had been ‘a great sacrifice’ to leave the beautiful seclusion of his houseboat on the Padma where he could immerse himself with his ‘special gift of music and poetry’ and choose instead to take on the great odds of running a school in arid settings that ‘sapped my life and energy’. However, what kept him going was his conviction that his ashram-school would throw open its doors to all and become ‘the guest-house of India, a centre of culture and maitri.’ Tagore invited renowned artists and scholars from the city to live in residence and inspire his students. He himself held classes under the big shady trees teaching them what he could, playing with them, reciting the ancient epics and singing his songs. As he recalled:

I trusted the spirit of freedom in the atmosphere. I had to fight the teachers who assisted me, who had been brought up in a different environment to that of mine who had no faith in freedom, who believed that it was impertinence for the boys to be boys.

In the world of the young Rabindranath rediscovered his youth. His creativity flourished and in his forties he found himself still growing, although life dealt him serious blows as he lost his wife and two of his children in quick succession. Tagore explained:

the reason is this, that I offer freedom, and therefore that I get freedom, the freedom

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10 Ibid.
11 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘To the Child’ lecture June 17, 1924, in The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Volume Four, ed. by Nityapriya Ghosh (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2011), p. 524.
12 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘To the students of Santiniketan’, August 4, 1938, in The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Volume Four, ed. by Nityapriya Ghosh (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2011), p. 604.
13 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘My School’, June 12, 1924, in The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Volume Four, ed. by Nityapriya Ghosh (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2011), p. 521
which has the power to stimulate the creative mind and life.\textsuperscript{14}

Santiniketan proved to be the most productive environment for Tagore’s songs. The majority of his \textit{Gitanjali} songs were written here, many of which he translated into English later in Shelidah, while recuperating from an illness and which went on to win him the Nobel Prize in 1913. The wide horizons and extreme weather conditions in Santiniketan gave Tagore a greater feel for nature. He would keep his windows wide open to the glare of the midday sun in the extreme heat of summer and to gusts of rain bearing winds during the monsoons. Each morning he woke up before dawn so that the first rays of the sun would stream in through the open windows onto his face.\textsuperscript{15} His affinity with nature and sense of connect with life primordial found expression in some of the best nature songs that he wrote now.

Tagore’s songs on nature or \textit{prakriti} numbering 283 form a distinct genre in his musical oeuvre. In these songs Tagore sought to capture the self contained balance that he discovered in nature. The varying moods of the seasons resounded with different rhythms and reflected the changing patterns in foliage and flower. But nature’s self-sufficiency created a unity in this diversity. As Tagore pointed out, the colours of a rainbow were like the hues of love – there was place for each hue without encroachment by another. Like the notes of music, they collectively created harmony. The seasons too, rich in their different manifestations, blended into each other, forming one composite whole. Tagore interacted with each season as a long lost friend, welcoming and bidding farewell in due course to each. Tagore’s appreciation was not limited to the external beauty of colour, fragrance and form. In his understanding of nature and the environment Tagore sought to discover an underlying divine bliss – \textit{anandaroop}. One had to look beyond the dust or the water of the earth and regard them as manifestations of a divine presence, recognising them as spiritual offerings and inspiration for an advanced consciousness. Rabindranath felt truly blessed to find himself in the midst of life that surged around the skies, the sun, stars and the earth. One of the finest expressions of this awareness of being connected with cosmic creation is in his song \textit{Akash bhaura shurjo tara}:\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{quote}
The sun and star-studded skies – a world throbbing with life
In the midst of which have I found my place
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!
The turbulence of eternal time – the ebb and flow that rocks the world
Have sent a tidal surge coursing through my blood stream
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!
On blades of grass have my feet stepped along the forest path
My mind has started at the heady fragrance of flowers
The gifts of your joy are scattered all around
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 526.
\textsuperscript{15} Reba Som, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{16} Translation mine. Reba Som, \textit{Rabindranath Tagore, The Singer and His Song}, pp. 247 – 248.
I have poured out my life unto the bosom of the earth
I have searched for the unknown in the midst of the known
In wonder thus, does my Song arise!

In arid inland Santiniketan, with its red dusty roads and distant horizons, Tagore sensed acutely the dramatic changes that came between summer and winter. Summer came with its sizzling heat and Tagore captured the mood of a long summer day thus in his song *prakbar tapan taapey*:\(^{17}\)

In the intense heat of the sun, the earth shivers in deep thirst, the winds rage
I come to a temple and cry at the end of a long journey ‘open, open, open the doors

*Varsha* or the rains were perhaps the most favourite season of the Poet. It drew a veil of rain over the mind and created a canopy of clouds so that the mind could not wander. The rhythm of thunderous rain made the mind withdraw inwards in contemplation, creating a mood of solemnity, not frivolity. The monsoons were celebrated in Santiniketan with *varsha mangal*, a festival of dance and songs composed specially in celebration of the rains. Welcoming the rains as *shyamal sundar*, or the verdant beauty,\(^{18}\) the Poet called out for its ‘cooling, thirst-quenching nectar of companionship.’ The mood was of a lovers’ reunion after days of desolation and pain celebrated through the rhythm of vigorous dance to the accompaniment of the sound of the rains. In another song\(^{19}\) Tagore recalled Kalidasa’s cloud messenger *meghduta* emerging after ages and hovering over the banks of the river Reba, making its way to the lover as she waited with bated breath. Tagore’s rich imagery wove a brilliant tapestry around nature’s wondrous moods in his songs, which matched in music and rhythm the nuances of the lyrics. The rejuvenating impact of the rains on a parched countryside is captured in his song *Abar eshechhe ashad* where he spoke of the fragrance of the rains carried by the breeze which made his old heart dance with joy as he looked skywards at the darkening clouds. Wishing goodbye to the rains as he would a dear friend, Tagore’s song was heart wrenching. *O verdant shade surely you don’t need to depart after pouring out your last showers he wrote.*\(^{20}\) But despair soon gave way to hope as he concluded in the song:

the new sun will yet rise in laughter
the clouds will play a golden flute
darkness and light will combine creating the mood of union.

*Sharad* was the season of golden sunshine, blue skies, swaying bulrushes in fields, heaps of *harsingher* on green dewy patches and white floating clouds. He addressed an autumn day thus:

I know not your name, I know only your tune/ you are the message of light,

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17 Translation mine. Ibid, p. 97.
18 *Esho shyamal shundor*, Translation mine (unpublished).
19 *Bohu juger opar bote ashad elo*.
20 *Shyamal chhaya nayi ba gele*, Translation mine (unpublished).
heralding sharad's dawn.  

This beautiful and evocative description captures the essence of the very short season of sharad, celebrated by students in Santiniketan as *sharadotsav*. The season of Hemant came with star spangled skies and dewy nights. With the imagery of diwali or the festival of lights in mind, Tagore composed his celebrated song *heemero ratey oyi gogoney*. It was a season of empty flower gardens where singing birds had become silent and bulrushes poured their foliage into the river. But carrying the message of hope and revival, the myriad stars in the night sky seemed to inspire earth’s children to light their own lamps of *deepalika*, conquering despondency and darkness with life sustaining illumination. Winter brought with it golden sunshine and the promise of a rich harvest. Tagore wrote:

> The season of Paush hails you, come hither, come hither/ Her platter is filled with ripe harvest, come let us celebrate.

With a catchy baul tune this song lends itself well to a group folk song and was introduced by Tagore as an item in his play *Rakta Karabi* (*Red Oleanders*).

To complete the cycle of seasons in the collection of Tagore’s nature songs was *ritu-rajbasant* or spring, the king of seasons. Basant, to Tagore, was like a free wandering spirit which released the mind from its deep recesses, making it float on a balmy breeze, intoxicated by a heady floral fragrance and lulled to sleep in moonshine. Unlike the solemn *Varsha*, it was flirtatious and frivolous. But it also came as the harbinger of hope and inspiration as an affirmation of life after the long winter. The magic of spring was beautifully captured by Tagore in a song thus:

> A light touch do I feel, a few words do I hear
> And I conjure in my mind spring’s full moon
> The intoxicating red of the ‘palash’
> Mixed with a dash of champa’s heady fragrance
> I weave with music into a net of colour and fervour

Spring was celebrated in Santiniketan with abandon on the day of the festival of colours – *boli*. The day began with girl students streaming onto the streets singing an invocation to householders to open their doors for spring had descended on land, on waters and in the forests. The procession gradually swelled with residents joining in, and wound its way through the alleyways towards the mango grove which sported a festive air with fluttering coloured stoles tied to branches. On a central stage, hand painted with alpona, were assembled girls wearing mustard coloured saris symbolising spring. The Poet would usually begin the celebrations with his recitations which would be followed by his

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21 *Tomar nam jani ne shur jani*, Translation mine. Reba Som, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song*, p. 98.
22 *Paush toder dak diyeche*, Translation mine. Ibid.
23 *Ektuku chhoya lage*, Translation mine. Ibid, p. 97.
24 *O re gribo bashi khol daar khol legechhe dol*, Translation mine. Ibid., p. 98.
celebrated songs of spring such as:

The southern gates have opened – come, come, come my spring or Today we have to blend into each other’s colours.\textsuperscript{25}

The play of colours would follow using only dry red powder and sandalwood and the festival of Basantotsav would end on the full moon night with a feast of song and dance celebrating the magic of spring.

Despite the apparent impermanence of the seasons, Tagore found in nature a continuous and ever-present spiritual presence, which was held in balance and harmony. In his communion with nature, Tagore felt blessed in the divine revelation that made its presence felt in the dust, the green grass, the animate beings and the celestial bodies in the skies. Tagore’s magnificent song composition Nataraj on the theme of the mutability of human existence amidst the permanence of nature was performed during the Holi celebrations in Santiniketan in 1927. Nataraj or Shiva, in his cosmic dance or tandava created the external beauty of the universe with the strike of one foot, while with the stamp of the other he caused the emotional landscape of the individual to be manifested. Since the concept of the eternal passage of time or shomoye was integral to Shiva (Nataraj) as also the seasons, Tagore later restructured his composition Nataraj and called it Riturangashala. Incorporating classical dance movements with new songs and involving men and women students in the dance composition, Tagore’s path breaking production was staged on multiple occasions in various places.

Tagore’s anushthanik or occasion-specific songs in his song anthology Gitabitan were meant to create a mood appropriate for a whole range of events that marked quotidian life. Following his visit to Bali, the poet introduced Bali dancing in a colourful festival in 1928 to commemorate tree planning or briksharopan as part of an environmental awareness campaign. Brightly dressed young girls sang songs and blew on conch shells while accompanying tree saplings in procession. In the same year he introduced another festival – Halakarshan – to celebrate agricultural fields being ploughed and harvests being reaped, which would help bring together the human community. Many Santhal tribals who lived around the village were invited to be part of these celebrations. At Sriniketan, adjacent to Santiniketan, where Tagore had set up a centre for agricultural studies, a festival celebrating handicraft was annually held on ‘Viswakarma Puja,’ a religious festival dedicated to the patron deity of artisans and workers, who blessed their professional implements and tools and brought good luck to their services. Many songs celebrating the dignity of labour were sung accompanied by group dances such as ‘We lend our hands to all work’\textsuperscript{26} or an invocation to the instruments of handicraft.\textsuperscript{27}

Tagore’s continued attempt to instill in his students a respect for the environment grew with his increasing disillusionment during foreign travels when he observed with alarm how:

\textsuperscript{25} Aji dokhino duwar khola; Aj shobar raunge raung melate hobe, Translation mine. Ibid, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{26} Shaub kaje hath lagayi mora, Translation mine. Ibid, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{27} Namo jantro, namo jantro, namo jantro, Translation mine. Ibid.
fashionable beauty-seekers trample down the beauty of the lake scenery with the proud march of gaudy comfort and convenience. They choke the great voice of space with brick and mortar, with din of advertisements and throng of things.\textsuperscript{28}

Tagore’s words of caution sound uncannily prophetic today as he predicted:

before long, the sky over the human world, the East and West, will be smudged with factory smoke and the green of the living nature will be licked grey by the demon of the utilitarian spirit.\textsuperscript{29}

In their school anthem \textit{Amader Santiniketan}, students sang of their communion with nature, nurtured by groves and protected by an embracing sky. Tagore’s sustained efforts to create an oasis of inspiration in arid Santiniketan by immersing young minds in creative freedom is best expressed in his song\textsuperscript{30} composed on the occasion of \textit{Briksharopan}:

Vanquish the desert flying high the banner of victory, o committed heart!  
Bring glory to the dust engaging it with compassion, o benevolent heart!  
When will the song of the mute earth resound in your own Song  
Filling with beauty, the flower, fruit and leaf?  
O traveler, take a seat in the shade of the verdant green  
Be a companion to the restless breeze coursing the skies  
May the dawn raise in the tree branches the intimation of Music  
May the evening descend with its language of deep repose  
Giving voice to the latent music of the night

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\textit{The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Three}, ed. by Sisir K. Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996).

\begin{itemize}
\item[28] Rabindranath Tagore, ‘To the Child’ lecture June 17, 1924, in \textit{The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Volume Four}, ed. by Nityapriya Ghosh (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2011), p. 525.
\item[29] Ibid.
\item[30] \textit{Morubijoyer ketan}, Translation mine (unpublished).
\item[31] The festival of tree-plantation.
\end{itemize}
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Reba Som studied history at Presidency College, Kolkata, standing first class first both in BA and MA examinations, and obtained a PhD from Calcutta University. She was the recipient of the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship in 2000–02. She has served as the regional director of the Rabindranath Tagore Centre, ICCR, Kolkata, from 2008 to 2013. Her publications include Differences within Consensus: The Left-Right Divide in the Congress (Orient Longman, 1995), Subhas Chandra Bose and the Resolution of the Women’s Question (CWDS, 2002), Gandhi, Bose, Nehru and the Making of the Modern Indian Mind (Penguin 2004), Rabindranath Tagore: The Singer and His Song (Penguin, 2009) and Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda (Penguin Random House, 2017). She is also a trained singer of Rabindrasangeet and Nazrul Geeti; her compact disc albums, Selected Songs of Rabindranath Tagore (Saregama, 2005) and Love Songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam (Times Music, 2016) also include her English translations of the lyrics.