

TAGORE WHOM I NEVER MET

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Introduction

In my book-shelf, there is a collection of the Bengali works - in prose and verse - by Rabindranath Thakur, complete in eighteen volumes, brought out on the 125th anniversary of the author's birth. Popular as Robi Thakur, the author lived during the last thirty-nine years of the 19th century and the first forty-one years of the 20th. At the age of fifty, Thakur is said to have translated a selection of his poems into English and published them under the signature of Rabindranath Tagore but, in spite of receiving a coveted award like the Nobel Prize in 1913, he was more of a traitor than a translator of his own poetry : quite indifferent to the aesthetic specificity of his prosody intimately married to the semantic excellence of the compositions, he wanted to avoid hurting the puritan taste of the English-reading public with their initial ornamented presentation. Fortunately the number of his works thus "translated" represents rather a small portion of the totality of his publications in Bengali.

Encouraged by the audacity of earnest translators who, down the decades, have successfully tried their art and science in bringing out Thakur's original Bengali writings – often approved by the author - in other languages of India and of the world, since long I had been planning to test my merits in this craft. Author of an anthology of Bengali poetry in my French translation (in addition to some other similar exploits), I have also tried my hand in translating mostly French authors – René Char, Albert Camus, St-John Perse – into Bengali. The latter, for instance, earned me a long letter of congratulation from the Franco-Bengali essayist Father Pierre Fallon, attached to the University of Calcutta.

The chronological order of the poems helps the reader to appraise the blossoming of the poetic genius of Thakur. During his stay on the house-boat at Shilaidah in the 1890s, in close contact with the rural life of his subjects, Thakur was in a mood to produce an interesting crop of short stories, along with the narrative groups of poems included in *Katha* ("Tales") and *Kahini* ("Legends") : though most of them are well known to the Bengali readers, I have not selected them for the time being. Thakur did not name some of his short poems such as in *Kanika* ("Morsels"), even though each of them be a complete poem; I have taken the liberty of naming them. For obvious reasons, I have to sacrifice the rhymes of the Bengali origin. He

was automatically in favour of rhymes, though for the sake of experiment, he has had phases of unrhymed free verses.

Before I present a selection of Rabindranath's Bengali poems in my translation, I feel tempted to remind the reader, in the Preamble - which is the opening chapter of this book -, how hovering or penetrating a poet's presence can be in the life-span of someone of my generation, born in the mid-1930s, living far from Kolkata (from 1948 to 1966, at Puducherry; then onward, in Paris).

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Paris

I
PREAMBLE

In 1970, during a conversation in Paris with Jules Romain (1885-1972), eminent member of the French Academy, I was surprised to learn that he had known even Victor Hugo (1802-1885). Fathoming the depth of my diffident curiosity, his smiling eyes reminded me of the roguish Doctor Knock, the most famous and hilarious of his characters. In a mock apology, he added a crisp note of explanation : "My mother had joined Victor Hugo's funeral procession and, of course, I was inside her womb."

I had a slightly greater chance of better knowing Rabindranath Thakur, better known to the west as Tagore.

In my book-shelf, there is a collection of the Bengali works - in prose and verse - by Rabindranath Thakur, complete in seventeen volumes, brought out twenty-five years ago, on the 125th anniversary of the author's birth. Popular as Robi Thakur, he lived during the last thirty-nine years of the 19th century and the first forty-one years of the 20th. At the age of fifty, Thakur is said to have translated a selection of his poems into English and published them under the signature of Rabindranath Tagore; but, in spite of his receiving a coveted award like the Nobel Prize in 1913, I have a very personal opinion of his translation, having been myself a translator - Bengali↔ French↔ English - and having always considered translation to be as much a science as a piece of art. Although an over-all cautious person, Tagore seems to have been, more of a traitor than a faithful translator of his own poetry : quite indifferent to the unique aesthetic specificity of his prosody - which was so intimately married to the semantic excellence of his compositions -, probably he wanted to avoid hurting the puritan English-reading public with the initial ornamented presentation of his poems. He was happy to have culled strictly their striking philosophical and devotional substance for a mystic silhouette. Fortunately the number of Tagore's poetic works thus "translated" represented rather a small portion of his total publications in Bengali.

A couple of years before World War I, inside a peaceful cottage in the South Kensington area of London, an adventurous young Frenchman - future diplomat - had listened to Tagore, reading out his poems for the first time in front of a distinguished European audience. His name was Alexis Saint-Léger (1887-1975), to be known all over the world as the poet Saint-John Perse, Nobel Laureate in 1960. Carried off by the immense beauty of Tagore's presence, Alexis seemed to detect immediately in this poetry a new harmony welling from the Cosmic

Soul, whereas Europe had been preparing to tackle an apocalyptic all-devouring forest fire. Alexis rushed a letter to his friend André Gide (1869-1951), the well known French author, requesting him to translate Tagore who wanted to be introduced to the lovers of poetry in France. Although sharing the enthusiasm of Alexis, Gide took time to assimilate this novel literary genre. And, while retranslating *Gitanjali* into French, the artistic intuition of André Gide - perhaps thanks to the presence of a Bengali knowing person by his side - had at times caught something of the musical qualities of the original lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore.

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I was born in the mid-thirties of last century. In that very year, my father got constructed our house at Ballygunj Place, which was then considered to be a suburb of Kolkata : in the evening, jackals came out with their serenade. According to late Umaprasad Mookerjee, when, slightly earlier, his father Sir Ashutosh had decided to settle in Bhowanipore, people found it to be far from the City. At the east of our block of three isolated houses there was a field leading to Dihi Serampore Lane : under an imposing banyan tree, the Pond of Lachmi's Mother was a paradise for local washermen : Lachmi's Mother was a poor and aged lady from Bihar, who lived in a hut and sold the milk of her goats for the children of the area. Behind our house, at the north, too, there was a field with quite a few *kadamba*¹, palm and date trees : it was a treat, every winter, to have from the keepers a pitcher or two of freshly collected date sap secreted overnight. In front of the house, at the end of another large field thrived families of Punjabi milkmen with a score of buffaloes; this led southwest-ward to the junction of Swinhoe Street and Ballygunj Place where lived an old man called Arabindanath Tagore, a descendant of the Poet's sister Kadambini; he was married to a niece of the painter Abanindranath's : with his look inadvertently cultivated to resemble Rabindranath, this neighbour enlivened by his presence the cultural functions of the locality. In those years, several well-known personalities from different walks of life honoured Ballygunj Place: Prabodh Bagchi, Dr Ahmed, Khagendra Mitra, Sagarmay Ghose, Kumarnath Bagchi, Subodh Ghose, Upendra Ganguli, out of a long list. Santideb Ghose, specialist of Tagore songs, was to inaugurate here Dakshini and, much later, Uday Shankar, too, will choose to live here.

The world-poet Rabindranath Tagore of Jorasanko, resident of Shantiniketan, and myself - the Bengali specimen of Master Thomas-Richard-Harold - at Ballygunj Place, we shared the same

¹ *Anthocephalus cadamba* Miq. Its fragrance fills especially the Monsoon nights. Its leaves and bark are widely used in traditional medicine

sky of Bengal during his last five long years : when he departed this life, I was just learning the alphabet of my mother tongue, Bengali, the language of Tagore, enriched and refashioned by the self-same Tagore. I remember Didi - my elder cousin, Geeta -, who was earnestly preparing her matriculation while listening to the cynical bulletin of Tagore's health on the radio. As soon as the news of Tagore's death reached her ears, she exclaimed "Rabi Thakur is no more !" and fainted. That left a sable mark upon my green though prematured mind, wondering who that "Rabi Thakur" was, whose passing had cast such a shadow of grief not only upon our loving Didi, but also on every face known to me. I had a very strong desire to know him. Here I am writing about that Tagore whom I never met. That Tagore who came again and again, mysteriously, at every turn of my life, for reasons quite unknown and, simultaneously, obvious. That very Tagore who influenced and inspired several generations of Indians, bleaching their hearts and their environment - polluted by centuries of slavery - with Tagore's persistent and persuasive cult of Beauty.

All that my anxious inquiries could elicit was that Tagore was a very great poet. It was 22 shravan² of the Bengali year 1348, the fateful Summer-end of 1941. Soon after, V 2 airplanes started splitting our sky and we had to quit Kolkata for the safe refuge in Mihijam on the borderline of Bihar. Early May - on 25 baishâkh - I was informed about the birth anniversary of Rabi Thakur : I noticed that on every face familiar to me there was an unwonted glow of reverence. In the evening, my father assembled all the family members and friends before the picture of a wonderfully bearded man, bedecked with bunches of tuberose. I knew, that was the portrait of Rabindranath Tagore. Later, when I grew up, I learnt that it was a work by a Bulgarian painter called Boris Georgiev (1888-1962). A couple of years after Georgiev's death, in 1967, I met - at Via Salaria in Rome - Marta Vukotic, a distinguished Italian lady, musician and student of Respighi (1879-1936), mother of the promising actress Milena Vukotic. Marta's ambition was to conduct an orchestra, which was as yet reserved to men only. Her husband, a Yugoslav diplomat, along with his friends - Respighi the composer and Georgiev the painter -, had visited Tagore several times; Respighi had set to music quite a number of Tagore's songs from the French edition of *Gitanjali*. Generous Marta offered me a copy of the original portrait of Tagore painted by Boris Georgiev.

² The fourth month on Bengali calendar, beginning in the middle of July when, according to Indian astrology, the Moon (a male god) enters the house of his twenty-second wife, the constellation Shravana. The first month, baishakha (or vaishakha < constellation Vishakha) begins in the middle of April

Let us return to that celebration of Tagore's birthday at Mihijam. I remember the respectable homoeopath Pareshnath Banerjee (nephew of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar) chanting something from Tagore; local people, mostly of tribal origin, looked upon the doctor as a saint. Phani Chatterjee, the husband of the doctor's niece, sang a solemn composition of Tagore in the raga *yaman*. Boro-mama - my maternal uncle Prabodh Chatterjee, a double gold-medalist in physics -, had been carrying on his weightlifting exercises in the courtyard; when his turn came, called by my father, he shot up on the dais, short-clad, and recited Tagore's famous poem on the waking of the cascade. This man was very popular among the adolescent members of the family : at the rear end of the big garden, he had improvised a kiln to demonstrate how heat transforms matter. In the midst of famine and various restrictions, Boro-mama utilised the back of the city transport tickets to note with a fine pen useful data, including lessons of Arabic and French, languages that he had been learning out of professional curiosity (and teaching me). That evening, after his recitation, having sung Tagore's invocation to "the touchstone of fire" (*aguner parash-mani*), my mother took me by the hand and stood me on the dais, whispering to me to recite "The Palm Tree". The applause from the assembly made me realise that it was a glorious thing to be able to recite or sing Tagore's pieces. It ended up with a chorus, a Tagore song welcoming the month of baishakh.

Year after year, 25 baishakh has returned since. Year after year, knowingly or unknowingly, I have been acquainted with more and more of Tagore's songs, poems, short stories, novels and dramas, that had flowed incessantly out of his prolific pen. Sketches and drawings and paintings by him haunted me at times in my dreams. I was hardly nine when, to celebrate Tagore's birthday, the recreation club of Ballygunj Place organised a contest of recitation. I chose the narrative poem beginning with "While Aurangzeb was busy shattering India into shreds", coached by my elder cousin Dilip Raychaudhuri; among other candidates, there was Manasij, son of Hemanta Sarkar, a close friend of Netaji's, with the poignant lyric beginning with "Your conch is lying on dust, it is too much for me to bear !" The president of the jury, Meghendralal Ray, nephew of Dvijendralal, stood up to congratulate me as the winner. Here I sensed how inexhaustible is the treasury of Tagore's creation. During one of the regular visits of our "Didimoni from Bhowanipore"³ with Boro-dadu, I was requested to recite the same and the delighted couple also proposed a generous prize for my talent.

³ Tara Devi, my grandfather's cousin and daughter of his Choto-mama Lalitkumer Chatterjee; she was married to late Ramaprasad Mookerjee

Did not Monsieur Jourdain, the hero of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by Molière, marvel on hearing that - without being aware of it - he had been practising *prose* day in day out ! For our present age and for decades to come, Tagore will remain such a marvel to us who practise Bengali, a language which received from him an exceptional vitality. Should we not feel a thrill of joy if we suddenly heard it said that, year in year out, in all our speech and writing, in all the turns and gestures of our life, we have been doing nothing but using Tagore's language ? Tagore's contribution has permeated every cell and fibre of our culture to such an extent that if anybody makes up his mind to get over its influence, to carve out his own individual line, he has to become a Hercules. Deep, indeed, is the bond of obligation with which Tagore has bound us.

2

In my lifetime - covering almost three quarters of a century at this juncture -, the proximity of several personalities has urged me to move forward, heedless of ups and downs, exploring four continents of the globe. The greatest ancestral debt I have is to Jatindra Nath Mukherjee (1879-1915), whom people know as Bagha Jatin. He has most probably given me the hereditary taste for approaching, appreciating and assimilating the elevating influence of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and the Mother (1878-1973), and to a great extent that of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). They are all close to me though, however high I raise my look, I cannot get beyond the foot of their towering greatness. Between 1948 and 1950, I have been before the feet of Sri Aurobindo ten times and received from him *drishti-diksha* ("initiation by sight"). As far as the Mother is concerned, I have grown up under her direct guidance (1948-1973). It was she who gave me the first serious lessons of French.

Even if Baba - my father Tejendra Nath (1909-89) - was hardly six when his father Jatindra Nath, at the age of thirty-six, laid down his life fighting for India's freedom, the Hero was constantly present amongst us : first of all, through the living example of our Borden, Jatindra's elder sister and alter ego, Vinodebala Devi (1875-1943), tireless, proud and eloquent on the topic, whenever occasion came; she had left pages of written notes for the use of future historians. Then, through our Thakuma Indubala Devi, Jatindra's wife, dedicated *sahadharmini*⁴, almost his spiritual complice; through Jatindra's maternal uncle and revolutionary colleague of the early years, Lalit Kumar Chatterjee (1874-1953); our Swamiji-dadu, Jatindra's boyhood friend and revolutionary associate, Bhavabhushan Mitra (1881-

⁴ "she who shares the duties [of her husband]"

1970), later known as Swami Satyananda Puri; and Jatindra's innumerable followers, disciples, and admirers. This Swamiji-dadu was a loving task-master, helping Bordi, Thakuma and my parents to bring up properly - as Tagore would call - these "tiger-cubs"⁵.

Fond of listening to reminiscences of these elderly persons, I gathered that Jatindra was born at the village Koya, on Gorai - the turbulent daughter of the Padma -, near Kushtia, at his maternal uncles' home (now in Bangladesh). His father, Umesh Chandra, a spirited scholar, owned a *brahmottara*⁶ property in the adjacent Jhenaidaha subdivision. He was a patriot. And he loved horses. Even the notorious indigo planters in the vicinity behaved themselves in his presence. Jatindra's maternal uncle Basanta Kumar Chatterjee (1857-1908) was a government pleader and professor at the Krishnagar law college. He was also the legal advisor of influential neighbours like the Maharaja of Nadia, the merchant Ramgopal Chetlangia and the poet Rabindranath Tagore. Basanta Kumar's grandfather Ramsundar Chatterjee (1794-1890) had left behind him a large house with outhouses and eighty acres of land, counting among his subjects one hundred fishermen ready to defend his cause : his popularity was comparable to that of Noimuddin Mian of Kaloa and, almost, of their hierarchical superior Devendranath Tagore (1817-1905), father of Rabindranath, powerful landlord of the entire subdivision called Birahimpur, with the Shilaidaha estates as residence. Devendranath had quenched peacefully a revolt swaying Koya, Kaloa, Shilaidaha and Sadarpur areas, thanks to the complicity of Ramsundar (who had a command over the Hindu subjects) and Noimuddin (managing the Muslims). As a token of gratitude, Devendranath had conferred on Noimuddin the privilege of *purna-paatra* : the first and foremost among the landlord's subjects to pay the annual tribute, he was authorised to come to the headquarters on a palanquin. As far as Ramsundar was concerned, Devendranath had commissioned him for some time to manage his estates at Cuttack, in Orissa.⁷

Rabindranath's nephew Surendra (1872-1940) had been in charge of the Shilaidaha estates and, as such, went very often to consult Basanta at Koya, situated four miles southward; he was seen borrowing Basanta's mare "Sundari" for visiting his subjects. Himself, a high-souled patriot, Surendra looked after Basanta's nephew Jatindra with the care of an elder brother. In

⁵ *bagher bac-charey/ bagh na korinu jadi, ki shikhanu tarey ?* ("what have I taught them/ if not to teach tiger-cubs to become tigers ?")

⁶ tax-free land offered to a Brahman

⁷ Information received by e-mail dated 17 February 2010 from Shri Dhirendranath Sarkar, Chief Executive officer of the Zilla Parishad of Kushtia (Bangladesh), after interview with Advocate Giasuddin, great-grandson of Noimuddin Mian. The latter's son, Omed Ali, had been a friend of Anathbandhu (1869-1960), younger brother of Basantakumar Chatterjee

fact, Jatindra had a younger brother who was named Surendra, too; but the boy died very young, shortly after Umesh Chandra's death. Though Jatindra's mother Sharat Shashi (1858-99) was an accomplished mistress of the household and a *sahaj kavi* (born poet), she had, in her personal library, works of eminent Bengali authors like Madhusudan Datta, Hemchandra Banerjee, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Dinabandhu Mitra, Yogendra Vidyabhushan, including the freshly acquired and juvenile writings of Rabindranath.

Jatindra was eleven when, in 1890, Rabindranath with his family chose to settle at Shilaidah for a period of about ten years to help Surendra in managing the estates. Photos of the epoch show Jatindra with his pony and, a few years later, Shamindra - Rabindranath's elder son - with the same. The village of Koya was divided into several quarters, each inhabited by subjects belonging to communities of Muslims, Brahmans, Kayasthas and members of other professions. Basanta's grandfather had sheltered, however, a number of families for his household purpose immediately inside the compound, including three washermen, one barber, one potter, one blacksmith, one carpenter, several cooks, domestics, cowherds and gardeners. There lived also, in one of the outhouses, Feraz Khan, an ex-military man from the North-West Frontier Province, who taught various arts of self-defence and who boasted that his people had never accepted any foreign domination. Feraz seems to have been the prototype of the *Kabuliwala* ("Man from Kabul"), the famous short story Rabindranath wrote : the affectionate relationship that grew between Jatindra - the little boy - and sturdy Feraz, seemed to reveal to the Poet the universal appeal of human feelings and nostalgia.

Jatindra had grown up by the side of the river Gorai, impetuous daughter of the Padma, known as Madhumati before throwing herself, down south, into the Bay of Bengal. By the end of November 1890, Rabindranath wrote from his newly appointed headquarters, to his niece Indira Tagore : "On the opposite bank of Shilaidaha we have moored our houseboat in front of a sandbank. Immense sandbank, stretching before us endlessly...When we are in Kolkata we forget how marvelously beautiful, indeed, is the earth. Once we are here, we can realise what a grand and marvelous happening takes place here, beside this little river, by the very fact that the sun sets every day in the midst of the peaceful vegetation, that in silence, every night, hundreds and thousands of constellations appear above this unending, gray, solitary and silent sandbank."⁸

⁸ *Chinna-patravali* ("Bunch of torn letters"), No.7, Letter 3

Mother Sharat Shashi, after the day's chore, regularly took Jatindra for swimming, even when Gorai with the seasonal spate grew fierce. This was the lesson of fearlessness that Jatindra acquired from her in all earnest. On 20 July 1892, impressed by the wild beauty of the Gorai in the middle of the Monsoon, Tagore wrote further to Indira : "She is like a vigorous wild horse waving its tail and puffing its mane with the neck cocked. Conceited by velocity she goes on surging and swelling : riding this demented river, we keep on tossing... From here we shall reach the Padma, another demented and intoxicated lass dancing wayward. On considering her, I am reminded of the image of Kali : dancing, destroying and rushing forward with floating locks."⁹

Jatindra liked meditating near the solitary bend where the Gorai became Padma. Again, on 7 August 1895, Tagore wrote from this spot how relieved he felt by the absence of one of his talkative employees, enabling him to pass a day "listening to the murmur of the river. The very fact of having a single person in front deprives the ears from half the message of Nature. I have noticed that there is no greater waste of mental energy than intermittent morsels of conversation. If before undertaking any creative activity one requires to have a fresh intellectual and imaginative power, one must remain absolutely silent for a long time." He ended the letter by adding : "We have two existences : one mundane, the other in the realm of Ideas. I have inscribed on the sky above the Padma several pages of my life from that realm of Ideas... Whenever I come here, I can understand pretty well that I have not been able to communicate much through my poems. I have been unable to express all that I experience."¹⁰

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As a student of the Krishnagar A.V. School, Jatindra with a batch of restless friends formed a football club, which helped them also stage mythological plays in which Jatindra chose roles of God-loving characters like Prahlad, Dhruva, Harish Chandra and Hanuman. Rabindranath's patriotic writings and speeches inspired them a good deal. Basanta, Rabindranath and Surendra were among their frequent guests who guided them studying the traditional message of the Gita along with essays by contemporary thought leaders on current social and political issues. Jatindra and Bhavabhushan Mitra met Okakura in 1900 at Surendra's house, in company of the latter's firebrand cousin Sarala Devi (1872-1945), shortly before their

⁹ Op. cit., No. 143, Letter 68

¹⁰ Op. cit., No.304-305, Letter 140

founding the Anushilan Samiti. Jatindra was prompt in opening branches of the Samiti not only in Nadia and Jessore, but also in North and East Bengal.

3

Vinodebala Devi was Bordi ("Elder sister") to everybody, everywhere : eldest of the generation of cousins, eldest in the heart of young nationalists who were to follow Jatindra, eldest in the daily life of Jatindra's grand children. She went to Victoria School, and was much appreciated by the earlier batches of Bengali women who had received English education. J.E. Drinkwater Bethune (1801-51), as the President of the Education Council, – in collaboration with Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-81) and Madanmohan Tarkalamkar (1811-58) – had inaugurated this school in 1849, "only for the upper class Hindu girls," excluding any proselytising. The members of its Committee and the teachers were all Hindus with both conservative and progressive views. Tarkalamkar's two daughters – Bhuvanmala and Kundamala – had been among its first students, before Saudamini, daughter of Devendranath Tagore, joined them in 1851. Vidyasagar arranged the marriage of Malatimala, Tarkalamkar's youngest daughter, in 1871 with his favourite disciple Yogendra Vidyabhushan (1845-1904). The Brahmo religious faith of Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-84), Vijaykrishna Goswami and Shivanath Shastri (1847-1919), too, helped this school to be popular. The Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya, founded by Annette Akroyd, merged with it in 1876 as Bethune School, going up to College standard. Among its students, in 1883, Chandramukhi and Kadambini Basu were the first lady graduates.¹¹

Since 1856, supported by a new legislation for which he had fought, Vidyasagar started organising remarriage of widows, with a considerable help from the Brahmos : Durgamohan Das - father of Deshabandhu Chittaranjan - had given to marriage his young widowed step-mother with a friend of his. Rajnarain Basu's daughter Lilavati helped eight widows to get remarried between 1883 and 1890. Even though Devendranath Tagore had been against it, in 1910, an enthusiast Rabindranath officiated in marrying his son Rathindra to Pratima Devi (1893-1969). In 1886, dismantling the women's branch of the Theosophical Society and turning away from Madame Blavatsky, Rabindranath's elder sister Svarnakumari had founded the Sakhi Samiti, where ladies of the Brahmo and the Hindu families were trained to become governesses in families : till then, usually, European ladies were employed for this purpose.

¹¹ *Ramatanu Lahiri o tatkalin banga-samaj*, by Shivnath Shastri, 1957 (2nd edition), p170, p306; "Bethune College" by Jogesh Chandra Bagal, in Kalidas Nag (ed): *Bethune College Centenary Volume*, Kolkata, 1949; *Reluctant Debutante : Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation*, by Golam Murshad, Rajshahi, 1983

Though she looked for proper education and social insertion of widows, she cared more for the dignity of widows earning their livelihood, whether they got remarried or not. In 1898, Vinodebala Ganguli, our Bordi, on coming for studies to Kolkata with her younger brother (Jatindra Nath Mukherjee) was received cordially by Sarala Ghoshal (Svarnakumari's daughter) and other ladies of the Tagore family, Keshub Chunder's daughters Suniti (future Maharani of Coochbehar) and Suruchi (future Maharani of Mayurbhanj), and grand-daughters of Rajnarain Basu. Sarala had passed the Entrance in 1890, at the age of eighteen. Preoccupied with the national movement, Sarala was soon to make acquaintance with Jatindra, too, thanks to her elder cousin Surendra Tagore.

In addition to a moral and spiritual development, Vinodebala found in their company a suitable milieu for her aesthetic blossoming. Becoming widow shortly after her marriage in her childhood, she had received strength from her mother Sharat Shashi - herself a widow - to search for the true accomplishment in human life. At Kolkata, embellishing with elegance the white cotton garment and the hair cut short – as imposed on the Bengali widows -, she adopted light shoes with stockings; for household purpose she utilised a white dressing gown. It was all shocking for the middle-class sensibility. Svarnakumari's daughter Hiranmayi founded at Kasiabagan - near the crossing of Raja Dinendra Street and Ultadingi Main Road - a Workshop for Widows. Till the end of her life, Vinodebala was to look after Hiranmayi's school and, later, with Hemalata Tagore - who was married to Rabindranath's nephew Dwipendra (1862-1922) and sister of Mohinimohan Chatterjee (descendent of Rammohun Roy) -, Vinodebala was in connection with Gurusaday Datta, founder of the Sarojnalini Home for Widows in 1925. They looked for remedies to relieve women of all kinds of social and other discriminations that poisoned their existence.¹²

4

In the 1930s, invited by Surendra, my father Tejendra Nath - Jatindra's eldest son - started visiting Rabindranath at Shantiniketan. On sensing the absence even of a single line on Tejendra's father in his monumental works, one day the Poet read out to him "The Pioneers", a poem from his collection known as *Balaka* ("Flight of Swans"), written in the beginning of World War I. Tejendra had heard about this poem from Jatindra's followers who had remained in touch with the Poet. The Poet seemed to confirm a hint that behind the allegory

¹² Chitra Dev, *Thakur-baDi'r andar mahal*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 10th reprint, 1983

of the fragrant *champaka*¹³ and *bakul*¹⁴, he had in mind the untimely sacrifice of the young heroic souls led by Tejendra's father. Later, on 18 August 1939, when Tagore saw Tejendra as a volunteer receiving him at the inauguration of the *Mahajati Sadan* ("Home of the Great Nation", as Tagore called it), by the side of the eminent host, Subhas Chandra Bose, he had an enigmatic smile of complicity. Before elucidating that point, I draw the readers' attention to the Poem No. 65 at the end of this introductory chapter.

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Let me now comment the enigmatic smile of Rabindranath Tagore. Elected President of the National Congress in December 1937, Subhas Chandra Bose had qualified himself - on 1 January 1938, in London - before Marquess of Zetland, the Secretary of State for India, as a socialist, "distinct from the Communists." Asked by Rajani Palme Dutt of the British Communist Party, Bose admitted that in Indian Struggle he had to concentrate on a double object : first of all, political independence; then create a socialist State.¹⁵ On noticing Jawaharlal Nehru's fascination for Bose's left-wing politics, Gandhiji recovered Nehru's allegiance with the promise of a secure political career.

In April 1938, backed by a hearty encouragement from Tagore, Bose decided to construct in Kolkata a House for the Congress. At this juncture, displeased with Bose's election for a second term as President of the Congress, on 31 January 1939 Gandhiji declared the defeat of his candidate Pattabhi to be his own defeat. Bose was helped to resign on 29 April before he created his own party, Forward Bloc, "expression of the Time-Spirit". Qualifying Bose's defeat as a "permanent victory", Tagore supported him : "The dignity and the tolerance that you have shown in the midst of such aggravating circumstances fill me with admiration and confidence in your role as a leader of the people."¹⁶ On this occasion, in May 1939, Tagore composed the following tribute and sent it to the Press : though printed, Tagore ignored that it was not to be published for a long time. An official biographer of Tagore presumes that *under the pressure from friends of the poet and well-wishers of Visvabharati, this text was*

¹³ *Michelia champaca* Linn. Particularly fragrant flower blossoming in Summer, utilised in traditional medicine as remedy for several ailments

¹⁴ *Mimusops elengi* Linn. Another flower of Summer, its discreet perfume lingers even when the flower becomes dry. It has more medicinal properties than the *champaka*.

¹⁵ Amal Tripathi, *swadhinata samgrame bharat'er jatiya congress (1885-1947)*, Ananda, Kolkata, 1991, 2e impression, p.248

¹⁶ *Statesman*, 4 mai 1939

withheld.¹⁷ It is not available either in Tagore's complete works. This hypothesis supplies also a key to the mysterious absence of Jatindra Nath Mukherjee (1879-1916), my grandfather, in the eighteen volumes of Tagore's published works.

In that text entitled *Deshanayaka* ("Leader of the Country"), Tagore left a full paragraph of homage ("In the subsequent generation") to the life and deeds of Jatindra Mukherjee, without, however, naming him : the use of the adjective "impatient" reminds us immediately of the poem *Agrani* ("The Pioneers") from the collection *Balaka*, supposed to have been composed after Jatindranath's heroic death. Here I quote some extracts of that "proscribed" tribute by Tagore to Bengali revolutionaries and designating Subhas Chandra Bose as the true and legitimate leader of India :

I am poet of Bengal, in the name of Bengal I invite you to assume your role of the People's Leader. The Gita reminds us that the protector of the Right Action comes down age after age. Every time when the State suffocates in the snare of calamity, the Leader of the Country appears, invoked by the innermost suffering of the oppressed motherland. Crushed by the government's censure, dispersed on all sides by internecine disputes, Bengal watches in the sky of its destiny ominous auguries. Within, it is inhabited by weakness; without, a hostile troop. Numerous fissures appear in our systems of economy, activism and ethics, our policy of the State has neither rhyme nor reason.

During such critical times, we look for the right hand of a manly personality, solid in his convictions that, in his triumphal march can energetically disdain any ill luck. In your life, you have learnt to assimilate a host of experiences, your becoming that I have watched on the field of duty has brought me proof of your robust vitality. This vitality has known the ordeals of painful imprisonment¹⁸, exile, attack of untreatable disease; nothing could discourage you; all has been an occasion to enlarge the width of your spirit, to stretch your gaze - beyond the boundaries of the country - towards the farthest horizons of history. You have sublimated misfortune into opportunity, converted stumbling blocks into stepping stones. This has been possible, because you never accepted any defeat to be irreparable reality. It is this force of your character that is required to be urgently injected into the mentality of Bengal.

¹⁷ Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyaya, *rabindra-jibani*, Visvabharati, Kolkata, 1956, 3rd edition 1994, pp.196-198 [Italics are mine]

¹⁸ After serving as a prisoner for five and half years, when Bose was released, on 6 April 1937, a mammoth public gathering was organised at Kolkata, where Tagore's telegram sent from Shantiniketan was read out : "Uniting my voice with that of the entire nation, I welcome Subhas."

In the past I have been able to contemplate the face of Bengal's will power against the Partition of Bengal. This will power has been able to resist the sword that was raised to cut Bengal's body asunder. In those days the Bengalis knew how to unite against a power considerably dreadful; they had not recourse to sophisticated debates to determine whether they were capable of disentangling from the intentions of this imperial force, they did not sit down to deliberate; from the bottom of their hearts, all that they did was to will.

In the subsequent generation, I could admire the fire-wombed will in the mind of young Bengalis. They were born with the light to kindle lamps all over the country, but inadvertently they set fire everywhere that even devoured them, turning the path into a blind alley. In the failure welling from this error, however, the magnanimity of the heroic hearts that shone forth, I have never seen anything like it elsewhere in India. Sacrifice upon sacrifice on their part, suffering upon suffering, this frenzy to immolate one's life turned into ashes very soon, but they have all the same, courageously, expressed the indomitable will force of Bengal. Whatever be the judicious blames that seek to blacken the soul-rending mistake of the impatient youth, as recorded in this chapter of history, is it really possible to tarnish their innate nuclear irradiation ?

Witness that we have been of the multiple weakness of our motherland, wherever we have discovered, all the same, proof of her strength, all our hope - hidden, underground - eagerly looks for the future. You will have, henceforth, the responsibility of making this expectation vigorous and pregnant; your duty will be to usher on the activist path the finest elements of the Bengali nature, all its faculties : its witty spirit, its imaginativeness, its clear sight to discern the new, its skill in creating forms, its spontaneous receptivity to the gifts of unknown cultures. Scrubbing all that is obsolete and worn out in this country, ridding its new energy of sheaths of inertia, come to assume the authority to help them blossom in a new springtide.

You have the right to protest that it is hardly possible for a single being to realise such an important task. You are right. But it will not be feasible, either, individually, by several persons. The impossible will work out if the countrymen can unite thanks to the centripetal magnetism of a single leader. All those who really represent the interests of the motherland are never alone. They belong to all, their rights transcend time. Dominating the summit of time present, they raise the first offering of progress to the reddening of the first rising sun. Keeping in mind this observation, today I welcome you to your stature of the Leader of the state of Bengal, while I am turning to the people by your side.

Let nobody accuse me of trying to separate Bengal from the rest of India, either by any provincial arrogance or desiring to create a seat challenging the Great Soul who - as far as realpolitics are concerned - inaugurates in the world a new era, who has made India famous all over the world. My petition today has only for object a complete union of Bengal, precious, fruitful in its totality near the whole of India, which, exhausted, must not lag in the rear-guard. Each province has to compose and carry the appropriate offering for the grand ceremony of the ritual sacrifice around the unity of states in vigour in India today. Let your austere quest fully reveal the reason of the self-sacrifice made by Bengal, setting it in all its splendour, so that its specificity may shine.

Long ago, during another meeting, I had pronounced my message to the awaited Leader of Bengali society. So many years later, making good of another occasion, I personally invite the great Leader of Bengal. My age does no more permit me to collaborate with him on the field, physically and mentally, my force is failing. I have only the chance - as my last duty - to invoke the will power of Bengal. I can only wish that this will serves to goad your will to its plenitude. Then, having blessed you, I shall be off with the certitude that you have made of the country's suffering your own, that the fortunate liberation is nigh, carrying your supreme award.¹⁹

5

When in 1948, I was admitted to Sri Aurobindo Ashram school, I discovered that our Bengali teacher, Ila Sen, had belonged to a family very close to Tagore, as were Sahana Devi (niece of Deshabandhu Chittaranjan), who taught us Tagore's songs, and Dilipkumar Roy who always greeted us with his "eyes of light". In a spirit of meditation, Ila Sen communicated to us the innermost quest inherent in Tagore's poems : it was obvious especially while she made us learn by heart the puissant poems such as the philosophical reflection on the flight of migratory birds ("balaka") in the sky above the poet's head, when his subtle ears were listening to thousands of sprouting seeds thumping below the crust of the earth, athirst to take off. I was thrilled with its impetuous rhythmic swing.

Years later, the very first movement of Igor Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* - a revolutionary composition almost contemporaneous to that poem by Tagore - brought me back the vital surge of the Time Spirit experienced simultaneously both by Tagore and Stravinsky, whereas

¹⁹ Translated from Bengali by Prithwindra Mukherjee. Italics and bold letters are by the translator.

ten thousand kilometres were separating them. In the early 1970s, in one of the first features I produced - on Bengali poetry - for Radio-France; while recording my talk, I superimposed these two masterpieces of our times, reading out my French translation of the poem along with the orchestra playing Stravinsky on a LP; the seasoned French technician, Georges Gravier of the establishment, frowned at me, disapproving my audacious attempt. But, enjoying the Station Director's full confidence, I managed to broadcast it as such. Quite a few letters from attentive listeners - including Guy Bugault, Professor of Indian Philosophy at the Sorbonne University, and the Indian Ambassador Dwarkanath Chatterjee, nephew of Saumyendranath Tagore - reached me from all corners of the country, congratulating me for this "most novel" rapprochement.

In contrast with Ila Sen's indrawn worshipping attitude, I was to discover the full-blooded frolicsome relationship that Nishikanta had had with Tagore, as a former student of Shantiniketan. Having lost his mother at four, he had gone to live with the family of his elder brother Sudhakanta, who was one of the Poet's secretaries. Wandering still in the realm of the *Arabian Nights*, the very first time Nishikanta saw Tagore, he came to believe him to be Harun Al Rashid; asked to touch the Poet's feet, Nishikanta pinched them to see whether the old man was real or not. How I regretted not having been by the side of the impish boy. With a cunning look, hiding all other reaction, the old man brought out from the large pocket of his velvet tunic a handful of toffees for Nishikanta. Soon after, on noticing that the boy was quite fond of eating, the Poet often sent for him whenever there were special items cooked for his own meals. In the 1890s, when he had been living in a houseboat to look after his estates at Silaidaha, he is said to have had two hobbies : (1) test the effect of homoeopathic medicines on himself and on those who surrounded him; (2) invent recipes mostly for fish and vegetarian dishes, which, religiously, his wife executed. She was no more. Ladies of the family encouraged him, all the same, to give vent to this aspect of his creativity. Contrary to his elder brother Dvijendranath - the philosopher - who held that his mother never wasted clarified butter to fry *luchis*²⁰, just requiring plain water, Rabindranath was more familiar with the reality inside the kitchen. Nishikanta's temperament turned out to correspond perfectly to the Poet's taster of predilection, which did not at all seem to disturb the boy. I wonder whether the Poet had knowledge of Nishikanta's excellence as an inventive cook : with left over breads he prepared delicious *pantuas*²¹.

²⁰ A typically Bengali variety of pancake

²¹ A sweetmeat usually made of fresh cheese, known also as *gulabjamun*

With a gang of friends, one day, Nishikanta managed to get hold of a generous chop of tiger's flesh from the tribal villagers; already an expert cook, the boy had been adding select spices and ladlefuls of clarified butter, spending hours, waiting for the meat to soften. News of this experiment reached the Poet who, immediately, in a mock panic, requested his daughter-in-law to prepare some items that Nishikanta relished. Discouraged by the undaunted feast, the boy preferred joining the Poet for dinner. He heard from well-wishers that half a crack-brain as he was, had he managed to taste tiger's meat, he would have gone helplessly nuts. With his peers Nishikanta loved composing ballads and doggerels which, set to music, were sung in a hilarious procession. In utter certitude, one day, Nishikanta informed Tagore that Bishi-da - Pramatha Bishi, the ring leader of the rowdy boys - was already a good poet and was to become greater than Rabindranath, when he would grow old enough. Tagore, curious and tolerant, was happy to observe behind this frank and boisterous vitality, the maturing of a poet and an artist heading for deeper motivations in life.

The librarian drew Tagore's attention that Nishikanta had been borrowing all the available works by Sri Aurobindo. Before long, early in the 1930s, when the boy was to leave for joining the Ashram at Pondicherry and, blossoming into a spiritual poet, Tagore was among the first to welcome Nishikanta's maiden book of verse published in 1940 : " ...On reading I am astonished. Your realisation cannot be compassed by the experience of everybody, but the felicity of the way it finds expression in your poetry can be enjoyed by all. The speech-craft you have composed with your language and your rhythm can claim appreciation from every sensitive soul."

I have been informed that Rabindranath was as handsome as robust. A real man with a prophet's appearance. Young people around him, in Nishikanta's times, were also upright and virile. Fifteen years after Nishikanta came away from Shantiniketan, specimens of a new generation of young men from Tagore's university started visiting Pondicherry. I remember a later day Shantiniketan professor's first meeting with Nishikanta : bobbed and back-brushed hair, beardless boylike face, daintily attired in an immaculate dhoti, both arms crossing elegantly as in a prayer, the manicured hands busy putting back a fine unruly scarf across the chest, over his tunic - as girls are wonted doing to hide their intimate shapes - his cosmetic smile vanished from the bashful Kabuki mask, on observing Nishikanta's unsophisticated astonished look. Most courteous exchange of words left little room for much conversation. After his departure, Nishikanta felt relieved and came out with an anecdote. Aging, Tagore had a slight stoop, especially when he walked up and down the lawn before his house, lost in

his brooding, the hands clenched behind. One day he was amused to see a few young students passing by, hands clenched behind, with a stoop. The next day he summoned them and advised them with a smile to wait for the right age to have that stoop. Nishikanta remembered, too, of an aesthete of a boy who was once seen embarrassed by a buffalo's daydreaming in the middle of the path; finding it too rude to call the buffalo a 'buffalo', the boy in a softened vocabulary politely requested, "O Cow, please let me pass !"

6

In 1952, a strange French lady - Suzanne Karpelès by name - joined the teaching staff of the Mother's International Centre of Education at Pondicherry. She too was amused by these later "ethical" turns taken by some of these Shantiniketan inmates.

Everybody found Suzanne to be particularly beautiful, very original in her deep ochre clothes, highly cultivated. The Mother called her Bharati-di. Hardly did she start taking our French class, on one fine morning in October 1952, she was happy to announce that Albert Schweitzer had been awarded the Nobel Prize. We were aware of the works of the French Doctor at Lambarene and his love for music. Like a bolt from the blue, Suzanne chose me for writing a letter congratulating the Doctor, on behalf of the class. Diffident, out of pity for the old lady, I accepted to do it. In about ten days' time, I received by air mail, with beautiful stamps, a handwritten letter of thanks from the Nobel Laureate, with a friendly request to remember him to Suzanne ! I was to learn later, Tagore had been one of the common subjects of admiration bringing Albert close to Suzanne.

A former in charge of the French School of Far East in Cambodia, Suzanne with her elder sister Andrée had first come to India as infants, with their parents, invited by the Tagores. Probably they had a dog called Niçois ("living in Nice"), after which other dogs of the Tagores were christened, but assuming the Bengali derive as Nichua. Andrée had grown into a clever artist, expert in woodcuts on Indian motives; as a devotee of Abanindranath Tagore, she was nicknamed Amrita. In collaboration with her husband Hogmann, she ran a publishing house called Chitra, making available in French translation mostly writings of the Tagores, in very spick-and-span editions. Invited by the Poet, Andrée inaugurated the Women's Section of the faculty of Arts at Visva-bharati. One day, at the Ashram post office, a parcel came for me from France : it was Andrée who sent me her beautifully illustrated edition of *Poupée de fromage* ("Kshirer putul") by Abanindranath, as "a gift for writing French so well" ! The

translation, foreworded by the Nobel Laureate Selma Lagerlöf (1856-1940) and illustrated by Andrée, was brought out by Publications Chitra, directed by C.-A. Högman, in 1933.

Since their childhood, the Karpelès sisters had been used to have Indian guests in their Paris home. The great language-devourer Harinath Dey stayed with them for a while. In the mid-50s, the Bengali weekly *Desh* serialised the reminiscences of Tapan Mohan Chatterjee (grandson of the philosopher Dvijendranath Tagore; son of Mohini Mohan, to whom W.B. Yeats dedicated at least one of his poems; and author well-known for his masterpiece on the Battle of Plassey). In one of the issues, the writer admitted that during his student years in England, whenever he had enough of the English food, he went to the Karpelès' for holidays; he compared the two sisters to Lakshmi and Sarasvati. When I translated the passage for her, Suzanne was moved to tears, muttering : "Yes, we were like cousins !" Fishing out Tapan's Kolkata address, she enjoined me to inform the writer how happy she was to remember those years. By return mail, on a short blue-greyish sheet he replied, in fine characters, that he was surprised to learn that Suzanne was in India, expecting to see her if she went to Kolkata.

Suzanne had founded the Association of the Friends of the East at the Guimet Museum and had got Rabindranath invited to Paris for lectures and, in 1930, for inaugurating the very first exhibition of Rabindranath's paintings in Paris, even though England tried her best - in vain - to have priority . On each of these occasions, Suzanne had served Tagore as interpreter and local guardian. Knowing her to have been a precious eye-witness of Tagore's visits in France, I urged her to commit those memories to writing. Soon an opportunity came. Appointed by the French Government, along with a National Committee, to celebrate the centenary of the Poet's birth, Professor Jean Filliozat - Director of the French School of Far East and the leading figure in Indian studies in France - in one of his visits to Pondicherry came to consult Suzanne at the preparatory stage. As an old friend of his, as usual, Suzanne invited me and a few of her other students to have dinner with him. The Professor insisted on having a paper by Suzanne and, seeing my interest in the matter, agreed to supply me material for writing a book on Tagore, as seen from France, promising also his own contribution. Almost religiously Professor Filliozat sent me papers for this project. Among the contributors were Saint-John Perse, Jean Guehenno, Jean Follain, Louis Renou, Félicien Challaye, Philippe Stern, Arnold Baké, André Maurois, Charles Beadouin and tributes from deceased authors like Romain Rolland and André Gide. I translated and published quite a few of them in eminent periodicals of the time : the weekly literary supplement of the *Yugantar*, *Amrita* and, of course, *Desh*. On preparing the final copy of her text, Suzanne handed over to

me, with a comment : "Probably your Bengali version will come out before the original in French." It did so. And with the enthusiasm of late Daudayal Mehra, Rupa and Company brought them out within the two covers of my *Farasider chokhe Rabindranath*, much appreciated by Bengali readers. In June 1994, Shri Mehra, out of unfailing affection, brought out an enlarged edition of the book, with a new title : *Vishver chokhe Rabindranath*. Much later, in Paris, invited by Professor Etiemble, founder of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Sorbonne, Professor Rabindrakumar Dasgupta, during our presentation, exclaimed on hearing my name : "Author of *Farasider chokhe Rabindranath* !" Again, in 1989, during the centenary celebrations of Nolinikanta Gupta's birth, at the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan in Kolkata, Professor Dasgupta greeted me with the same remark.

The Karpelès sisters were both very close to Pratima Devi, the Poet's daughter-in-law and literary secretary : the latter considered herself as Andrée's student. A few months before Tagore's centenary of birth, Suzanne gave me a Bengali book, *Nirvana*, by Pratima Devi, an intimate chronicle of the last days of the Poet. She informed me that if I could translate it into French, the author would submit it to the Poet's French publishers. Once the translation was green-signaled by the Visvabharati experts, the Gallimard in Paris found it too short to be published as a single volume. In January 1964, when I visited Shantiniketan as Pratima Devi's guest, she agreed to my proposal of enlarging it by adding sidelights from the chronicles of two other ladies who were the Poet's disciples : Rani Mahalanobis and Maitrayee Devi, with an annex containing the last poems by Tagore. Twenty five years later, on a very different context, I had the privilege of making the acquaintance of Maitrayee Devi at her Khelaghar Centre in South Kolkata. She informed me that her ancestral home was quite near Koya, where my grandfather was born and, during the period after the 1947 Partition, she devoted several years of social work in the vicinity of Jhenaidah, halowed also with the memory of my grandfather. In 1989, when I met her, she was fully justified in getting terribly upset about a French adventurous movie-maker's shooting a feature film in Kolkata based on *La nuit bengali*, a fiction in which Mircea Eliade had thrown gratuitous slur on her past. In course of our conversation, when I raised the question of bringing together the three reminiscences on Tagore's last days, Maitrayee Devi was happy to urge me to undertake it. Shri Bhanu Ray of Messrs Mitra and Ghose of Kolkata, publishers of Rani Mahalanobis, too, sanctioned warmly the idea of dovetailing the three chronicles. Unfortunately, this project has as yet remained pending for a suitable opportunity.

The spontaneous ovation that France had reserved to the Poet of the *Gitanjali*, year after year, has been noted down by Suzanne in her article on Tagore. On each occasion where Tagore was present, the organisers - Suzanne among them - were overwhelmed by the eagerness of the public to reserve their seats; some people, to be sure of getting their tickets, even offered them bank notes inside envelopes as gifts of gratitude. In response to Suzanne's initiative, major French publishers and authors sent piles of books for the French library at Shantiniketan. One day, on receiving Tagore at the St-Lazare station, Suzanne was accompanying him by taxi to his residence at the famous Garden House of Albert Kahn, in. Expecting to pay a substantial fare for the trip with excess luggage driving down to the Southern suburb of Paris, Suzanne stood by the driver, consulting his metre; Tagore joined him. On gazing at the Poet's face, the man brought out a copy of the leftist daily *L'Humanité* with a portrait on the front page. "Is this the man ?" asked the driver. On gathering that his client was the dear Poet, the driver refused to be paid. It all ended with a brisk shaking of hands.

Suzanne told us also how, one evening, Tagore wanting to visit the Café Prevost near his residence where he had liked the hot cocoa with milk. On taking his seat he was waiting for Suzanne to order the drink. From a remote corner of the hall crowded with people drinking and smoking, a voice was heard : a young Frenchman, standing upright, looking at the Poet, was reciting from the French *Gitanjali* : "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high !" When the man approached to see the Poet better, he was welcomed with a hearty smile. Every morning, when Suzanne opened before Tagore the letters in the mail-box, she had noticed that he understood French very well.

With all her humour and out of some obviously feminine reaction, Suzanne also spoke of the episode with the Princess Anna de Noailles (1876-1933), influential poet and patron of poets. Only a woman could fathom the depths of such an event in all its implications. In addition to her fabulous beauty, Anna was well-known for her elegant toilette : men of all age fell in love with her at the very first sight. When she announced her visit to come and see - and conquer - the Nobel Laureate commanding the destiny of millions of Indians, Suzanne remained particularly alert to spare the dignity of both the visitor and the host. Mute witness of an unforgettable mime show, she remembered how Tagore's attitude of soaring higher and higher drove Anna more and more fondly determined to possess him. Putting an end to this speechless contest, Tagore was the first to speak out : "Well, we are both poets. We should not lose sight of the significance of this meeting." Requested by Anna to read out a few of his

poems, Tagore did it with utmost care. Anna was so happy that she participated in organising Tagore's one-man exhibition in Paris and foreworded it zealously.

7

Suzanne was a dynamic organiser. When, for instance, she chose to stage *Esther*, the famous play by Jean Racine (1639-99), with the Mother's permission she looked after the casting - indifferent to the glamour of the established vedettes - and revealed new talents among us. To avoid a heavy budget for the production, out of gunny bags, she confected beautiful garments which appeared to be velvet under the spotlight. Later, decided to create at our Centre of Education a compulsory coaching for all teachers of French in various Indian colleges and universities, she officially obtained necessary financial support from both New Delhi and Paris. Similarly she was given the responsibility of organising Tagore's centenary of birth in several cultural centres of our brand new State of Pondicherry. The first person Suzanne requisitioned for singing a selection of Tagore's compositions was Tinkari Banerjee, composer and teacher of music at our Centre of Education. I was appointed for two main purposes : (1) accompanying Tinkari-da with my flutes : I had quite a collection of them, beginning with highly sensitive flutes made of choice bamboo and smuggled from Chittagong in the then East Pakistan, along with a big European side flute with keys, and my favourite Db Piccolo which I utilised mostly for the Ashram brass band orchestra; (2) to translate into French each song and present it before the public, before Tinkari-da's intervention.

For the inauguration of the Tagore festivities at the Town Hall, official representatives from France and India were present. Suzanne asked me to prepare the keynote speech bringing out the universal aspect of Tagore's works. Picking up a sonnet from the French poet Pierre Ronsard (1624-1685), another from W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), and a poem from Tagore, I showed how each poet wanted to transcend the present in his own specific way, by projecting forward to grasp a glimpse of the future. Ronsard's message was quite pragmatic, warning his beloved Helen that like everything, beauty is also fleeting :

1. Sonnet for Helen

When you'll be fairly old, in the evening, by candle light,

Sitting on the fireside, reeling off and spinning,

Remember, singing my verse, quite enthralled :

Ronsard celebrated your years of beauty.

When you'll not have a maid who on listening to such news -

While half dozing under overwork -

Would not start up on hearing my name,

Blessing your name with immortal praise.

I'll be under the earth, a boneless phantom,

Resting below the shadowy myrtle;

Near the fireplace you'll be a crouching old woman,

Regretting my love and your haughty disdain.

Live, O believe me, without waiting for the morrow :

Pluck right now the roses of life.

Pierre Ronsard²²

The second poem was considerably close to the spirit of the first, with almost an identical philosophy of life guiding the Irish poet's desire to intimate his beloved how transient love is :

2. When you are old and grey

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,

And nodding by the fire, take down this book,

And slowly read, and dream of the soft look

Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,

And loved your beauty with love false or true,

But one man loved the pilgrim Soul in you,

And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,

Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled

²² Unpublished translation from French by Prithwindra Mukherjee

*And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.*

W.B. Yeats

The third poem I presented at the Pondicherry Town Hall celebration, was from Rabindranath Tagore : ardent in his optimism living, the Bengali poet addressed this poem to an asexual or unisexual reader, proposing to bring down to residents of this earth - across the span of a century - , something of the happiness and the fulfilment that surrounded him and indwelt his heart, an ever-lasting gift of a poet of the yesteryear to another poet of the new age. This message and this vision created in the audience a deep atmosphere of meditation :

3. The Year 1400²³

*One hundred years after today
Full of curiosity
Who are you reading this poem of mine...
One hundred years after today.
Steeped in passion,
Will it not be possible for me to hand over to you
The slightest share
Of today's joy by a springtide dawn,
The slightest flower or the song of a bird,
The slightest reddening of the sun
One hundred years after today.*

*Nevertheless, opening the southern gate
Seated by your window-sill
Gazing at the distant horizon
Dipping into your imagination
Consider for a while :
One day, one hundred years ago -
From which paradise nobody knows -
A restless and surging glee
Broke among the plexus of the world.*

²³ This date on the Bengali calendar corresponds to 1993 A.D.

*By a day of juvenile spring
Intoxicated, boundless and impatient...
Fragrant in pollination the south-wind
With wings outspread...
All of a sudden and promptly they have reddened
The earth with the blushing of youth,
One hundred years before you.
Eager in expectation, the heart immersed in music that day,
A poet was on vigil...
Full of passion he sought to help flowering
Unending words,
One day, one hundred years ago.*

*One hundred years after today
Who is that new poet singing inside your home ?
I convey to him the joyous salutations
Of today's springtide.
Let my song of springtime
Mingled with your springtide
Resound for a while
With the throbbing of your heart
And the buzzing of the bees
And the rustling leaves,
One hundred years after today.*

Rabindranath Tagore²⁴

The speaker who followed was Shri Bharathan from Kerala, the Secretary of State for Culture who turned to me with thanks for this vivid demonstration of the various sources behind a poetic creation. Then he read out lengthy passages from the Introduction written by W.B. Yeats for the first edition of the *Gitanjali* in English :

²⁴ Unpublished translation from Bengali by Prithwindra Mukherjee

"I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me. These lyrics - which are in the original, my Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention - display in their thought a world I have dreamed of all my live long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble. (...) Rabindranath Tagore, like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defence. These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life, or be carried by students at the university to be laid aside when the work of life begins, but, as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon the rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. At every moment the heart of this poet flows outward to these without derogation or condescension, for it has known that they will understand; and it has filled itself with the circumstance of their lives. The traveller in the read-brown clothes that he wears that dust may not show upon him, the girl searching in her bed for the petals fallen from the wreath of her royal lover, the servant or the bride awaiting the master's home-coming in the empty house, are images of the heart turning to God. Flowers and rivers, the blowing of conch shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, or the moods of that heart in union or in separation; and a man sitting in a boat upon a river playing lute, like one of those figures full of mysterious meaning in a Chinese picture, is God Himself. A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream."

In the mid-1950s, I was preoccupied with the suitability of composing music for a fully Western style of orchestra, inspired by Indian ragas. Birendrakishore Raychoudhury warmly supported the idea and told me how, in one of the prestigious hotels of Calcutta, there was a concert given by an Italian composer who explored the ragas as potential for his creativity. When he started playing, the audience was spell-bound by the counterpoint enhancing the subtle Indian melodies. In 1955, I was informed that the great musicologist Alain Daniélou had come to Pondicherry, appointed by the French Institute. Having informed him of my wish to examine with him certain points pertaining to my research. On entering the colonial cottage on the strand, near the Ashram tennis ground, where Daniélou stayed (this was going to be the residence of Jean Filliozat and his family), notes on a piano reached my ears : it was one of the most popular songs composed by Tagore, beautifully accompanied by a cascade of harmonic chords. This was what I had been wishing to do. A valet went to inform Daniélou of my presence. The music stopped. An elegant man appeared to greet me and cordially showed me to the drawing room where the piano was.

On listening to my object of visit, Daniélou frowned menacingly : "You want to sacrifice the delicate values of Indian music by imposing harmony ? Have you any idea of the chimera you want to produce !" I asked him whether it was he who was on the piano when I came. "Yes, I take pleasure in playing Tagore in my own way." Merciless in my reaction, I pointed out that the song he was playing had been composed on a bona fide Indian raga and that sort of music was far from a chimera, as far as Indian public is concerned. Fortunately a casual visitor turned up, who was also known to me, and the conversation took a more genial turn. Later in Paris, Daniélou and I had other topics of common interest - general poetry, Charyapada and Baul songs - that raised no animosity, except topics like his interpretation of Shivaism in Indian tradition : I had the thankless role of contradicting him in a public debate organised by a well-known French distributor of books, records and cassettes. Even I was to discover, later, how apt was Daniélou's mathematical analysis of the microtones (*shrutis*) of our music. I frankly admit that his work in this field has been for me a great help in my cognitive research with the scales of Hindustani and Karnatik systems of music : after twenty-three years of perseverance, when my French manuscript was ready, Pandit Ravi Shankar suggested that I translate it into English; in the foreword of the edition brought out by the

Indira Gandhi Centre of New Delhi, Panditji qualified it as "a monumental work". Unfortunately Daniélou was no more.

*

Varvara Pitoeff joined the teaching staff of the French Department of our International Centre of Education in 1958. I had already been teaching, since 1955, literature and languages (Bengali, French and English) at various levels. The Mother called her Shrimayi. Her parents Georges and Ludmilla - friends of Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) - had a troupe of experimental theatre, bringing about a revolution in the French stagecraft. Invited by me, Varvara wrote also an article about the influence of Tagore on her parents. Son of a director of theatre at Moscow, Georges had been to Paris for his studies (mathematics, architecture and law), before opening his own Theatre at Saint-Petersburg. Between 1916 (the year when, at the age of thirty-one, he married Ludmilla) and 1939 (the year of his death), the couple produced two hundred four plays signed by one hundred and fourteen authors : in addition to French playwrights, they staged foreign authors like Gogol, Gorki, Pouchkine, Tolstoy, Tourgueniev from Russia; Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, J.B. Priestley, Shaw, Synge, from Great Britain; Calderon, D'Annunzio, Pirandello, Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann from Europe; O'Neill from the United States. In Geneva, Georges had staged, in 1919, Tagore's *Visarjan* and played himself the role of Raghupati. In 1937, at the prestigious Theatre des Mathurins in Paris, the troupe played Tagore's *Dakghar* translated by André Gide. This theatre has enacted down the decades works by Oscar Wilde, Sacha Guitry, Jean Anouilh, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Marguerite Duras, some of them interpreted by the highly romantic actor Gérard Philippe and the unforgettable actress Maria Casares. In the beginning of my stay in Paris, more than forty years ago, I came across aged theatre-lovers who, with much emotion, remembered Ludmilla's luminous interpretation of the sick boy Amal, waiting for the King's letter. Since she had played the role of Saint Joan in Bernard Shaw's play, she seemed to have already attained a kind of mystic state, which had been extremely helpful in her interpreting such a character from Tagore's play. The French author Colette (1873-1954) wrote in her column on "Spectacle de Paris" in the *Journal* (dated 22 February 1937) that the composer Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) enhanced the bare settings of this play with "a light music of angels", perfectly in harmony with the dying child.

In keeping with her father's stagecraft, Varvara had learnt to admire Tagore for shunning the glamour, the limelight and the popularity of the professional stage; out of that conviction,

Tagore had created his own public. She admits having learnt also to consider each character of this play with a psychological specificity in their double appurtenance : simultaneously they are dwellers of the real and the imaginary worlds, flushed in the light of the poet's Ideal. For Varvara, Amal personifies that Ideal, capable of transfiguring everything with a new meaning. She believes that these characters help people of the greater world to know better India and her message, which is indispensable for the ascending march of humanity.

In the 1970s, while producing regular features for Radio-France, I had wished to bring together in a set of LPs all available music by Western composers like Respighi, Janacek, Milhaud, Henri Sauguet, and others who were inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's poems translated into various European languages. It could include also orchestral pieces like "Shishu-tirtha" by Timir Baran. Each of these compositions can have choreographic representations leading to audiovisual publications. Absorbed in a cognitive study of the scales of music from North and South India at the Department of Ethnomusicology (Laboratory of Languages and Civilisations with Oral Tradition/ National Centre of Scientific Research in Paris), for more than twenty years I had little time for other projects. In a recent meeting of experts at the UNESCO, with a view to celebrate 1911 as Tagore Year, 1912 that of Pablo Neruda, and 1913 that of Aimé Césaire, it has been my pleasure to suggest a comprehensive DVD publication by bringing together all available musical compositions which set tune to or have been inspired by the poems of these three poets, accompanied by all forms of dance, traditional and modern.

9

In 1966, when I reached Paris, I occupied a room at the new University hostel in the 14th district, near Denfert-Rochereau. We were about two hundred male students, nearly half of us coming with a French Government scholarship, from various countries including Red China. The lobby leading to the restaurant was welcoming enough for meeting in small groups at breakfast, before and after meals with a glass or a cup, and watching TV items.

The area had its charm. On getting out of the Metro Saint-Jacques, on your right, at the crossing of Boulevard Saint-Jacques and Rue du Faubourg Saint-Jacques lived Samuel Beckett. I was to meet him later, while collaborating with Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud. On your left, sauntering down the Boulevard Saint-Jacques towards Place d'Italie, the first turn to the right was our rue Dareau : the big PLM hotel was not yet constructed. As

our street bifurcated into rue Emile Dubois, immediately at the corner there was an ultramodern building known as Le Méridien, from where often a man with a moustache passed in front of our hostel and, sensing that we had recognised him, stopped a while to chat with us. It was Georges Brassens. He even invited some of us to tea; at times Jacques Brel accompanied him.

My neighbour on the same floor was Jean-Pierre, hailing from Jarnac - in the famous region of Cognac - where his mother had been to school with François Mitterand, who was to become the President of France. On meeting for the first time a compatriot of Rabindranath Tagore, Jean-Pierre seemed to be ecstatic. Jarnac was also known for the serious little magazine, *La Tour du Feu* : the editorial board and the contributors met regularly in Paris, at a restaurant, with a copious lunch and assorted wine. As a budding poet, Jean-Pierre was a member of the group. All excited, he informed me that the poets have encouraged him to invite me - coming from the land of Tagore - to their forthcoming lunch, to celebrate the special issue on the poet Adrien Miatlev (1910-64) : a former editor of the review *Esprit*, Adrien had joined *La Tour du Feu* in 1947. About twenty eminent poets like Jean Follain, Edmond Humeau, Luc Decaunes (son-in-law of Paul Eluard), along with Pierre Boujut (founder of the paper) and a few lady poets welcomed me heartily.

Jean Follain (1903-71), after practising law in Paris, had left for Charleville - the native town of Arthur Rimbaud - as a magistrate (1951-61). In the capacity of an active member of the French PEN Club, he had been invited to many countries of the world. As such, he remembered that in 1961, for the centenary of Tagore's birth, an Executive Committee was formed in France by André Malraux, the Minister of Culture, with Louis Renou as its President. Involved in publishing a symposium which I had entitled *Tagore : the Poet of Light*, I had received a message from Jean Cocteau of the French Academy. It contained an article also by this senior poet, Jean Follain.

As a friendly gesture, Follain had brought a copy of that article along with my translation from his French. It was Jean-Pierre who read it out in French. Follain's tribute stated that the universality of Tagore is such that his words and his poetry reach straight the core of Western sensibility. Claiming that Tagore reminds him of Blaise Pascal, André Gide had written that the most admirable feature of Tagore's poetry consisted in its making of the Brahmanical teachings - so intellectual, so abstract - something thrilling, throbbing just the way a sentence from Pascal's *Mysteries of Jesus* would have been. Follain held that Romain Rolland, a

Frenchman through and through, had found that Tagore's philosophy, in many respects, was kin to that of the ancient Greeks', although India thoughts are evidently had a greater amplitude. Follain held also that Tagore reminds as well of those Westerners of the Renaissance age who were philosophers, writers and painters at the same time. At the age of sixty-seven, when Tagore took to painting, before exhibiting his works in London and in Berlin, he chose to show them first in Paris, in 1930. Before painting, Tagore would meditate over the execution for a great while, instead of carrying them out rapidly. These show, however, moments of his spiritual elevation. Follain reminded Tagore's regret that those Westerners who study sacred religious writings of India do not consider those texts to possess anything more than a purely retrospective and archaeological interest, whereas for the Indians they have a vital importance. France is most thankful to Tagore for having convinced her it.

During the lunch Follain asked me whether I met his friend Eugène. "Eugène Guillevic," prompted Jean-Pierre. The address Follain gave me was "Le Méridien" - the ultra-modern specimen of architecture - and was delighted to learn that we were Guillevic's neighbours. Four years later, one evening, a rash driver ran into Follain and killed him on the spot while, myopic, he was returning from an official reception on his getting the Grand Prix of the French Academy. Follain was the greatest moving spirit in French poetry to help young poets wriggle out of the omnipotent clutch of Surrealism.

*

Principally under Follain's influence, René Char and some other poets like Guillevic had battled against the prevailing hypnotic and ominous presence of André Breton's school of Surrealism in contemporary French poetry. Reading Tagore's poetry was a God-send for the whole generation. When I went to see Guillevic, he had just published his collection, *Avec*, soon to be followed by *Euclidiennes*. In his practice, he appeared to be against much of what I appreciated in poetry, and in Tagore's poetry : with due regard to Tagore, he was, against all flight of romantic expression; by metaphysics he seemed to mean *now* and *here*; by objectivity he cultivated his tactile contact with objects, things in Nature or, very simply, belonging to the gamut of everyday life : an experience which led him to an inner dimension of silence, close to a mysticism which is associated with the Celtic tradition. Born in Brittany, he was proud to be Breton and he relished the brine in the air, in the wrack, on the shingly beach of his native soil. He loved even to move about with a beret Breton.

As soon as I entered the apartment, a pair of sharp but benevolent eyes - under thick lavish eyebrows – peered through the spectacles; a navy-style beard, and a spontaneous grin of a chubby Cheshire cat made me at once feel at home with him. Behind somewhat a husky voice lurked a warm and tender timbre. The year after, on returning from Rome and having had a short interview with Paul VI, I went to see him. Though as yet a Communist, with rapt interest he listened to my impression of having spoken to the holy man.

On another visit, I met in his apartment Monique Royer, an actress : he told me that she was in charge of a poetry recital every Monday evening at the crypt of La Madeleine, programmed by the City Council of Paris. Each session invited a poet to read his verses, along with a selection of his verses interpreted by Madame Royer herself in collaboration with her husband Jean (a gifted composer). Very soon, I received an invitation for reading my verses, and I understood how innocent Guillevic was when he had wanted Madame Royer to be present during our conversation. In addition to several sessions reserved to my poetry, Madame Royer asked me also to read out extracts from my anthology of Bengali poetry in French - and a considerable number of Tagore's poems - once the book came out. Encouraged by her, I even invited and presented senior French poets like Jean Biès at the crypt.

Late in 1979 the first collection of my poems in French – *Serpent de flammes* – appeared with a foreword by Gérard Mourgue; on receiving it, Guillevic wrote me : “Dear Poet/ The Pope Paul VI was right : you are poet and a happy poet./ Reading your poems brings joy, you live in poetry and you sing your life with all your soul – with your beautiful soul./ I was happy to have been in communion with you. I still am./ Friendship. /Guillevic.”

Off and on we met, even when he moved to the 5th district, at rue Claude-Bernard. He loved visiting new countries and was to go to Calcutta, the birthplace of Rabindranath Tagore. In spite of the fundamental difference between our styles of writing, Guillevic was always receptive to the content of my poems. He represented a generation for which humility and generosity were inherent qualities of greatness.

10

National or dialectal poetry? Lately evoked in a Parisian evening paper, this debate reminds me an anecdote. Invited by my friends Daniel and Françoise to spend a part of the Summer holidays in the farmhouse belonging to the latter's parents, near Maussane, at the foot of the Alpilles, haunted by Van Gogh's memory, I had been to Provence with my family. On

learning from my friends that I would be coming from Paris, the poet René Char had expressed his wish to receive me in the quality of a compatriot of Tagore's. At the time of this first visit to the Busclats, at Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, near Avignon, on 13 August, 1972, we were looking for the house of René Char. Suddenly a peasant realised that the fellow we wanted to see was their "Poet René" and indicated the way to his cottage; with a note of pride, the peasant added: "Believe me, even people from Paris come to visit him. "

The season was hot enough for the maturation of the particularly fragrant melons in nearby Cavaillon. René Char was waiting for us, late in the afternoon, relaxing in his garden. Four or five impressive grass snakes observed us, all around the bower, suspended from the roof, between the lianas, of which a wisteria. The Poet rose, bent on the basket where slept my little daughter, Adya: she had just had one month; with precaution he installed her close to him to cast a fond glance, from time to time.

As I had already guessed, my friends had informed Char about my literary preoccupations, that I had been, in India, the first ever to translate French authors as yet unknown in the subcontinent – such as Albert Camus, Saint-John Perse and himself, among others - into Bengali, the language of Rabindranath Tagore. In course of our conversation, we talked of Gabriel Marcel (the Catholic Existential philosopher), Heidegger, Sri Aurobindo... I was preparing, with Jacqueline Piatier, a special issue for *Le Monde* - earmarked for 18 August -, on the occasion of the philosopher's centenary of birth. Char commented : "It was high time. I will wait for this issue. "

*

Next to Char, on a low table, there were a few books (he was going to offer them to me with dedications); handing over to me a copy of his latest work, *The naked lost*, he murmured: "I would like to see what my poem looks like in the language of Rabindranath Tagore." I stopped on the small poem "Mute Game" (p75, edition of September 1971) :

With my teeth

I took life

On the knife of my youth.

With today's lips,

With my lips only.

Little upstart,

The flower of the slopes,

The spear of Orion,

*Has reappeared.*²⁵

At the end of a quarter of an hour, when I submitted my copy, he took it with a great interest before asking me to read the translation aloud. When I finished, he asked me what equivalent I had found in Bengali for the *spear of Orion*. Proud of my knowledge of astronomy, I replied that Orion, the constellation, carried the Sanskrit name of *Kaala-purusha* ('Time-Spirit', a sort of 'Zeit Geist'). He rose, with an amused smile; he moved towards a corner of the garden. He came back with a variety of cactus flower, and commented: "This is what we call in our region the *spear of Orion*."

*

A regular reader, he was to congratulate me on the issue of *Le Monde* containing precious testimonies from Gabriel Germain, Olivier Lacombe, Jacques Masui (friend of Henry Miller, finding *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo's epic to be sort of a new *Divine Comedy*) and Rev. Monchanin (who considered Sri Aurobindo to be the Teilhard de Chardin of Indian tradition). René Char wrote to me, on 18 September, 1972: "Your thought touches me a lot. My poems, under your care, in Bengali script, have the sudden face of the dawn, face that old Europe can no more receive under those features. I read your text in *Le Monde* of 18 August. This page on Sri Aurobindo did more than interest me. It called and recalled. It has, hence, attained its inner objective among the best [readers] of the newspaper. / Please share, I pray you, with Mrs. Mukherjee, and your child my thoughts all friendly./ See you in Paris, in October."

In October 1972, I received from René Char a new edition of *Rear-history of the poem pulverised*, reproducing a lithograph by Nicolas de Stael (portrait-silhouette of the author), with dedication: "To Prithwin Mukherjee in remembrance, in friendly homage, this Rear-history". Hoping to make a short stay in Paris, he gave me his address for our meeting. On 18 February, 1977, he wrote me on a post card representing *The Fishing*, fresco of Matteo Giovanetti (1343), preserved in the Deer Chamber, at the Popes' Palace, Avignon: "Please

²⁵ Unpublished translation from French by Prithwindra Mukherjee

excuse me for coming as late to you. But it is only an appearance that an armful of Time diverted by inherent difficulties of my state of health. My memory stays attached to your poetry as to yourself, silence is a closeness, the poets know it." I recovered in the mail of the time the same post card, dated 14 January, 1978: "Your thoughts find us very sensitive. Accept our wish for one happy year for you and for your Family./ The Busclats and its inhabitants have the hope of your visit in 1978. Faithful memory. "

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Our last meeting goes back to 4 September, 1978. The weather was awful. Very constrained, while opening us the door, Mrs. Char announced that he was bedridden with a formal prohibition of visits. "Sorry!" I was going to make a U turn. Prompted by a last-moment inspiration, she made me wait and, eager to avoid any regret, she went upstairs to consult the person concerned. On coming down, having made sure that I would not stay long, she guided me towards the bed where lay the sportsman's physique; the blackened face, marked by a suffering, became radiant at my sight.

René Char raised his arms to thank me for this visit that seemed to count much for him. At the time of leaving, he made me gift of his new collection, *Songs of the Balandrane*, with dedication: "To the poet friend P. Mukherjee whose presence at the Busclats, for me, has hope as clarity and the day of gloom as poetry."

11

On coming out of a seminar by Jean Filliozat, holding the Chair of Indian Studies at the prestigious Collège de France, the Professor introduced me to a charming lady in her fifties, who seemed to have been eager to see me. Her name was Mademoiselle Christine Bossenec. "If you want to hear Tagore's own voice, come for a cup of tea next Saturday," came her immediate invitation. "I have some other friends, too, who will be happy to make your acquaintance." Mademoiselle lived in Passy, on the rue Raynouard : one of the distinguished areas of the Capital, not far from the Radio Station. Nearby lived Thérèse Aubray, herself poet, and translator not only of D.H. Lawrence, but also of Sri Aurobindo.

While we listened to records of Tagore's songs interpreted by himself, Christine commented : "Who can remain indifferent to a voice with such an exceptional musical quality ?" She remembered that in the beginning of her stay at Shantiniketan, Tagore asked her what she thought of Bengali as a language. She replied that even though she could not understand it,

whenever he spoke she had an impression of hearing music. Tagore was fond of the songs that he composed and wanted his compatriots to learn them. Since then - Christine was happy to mention - entire India has been flooded by them.

Christine remembered *Shyamali*, the clay-made hut which Tagore had designed and got built for living. Early every morning he used to wake up and sat under the verandah, near a jasmine plant known as *chameli*, to see the sun rise. Those moments filled him with inspiration : words would be followed by music and he was heard humming them. Once, having got hold of the melody and the poem, promptly he would note down the words and send for a disciple²⁶ who was endowed with one of the most accurate voices and ears. The two men would set to singing together. Christine has very often been witness of this inspired moment, following it phase after phase. Nothing appeared to her to be more touching than the poet trying out his songs as does the morning bird. Near his house there was a garden of roses where she alone - other than some members of his family - could go and pluck flowers; every morning she used to go and collect discreetly a single rose, while she listened to the poet, absorbed composing his songs. Having waited for the melody to settle, Shantideva noted it fast and taught it to a group of select monitors, before other students could learn it. Even during the first year of her stay at Shantiniketan, when Tagore was about seventy-five, Christine saw him willingly participate in the casting of several of his plays. He had organised with them tour of recitals all over the country, to collect funds for running the Visvabharati. She remembered that desirous to reach the Western audience, Tagore had asked her friend Alain Daniélou to translate some of them and note down the music for a better communication.

In his autobiographical writings Daniélou has often referred to Christine Bossenec (...) who died a few years before him. Daniélou had gone to see Tagore while visiting Afghanistan, as suggested by André Gide. Romain Rolland, in his diary, *Inde*²⁷, writes on 3 February 1933 about the visit of two young men "effeminate and dandy" : Alain Daniélou and Raymond Burnier (Rolland does not mention Burnier's name). Received and fascinated by Tagore, and with his approval, they had been to meet Rolland with the proposal of forming an international Committee to encourage each State of the World to create a chair at Shantiniketan, in a gesture of assuming the financial charges of the establishment that Tagore

²⁶ Shantideva Ghose, who succeeded the late Dinendranath Tagore, grandson of Dvijendranath : Rabindranath had christened Dinendranath "The treasure-trove of my songs" (*aamaar gaaner bhaandaar*)

²⁷ Editions Vineta, Paris-Lausanne-Bale, 1951, p.345

bore all alone. He had donated all his earnings including the money received from the Nobel Committee; and all his children and heirs had honoured this will of the Poet.

A couple of years later, Daniélou claimed to have "corrupted" Christine to the cult of Tagore and got her admitted to Shantiniketan : she had been teaching at the famous and posh institution called Sainte Marie de Neuilly, created by his mother Madeleine Daniélou. Christine became very close to Tagore and his family : she remained in touch with them till her death, and has translated Tagore's writings with the help of a Bengali scholar. After Tagore's death she became director of the l'Alliance Française of Calcutta, before opening a Cultural centre there, which had a special renown in the Bengali intellectual circles.²⁸

What had struck Christine in Tagore as a poet was his identification with the seasons. In Bengal there are six seasons. The year begins with the scorching Vaishakh (mid-April) to "purify the earth with the baptism in fire" : two months of Summer and luscious mangoes, jackfruits and litchis. The third month, Asharh, announces the much awaited monsoon which brought back to the soil its fertility. With the fifth month, Bhadra, comes Sharat (the "White Autumn") when light flocks of white clouds float in the sky, competing with the white garlands of herons landing on the riverside white with rattan blossoms : it leads to the annual festivity to celebrate Mother Durga's victory over the demon horde. Kartik, the seventh month, is the beginning of Hemanta ("the Golden Autumn") with tossing golden ears in the paddy fields waiting for harvest. Winter settling with Poush, the seventh month. And Phalgun, the eleventh month, when Spring arrives with its rioting red and orange flowers. He knew personally all the trees in the vast campus of Shantiniketan, particularly fond of the beautiful and elegant *shimul* - a variety of silk cotton tree - standing opposite his hut, with its offering of large red blossoms. He introduced the ceremony of planting saplings and trees in the midst of songs and dances. Fond of children, he personally joined the teachers with their classes for a long walk under the soothing rain. He wrote manuals for them. He spent hours narrating stories and reciting poems and nursery rhymes. His doors were always open to the little visitors who knew that boxes full of sweets awaited them on his desk. For Tagore, the very first notion of education was connected with the bringing up of children in a natural environment, in open air classes, under the shade of robust trees and by the side of carefully grown delicate vegetations. Beyond the boundaries of his establishment, he helped spread education in rural areas.

²⁸ Confirmed by Jacques Cloarec in reply to my e-mail dated 24 February, 2010

Quite often Tagore had explained to Christine the way his career as a painter had begun, late in his life, when he was about seventy. That was about five years before Christine joined him. She gathered from her talks with Tagore that while correcting his texts and compelled to delete words, it always hurt him to smear the pages. So, utilising the words crossed out he had started making sketches : slowly the fantasy got the upper hand and, with his pen and ink with different colours, he had started creating landscapes, faces and dreams. They seemed to incorporate intimations from another world. On a short visit to Paris, Christine made a good provision of ink for Tagore's pleasure.

Christine had thought of proposing a fourth manuscript of Tagore's writings translated into French with my collaboration; the Gallimard publishers agreed to include it in their catalogue; but time did not permit me to undertake it.

12

After the initial mirth of the students' agitation in Paris, suffocating in the dust and din of our seething hostel, towards the end of May 1968 I had a strong desire to get out of the vortex. Like a messenger from heaven, René Grandjean - RG -, father of my friend Guillaume, gave me a ring : "I have a good stock of petrol in my garage. Leaving for Spain on the day after tomorrow on my Volvo. If you can get hold of a visa, you're welcome to hop in." Guillaume was student in architecture, dreaming of working as Roger Anger's assistant in constructing Auroville. His father was engineer, acting advisor for several sugar factories in Spain.

Though I hated hitchhiking, I spent the next day trying my luck in the midst of disrupted city transport service and, finally, I managed to reach the Spanish consulate and bagged the visa on time. Trucks full of Spanish menial workers had been returning home, regretting that France could no more pay their service. In a leisurely mood, we reached Andalusia, tasting the local varieties of cheese and temperate glasses of Val de Penas. While visiting the garden of Alhambra, the fragrance of the buxom roses under a merciless sun reminded me of poems of Juan Ramon Jimenez, steeped with the influence of Rabindranath Tagore : I had learnt Spanish in order to appreciate and translate his classic *Platero*. All of a sudden, one morning, RG discovered that his purse with money, identity card and cheques had disappeared. "Don't you worry," he smiled : "I know how to get it back."

We drove up to the Sacromonte, near Granada where, on the hill-top, lived Gypsy colonies. On getting off the car, we entered a large drawing room, through and through decorated with

shining brass and copper utensils. A snotty-nosed boy of about five years was playing in a corner. RG in his unique and fluent French accent hailed the boy, "Hello, Munche !" and enquired where the grandmother was. Soon an old lady of about seventy stepped out and hugged RG tenderly. I was introduced to this Gypsy Queen who was well-known as the Faraona, specialist of the Flamenco. After listening to RG, she looked at the clock and proposed : "It's lunchtime. Share our humble meal !" On sending out Rafaelo, one of her sons, on some errand, she sat by my side, while waiting for the food to be served, and sighed : "You don't know how I long to go and spend the rest of my life on the bank of the Ganges. How I wish to go and breathe the air of Bengal where lived Tagore!"

In spite of the muddy appearance of the gravy in which meat cubes stood, I could not refuse to partake this feast. While we were eating, Rafaelo returned with a stripling, quite panicstricken and helpless, and explained : "Novice in his career, Pepe did not know that RG was one of the family friends !", while Pepe returned the purse - intact - with tearful eyes, RG gave him some money, warning him to behave himself.

Before we left, Faraona proposed : "Though I don't anymore dance, though I find my granddaughter Lola to be mature and beautiful enough, this evening I have decided to dance for you. American tourists will be paying ten dollars a glass of Coca-Cola during the show but, mind you, you will be my guests ! Do come."

*

A few days later, RG was on visit to a big factory nearby. I decided to try hitchhiking and reach Malaga of my own. Having spent the morning in vain, brandishing my thumb in all directions, at last my eyes fell on a traffic police on the cross-road, watching me out of curiosity. On seeing me approaching, he saluted me politely (it was still the regime of General Franco) : "Are you German ?" Most often - probably struck by my typical Aryan look (*sic!*) - the first question I was to face was this delicate one.

I replied that I was *Indio* and not *Indiano* (the mistake Columbus had made centuries ago).

"In-di-o ? Coming from the land of Ra-bin-dra-naz Ta-go-re ?"

"Quite so !"

"Oh, just fancy! Since my college years, I love Tagore," jubilant, he exclaimed, before lowering the voice, "Myself, I am poet !"

"So am I !"

He took my hand and shook it respectfully as confrères are wonted to do, while four or five cars hissed by. On learning about my destination, my saviour the poet stopped the sixth car the way Herbert von Karajan marked the transition of tempo in his orchestra. Then he ordered the driver authoritatively to drop me at Malaga where dignitaries were waiting for me for an official meeting.

13

My first collaboration with Radio-France was a series of round-table talks with the participation of eminent French specialists on Sri Aurobindo, on the occasion of the latter's birth centenary which begun in August 1972. Immediately after, I received a letter from one Jean-Pierre Angrémy (later I learnt that he was Pierre-Jean Rémy, member of the French Academy), on behalf of Arthur Conte, the President Director General of the prestigious ORTF²⁹, advising me to contact Gérard Mourgue, in charge of literary features for the channel France-Culture and a great admirer of Sri Aurobindo. Mourgue asked me to prepare a 60-minutes new feature on "Three Great Contemporaries : Tagore, Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo". Mourgue appointed the sacrosanct technician Georges Gravier as producer and, for the purpose of reading out extracts, he requested Gianni Esposito to remain available. Though principally impressed by Sri Aurobindo, Gianni - a very handsome, youthful and popular actor, poet, musician - was fully familiar with the other two masters and, on the whole, with sacred Hindu and Buddhist texts; thanks to his serene and inward presence, the entire talk took a very vivid turn. Gianni invited me to his apartment near the Luxembourg Gardens and presented me to Ersie, his fiancée, a Greek dancer : together, both of them seemed to create a paradise for the aesthete, a kind of a *gandharva-loka*. I did not know that Gianni was to be carried away in a few months' time.

In course of my radio talk, I described the mystic experience Tagore had during World War I, one evening, on the bank of the Jhelum in Kashmir, when he witnessed a flight of migratory birds overhead : in a vision, he sensed millions of sprouts fluttering their wings below the crust of the earth, with their desire to join that flight, just as the forest and the mountain chains, just as the constellations - winged - were longing to take off in a passionate vital impetus, in the direction of the Unknown. This cosmic urge reminded me of the throbbing

²⁹ Office de Radio et Télévision Française

opening movement of the *Sacre du Printemps* - "The Rite of the Springtide" - by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), composed also during World War I. Though geographically they were several thousands of miles apart, the Poet and the Composer seemed to have been side by side to share this vision. While recording this poem in the original Bengali, before Gianni could recite my French translation, I asked to be excused for half an hour, went to the Radio Phonothèque Section where we could consult and borrow recorded music, and I returned with the Stravinsky LP. On hearing my intention to superimpose it with my reading, the seasoned Gravier got flabbergasted : "But... these are... two different cultural spheres !" When I insisted in the capacity of the official author of this feature, curious and open to novel ideas, Gianni too wanted Gravier to listen to me. A couple of days later, following the broadcast, piles of letters reached me, enthusiastically congratulating me for this revealing rapprochement. This even encouraged Dvarkanath Chatterjee, the then Ambassador of India in France, to participate in one of my subsequent features on Bengali poetry to recite the poem *Sonar tari* ("The Golden Bark") by Tagore in the original, before I read out my translation in French.

*

A letter from Professor Etiemble informed me in 1971 that he had proposed my name as a possible collaborator for the project, *Encyclopedia Universalis*. Since then, my contribution on Tagore has been religiously reprinted in all its editions but, also, I was invited to write a supplementary article on the *Gitanjali*. I have had the honour of signing several articles on Tagore among other such publications, for instance the Dictionary of Universal Literature issued by the Presses Universitaires de France or the *Prix Nobel de la littérature*, the long chapter on Tagore in the introduction of my anthology of thousand years of Bengali poetry, and the chapter on Tagore in my thesis for the State Doctorate supervised by Raymond Aron : *Intellectual Roots of India's Freedom Movement (1893-1918)*. According to a well informed literary critic, nobody else has written so much in French on Tagore, as I have done.

14

The former Prime Minister of France, Mr Dominique de Villepin and his wife Marie Laure, out of a natural pleasure to be in company of poets, organised from time to time - even during his official mandate - dinners with poets. He himself writes poetry, too, and appreciates gifts of short poems off and on, which he carries inside his pockets and reads them whenever he needs some cultural oxygen.

Once, on the occasion of the visit of a group of poets from Latin America, a select number of poets living in Paris participated in the banquet that he gave, with their partners. We were not all of French origin : I was the only poet from Asia. De Villepin - as fluent in Spanish as in English and French - spent with each guest a jovial moment. Madame de Villepin had a long conversation with Catherine, my wife, about the years they had been posted in India : one of their daughters was born there.

First we had a leisurely cocktail in the garden of the Hotel Matignon, by the side of the tree recently planted in honour of the Prime Minister. Then we entered the dining hall and took our seats to enjoy relish starters and a choice of main courses, matching with adequate vintage from all corners of the Hexagon. Between "the cheese and the pear" - so to say -, De Villepin brought me a microphone : "We begin with our Bengali poet, reading out his poems in Bengali, the language of Rabindranath Tagore, as well as in French." The whole assembly greeted with admiration and whispered : "The language of Tagore !"

16

Encouraged by the audacity of earnest translators who, down the decades, have successfully tried their art and science in bringing out Tagore's original Bengali writings – often approved by the author - in other languages of India and of the world, since long I had been planning to test my merits in this craft. Having published a number of collections of my own verse in Bengali, French and English, in 2000 I was informed by the senior-most Western composer Henri Dutilleux (born in 1916 at Angers), that he had set to music one of my French poems - "Danse cosmique" - dedicated to Shiva Nataraja, with a view to weaving out of it an introspective series called *Correspondances* with texts from Solzhenitsyn, Rilke and Van Gogh, intended for the golden voice of Dawn Upshaw and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Simon Rattle : since its inauguration in 2003, this opus has been regularly programmed by all the important concert halls of the globe and, consequently, my Nataraja has been translated into about a dozen important languages. Also author of an anthology of Bengali poetry in my French translation (in addition to some other similar exploits like a volume each exploring the corpora of the 10th century Charyapada and the contemporary Baul songs, both inspired by the Buddhist *sahaj-yana*), I have tried my hand in translating into Bengali several French authors, when, in the late 1950s, few people in India heard of

these authors. The latter, for instance, earned me a long letter of congratulation from the Franco-Bengali essayist Father Pierre Fallon, attached to the University of Kolkata.

The chronological order of the poems helps the reader to appraise the blossoming of the poetic genius of Rabindranath. During his stay on the house-boat at Shilaidah in the 1890s, in close contact with the rural life of his subjects, Rabindranath was in a mood to produce an interesting crop of short stories, along with the narrative groups of poems included in *Katha* ("Tales") and *Kahini* ("Legends") : though most of them are well known to the Bengali readers, I have not selected them for the time being. Rabindranath did not name some of his short pieces such as those in *Kanika* ("Morsels"), even though each of them be a complete poem; I have taken the liberty of naming them. For obvious reasons, I had to sacrifice the rhymes of the original Bengali.

On looking through the website magazine *Kaurab* on 23 May 2009 and coming across my translation page from Rabindranath, the famous translator Professor William Radice left a note, finding it to be "an impressive and generous selection, and it's particularly good to see those youthful, erotic poems... The poems from Kanika are very familiar to me ..."