

Personalities

Rabindranath Tagore — renaissance



By Shashi Tharoor

Nobody has excelled in so many fields or dominated his culture to the extent that Tagore has

It is genuinely difficult to explain to foreigners the scale of Rabindranath Tagore's accomplishments. Some have made glib comparisons to Shakespeare and Goethe, but neither man, despite his undoubted greatness, excelled in as many fields as the Bengali Thakur, nor dominated his culture to the extent that Rabindranath has. Think of it: he was not merely an extraordinary poet, the only Indian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1913, for his *Gitanjali*). He was also a prose-writer and essayist of the first rank, whose articles, books and monographs commanded a wide readership around the world. As a philosopher and mystic, he was perhaps the first to develop a synthesis of Eastern and Western approaches, and he developed political ideas of great depth and humanity (of which more later). He was a great, if

uneven, novelist and short-story writer who produced several masterpieces that continue to be read a century and a half after his birth. He was also a playwright of rare distinction: "The Post Office", for instance, was one of the most popular plays in the world before the Second World War.

Enormous range: But, added to all that, were other talents: he was a painter of high quality and perceptive-

(India's "Jana Gana Mana" and Bangladesh's "Amar Sonar Bangla"), though both nations were born after his own death. (Even greater than both official anthems is his "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high", an inspirational poem that could serve as the anthem for any nation seeking freedom.) And he was an educator of great vision and courage, founding *Vishwa Bharati* at

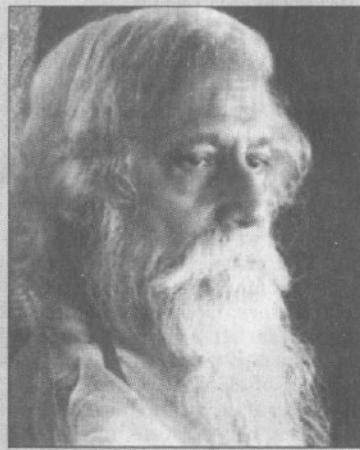
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ness, an artist with a poet's eye. He was a composer of over 2,000 immortal songs, of which he authored both the lyrics and the tunes, and through which he essentially founded his own branch of Indian music, known as "Rabindra Sangeet". He is the only person to have created the national anthems of two different countries

Santiniketan to offer an authentically Indian experience of higher education, following systems and approaches of his own devising. It educated the likes of Satyajit Ray and Indira Gandhi (not to mention offering a cradle to Amartya Sen, whose first name was given by Rabindranath - probably the only instance of a Nobel laureate pas-

siting another!)

If all this were not more than enough - representing a level of achievement so towering that it is difficult to imagine an individual in any other culture who comes close - there is also the remarkable fact of Tagore's huge worldwide impact, which even today's Indians may have difficulty imagining. Tagore was a global giant before the era of globalisation. When



he was to speak at New York's 4,000-seat Carnegie Hall in 1930 (itself a rare enough honour, since the hall is usually reserved for concerts, not orations), more than 20,000 people were turned away from the sold-out event, creating a mass of humanity on the streets outside that blocked traffic for miles. No living writer on the planet had ever

had something comparable happen, and what's more, Tagore was handsomely paid for his speeches. One American critic, not without a tinge of jealousy, wrote acerbically that the Indian "scolds Americans at \$700 per scold". (By today's standards that would be more like \$7,00,000 in purchasing power terms.)

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celebrating Rabindranath Tagore, would not particularly have appealed to him. Though his decision to return his British knighthood after the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre led Indians to regard him as a great hero of the nationalist struggle, Tagore did not really believe in nationalism but in the values of the human spirit.

renaissance man

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transcending all national boundaries. At the same time, he was not exactly an internationalist in the classic sense beloved of UN types like myself. He died before the United Nations was created, but he did not think highly of its forerunner organisation, the League of Nations. Tagore wrote of the League that it was well conceived in theory but not in practice, because it was an institution in

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which the world was represented by national Governments and nationalist political leaders. "It is", he wrote, "like organising a band of robbers into a police department". There is no reason to believe he would have felt any differently about today's UN, which is also an organisation of States rather than peoples.

The archetypal sage: With his long beard and his flowing white robe, Rabindranath Tagore epitomised for many the archetype of the Indian sage, the precursor of so many god-men and gurus who have followed his footsteps to the West. There is little doubt that his magisterial mind and his authoritative presence did a great deal to inspire admiration across the world, and to spark a revival of interest in Hinduism and in the teachings of Hindu spirituality. Tagore's Hinduism had little to do with the Hindu-ness sought to be promoted by today's Hindutva brigades; it was a faith free of the restrictive dogma of holy writ, untrammelled in its yearning for the divine, and universalist in its conception and its appeal. This is what made his ideas so attractive to non-Indians. When the great British poet Wilfred Owen (author of the greatest anti-war poem in the English language, "Dulce et Decorum Est") was to return to the front to give his life in the futile First World War, he recited Tagore's "When I Go From Hence" to his mother as his last goodbye. When he was so tragically and pointlessly killed, Owen's mother found Tagore's poem copied out in her son's hand in his diary.

With his typical generosity, Tagore said of the artist William Rothenstein, "He had the vision to see truth and the heart to love it". The same was true of himself. It is reason enough, today, to pay tribute to the greatest Indian who ever picked up a pen. COURTESY THE HINDU