

Gurudev Tagore, the High-minded Patriot

Excerpt from *Miscellany from Amida-in* by Arai Kampō
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"The people seek light, the youths cherish hopes." Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, a patriot, who sought national freedom from the fetters and exploitation of the British, used to recite his own verses sonorously. He passed away at the end of 1941 before seeing the light of hope that was about to come true. While staying with the Tagore family for two whole years, I closely associated with Mr. Tagore every day. I would like to write about a glimpse of the patriotic man who deeply touched my heart and soul, and also about some of my memories of India.

It was in November of 1916 that I left Japan for India at the invitation of Mr. Tagore. As the beginning of the story, I briefly explain how he invited me to India. Mr. Tagore was a guest of Mr. Hara Tomitarō in Yokohama for three months during his first visit to Japan. When he saw Mr. Hara's art collection, including some Japanese-style paintings, he was impressed by the size of those paintings on *fusuma* (sliding doors) or *byōbu* (folding screens). The Mughal paintings possessed by the Tagores were small works, measuring about 1.8 feet at the largest. In India, it is not common to paint large works.

As a result of appreciating the Hara collection, Mr. Tagore conceived an idea of having the young Bengali artists around him learn how to paint large works, and asked if he could hire an instructor from the Nihon bijutsu-in (Japan Art Institute). When Mr. Hara discussed this matter with Mr. Yokoyama and Mr. Shimomura, he said, "Among the members of the Bijutsu-in, the one who studies Indian paintings would be a suitable teacher. I believe it is Mr. Arai." Since both Mr. Yokoyama and Mr. Shimomura instantly agreed, they soon contacted me. For over a decade, I had been working on Buddhist paintings for the *Inten* Exhibitions (official exhibition of the Nihon bijutsu-in). To pursue these works, I had a long-cherished wish to visit India at least once. Their suggestion was therefore a timely offer to me. Moreover, the invitation of Gurudev Tagore, the leading figure of India, led me to accept it without a second thought.

This is how I came to instruct the young students at Santiniketan (Brahmacharya Vidyalaya, the school for youth education run by Mr. Tagore) in

how to paint large Japanese-style paintings. As previously mentioned, I departed from Japan for Calcutta in the autumn of 1916 to be a guest of the Tagores. While the First World War was taking place in Europe, only cargo ships were available for travel to Calcutta. I boarded one of them, which stopped in Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang, and Rangoon for loading and unloading cargo. It took me a month to reach Calcutta. The foreign culture I encountered during this trip were so impressive that I almost wanted to continue the voyage. Mr. Katayama Nanpū accompanied me on the ship. When I arrived in Calcutta, Mr. Tagore had gone to the United States. But I promptly started to play my role as a teacher to more than ten young men.

I was treated with kindness by the Tagore family and received a beautiful room. They had a two-story building beside their main house, which they called the Bichitra. It was utilized to study literature, art, music, and handicrafts. I was given a room there. The Bichitra is connected to the Tagores' main house by a corridor, but is not normally used by anyone except for the four types of studies mentioned above.

I usually dined with the family in the dining room. On the evening of my arrival, they asked me if I wanted to have Indian food or Japanese food, and assured me that their Japanese servant would prepare a Japanese meal if I wished. I replied that I would rather savor Indian cuisine with them since I had come all the way. From the first day, I thus lived on Indian food throughout my entire stay.

Indian people eat by grabbing rice with their right hand, kneading it, mixing it with side dishes, and then feeding it into their mouth. In detail, food is mixed with the fingertips, gathered together with the middle finger, and neatly brought to the mouth with their thumb. The way they move their fingers is more beautiful than the way Japanese people use chopsticks. As I could not do as they did, I ate with a spoon. But it was not useful enough to mix food well, and its smell was annoying. Accordingly, I tried to imitate them in using my fingers. In two years, I mastered the art of eating with my fingers. They later vouched for my ability to eat Indian food properly anywhere in India.

In India, they have two meals a day. Even when Mr. Tagore was away, I became close to the family by dining together. After a while, they told me that they would like to display the picture of *Yoroboshi*, which I had brought from Japan, in an appropriate place to enjoy it. After much thought and consideration,

I decided to set up an instant Japanese-style *tatami* room in the Bichitra. Since a Japanese carpenter happened to be in Calcutta, I instructed him to install Japanese-style rafters and decorative transoms, and to make rush mats with decorated edges that resembled *tatami* mats. I placed the picture of *Yoroboshi* there for the Tagore family.

Let me explain what had happened before this. *Yoroboshi* profoundly moved Mr. Tagore when he saw it at Mr. Hara's residence. Since he enthusiastically praised the work and wished to own it, I made a reproduction of it on a gold folding screen spending about two months before my departure and brought it with me to India.

Now I displayed my reproduction of *Yoroboshi* in the improvised Japanese-style room for the Tagore family. They looked so ethereal and poetic when they were standing in front of the painting, creating an impression that they were entering or even appearing from it. A group of three or four dozen people, including both young and old, men and women, all dressed up, advanced up the corridor from the main house to the Bichitra while singing and walking gracefully. They sat down in front of the painting, still singing in chorus. The scene produced an atmosphere of indescribable purity. I have no idea how to express it, but I was deeply moved by their humble attitude toward the painting I had brought from Japan.

Only after they finished singing, did they begin to talk in whispers about the painting. The song, which was composed by Gurudev Tagore, reflected his fundamental idea: "All the people in the world, caught in darkness, are longing for a single ray of light." Reciting this verse, they approached the painting.

The painting depicts a blind *yoroboshi* who is putting the palms of his hands together under a blooming plum tree and seeking sunlight that he is unable to see. This piece of work has the same spirit as that of Mr. Tagore's verse. *Yoroboshi* is a great masterpiece of Mr. Shimomura Kanzan, which was highly acclaimed at an *Inten* Exhibition.

Six months after my arrival in India, Mr. Tagore returned from the United States. The day after he came back, I accompanied him to Santiniketan. We went there in a large group. Santiniketan is located more than a hundred miles away from Calcutta. When the train arrived at the station called Bolpur around midnight, about two hundred students in white robes with torches were waiting there. They had prepared a carriage for Gurudev and greeted him. As Mr. Tagore got off the

train, they were all very excited to see him. The students put wreaths of white flowers around his neck one after another, as they traditionally do in India, until the flowers obscured his face. Mr. Tagore's face lit up with pleasure as if he was receiving a warm welcome from his children and grandchildren. He turned away from the carriage, stating that he wished to walk barefoot as the students did. The young people surrounded Gurudev, almost embracing him, and walked a mile-long stretch across the open field toward Santiniketan. It demonstrated how much Mr. Tagore loved them and how they, in turn, revered him like a divine father. It had a profound impact on the Japanese visitor who accompanied them.

In the vicinity of Santiniketan, there was a clean welcoming road. In front of the school, there stood a welcoming gate made of evergreen trees that looked like roses, and underneath it was a two-foot-high earthen mound with a lotus seat. When Gurudev was seated in the center of the seat, the teachers greeted him in the lights of students' torches. Then, the students sang and played music. The ceremony ended in an hour or so with Gurudev's address. He entered his dormitory room, which was as humble as the teachers'. I was given a moderate room for guests.

The next day, we were treated to lunch prepared by the teachers' wives and daughters in a temporary dining place set up in the open air. Gurudev was seated on a six-inch-high bench with me sitting alongside him and the head teacher on the right. Others sat in a circle with the students and enjoyed the food. The food was served on each plate from large bowls. When finished with one dish, the next food was passed around.

In the evening, a student came to take me out and urged me to go and listen to Mr. Tagore's talk. Arriving at the place, I saw the old man in a white robe sitting on a five-foot-high stone and talking by the bonfire in the woods. More than two hundred people were sitting around him and listening attentively. The story seemed to be about a journey. The moment I saw them, I was struck by their indescribable sanctity. The beauty of love between a master and disciples inspired me to envision Sakyamuni giving a sermon long ago. I intentionally refrained from getting close to them and gazed at this stunning scene with rapturous delight from a distance.

I had often heard about Mr. Tagore even in my country. I met him when he came to Japan and learned to understand and respect him as well. However, in India, I met him again and realized his true greatness for the first time in this way. It was when I began to love and respect him even more profoundly.

Known as the “Great Poet,” Mr. Tagore’s fame extends worldwide. It is entirely appropriate to call him a Great Poet. But talking about Mr. Tagore is incomplete without acknowledging that he was a genuine patriot who had a deep concern for his country. We must not forget that his creation of poetry, songs, and novels were all means of rejuvenating his homeland, just as Kōbō Daishi (Great Master Kūkai) utilized his paintings and sculptures to spread Buddhism.

In this context, Mr. Tagore educated over two hundred students at Santiniketan and sent dozens of young people out into society every year. Through these efforts, he sought to revitalize his homeland. Mr. Tagore always uttered the words, "Awaken, India!"

Mr. Tagore visited our country three times. He also traveled to the United States of America and the United Kingdom. He would give lectures there and receive honoraria, and also solicit donations from Indians resident in those countries each time. All of these funds were used for running Santiniketan. As Mr. Tagore's son was financially secure due to his substantial fortune, there were no worries about this matter. It enabled Mr. Tagore to solely devote himself to making the school successful. Perhaps even his pictures painted in his later years were to contribute to this purpose.

The house of the Tagore family was a spacious and magnificent three-story building, so large that you might lose your way inside, yet only a small part of it was used. Their lifestyle was simple.

The family consisted of about two hundred people; they allowed troubled family members to live in the mansion. Given that it was a family of two hundred people, conflicts and feuds occasionally arose. Among the relatives were even *maharajas* (sovereign king). But as soon as Gurudev showed up, conflicts were resolved. He was indeed the head of the family who earned trust, respect, and reverence.

Mr. Tagore always loved the youths saying they had hope. He gathered young people at the Bichitra, where I live, once a week for lectures, chats, and poetry recitals. I was quite envious of the lively and friendly atmosphere they had.

Mr. Tagore’s father was Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, the religious leader. There is an anecdote that when Maharshi was preaching at a certain place, a gang of dacoits intruded there and threatened him. But being well aware that

some evildoers would break in, Maharshi earnestly admonished them for their imprudence and made them repent. In honor of that location, Mr. Tagore later established a school there, which was situated in Santiniketan. The villagers near the school are descendants of the repentant dacoits.

Maharshi, the religious leader was the father of Mr. Rabindranath Tagore, who was the youngest among nine siblings. All of his siblings were distinguished figures, with his eldest brother being a great writer and his other brother becoming a judge. The Tagore family had generally been of the Brahmin caste, but later renounced their status due to some inconvenience. According to a custom, they could return to their caste by paying money, but they deliberately chose not to do so.

Maharshi Debendranath Tagore owned vast lands, which were difficult to administer. In order to manage the property, he sent his eldest son there. But the eldest, though benevolent like his father, gave money to the tenant farmers to support them instead of putting it in the right order, which resulted in great difficulties. Therefore, the father, in place of the eldest, commanded Rabindranath to take charge of the management.

Rabindranath was about thirty years old at that time, and was presumably recognized as the most capable among the siblings. In fact, he displayed a brilliant talent for management. Furthermore, his virtue and benevolent governance made the tenants submit to him more than to any *maharaja*.

While engaged in the family business, Mr. Tagore lost his wife, leaving behind two children. Overcome with grief, he composed *Gitanjali*, the famous poetry collection. The death of his dearly beloved wife brought him a new outlook on life. He was about thirty-five or thirty-six then, and never remarried afterward.

Mr. Tagore's daily routine began early in the morning. Every morning, I would go out of Bichitra to greet him at his residence. But, upon seeing me coming, he would greet me first from inside his room by putting the palms of his hands together. Although I thought it impolite to greet him from a distance, I felt indebted every time I failed to be the first to greet him.

Regarding meals, Mr. Tagore, his son, his daughter-in-law, and I would dine together at the table. They would usually serve two or three extra dishes for Mr. Tagore, but he himself would not eat them. He would always give one dish to me and the other one to his daughter-in-law.

During meals, Mr. Tagore's sisters and grandchildren would attend to us and watch us eat. This made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. I was informed that they would do it for Mr. Tagore as a traditional way of making mealtimes pleasant.

After every meal, *paan* is always served. It is a bluish leaf with a coating of something like lime, eaten with several kinds of chopped nuts, such as betel nuts. This is just like what the role of tea is in Japan. Chewing it thoroughly activates the secretion of saliva and gives a refreshing feeling in the chest. Indian cuisine is based on curry, which is spicy. They drink water not during meals but only after eating, and then finish by chewing *paan*. At the very end, a servant brings a water jar for washing their hands. If mangoes or other fruits are offered, one can enjoy the exquisite sweetness.

Mr. Tagore had a good physique, about six feet tall, but he was a light eater. After meals, he would gently sing a song, as if he were unified with the universe into one, evidently enjoying that state. Mr. Tagore's face was beautiful, so too his hands and fingers. His voice was like the sound of a silver bell. In detail and in whole, one might say he was a supreme embodiment of human beauty. His gestures and movements were remarkably calm and dignified.

In India, from midday to around three in the afternoon, people darken their rooms and take siestas. Contrary to the Japanese custom, all windows are shut to block outside air, leaving only the south side open, where a mat woven from plant roots is hung. It has a most pleasant scent. Moistened with water, the mat has a mysterious effect of drawing off heat from the room. As per the same principle, one can place an earthenware jar filled with water in the room and leave it for some hours. The water in the jar will cool the room.

Mr. Tagore never indulged in siestas. After everyone had gone to sleep at night, he would stroll on the roof terrace by himself and ponder. In the afternoon of the following day, he would organize his ideas or write while others were taking a nap.

In India, mosquito nets are kept hanging year-round and are never removed. One oppressively hot night, a few young men were sleeping under a fan without nets. Out of curiosity, I did as they did overnight, but unfortunately I ended up being bitten by mosquitoes and catching malaria.

During my malaria-induced illness, Mr. Tagore visited me on my sickbed one night to bid me farewell. When I asked the reason, he said, "Tonight I will give a lecture. If I do it, the police will surely arrest me, so I won't be able to see you for

the time being. This is why I came to bid you goodbye now.” That was alarming. But I wanted to listen to the lecture. Unfortunately, I was unable even to walk because of malaria. As Mr. Tagore left, I felt very anxious. After some hours, I heard loud footsteps and a clamor. It seemed he had given his lecture without any trouble and returned. Unable to stay still in bed, I went into the tumult and asked a young man what had happened. In his excitement, he said, “Tonight, for the first time, Gurudev Tagore gave a political lecture, truly once-in-a-life-time speech. But the police could do nothing; they merely watched. After the speech, the audience sang a national song composed by Gurudev, then dispersed.” It was right in the middle of the First World War; if the police had arrested him, it would certainly have caused a revolt among young people, so they could not do it.

In Calcutta, there was a brave woman named Annie Besant. Although I did not ask her nationality, she was a foreigner living in India. She ran a newspaper and consistently supported India so that she was often imprisoned. Upon her release from Madras prison after a one-year sentence, Mr. Tagore accompanied me to meet her. It was a spectacular moment when Mr. Tagore and the great woman exchanged a firm handshake among the welcoming crowd of tens of thousands of Indian youths. The next day, another meeting took place in the large hall of the Bichitra. I had the privilege of shaking hands with her then.

One day, Mr. Tagore’s son took me out. He, his cousin and I went on an excursion. The cousin was one of the revolutionaries who had become a close friend of Mr. Okakura Tenshin (Kakuzō).

Arriving at a station in the middle of the night, we took a carriage for over two and a half miles and reached a grand gate with two guards bearing rifles. As we entered the gate, we saw a few elephants tied nearby. The carriage stopped in front of a mansion that was so magnificent it appeared to be a mysterious palace.

The next morning, the two companions were gone. At the direction of the servants, I was pushed into a carriage at the entrance. The carriage, with a lash of the whip, set off swiftly. Through woods we went until we stopped in front of a large building. After getting off the carriage, I was led into a room with a large bed. The coachman who took me there left saying, “Stay here. You will be served again later.” Considering the events since the previous night, it all felt like a dream, utterly incomprehensible.

After a time, a servant brought me breakfast. I tried to ask him in English about the mysterious situation. But the old servant didn't understand. I resorted to broken Hindustani (the colloquial tongue used by servants), pointing to a telephone on the table and asking him with gestures to bring a student from a nearby school who could show me how to make a phone call. The old servant, who was seriously mimicking my gestures, was unable to comprehend. As it caused me irritation, I shouted in Japanese, which startled him. He dashed out and soon brought a student. The student told me pityingly that the telephone did not work. Now I have reached a dead end. If the telephone had worked, I could have asked Mr. Tagore's son why I was confined there.

A weird day went by. I gave up and crawled into bed. Then came a prickling pain, like being stung by needles, and I leapt out of bed in fear. Under such mental strain and with the strange pain, I was convinced I had been bitten by a venomous creature. In fact, the culprit was nothing but bedbugs. After a while, I was relieved when the two companions reappeared.

From there, we again advanced by carriage to a certain place where a fair or exhibition was taking place. We entered amid cheering crowds, watched the exhibition, and then moved on to a theater. We were shown to the best seats. A gentleman of noble bearing approached and extended his hand for a handshake. Mr. Tagore's son introduced him to me and revealed his *maharaja* status. Many British officials dressed in splendid attire were also present in the theatre. On the way back, I found myself alone again and was housed overnight in the same strange mansion. The next morning, a carriage came to pick me up to return to Calcutta, rounding off the excursion. Upon reflection, I realized the reason why I had been confined in the strange mansion and kept apart from the two companions was that they were afraid of drawing the attention of the British authorities by being with a Japanese man.

At the Bichitra where I lived, they held meetings and gatherings from time to time in addition to academic activities. Occasionally, prominent persons from Calcutta would come to hold discussions. Mr. Bose (Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose), the scientist, was a man of brilliant ability who possessed the greatest eloquence in Calcutta. I was told that he had invented wireless telegraphy prior to Marconi, but was subjected to oppression by the British authorities. In Mr. Bose's science class, the lecturer and listeners were separated by a barrier, so they could not see each other's faces. The purpose of this was to prevent delusions caused by

exchanging looks that would hinder unity between them. Mr. Bose thus demonstrated the worth of an Indian scientist.

One day, a drama based on Mr. Tagore's script was staged in the Bichitra, performed by the actors from the Tagores and Mr. Tagore himself. The plot was to satirize the situation in India. There was an old, declining princely state whose monarch, performed by Mr. Tagore, had sons and daughters. Their friends frequently came to their house. Though these friends appeared affable and honest, they sneaked the utensils and treasures into their pockets and pretended to be quite unconcerned. Some, like wolves, tried to prey upon the daughters. This is how the actors performed. Through the plot, it was revealed how Britain, acting like a gentleman, exploited Indian wealth. Mr. Tagore's ideas were represented with sharp irony and sarcasm by the actors who wore costumes that symbolized literature, music, art, and craft. The drama ended with a resounding voice: "Why do you not awaken?"

Those are a couple of short stories that highlight the unjust history of Britain and the resentment of a Japanese visitor toward it. They were deeply etched in my mind while I was in India.

Mr. Tagore always told me as follows. "All the servants in my house are without exception dogs tamed by the British. Even the letters I receive from Japan have been opened." It was almost obvious that he was kept under strict surveillance.

As is commonly known, Mr. Okakura Tenshin, Mr. Yokoyama Taikan, and Mr. Hishida Shunsō had established friendships with the Tagore family ten years before I did. In particular, Mr. Okakura worked tirelessly for the sake of India. He was a comrade and close friend of the son of Mr. Tagore's elder brother, the young revolutionary who accompanied me to the event at the aforementioned strange mansion. Mr. Okakura was ordered the expulsion by the British authorities on suspicion of inciting a revolutionary movement. When he was given that order, the Tagores faced danger for a period of time because a young betrayer attempted to divulge the plan of the movement to the British authorities. But, fortunately, a dagger of other young activist stabbed him right before the leak of secret information. The activist immediately killed himself, and is now enshrined as a god of India in a corner of Tagore's residence.

At Santiniketan, Western learning is completely excluded. This shows Mr. Tagore's antipathy toward the British.

When, after two full years, I bade farewell to the Tagore family, Mr. Tagore said to me, "Mr. Arai, you have come to know me well. When you return to Japan, please speak to those who misunderstand me and convey my true heart. Speak also, if possible, to the Prime Minister (Count Ōkuma was in charge at that time)."

"Okakura-sensei asserted that 'Asia is One.' I am with him on that. The final war would be the conflict between yellow and white races. Up until the time of the ongoing war (the First World War), Great Britain has been standing at a high position on the earth. After the war, Britain will begin to tilt, or is already tilting like a spinning globe, and will eventually fall to a lower rank. Which country will be the next to take the high position? It must be your country, Japan. In the East, Japan is now the only strong elder brother. He is followed by weak younger brothers, China, and then comes India. It is the duty of the strong elder brother to save his two weak younger brothers."

These were Mr. Tagore's words of farewell addressed right before I returned to Japan.

At my request for a commemorative poem, Mr. Tagore took the brush from my hand and composed the following one.

"Mr. Arai, you first entered my home
At the time of your departure, you have entered the home of my heart"

That was also the first time he took up a brush and ink.

Mr. Tagore passed away at the end of last year without knowing about the outbreak of the Greater East Asia War. But as a sage, he could hardly failed to foresee the coming of December 8.

Although it has been more than twenty years since I had closely associated with Mr. Tagore, I have never forgotten the way he looked. He was the embodiment of beauty shaped by divine workmanship, with gentle yet strong-willed eyes.

While making remarkable achievements in the Greater East Asia War, the leader of East Asia is urging India to stay true to their path. I expect that tens of

thousands of youths who have inherited the spirit of Gurudev Tagore will be resolute in taking action when the time comes.

Written at Amida-in of Hōryū-ji, Ikaruga in December of Shōwa 17 (1942).