

Tagore Response to Iranian Culture

Dr. R. K. Dasgupta

Scholar & Cultural Expert

When Rabindranath Tagore arrived in Iran on 13 April 1932 India's contact with that ancient land was about two thousand and five hundred years old. The Indian poet was acquainted with this long history of his country's relations with ancient and medieval Iran and was now happy to have a chance to visit her as she was stepping into the modern world. He was no less aware of his people's ethnic affinities with the inhabitants of the host country. Barely two years before his travels in Iran he had said in his Hibbert Lectures delivered in Oxford in 1930 and published as *The Religion of Man* the following years that 'it has been a matter of supreme satisfaction to me to realize that the purification of faith which was the mission of the great teachers in both communities, in Persia and in India, followed a similar line.'

To the twentieth century India, however, medieval Iran or Islamic Iran was closer due to the circumstances of history, That Darius annexed the Indus Valley in the sixth century B.C. was not historically important for the modern Indian and the only known souvenir of that ancient conquest was the use of the word satrap, for centuries, the Persian title for a provincial governor. That the Kharoshthi script, a variety of Aramaic bore a Persian influence, that some of the rituals of the Maurya court had Magian elements or that there was a Persian prototype for the Sarnath capital would now interest only the archaeologist. But in the literature and art of medieval Iran our people found a living and continuing source of inspiration. M. Grousset, the French savant called the Taj Mahal 'the soul of Iran incarnated in the body of India'. And no less powerful was the influence of the poetry of Omar Khayyam, Sa'adi, Rumi and Hafiz. While it is possible to understand the most vital features of Indian mystical verse in terms of a native spiritual tradition, the influence of Persian sufism certainly gave it a new dimension.

So when Tagore visited Iran he knew, as Jawaharla Nehru said 14 years later in his book 'The Discovery of India', (1946) that 'few people have been more closely related in origin and throughout history than the people of India and the people of Iran.' The intimacies between the two countries in the realm of poetry were stressed by the leader of an Iranian Cultural Mission to India on the eve of our independence: 'The Iranians and Indians are like two brothers who, according to a Persian legend, had got separated from each other, one going east and the other to the west. Their families had forgotten all about each other

and the only thing that remained in common between them were the snatches of a few old tunes, which they still played on their flutes. It was through these tunes that, after a lapse of centuries, the two families recognised each other and were reunited. So also we come to India to play on our flutes our age-old songs so that, hearing them, our Indian cousins may recognise us as their own and become reunited with their Iranian cousins.

Perhaps what attracted both Tagore and Nehru in modern Iran was that its modernity was rooted in its great past. In his *Glimpses of World History* published two years after Tagore's visit to Iran, Nehru said that 'Iran's National revival is in the true Iranian tradition of two thousand years. It looks back to the early days, prior to Islam, of Iran's greatness, and tries to draw its inspiration from them.' Seventeen years later the distinguished French historian of Iran, R. Shirsman remarked: 'Modern Iran has once again adopted the outward forms of Western civilisation, but in spirit remains faithful to its native traditions.'

It was this regenerated Iran building up a great future on the foundation of great past, receiving a good deal from the West and yet ever revitalizing its Eastern identity which discovered in Tagore an ideal for a new Asia in a new world. The first expression of this view of new Iran about the Indian poet is a tribute to him from Rahim Zadeh Safavi on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. 'The fruit of the Western civilisation is fragrant and gaudy' Safavi said in his tribute published in the *Golden Book of Tagore* (1931) 'but in the taste of humanity it has no pleasing savour and some say it ruins the health. Eyes were anxiously looking in every direction and the human soul was in quest of its lost Beloved. All of a sudden, from the East, yes from the everlasting East rose the resplendent sun greeting our eyes. India once more sent her divine Poet herald out to the world.'

The sentiments of the people of Iran about the poet were conveyed to him by Foroughi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in a message included in the *Golden Book of Tagore*. Soon after this the poet received an invitation to visit Iran. He recorded his impressions of Iran in two pieces of travelogue; *Parasyatra* (Trip to Persia) published in *Pravasi*, a Bengali magazine, in 1932 and *Parasyabhraman* (Travels in Persia) published in *Vichitra*, another Bengali magazine, the same year. A slightly abridged version of these two pieces was included in his book *Japane Parasye* (In Japan and Persia) in 1936. In 1963, the same version was issued as a separate book entitled *Parsya-yatri* (Journey to Iran) which gives in an appendix the portion of the original articles published in the two magazines and all addresses of welcome and the poet's replies which were in English. It also includes a picture of Tagore in Tehran on his birthday, and at the graves of Sa'adi and Hafiz in Shiraz, a facsimile of a poem composed by him in reply to an address presented to him on

the occasion of his seventy-first birthday celebrated in Tehran and a facsimile of the first page of the manuscript of the travelogue. English versions of the first and third chapter of the travelogue were published in the *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* as 'Journey to Persia' in 1937 and its second chapter appeared in *The Modern Review* as 'Asia's Response to the Call of the New Age' in 1932.

Arriving in Bushahr the poet realized that the Iranians were treating him as both an ethnic and spiritual kinsman. 'My relations with the Iranians have a speciality' he says in his travel-diary. 'First, I am an Indo-Aryan. The Iranians have been proud of their Aryan blood since ancient times and the feeling seems to be the stronger today. Secondly, it is believed that my poetry has affinities with Persian sufism.' In Bushahr where the poet stayed for two days there was a reception in his honour at which the governor of the province welcomed him as a 'representative of the descendants of the Indo-Iranian people and the symbol of whatever is beautiful and noble in the genius of the East'. 'The visit of Tagore to our country' said the governor in his address 'is significant as expression of liberal India's sensitive response to our intellectual achievement and her respect for our literature.' The governor also stressed the traditional bond between the two countries in philosophy, art and poetry and said that this bond would now be strengthened. In his reply the poet said that had he 'not visited Iran his life's pilgrimage would have been incomplete.' At a banquet in honour of the poet the governor called the poet the 'brightest star in the sky of the East which has cast its light on the whole world.'

Tagore had an occasion to express his thoughts on Persian poetry in reply to an address presented to him by the members of the Chamber of Commerce in that city. 'Persia's introduction came to me when I was a boy' the poet said. 'It was that of the ideal Persia, the Persia of the poets, the Persia which sends her welcome in songs to strangers across all barriers of geography. My father was intoxicated with Hafiz's verses. When I was a boy, I often used to listen to his recitation of those poems, and he translated them to me with a fervour of enjoyment that touched my heart. The vision of Persia was invoked in my imagination by the voice of our own poets who brought to my mind's sky the breath of your spring breeze with the enchantment of its blossoming roses and nightingale's songs. My arrival in your land today is therefore a continuation of the same enchantment and I am glad to mingle my voice with the rejoicing of life which has broken out in the air of your beautiful country fragrant with the perfume of orange blossoms. It brings to my mind once again how my father to the end of his days derived deep consolation from your poet's songs assimilating them in his devotional life.'

A very curious thing happened when the poet visited the grave of Hafiz in Shiraz. A large volume of Hafiz's poems was brought to the poet and he was asked to wish some thing

and then open it, the tradition being this that the page at which it was opened would indicate how the wish would be fulfilled. The poem on one of the two sides read: 'The gates of Heaven will open and with it the knots of all our problems. Can this be true? If due to our vain priests who only pretend to be religious they do not open after all, have faith in God who will open them. The poet was deeply touched by this fortuitous event, which reminded him, as he says in his travelogue, of the frowns of fanatic orthodoxy in his own country.

On 23rd April the poet arrived in Isfahan where he was received by its citizens at a very largely attended meeting. Amongst the guests was a village poet who presented to the poet this poem of his, composed for the occasion. The caravans of India always carry sugar, but this time it has the perfume of the muse. O caravan, please stop your march, because burning hearts are following these like the butterflies which burn a round the flame of candles.

O zephyr, softly blow and whisper on the tomb of Sa'adi. Thereupon in joy Sa'adi will come to life in his tomb. Tagore, he is the unique, the philosopher who knows what is past and what the future holds. Let his arrival be blessed and fortunate in the land of the great Cyrus, an august descendant of who today fortunately wear's the crown of Persia.' The poet reflected on Iran's genius for preserving its unity and its soul through the ages. 'It is a wonder' he writes in his travel- diary, 'that Persia has been attacked by the Arabs, the Turks, the Moguls, the Afghans and yet its soul has ever expressed itself in its true identity. The main reason of this seems to be this that the unity of the people has only been strengthened by their successive rulers, Achaemenian, Sassanian and Safavi. The inner unity of the nation is particularly reflected in the history of its architecture. In the architecture and sculpture of the Achaemenian period there is the influence of Assyrian, Babylonian and Egyptian art. Actually the palaces of those days were the work of artisans from different parts of vast empire. But the soul of Persia gave unity to all those diverse influences." the poet then quotes the words of Roger Fry on the character of Persian art' This extreme adaptability is, I think, a constant trait in Persian art. We tend, perhaps to exaggerate the importance or originality in art. we admire in it the expression of an independent and self contained people, forgetting that originality may arise from a want of flexibility in the artist's make-up as well as from a new imaginative outlook In his reply to an address of welcome presented to him in Isfahan by its Municipality on April 27 the poet said that when his friend Mr. Dinshaw conveyed about an invitation to him to visit Iran, he thought it was in keeping with the tradition of the East when the Emperors represented the humanity of their nation and accepted their duty to establish

communications with foreign lands. The revival of this spirit in modern Iran has given me a new hope for Asia.'

On May 6 the scholars and writers of Tehran celebrated the poet's seventy first birthday at a very impressive function. The poet composed a poem to mark the occasion and it is included in the appendix to his book *verse called parihesh* as included in the fifteenth Volume of his complete works.

Iran all the roses in the garden and all their lower birds have acclaimed the birthday of the poet of a far- away shore and mingled their voices in a poem of rejoicing. Iran, thy brave sons have brought their priceless gifts of friendship. For they have known him in their hearts and their own. Iran, crowned with a new glory by the honour from thy hand this birthday of the poet of far-away shore. On this birthday of the poet of a far- away shore, finds its fulfillment.

And in return I bind this wreath of my verse on thy forehead, and cry: Victory to Iran.

On May 9 Tagore spoke at the Tehran Literary society giving his impressions of his travel in the country. 'I had some knowledge of Persia even before my coming. I had read something of your history and geography, and formed some idea of your people and your country. My imagination was aroused though your great poets whose call had come to me even though I had no direct access to them. I used to dream of Persia where bulbul made love to the roses, where in dreamland gardens poets sat round their wine cups and invoked visions of ineffable meaning. But now that I have come to your country my dream has been formed into a concrete image. The past age of Persia lent the World perfume of its own sunny hours or spring to the morning of that day and the silent voice of your ancient poet filled the silence in the heart of the poet of Modern India'.

On May 13 the eve of his departure from Iran, the poet summed up his impressions of modern Iran in a statement to a Danish journalist In Baghdad: 'Persia has been a great inspiration to me. The whole country is marching on a head very fast, Persia is being unified; baffling customs and superstitions ruthlessly eliminated; her educational and social foundations are being securely established on same healthy nationalism which is in harmony with the modern age Deeply touched by Tagore's admiration for the culture of Iran the government of Iran promised to endow a Chair for Persian in Visva- Bharti and conveying that decision to the poet the Iranian Foreign Minister wrote: 'Cultural and spiritual bonds have been in existence between Iran and India from very ancient days; but your visit to this land has renewed and strengthened these already existing bonds, which will be of mutual benefit for both countries.' Tagore gratefully accepted the gift and said

in a letter to the Foreign Minister that 'it was only worthy of the greatness of your nation and a most hopeful sign of the revival in Asia of the munificent spirit of her past.'

When the first incumbent of this Chair of Persian Culture in Visva- Bharti arrived in Santiniketan in January 1933 Tagore said in an address of welcome that 'in different chapters of our history India has communed with your' culture; through art and literature and philosophy we have built up a comradeship of civilization. These were the golden days of Asia's well expression, when in spite of barriers of language and distance her neighboring continents carried on a commerce of the spirit: rich in the wealth of realization, of wisdom garnered from many fields of effort and achievement.

Tagore's view of the Westernization of modern Iran is stated in the course of a conversation with a member of the Iranian Parliament published in *New Asia* in 1947. When this member of Parliament asked him about Iranian music he said that although he did not quite understand some of its features which should influence the west he would welcome such influence because Iran had a wonderful gift for assimilating influences from outside and coming out more fully with the expression of your own unique culture. In music, too you are sure to gain by European influence. But there was disagreement with a Member of the Parliament regarding how far Iran should be Americanized. The Member of Parliament said that he was one of those who believe that Persia should assimilate 100 percent of American culture. The poet observed 'when you speak of hundred percent Americanization you must remember that America herself is faced today with an imminent crisis and has yet to achieve a stability which will prove the soundness of her social and political machinery.'

Now more than forty years after Tagore's visit to Iran, his response to her culture deserves our attention as a very significant aspect of our relations with the rest of Asia. The Asian awakening in the first two decades of this century, in so far as India has a share in it, was, by and large, the result of the Japanese victory over the Russians in the war between the two countries in 1905.

That victory gave us a new self-confidence and encouraged us to believe in the possibility of throwing out our white colonial masters. On the cultural side, our interest was concentrated on South East-Asia and we were particularly happy about archeological searches in our country and abroad, "which stressed the influence of our culture on the Far East. Obviously, this was due to our colonial situation which prompted us to exalt our past if only to neutralize the ignominy of our present. We were irresponsive to the culture of the Middle East although historically we were so close to it.

The influence of the Perso-Arabic words was certainly profounder and more pervasive on our life and letters than the influence of China or Japan. In Bengali about two thousand and five hundred words are derived from Persia which was the language of our administration till 1838. But the educated Bengali would know more of what India gave to Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia, China and Japan than of what she received from Iran. It is not unlikely that this indifference is mainly due to the communal situation in the country. The significance of Tagore's response to the culture of Iran is that it is the first instance of a serious attention to the culture of the Middle East in modern India. And it is a response which is not in the least warped by any sense of culture chauvinism or intellectual snobbishness. And it seems so important to remember that just ten years before Tagore's tribute to the work of Iran in the regeneration of Asia, C.R. Das had spoken of a 'Great Asiatic Federation' in his presidential address at the thirty-seventh session of the Indian National Congress held in Gaya in 1922. At the next session of the Congress Maulana Mohammed Ali suggested the organization of an Eastern Federation. Sarojini Naidu, Srinivasa Aiyenger and M. A. Ansari in their presidential addresses at the annual sessions of the Congress in 1925, 1926 and 1927 respectively stressed the need for Asian Unity and in 1929, only three years before Tagore's visit to Iran, Nehru spoke of an Asian federation in his historic address at the Karachi session of the Congress. 'If India has a message to give to the world' he said 'she has alone to receive and learn much more from the message of other peoples.'

Perhaps we have not given much evidence of such receptivity except that we have a flair for imitating the West. And even when we are inclined to turn to our Asian neighbors we turn more towards South East Asia than towards the West Asia or the Middle East. M. A. Ansari said in his presidential address I have mentioned that 'Fortunately we are so placed that a part of our population has cultural affinities with countries in the West of Asia while another has a similar relationship with countries living in the East of the continent. 'But this may not be really a good fortune for us. A nation's cultural relations with foreign countries should have the unity which it wishes to realize in its own culture. It would be fatal to imagine that only our Muslims can be interested in the culture of Iran while Hindu India alone can be interested in the culture of South-East Asia. I fear this kind of division of intellectual interests smogify, and to re-transmit.

This is what Tagore repeatedly affirms in his book on Iran. In a more recent work *The Cambridge History of Islam* published in 1970 Professor E. Yarshater stresses the Iranian respect for tradition even in change which prompted the princes of the Samanid dynasty to receive or encourage 'many old Persian customs' to give expression to the widespread of not always vocal, desire of many Persians for a distinct national identity. This again is

what Tagore mentions with great force in his travelogue. Sixteen years before Tagore's visit to Iran Sir Jadunath Sarkar wrote in his History of Aurangzeb that 'The Persian have been rightly called the Frenchmen of the East', their country has been the springhead of culture, thought, and fashion of the entire Islamic world. 'Tagore look upon that country as the home of a culture which was of universal interest. If now more than thirty years after the poet's death, we feel the need for a new intellectual basis for our cultural relations with Iran we will find it in what he said about that country in his Journey to Persia.