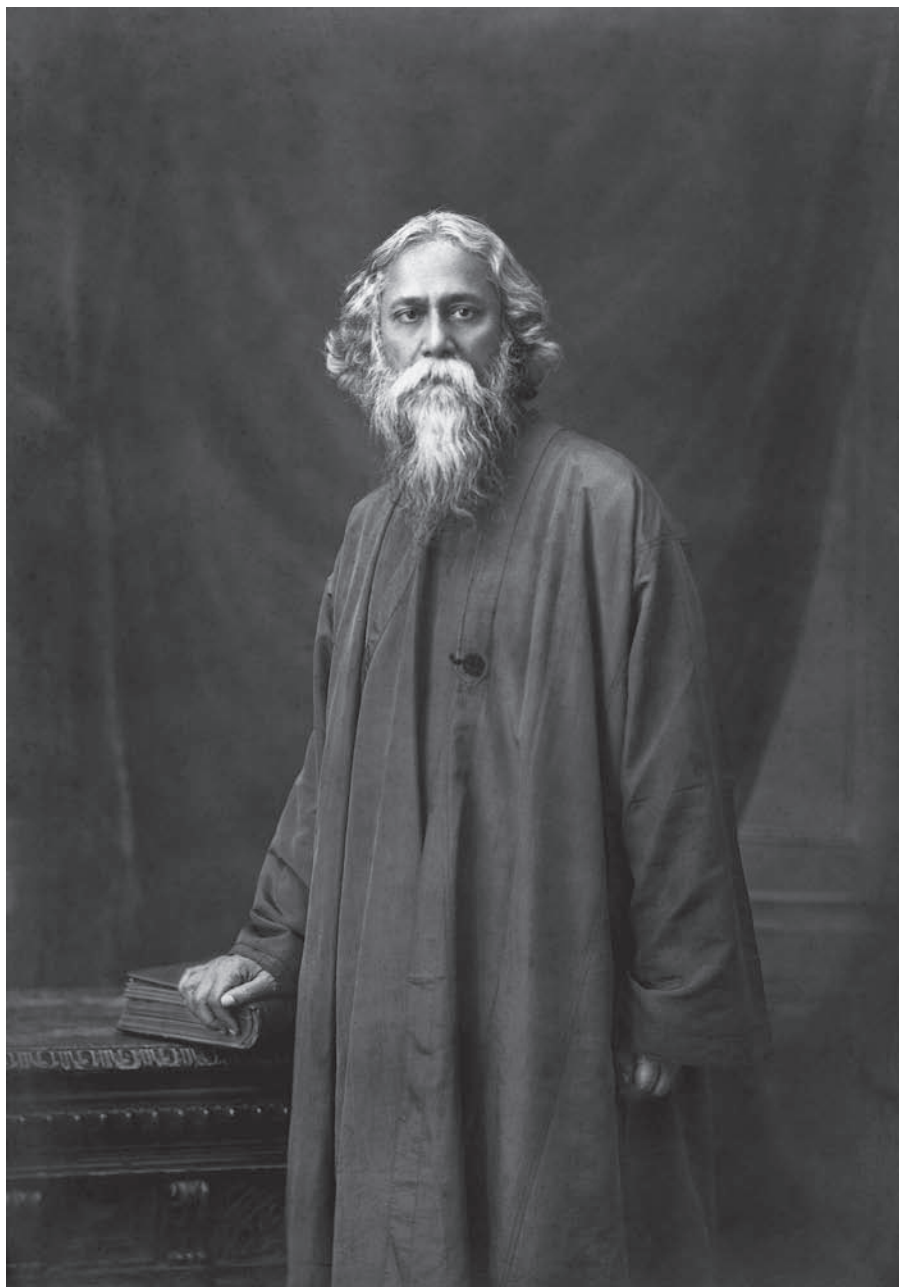




Rabindranath Tagore's Contributions to Thailand and the World



Picture 1

Rabindranath Tagore

All Tagore's photographs by courtesy of the Embassy of India to Thailand.

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Rabindranath Tagore's Contributions to Thailand and the World

Srisurang Poolthupya

Fellow of the Royal Institute, Academy of Arts

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's winning the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 boosted the morale and spirit of Asian races in the early 20th Century. Tagore's creative achievements and contributions to the world, and Thailand in particular, will be discussed in the fields of literature, education, religious philosophy, and women's emancipation. His literary works appeal to the people internationally due to his spirituality, cosmopolitanism and universality. His words remain meaningful through translations into various languages. When requested by the Thai intelligentsia to send an Indian scholar to promote understanding between Thailand and India, he soon sent Swami Satyananda Puri, who promoted the cultural activities between Thais and Indians by setting up an association of Thais and Indians in Thailand, now known as the Thai-Bharat Cultural Lodge.

Key words: Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, cosmopolitanism, Swami Satyananda Puri

Introduction

The year 2011 is the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, dramatist, writer, artist, and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. During the early decades of the 20th Century, there were two events that had great impact in Asia: one, mostly for nationalists and freedom fighters, was Japan's victory over Russia in 1905; the other event was, especially for lovers of culture, Rabindranath Tagore winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Japan, an Asian country, could conquer a European power, while Tagore was the first Asian to win the prestigious Nobel Prize. The two events boosted the morale and spirit of Asian races who were then generally looked down upon by Westerners. While Japan's victory over Tsarist Russia inspired



freedom fighters, Tagore inspired both nationalists and lovers of culture. One important reason for Tagore's winning the Nobel Prize was that his poetry had a universal appeal and an 'idealistic tendency' as stipulated by Alfred Nobel, who created this prize. Tagore's poetry transcends the Indian border and can be understood universally. His idealism inspires readers of all nationalities including the Thai people.

Tagore's background

Rabindranath Tagore was born on 7 May 1861 at his family residence named Jorashanko (the Twin Bridges) in north Calcutta (now called Kolkata). He was the fourteenth child and the youngest son of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. Tagore gave up formal studies at the age of thirteen (de Bary, 1966: vol. II, 231). This gave him time to explore knowledge by himself and to experiment with writing verse.



Picture 2
In front of Tagore's house



His extended pilgrimage of four months with his father to Amritsar and the Himalayas during his youth also had much formative influence on Rabindranath. He became closer to his father whose religious views helped shape Rabindranath's outlook on life. "Daily walks and daily lessons were followed by informal and formative discussions in the quiet evenings." (Ray, 1967: 31) The idea of learning outside classrooms and the love of travelling in his later life must have originated from this pilgrimage. Tagore died in 1941 at the age of eighty.

Tagore's contributions to Thailand and the world

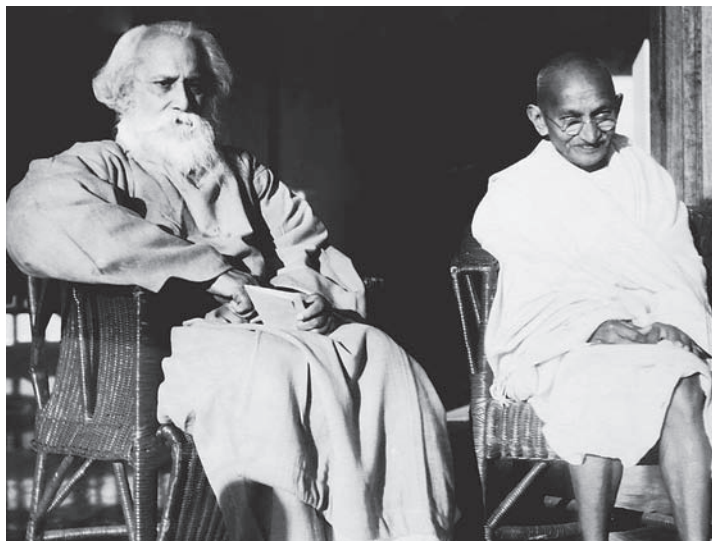
Tagore's poetry and other literary works, as well as speeches during his numerous visits to Europe, Asia and the Americas, are inspiring to the world. However, here I shall write mainly about Tagore's visit to Thailand and his direct and indirect cultural contributions to Thailand and Asia. Apart from literature, Tagore has contributed much in the fields of education, religious philosophy and women's emancipation. Of course, he has done much more than these but I have neither time nor space to enumerate. His works will be cited field by field. Some of his contributions will be cited from time to time to substantiate my statements.

Literature

Rabindranath Tagore is most famous in the field of literature. His prolific works as well as his personality inspire or bring about further richness in literary and cultural activities. Tagore's earliest works were written between the age of thirteen to nineteen. Although *The Padavalis of Bhanu Singh* was considered by Tagore himself as good enough to be published in book form, literary critics often considered *The Evening Songs* to be his first real book (Ray, 1969: 39-40). Tagore wrote these songs at Chandernagore (Chandranagar) when he was about nineteen. Apart from poetry, he also wrote many worthy novels and plays. His first novel, *Karuna*, was about the problems of love and marriage. It was written before he went to England at the age of seventeen. When he was twenty, he wrote his famous poem *The Awakening of the Fountain*, which expressed "his spiritual enlightenment that illumined the whole of his consequent life" (Ray, 1969: 41). Tagore could master his latent powers and emotional drives so that he could recreate and make full



use of his imagination, he had discovered an occupation compatible with his personality and inner need. In *Morning Songs*, the joy of life was expressed, which proved that Tagore was going against the traditional Indian outlook on life i.e. the rejection of the world. Rabindranath Tagore has enriched the literary world with poetical works, novels, plays, short stories, tales, essays, thoughtful addresses and lectures, about two hundred and sixty titles altogether. Mahatma Gandhi called Tagore “Gurudev” because his works are divine and inspiring spiritually.



Picture 3

Tagore with Mahatma Gandhi

Rabindranath Tagore is also praised as the “Wizard of Words,” words which remain meaningful through translations into various languages of the world. For example, if we read Tagore’s *Gitanjali*, the poetic work that won him the Nobel Prize, either in Thai or English translation, we shall feel spiritually uplifted. Of course, the original work in Bengali, his native tongue, may be the best, if we are lucky enough to know that beautiful language. The Irish poet W.B. Yeats wrote in his introduction to *Gitanjali* as follows:

“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 life long. (Tagore, 1970b: xiii)



However, if we read any book of Tagore's poetry, we shall be spiritually uplifted in the same way. For example, Tagore's *Fruit-Gathering* inspires me even though I cannot get the entire meaning from the English translation, because poems are to be felt, not just read. Let me quote poem IV to illustrate what I mean:

"I woke and found his letter with the morning.
I do not know what it says, for I cannot read.
I shall leave the wise man alone with his books,
I shall not trouble him, for who knows if he can read what the letter says.
Let me hold it to my forehead and press it to my heart.
When the night grows still and stars come out one by one
I will spread it on my lap and stay silent.
The rustling leaves will read it aloud to me,
The rushing stream will chant it, and the seven wise stars will sing it to me from the sky.
I cannot find what I seek, I cannot
understand what I would learn; but this unread letter
has lightened my burdens and turned my thoughts into songs."

(Tagore, 1927: 4-5)

Education

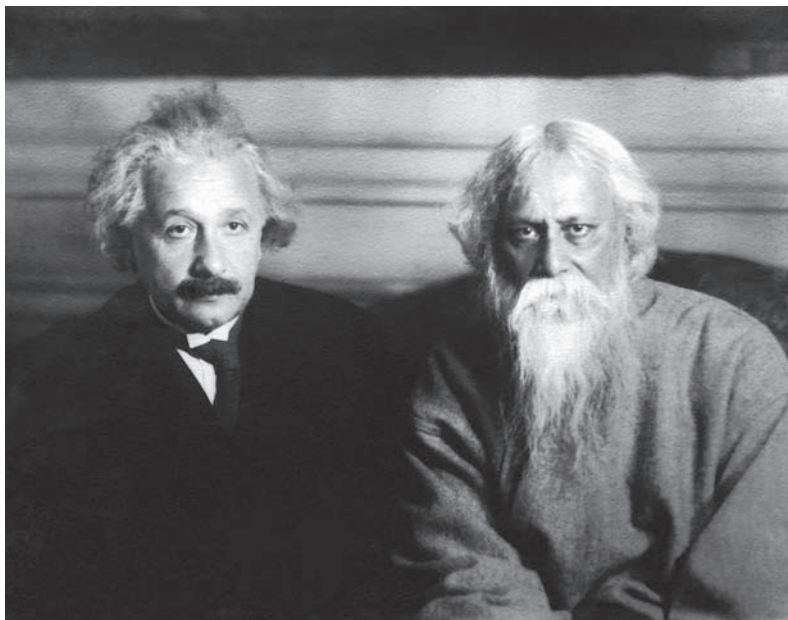
Rabindranath Tagore's view on education is widely accepted and put into practice especially at Santiniketan while he was still alive. His idea behind the founding of Vishva-Bharati University in Santiniketan in 1918 was to make the place "a rendezvous for Western and Asian scholars and a conduit between Asia's past and present, so that the ancient learning might be rejuvenated through contact with modern thinking." (Dutta & Robinson, 1995: 220) Vishva-Bharati University became a reality in 1919. Its nucleus comprised three departments: fine arts, music and indology. The Department of Indology was founded for the study of Buddhist literature, Vedic and Classical Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and later on, Tibetan and Chinese. This department remains popular with foreign students and scholars up to the present. Many Thai students have studied here.



One of the most famous cultural figures in Thailand who studied at Vishva-Bharati University was Karuna Kusalasaya (1920-2009), who came to know India and Indian culture very well. Together with his wife, Professor Ruang Urai Kusalasaya, he translated many worthy works from India including Tagore's, so that the Thai people can learn easily about India and Indian culture. Purnendu Kumar Banerjee, then Ambassador of India to Thailand, wrote in his Foreword to the Thai translation of *Gitanjali*, published in 1969, as follows: "Mr. Karuna has spent years in India and at Santiniketan which is a living monument to Gurudev's concept of education" (Karuna and Ruang Urai Kusalasaya, 1974: no page number). Karuna went to study at Vishva-Bharati Santiniketan University in 1939. He studied Sanskrit and Indology. Although his studies were interrupted by the Great East Asian War, which began on December 8, 1941, leading to his arrest on February 8, 1942, to be imprisoned as "an enemy alien," his time of studies at Santiniketan was fruitful. Karuna related in his autobiographical book, *Life Without A Choice* (Kusalasaya, 1991: 91-92) as follows:

"At the time I was in Santiniketan, Poet Rabindranath Tagore was already in the ripe old age of about 80 years. He did not himself teach as before but still acted as the Grand Old Man radiating fatherly influence on every aspect of the institution. I had met and entered into conversation with him during which he spoke of his visit to Siam in B.E. 2470 (1927) during the reign of King Rama VII. He was so kind as to give me an autographed photograph of himself."

Education at Santiniketan is for both men and women. Women can pursue the same courses as male students. Dhammananda Bhikkhuni (Dr.Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) also studied at Vishva-Bharati University where she had happy and enriching experience.



Picture 4

Tagore with Albert Einstein

Religious Philosophy

According to the Life Magazine of May 8, 1961, Tagore was “a poet, painter, philosopher, he left his mark on the entire world.” Although he was born a Hindu, he recognized the good of every religion. Apparently he had studied all outstanding religions in the world including Buddhism. Yet he looked at religions from a philosopher’s angle. He respected the cultural diversity while he transcended or went beyond religions. He stressed the importance of spirituality. “Rabindranath’s mission is – the divinization of man and the humanizing of God” (India Perspectives, 24 No. 2/2010: 64). This can be done by putting the concepts of beauty and love into his writings to bring man and God closer together.

Tagore was influenced by Brahmo Samaj’s teaching. As many Thais may not be familiar with Brahmo Samaj, let me try to explain briefly the concept of Brahmo Samaj, especially in connection with Rabindranath Tagore. Modern Indians respect the Hindu religion because it is their national heritage. Yet most of them object to some unreasonable Hindu customs. Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), known as the Father of Modern India, wrote:



“I do no more than assert that if correct reasoning and the dictates of common sense induce the belief of a wise, uncreated Being who is the supporter and ruler of the boundless universe, we should also consider him, the most powerful and supreme existence, – far surpassing our powers of comprehension or description.” (de Bary, 1966: vol. II, 22-23) Roy believed that Hinduism, especially as expressed in the Vedas, preaches the Universal God. Roy started to purify the ancient belief of thoughtless and unreasonable customs such as the caste system. Rammohun Roy established Brahmo Samaj (the Society of the Worshippers of God) in 1828-30. After his death, Brahmo Samaj was supported by Dwarkanath Tagore, Roy’s close friend, and later on, by Dwarkanath’s son, Debendranath Tagore who was Rabindranath Tagore’s father. Debendranath Tagore set down eighteen principles for his followers. In the first principle he said:

“The Brahmo religion is a spiritual religion. Its seed-truth is this: by the soul shall thou know the Supreme Soul. When God is seen in the soul, then, indeed, is He seen everywhere. The dearest dwelling-place of Him who is the root of all this complexity, the One Sovereign of all this universe, is the soul of man. If ye know not the soul, then all is empty. The soul is the knowledge of God.” (de Bary, 1966: vol. II, 59-60)

As already mentioned earlier, Rabindranath also knew well about Buddhism. In his poetry, one can see the influence of Brahmo Samaj’s teaching and Buddhist philosophy clearly. Let me quote a few lines from his poem “*To the Buddha*”:

“Thou giver of immortal gifts,
give us the power of dedication,
claim from us our greed and pride of self.”

While people usually pray to the Buddha for wealth, health and long life, Tagore prayed for the power of dedication, power to get rid of greed and pride. His aim is the universal good, not personal gain. From reading Tagore’s works, one can feel his underlying religious philosophy. He was a truth seeker and his message is the universal truth.

Women’s emancipation

The persistent belief that women are of the inferior sex, still current in India of Tagore’s time, was unacceptable to Tagore. Many of his works, especially his plays, show that Tagore was concerned with raising the status of



women. He was concerned with widows' plights, the unfair dowry system and women's education or the lack of it.

The ancient scripture *Manu Smriti* says: "Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, her sons protect her in old age – a woman does not deserve independence." (de Bary, 1966: vol. I, 228). Tagore, however, picked up a character, Chitrangada, from the epic Mahabharata to symbolize an ideal woman. In his drama Chitrangada asked Arjuna, "If I stand up straight and strong with the strength of a daring heart spurning the wiles and arts of twining weakness, if I hold my head high like a tall young mountain fir, no longer trailing in the dust like a liana, shall I then appeal to man's eye? ... Would it please your heroic soul if the playmate of the night aspired to be the helpmate of the day, if the left arm learnt to share the Burden of the proud right arm?" (Tagore, 1970a: 51)

In *The Home And the World*, Tagore tells the story through three characters who see things from their perspectives. The modern husband, Nikhil, wishes to educate his wife Bimala by getting a lady tutor, Miss Gilby, to teach his wife. He also takes her out of Purdah or seclusion into the real world. Tagore's educational essays also show his concern that men and women should have equal opportunities in acquiring knowledge.



Picture 5
Travelling Tagore



Tagore's contribution to Thailand

Rabindranath Tagore visited Thailand at the invitation of Indian and Chinese residents in 1927. However, he was welcomed as a guest of the Thai government. He and his party stayed at the Phyathai Palace Hotel, which was formerly King Rama VI's palace, now Phra Mongkut Klao Hospital. Tagore seemed to be impressed how the Thais had preserved Indian culture better than Indians themselves as can be seen from the following lines of his poem "*To Siam*".

"I come, a pilgrim, at thy gate, O Siam,
to offer my verse to the endless glory of India
sheltered in thy home, away from her own deserted shrine,
To bathe in the living stream that flows in thy heart,
whose water descends from the snowy height
of a sacred time on which arose, from the deep of
my country's being, the Sun of Love and Righteousness."

(Kusalasaya, Karuna-Ruang Urai, 2001: 42)

Rabindranath Tagore had an audience with King Rama VII (King Prajadhipok). Both the King and H.R.H. Prince Dhani Niwat, Minister of Education, requested Tagore to send an Indian scholar to reside in Thailand permanently so as to bring Thailand and India closer together through the scholar's help in promoting the cultural understanding. Tagore did not forget this request.

Thus Tagore's indirect cultural contribution, especially to Thailand, was when he recommended Swami Satyananda Puri to come to Thailand in 1932. Swami Satyananda was a good choice, his cultural activities being numerous. Here, I would like to remark just on his book "*Ramakirti*" which relates in English the whole story of the Ramakien of King Rama I. His English is so perfect that the Ramakirti becomes a creative work worthy of reading for those non-Thais who wish to learn about the Thai Ramayana. Swami Satyananda Puri also set up a cultural association, now known as the Thai-Bharat Cultural Lodge, where Thais and Indians can meet. It has a very good library. Yoga is taught by an Indian expert. Other activities such as Hindi classes are organized according to the needs of members and guests.



Picture 6

Tagore with H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab in Thailand

by courtesy of the Ministry of Culture

Rabindranath Tagore's literary works are universal and timeless. Yet also manifest in them is Indian culture. They promote good will and good understanding among nations. They can be understood by all as these literary works are universal and cosmopolitan in thought and not confined to India alone. They truly promote truth, peace and love among human beings in the whole world. Though we are now in the 21st century, Rabindranath Tagore's works are still relevant. If one reads "The Voice of Humanity", Tagore's address given in Milan, Italy, one will find that his words still ring true:

"Only those races will prosper who, for the sake of their own perfection and permanent safety, are ready to cultivate the spiritual magnanimity of mind that enables the soul of man to be realized in the heart of all races". (Tagore, 1970c: 146). In addition, do not forget that, for Rabindranath Tagore, all art forms and creative thoughts are equally important, be they poetry, music, painting, stories, essays, lectures. They can inspire and help anyone to "cultivate the spiritual magnanimity of mind."



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