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Book Review: *Rabindranath Tagore* by Bashabi Fraser. Suparna Banerjee.

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***Rabindranath Tagore* by Bashabi Fraser (Reaktion Books, London, 2019)**

**Reviewed by Suparna Banerjee**

Rabindranath Tagore, who was the first non-Westerner to win the Nobel Prize in literature, is still among the most famous Indians the world over. Along with M.K. Gandhi, he had been one of the most powerful influences that shaped the consciousness of modern India. And India, as an emerging global power and the largest democracy, is both important and interesting to the world. Therefore, any attempt to reappraise the life and times of Tagore in today's global context would be a valuable enterprise for the writer and the reader alike. Bashabi Fraser's *Rabindranath Tagore* is thus a welcome addition to Tagoreana—one that makes significant contributions to an understanding of the formation of Tagore and of the ways in which he formed modern India.

One of the defining features of Fraser's biography of Tagore is the strong emphasis it puts on the familial and social contexts of his life and work. In producing a narrative of Tagore's life Fraser also offers us a rich account of the cultural and political ambience of the Bengal of those times, indicating the illustrious Tagore family's role in the Bengal renaissance and analysing the formative influences on Tagore. This way, Fraser spins a holistic biography of the myriad-minded Tagore, one that throws light not only on the trajectory of his intellectual development but also on his emotional life, his family life, and his roles as an educationist and a rural reformer. It is this focus on creating an integrated account of a varied life and of a rich mind that is the cornerstone of Fraser's achievement as a biographer, one that complements the work of earlier biographers, like Dutta and Robinson (1995).

Another focus of Fraser's biography is on the Nobel laureate's self-assumed function as a global ambassador of peace and international cooperation and a champion of East-West confluence. The way she brings out Tagore's complex engagement with the seemingly opposed impulses towards Indian independence and global cooperation—towards nationalistic pride and

admiration of British culture—is rather interesting, and this forms one of the finer points of the book.

The biography unfolds through twelve chapters, starting from an account of the ancestral family of Tagore that traces the roots of their unconventionality and dynamism to their social history. Then comes an engaging description of Rabindranath's childhood in the bustling Tagore household that gives us a sense of the matrix in which child Rabi's sensitive, lonely mind germinated. Also, we are given an idea of how Tagore came to develop a taste for freedom. In the course of the book we see how this predilection for freedom—personal, political, and of the mind—characterised Tagore's words and actions.

The life-narrative thereafter progresses through concise yet enlightening accounts of Tagore's visit to England for education, the years spent as the overseer of the family's estates at Silaidaha, his educational innovations and rural reconstruction work around Shantiniketan and Sriniketan in Bolpur, his being catapulted onto the world stage after the Nobel win, his involvement with the Indian nationalist movement and the renunciation of knighthood in the wake of the Amritsar massacre, and his late years in Shantiniketan as the "Gurudev" of his "ashram". In the course of this well laid-out narrative we get a fair glimpse of a life less ordinary, marked by a constant and varied creativity, diverse practical activities on the local, national, and global levels, and interesting meeting of minds in the form of acquaintances with outstanding men and women of the times, including William Rothenstein, C. F. Andrews, Romain Rolland, W. B. Yeats, Albert Einstein, Jagadish Chandra Bose and, above all, M. K. Gandhi.

Indeed, one high point of the book is Fraser's delineation of the relationship and the exchange of ideas between Tagore and Gandhi in chapter nine. What emerges is a dialectic of deep mutual respect and honest intellectual interchange on a range of socio-political issues—like the ethical valence of non-cooperation as a political tool, the desirability of nationalistic traditionalism, and the right approach towards modern science. Despite Tagore's differences with Gandhi over these issues, they met on a level, we learn, as humanists who believed in the moral worth of the principle of non-violence and as fellow countrymen deeply interested in the upliftment of the poverty stricken, uneducated masses of India.

Another point of especial interest to Tagore enthusiasts would be Fraser's rendition, in chapter one, of the much maligned relationship between the poet and Kadamvari Devi, his youngest sister-in-law or "*Chhoto Bouthan*". The unconventional bond was marked by Kadamvari's nurturance and mental stimulation of the budding poet and an ardent admiration and devotion on the part of Tagore. It was a rare sort of friendship that was at once exalted and homely, cerebral and emotional. Fraser brings out the elusive beauty of their bond in a way that should do much to remove the stigma some people still like to attach to it.

The penultimate chapter brings out Tagore's modernity as a champion of international exchange and cooperation, East-West confluence, techno-scientific development, and a forward looking sense of what today we call environmentalism. We are also shown how, despite being in favour of scientific advancement and confluence of cultures, Tagore foresaw the dangers, physical and cultural, of rampant modernisation and the blind aping, in Asia, of Western mores and modes.

The final chapter takes stock of the legacy of Tagore in India and abroad, giving an account of his towering presence in Bengal and the rest of India and of the highs and lows of his reception in the West. Fraser highlights here the relevance of Tagore's globalist humanism and his warning against strident nationalism to the world of today, riven with ultra-nationalistic competition, violence, and ethnic hatred.

Fraser's life of Tagore, in all, is a well-researched biography that offers a much needed reappraisal of Tagore's life and times in the light of today's India and the contemporary world. Now that Asian Studies and Indology are well established as academic subjects, this fresh look at the life and legacy of one of Asia's greatest thought leaders is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to scholarship in these fields. However, the largely jargon-free vocabulary and the overall lucidity of the prose will let the volume appeal also to a broader audience. The many rare photos of Tagore, alone or in company, that adorn the pages of the book make it a collector's item. If we believe, with Thomas Carlyle, that "a well-written Life is almost as rare as a well-spent one", then Fraser has achieved a rare feat indeed.

#### Works Cited

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