PAN ASIANISM AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE’S IDEAL OF A COMMON ASIAN CIVILISATION

by Dr. Ruby Maloni
About Penang Story Lectures

The Penang Story Lecture Series aims to create awareness about Penang’s history and heritage. The theme this year is “Penang in Global History” focusing on the role the people of Penang played in local, regional and global histories. Equally fascinating is Penang as a place, a refuge and centre for knowledge development and intellectual movements.

The lecture series also aims to explore Penang’s unique “place-identity” and strengthen the enabling factors that continue to make Penang attractive to talent. These public lectures examine a particular theme from a multi-disciplinary perspective.
Foreword

The Penang Story Initiative: Local, Regional and Global Histories

With UNESCO World Heritage Site Inscription in 2008 and the growing awareness about cultural heritage issues, this new chapter of the Penang Story not only continues to celebrate cultural diversity but expands to include a re-discovery of Penang’s place in local, regional and global history. There will be a special emphasis on Penang as a place of “conjunctions, confluences and contestations”; highlighting the cosmopolitan society that contributed to the making of Penang’s “spirit of place”; and all this by concentrating on Penang’s multi-ethnic community and their contribution to local, regional and global histories.

The Penang Story is an open platform for all those with an interest in Penang from different parts of the world to contribute towards “deepening” the story. The project’s focus is not only on events and people but also on other intangible heritage involving foodways, economic activities, values and beliefs, education and all other aspects related to George Town’s “Outstanding Universal Values”.

The Penang Story will build a greater sense of solidarity amongst locals particularly stakeholders in George Town. It will also deepen the public’s understanding of Penang’s role as a place attractive to talent and a home where ideas germinate and return to influence world affairs. This will boost the sense of possibility so important to Penang’s civil society movement. Lastly, we hope that Penang Story will encourage communities to become proud of their own heritage whilst engendering great respect for the traditions and history of other communities. Ultimately, all communities will become aware of having contributed to Penang’s development and progress.

Dato’ Anwar Fazal
Chairman
Penang Story
About the Speaker

DR. RUBY MALONI is Professor of History at the University of Mumbai. She is an alumnus of both Calcutta University and Mumbai University, having done her graduation from the former institution, and obtained the Masters and Doctoral degree from the latter. She has published extensively on Modern India and Medieval India, particularly on aspects of the socio-economic history of India. She is the author of ‘European Merchant Capital and the Indian Economy’, among other books. She has contributed articles to several national and international journals, such as ‘Itinerario: European Journal of Overseas History’, published at Leiden University, Netherlands. Her research article, ‘Satyendanath Tagore’s “Bombai Chitra”: Bombay Presidency in the Nineteenth Century’, has been published in ‘State Intervention and Popular Response: Western India in the Nineteenth Century’, a work co-edited by Ruby Maloni and Mariam Dossal.

Dr. Ruby Maloni’s area of specialisation is ‘The Indian Ocean and Maritime Trade’. Recently, she has been awarded ‘Recognition for Excellence’ by the University of Mumbai. Her research work is frequently cited by noted Indian as well as foreign scholars. She is currently engaged in several research projects, including ‘The socio-cultural trajectories parallel to commerce in the Indian Ocean Region’.
Moderator

HIMANSHU BHATT is a veteran journalist based in Penang. His range of writings and news reports cover a wide array of issues, including politics, arts, business as well as special features on society and culture. He was previously the news editor of The Sun daily before joining FZ.com where he currently writes. A scholarship graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, Himanshu is also involved in Penang’s theatre industry. He is the director of the Cape Poetics Circle, an independent arts concern focused on literature and drama.
Abstract

Pan-Asianism and Rabindranath Tagore’s Ideal of a common Asian civilization.

In the words of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), “If Asian civilization constituted a great reservoir of spiritual power, and if modern civilization was about to destroy humanity itself, then it must be from a regenerated Asia that man’s salvation would come.” This statement of a visionary has great relevance today, when the quest for peace continues unabated in a world riven by conflict and aggression.

The kind of Pan-Asianism to which Tagore subscribed was of a community that sought to transcend the territorial nation-state and redeem and regenerate the world through Eastern spiritual morality. However idealistic this may be, Tagore’s view of Pan-Asianism reflects a trend towards a future world order dominated by large regional blocs, replacing the existing order characterized by the sovereign super power.

Visits of the celebrated poet and first Asian Nobel Laureate to Japan and China created a deep impact. Tagore spoke on several occasions in favor of Pan-Asian unity. Despite some criticism, he drew crowds wherever he went. Unlike other Asianists of his time, Tagore also wanted to spread the message among Islamic Asia, visiting West Asia in 1920.
Tagore's house in Jorasanko in Bengal became the hub of Asian idealists like Okakura and Coomaraswamy. In 1921 Viswa Bharati was founded, as the first institute of Asian culture, with a department of Sino-Indian Studies, which continues to flourish. His poetry, particularly 3 Haiku poems, and lectures, such as on ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, further elaborated his Pan-Asian sentiments.

Tagore’s perspective needs to be understood along with other Pan-Asianists like President Sukarno and Sun Yat-sen. Asian intellectuals observed the intrusion of the West, and the interface of Western modernity and Asian traditions. While it has been held that modern Asian identities emerged only with the process of decolonization, undoubtedly, the central event of the last century was the intellectual and political awakening of Asia.

Pan-Asianism is important for the contemporary global debate, as global power shifts towards the East. The critical question is how Asian thinkers will and leaders react to their region’s power shift and renewed capacity to assume world leadership.
Excerpt from

“SATYENDRANATH TAGORE’S ‘BOMBAY CHITRA’: BOMBAY PRESIDENCY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY”

by Dr. Ruby Maloni
Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923) is remembered as the first Indian to break into the stronghold of the Indian Civil Service. But his other claim to distinction was his deep interest in social reform and the national movement. In 1867, he took active part in the Hindu Mela organized by his brother Dwijendranath Tagore, Raj Narayan Bose and Nabagopal Mitra, and composed a patriotic song for the occasion. He was a scholar of Sanskrit and wrote both in English and Bengali. Along with his daughter, Indira Devi, he translated Maharshi Debendranath Tagore’s autobiography into English. He published verse-translations of the Gita and Meghaduta, and his own reminiscences in Bengali. These were first published as Bombai Chitra (A Picture of Bombay) by Kalidas Chakravarty at the Adi Brahmo Samaj Press, Calcutta in 1898. In 1915 they were again published, with additions, as Amar Balyakotha O Amar Bombai Prabas (My Childhood Story and My Stay in Bombay).

In 1864, Satyendranath Tagore was posted to the Bombay Presidency, which then comprised Maharashtra, Karnataka, Sindh and Gujarat. As District and Sessions Judge he was posted to a number of places, including Bombay, Ahmedabad, Poona, Satara, Sholapur and Karvar. In Bombai Chitra we find an analytical account of popular movements, important events, trends and controversies. Bombay takes the pride of place, and the book is replete with impressions, incidents and personalities of the city. His brother, Rabindranath Tagore had asked him to write a detailed account of his stay in the

1 British statesmen, conservatives and liberals alike, were anxious that the Civil Services should remain predominantly, if not exclusively, British in composition, to discourage Indians. The marks allotted to Arabic and Sanskrit were lowered in 1866. The first Maharashtrian who passed the ICS examination was Shripad Babaji Thakur in 1868. Surendra Nath Bannerji and Romesh Chandran Dutt passed the examination in 1869.

2 The Hindu Mela’s annual sessions started from 1867 and continued up to 1880. Exhibitions were organised of goods produced by indigenous industries in the northern suburbs of Calcutta. The main object was to foster the spirit of self help. It was also known as the Swadeshi Mela.

3 He was the President of the Adi Brahmo Samaj in 1871. In 1876 he started the secret society Sanjivani Sabha.

4 He was one of the founders of the National Association in 1865. In the same year he started the National Paper in English. He made the word ‘National’ popular among the educated people in Bengal. He also founded a National School and a National Gymnasium. He was closely connected with the Tagore family.

5 Indira Devi Chaudharani was a recognised authority on Bengali literature. She was married to Pramatha Chaudhari or ‘Birbal’, the editor of the literary journal Sabuj Patra. She died in 1960 at the age of 87.
Bombay Presidency, and the collection of essays is dedicated to ‘Rabi’. The first 35 pages are devoted to Sant Tukaram’s *abhang* which were thereby made available to Bengali readership. There are digressions, such as descriptions of travels in Ceylon and a somewhat humorous critique on the social habits of ‘The British in India’. The history of the Marathas and of Bombay City, Sindh and Bijapur constitute separate sections. The interest value of the book is enhanced by a map of Bombay and lithographs, several of them by Hari Narayan Bose. The author’s style was urbane and so were his personal views. The literary mode of the book is simple and ‘current’. It is not pedantic but immediate and colloquial.
INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

Until the end of the eighteenth century, Bengali intellectuals wrote mostly in Sanskrit and a few in Persian. Bengali prose came into common use quite suddenly when the printing press was introduced and periodicals of all kinds made their appearance. Patriotism in Bengal manifested itself in pride in the mother tongue. Debendranath Tagore returned unread many letters that were written in English. Rabindranath Tagore emphasised that even the English educated should employ the Bengali language in all their transactions. In 1897, at the Provincial Conference held at Natore, Rabindranath insisted on the translation of all English speeches into Bengali.

In keeping with the new trends in Bengali literature, Satyendranath Tagore's writings are “not sweet and sonorous, but lively and living”. The prose form is disciplined, marked by clarity and restraint.

Satyendranath Tagore's writings are to be understood in the context of the social climate of Bengal and his family background. His grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, had helped Rammohan Roy in the campaign for the abolition of sati and against the Press Act of 1824. He held the post of serishtadar to the Collector of Rangpur, Mr. Digby. This indicates the importance attached to government services in general. G.D. Khanolkar compares Dwarkanath to Jagannath Shankarshet, as both were respected leaders of the Hindu community.

---


7 Ibid

8 Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Pramatha Chaudhari, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1970. (Comment of P. Chaudhari, Malat Samalochana or Jacket Criticism, Calcutta, 1912, p.22)


Satyendranath Tagore’s father Debendranath Tagore was a religious reformer of high discrimination and a saintly man. He translated the *Rigveda* and the *Upanishads* into Bengali. His deep involvement with the *Brahmo Samaj* had an influence on all his sons. The ideals of Rammohan Roy had a continuing impact on the whole Tagore household. Other influences were of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rajendra Lal Mitra. The former started the journal *Bangadarshan* in 1872. Though influenced by Western rationalism and positivism, Debendranath Tagore emphasised Hindu resurgence. Dr. Mitra was a pre-eminent researcher in the field of the Vedas and ancient Indian history, whom Frederick Max Muller ranked with such intellectuals as Colebrook and Bernhof. He was the President of the *Vidwajjan Sabha* or Academy of Learning. This was organised by Jyotirindranath Tagore who brought many distinguished savants of Bengal together in a Critics’ Circle. Satyendranath Tagore’s elder brother Dwijendranath Tagore edited the *Bharati*, a journal which was launched in 1877. He was immersed in the comparative study of Kantian and Vedantic philosophy. Apart from literary controversies, the Tagore brothers were keenly interested in Hindustani music. They were staunch advocates of *swadeshi*, and Rabindranath Tagore

▲ Debendranath Tagore.

▲ Dwijendranath Tagore.
opened a swadeshi store in Calcutta. Having stayed in England for fairly long periods, Satyendranath Tagore was influenced by the intellectual revolution that had taken place in Europe, by the theories of Darwin, Spencer and Bergson. Both he and his friend in England, Sri Taraknath Palit read philosophy extensively, especially the works of James Mill. Rabindranath Tagore, while staying with him in Ahmedabad, found in his library at Shahibagh, the works of Dante, Goethe, Chatterton and Tennyson.

Satyendranath Tagore’s influence, direct and indirect, on the development of his youngest brother Rabindranath, if not as a poet but as a man, was subtle and abiding. He acted as a gentle corrective to the overpowering influence of the Maharshi who was radical in his religious convictions but conservative in his social attitudes. Though anglicised, Satyendranath Tagore was firmly rooted in the socio-political milieu of India. The cause which affected him the most was the emancipation of women. He insisted on educating his wife in Bengali and English. It is said that when he first took her out, unveiled, in an open horse carriage through the streets of Calcutta, the city was shocked and scandalised. But he was undaunted and even took her with him to England. Jnanadanandini Devi was the first Indian lady to attend the Viceroy’s reception and it was she who adapted the old fashioned way of wearing the sari to the modern style. She also started a monthly magazine for children called Balak.

---


12 He was a barrister in London and was interested in the promotion of education in science.

13 As a Civil Servant, Satyendranath Tagore was allotted the Shahibag Palace, built in the seventeenth century, on the banks of the river Sabarmati. Rabindranath Tagore as a young man, came and stayed here for six months, and the palace became the subject of his famous Kshudhita Pashan or Hungry Stones. In My Boyhood Days, written at the age of 80, Rabindranath wrote, “In Ahmedabad I felt for the first time that history had paused, and was standing with her face turned towards the aristocratic past”. Krishna Kripalana, Rabindranath Tagore, a Biography, OUP, 1962, P.75.
CONCLUSION

The subjects written about by Satyendranath Tagore in his compilation of articles are varied. They range from the universal to the particular, from the serious to the trivial. This was in keeping with the trend of the times. Satyendranath Tagore may be called an essayist of the nineteenth century. A large part of the writing was in the nature of sketches, diaries, letters and travelogues. The latter, ornamented with illustrations and engravings, were largely the genre of the day. Englishmen like Captain Robert Melville Grindlay wrote *Scenery, Costumes and the Architecture Chiefly on the Western Side of India* in 1826, and James Douglas published *Bombay and Western India: A series of Stray Papers* (2 vols) in 1893. Satyendranath Tagore’s work in parts does tend to veer towards this model, where he indulged in standard descriptions of the Elephanta Caves, Mahalakshmi Temple, Matheran, etc.

His writings fall in the same category as that of other western educated Bengalis. Though he evinced a lack of regard for tradition, his attitudes were basically conventional, tinged with the Romanticism of the Tagores. Bhramo influenced, his outlook was an amalgam of Western and Indian philosophy. Being neither a radical nor a conservative, his work consisted of social analysis and observations of a high order. In fact, some of the best research in India has been done by ICS officers. As bureaucrats, they had no vested interests and could devote time

---

14 Rabindranath Tagore too did this.

15 Rabindranath’s depiction of the ‘Peasant’ was found by critics to be romantic and lyrical.
to scholarship. In this, Satyendranath Tagore stands beside intellectual stalwarts like Romesh Chandra Dutt.\(^{16}\)

Satyendranath Tagore enjoyed the reputation of being a just, incorruptible and scholarly judge. He weighed European and Indian civilizations against each other impartially in his scale of justice, and did not criticise British rule severely. Some nationalists have looked askance at this, and perhaps for this reason, his work was not very popular.

The value of his work lies in the context of the larger movements of the nineteenth century, the Renaissance in Bengal and Maharashtra. Stayendranath Tagore was keenly aware that both regions shred ideological and cultural commitments. His is therefore a personal and ‘humanistic’ account, punctuated with vignettes of valuable information.

\(^{16}\) In Peasantry of Bengal published in 1875 and Famines in India published in 1900 (Kegan Paul, London), he made a plea for the extension of the Permanent Settlement to the ryotwari areas.
Joint Organisers

THINK CITY SDN BHD (TCSB) is a subsidiary of Khazanah Nasional Berhad, the investment arm of the Malaysian government, and an urban regeneration agency operating in the historic city of George Town. It manages the George Town Grants Programme (GTGP), which is a public grants programme designed to protect and preserve George Town’s Outstanding Universal Values. These include the city’s multi-ethnic and multi-cultural living heritage, architectural legacy and intangible heritage as a historic port city in the Straits of Malacca. Think City’s involvement in this project provides focus on the cultural mapping process (documentation and outreach activities involving local histories and heritage) and the intangible heritage of the city.

THE PENANG HERITAGE TRUST (PHT) is one of Malaysia’s most successful non-governmental organizations championing the heritage conservation with special emphasis on Penang and George Town. The PHT played a pivotal role in the nomination of George Town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was also a key partner in the 2001/02 Penang Story Project bringing together local communities through a celebration of cultural diversity.

Knowledge Partners

GEORGE TOWN WORLD HERITAGE INCORPORATED (GTWHI) is the area manager of the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site. It provides consultation and public awareness regarding the World Heritage Site. GTWHI also provides advice to the State and Local governments regarding heritage conservation issues and assists private property owners about best practices in conservation.

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA (USM) is Malaysia’s Apex University with wide-ranging research programmes. USM initiated several projects directly related to heritage conservation work in Penang and elsewhere.
Joint Organisers