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Rabindranath Tagore

IN GERMANY

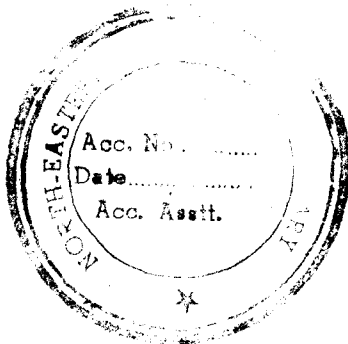
A Cross-section of contemporary
Reports 1921 - 1931
With a Preface by Humayun Kabir

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RABINDRANATH TAGORE IN GERMANY

Max Mueller Bhavan Publications

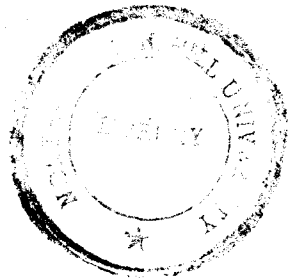
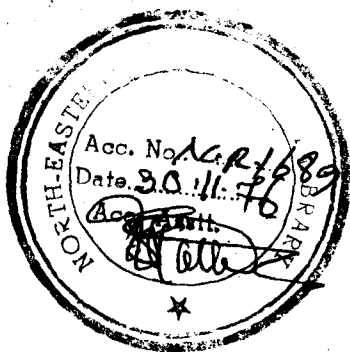


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Rabindranath Tagore

IN GERMANY

A CROSS - SECTION
OF CONTEMPORARY REPORTS
EDITED AND TRANSLATED
BY DIETMAR ROTHERMUND

Preface

I have read with great interest some of the articles included in the Tagore Centenary Volume published by Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi. They include contemporary writings on the poet during his visits to Germany in 1921, 1926 and 1930. Many of them are no longer readily available and I have read some of them for the first time. The Max Mueller Bhavan has laid us under a debt of gratitude by bringing together these contemporary records of Tagore's impact on the German mind.

Germany was rising out of the sufferings of the first World War when Tagore visited the country for the first time. In the preceding fifty years, the German people had reached great heights in industrial and military might but had in the process lost some of the spiritual quality which had earlier made Germany the home of philosophy, literature and music. Nationalism began as an assertion of the rights of the people, but almost everywhere it developed an aggressive attitude which sought to deny the same rights to others. Nationalism emerged late in Germany, but perhaps the late arrival itself led to an extreme and unbalanced development. After the colonial exploits of European nations in Asia and Africa in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, they turned against one another and their clash of national self-aggrandizement reached a new climax in the World War of 1914.

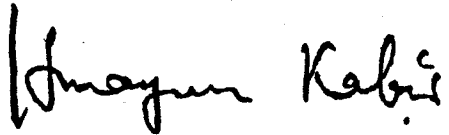
Tagore brought to war-torn and weary Europe the message of cultural autonomy and universal brotherhood. He was one of the staunchest supporters of the self-expression of individuals and nations but he also held that their self-expression must not be based on exclusive self interest but contribute to the enrichment of mankind as a whole. The individual can reach his highest development only through co-operation with and service to his fellowmen. Nations can also achieve their true destiny only when they give more than they take from the common heritage of man.

It was not surprising that during his triumphal march through Europe in the early twenties of the century, Tagore should receive the greatest welcome in Germany. Germany had suffered deeply not only materially but also in the spirit and yet an earlier Germany had provided Europe with resplendent gifts of spirituality, intellect and feeling. Bewildered by the experience of the war, German youth found in Tagore the authentic voice of their own glorious heritage and extended to him a warm and immediate welcome that has rarely been given to a visitor from another country.

Forty years have passed since Tagore's first visit to Germany. The predicament of the world has not however changed. In fact, the sense of bewilderment and doom is stronger today inspite of great advances in material prosperity and the prospect of still more astonishing advances. Today, man can plan to explore in safety the outer space but insecurity has entered into his very hearth and home. The threat of uniformity through regimentation is matched by the threat of fragmentation of mankind into petty groups. Never has the message of freedom and dignity of the individual in the context of universal co-operation based on reason been more necessary than today. The world wide Centenary celebrations in honour of Tagore are a reminder that man has not lost and

cannot lose hope but is seeking to find ways of survival and progress inspite of the challenges of atomic destruction posed by blind hatred and narrow self interest.

I congratulate Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi for a fine publication that reminds us of the values of the spirit which alone can prevail over the forces of destruction and darkness.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jhagan Kabi". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

New Delhi,
21st October 1961.

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Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore visited Germany three times : in 1921 at the age of 60 years, briefly in 1926, and again in 1930. All of these visits were lecture tours which took him to important cities and universities in different parts of Germany.

When the poet first came to Germany in 1921 he was received with great enthusiasm by a large number of people who crowded the lecture halls wherever he went. This first visit was in many ways the most important of his visits to Germany. The early 1920s were a time of intellectual ferment in Germany. The first volume of Spengler's "Decline of the West" had appeared in 1918 and the second volume was published in 1922. The world war had swept away whatever may have been left of the optimism of the enlightenment, and the irrational collapse of a rational world induced many people to look for irrational solutions of irrational problems. The 'cold' intellect was conceived of as an enemy of depth, wisdom, nature and the soul. Genuine heart-searching and wishful thinking were often combined in the contemporary thought of this period. Tagore's message was bound to be evaluated within this frame of reference. He therefore found ardent admirers as well as detractors in Germany. His visit was not seen as an irrelevant courtesy call of a foreign celebrity, it was felt to be a contribution to the discussion which was going on in Germany in those days. The statements of the scholars and writers who came into contact with him at that time are not only interesting because of what they tell us about

Tagore, they also illustrate contemporary German thought in its quest for new values and ideals.

Tagore's message of hope and harmony was a consolation after the great war. He was venerated in Germany as a seer and a prophet. His sympathetic understanding and his firm conviction that defeat and loss were but a blessing in disguise encouraged the German people. He attributed his own independent development as a man and a poet to the fact that his family had gone bankrupt. Identifying himself with the fate of Germany he indicated that the defeat and the fall of the old order would give the German nation a chance to start afresh. He hoped that Germany would "make use of the fire that had scorched her for lighting up the path to a great future". However, the fire that had scorched Germany proved to be insufficient, a far greater conflagration was still to come, and we can only hope that our capacity to convert heat into light does not require the test of an even more devastating blaze.

Tagore's message was but a translation of the basic theme of his poetry. His writings are permeated by a mood of longing and expectation. The imagery of waiting and coming, searching and wandering is ever present in his poems. This mood has a special appeal to the German mind preoccupied as it is with the ideas of becoming and striving. But coming is not becoming and the poet was likely to be misunderstood. Time and space are only dimensions of the separation of God and the soul in Tagore's universe, they are interchangeable parts of a lower level of reality which can be disrupted by the sudden presence of the aim of all longing.

Tagore's affirmation of the life in this world which Albert Schweitzer contrasted with the Indian tradition of the negation of life has to be understood in this context. Tagore sees life as a suspense in the

separation from God and he accepts it as such. German idealism also postulated a separation of the soul from God, but here the suspense was conceived of as a motor of evolution. With Tagore, however, the separation was willed by God to create an object of love, and the relationship between God and the soul in this suspense does not give rise to a laborious process of evolution, but it is "lila", the bitter and sweet tension between union and separation.

There are three ancient ways to perfection : gnanayoga, karmayoga and bhakti; Tagore chose the latter, but he was very much impressed by what he termed the Western world's perfection of the path of karmayoga. His recognition of the validity of karmayoga also appealed to the German mind. Work and soul were closely connected in the life of Germany, as Prof. Eucken explained to Tagore, but the link had broken. In the rapid transition from a society based on agriculture and arts and crafts to an industrial society Germany had experienced the painful dissociation of work from its aim, and it dreamed of a restoration of the creative unity of man's endeavour. Tagore was hailed as one who knew about this unity, and who could help to recover it. People often forgot that the poet himself was a seeker; they looked to him for answers which, as they thought, the East had preserved while the West had lost itself in the material world.

The ideal of a creative unity of man's life and work, the longing for a new humanism was reflected in the German Youth Movement which tried to shed the inhibitions and artificialities of the Victorian age, and propagated a cult of youth and nature. It was this movement which prepared the ground for Tagore's triumph in Germany. The votaries of this movement revived old songs and instruments and roamed through fields and forests. Young and enthusiastic they felt akin to Tagore's universe, and when he was in their midst they

sang and played for him and took him along to the hills and the forest.

The quest for a new humanism also led to a reinterpretation of the old imperial nationalism. Germany has been able to produce the most generous internationalism as well as the most fierce nationalism. Like Indian nationalism German nationalism originally developed under foreign rule—in the Napoleonic era—as a noble concept of national unity and self-determination. But Germany was faced again and again with the problem of territorial unity and integrity in an intricate system of a balance of power. This situation vitiated German nationalism. Nevertheless there has always remained a quest for the redeeming grace of international cooperation. Tagore's message seemed to convey this redeeming grace. In this respect his message is as valid today as ever before.

Sanctified days with Rabindranath Tagore

Darmstadt, June 10—14, 1921



(Author unknown)

In Darmstadt one evening Tagore was sitting at the window. The setting sun lighted his face with its last rays and he relaxed and talked about himself. He told us that his name really means the sun (and he continued that) often when he was asked to translate his works into English he had refused to do so and he had said : You do it, you know English much better than I do. His life had been devoted to his people and his own development. But at the age of 50—about 10 years ago—he had felt suddenly and unexpectedly that he should now, after he had reached his peak go to the West, as the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. He had begun to translate his works into English, and when he had finished this work he had to go to the West himself, and therefore he started on his pilgrimage to Europe. Thus the poet and sage of India, of Bengal, became the real poet of our time, the prophet who shows a path to the inner longing of our confused race.

“Tagore is a longing personified”—as a Frankfurt newspaper put it so well after his lecture at the university; in political and human dimensions he represents a far-off light.

Every morning at half past ten we met in the garden of the New Palace. We walked on the beautiful lawn which was like a carpet

Count Hermann Keyserling : Rabindranath Tagore

"Der Leuchter", 1921-22

On what does the spiritual progress of mankind depend? Most people believe that this progress depends on discoveries of new and hitherto unknown things. It is interesting to note, however, that almost all important thinkers have answered this question by stressing that they have not found anything new—this is true of Confucius, Buddha, Plato, and Goethe, and this is true today of Rabindranath Tagore. Nevertheless, these men who have laid no claim to original thought have influenced posterity more than all the original thinkers together who were there contemporaries.... Why is Tagore important? As far as the contents of his work is concerned there is hardly anything new to it. The deepest thinkers expound the same truths at all times. Even if God himself would descend amongst us, he would have nothing new to announce—not at any rate anything that would satisfy our intellectuals. His word would be the word of God only because of its inner meaning that is beyond the human mind. Similarly the importance of Tagore's message rests entirely on the inner meaning of the old truth which he states. To him it means something totally different from what it means to his critics, because his consciousness is rooted in a deeper level of existence, and thus he can give expression to the working of deeper forces. These forces are beyond the grasp of

Paul Natorp : Hours with Rabindranath Tagore

I want to talk to you about Rabindranath Tagore. I feel that the hours which I spent with this wonderful man do not belong to me alone but to all of you, and first of all to those who were looking forward to his visit with us here and who have been disappointed in this hope. I shall try to convey to you all that I can possibly do in such a short lecture. The poet has asked me to tell you how sorry he is for not being able to visit Marburg although he had promised to do so. He was exhausted, and it was time for his return journey ; his visit to Vienna was a matter close to his heart because he had been specially requested to go there. We cannot grudge him this visit, because he did not want to disappoint our German brethren on the Danube.

He wanted to come to Marburg particularly for one reason : he is very much interested in finding out about the attitude of the youth in the most important countries of the West and also in defeated Germany. He wants to come into personal contact with this youth, because the future depends on them. He had been told that I know this youth so well as to be able to inform him about those matters that he wants to know. Therefore he requested me to come to Darmstadt. I gladly accepted his invitation. I have told him the best that I could say. He was very grateful for what I told him and he showed this gratitude by a friendly cordiality with which he received me and which he retained up to the moment of my departure.

Hellmuth von Glasenapp : Tagore's arrival in Berlin

Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, May 30, 1921

(Glasenapp met Tagore on his arrival and reported about his conversation)

The poet told me that he was very glad to be able to visit Germany at this time. He was sorry that he could not come to Germany last year due to some passport difficulties created by some foreign authorities. Germany means to him not only the country of poets and thinkers, the country of Goethe and Kant, but first of all the country which has shown an unselfish interest in the study of Indian languages and religions. He quoted Heine who had said, that the German nation had been the only one that did not try to capture outward treasures in India but had striven for the spiritual values of India. Tagore hopes that German and Indian minds will be able to cooperate in order to bring about a better understanding between the East and the West. In working for this aim which still seems to be rather remote Tagore is planning to convert his school at Shantiniketan into an international university which should promote the idea of a reconciliation of all nations and a unification of the cultures of the Orient and the Occident...Long after Tagore will have left Germany the ideas for which he stands will remain with us and he will also have pleasant memories of his visit to Germany.

Max Hochdorf : Tagore in Berlin

Vorwearts, Berlin, June 3, 1921

Berlin University wanted to receive Tagore in a festive manner. But about noon at the time which had been fixed for the poet's lecture, the students stormed impatiently into the great assembly hall. The vice-chancellor and the professors were surprised and annoyed at the curiosity of the youth which knew no bounds. They were afraid of a veritable riot which would have ill suited the reception of this herald of meditation and wisdom. The vice-chancellor requested the students not to violate the dignity of the university... he threatened to call in the police if his request was not heeded. The turmoil subsided only after some time and policemen had to clear the way for Tagore so that he could reach the rostrum.—

He is a lean man of medium height. The oval bronze head is surrounded by a well groomed silvery beard. The face has a mild appearance ; with his long mustache and well cut beard he gives the impression of a fit and healthy old man. Tagore's body is concealed by the long grey silk gown of the oriental priest, but he does not seem to be a strange and aloof prophet. The priestly gown seems to be with him an official uniform. Perhaps he would feel uncomfortable in European clothes. I tried to catch a glimpse of his eyes. They are hidden under deep eyelids. While the vice-chancellor welcomed the respected guest, he himself seemed to be preoccupied, he did not take notice of the fact that these remarks were meant for

Rudolf Otto : Preface to 'Rabindranath Tagore's Faith'

In the summer of 1930 Rabindranath Tagore visited our university at Marburg and delivered the lecture which is reprinted in this book. We were very deeply impressed by the dignified appearance of this noble Aryan from the East who combined simplicity with dignity, the form of art with spiritual content, and an all-embracing humanism with individual originality. He spoke to us about his faith. We were most impressed by the fact that he did neither dilate upon theories of comparative religion nor did he give us an abridged survey of Indian religions—he simply made us participate in his very personal religious experience, an experience which cannot be separated from this man and his individual life, but which because of its peculiar immediacy and through the impact of self-expression confronted us with the question as to what we know of religious experience and whether we have some substance of our own.

For this reason I want to publish this confession of Tagore in this book. I do not intend to use this confession in support of my own theology, nor do I want to pigeonhole it according to my categories of comparative religion. I feel again the great difference between the spirit of the Upanishads and the spirit that took its rise on the soil of Palestine and spread all over the world; the difference between the religion of the poet and the religion of the biblical prophets to which I owe allegiance. But I as well as others who are conscious of the Christian religion felt even more deeply the

Correspondence between Prof. Rudolf Eucken and Rabindranath Tagore

(This correspondence was first published in the Tagore Volume of the Calcutta Municipal Gazette. Tagore himself seems to have thought of these letters as the best summary of his impressions of Germany. The translation of Eucken's letter which was published in the Calcutta Municipal Gazette is so literal that it is almost unintelligible. The text given below is an edited extract of Eucken's letter.)

Prof. Eucken to Tagore

Jena, June 11, 1921

Dear Sir and Master,

I very much regret not having been able to meet you in Germany because I am hard pressed by work. But I must send you my greetings and tell you how sorry I am for having missed you. I should like to assure you of my sympathy and my appreciation of your noble work. We are both united by a common aim : we want to raise mankind to a higher level of inner consciousness. This task may be of a different nature in Germany and in India, but our final aim remains the same. There is a profound lesson in our German way of life : the combination of work and soul...In this modern world, however, work and soul have been torn asunder ; our culture has become a onesided culture of labour, and the soul has lost its power to unite the whole of life in harmony. At the same time we have experienced a national and ethical defeat, and

Rabindranath Tagore : The Child

In 1930 Tagore attended the famous "Passion Play" at Oberammergau, a village in Bavaria. This play which portrays the suffering of Christ is performed by the villagers once in every ten years in fulfillment of a vow. Tagore was very impressed by this play, and when he was asked by a German Film Company for a script dealing with Indian life he composed this poem in one night in Berlin. It is the only poem which he ever wrote directly in English free verse. The plan of producing a film based on a script by Tagore never materialized, but this poem remains with us as a testimony of a sudden inspiration and a surprising vision.

I

'What of the night ?' they ask.

No answer comes.

For the blind Time gropes in a maze and knows not
its path or purpose.

The darkness in the valley stares like the dead
eye-sockets of a giant,

The clouds like a nightmare oppress the sky,
and the massive shadows lie scattered like the torn
limbs of the night.

57 A lurid glow waxes and wanes on the horizon, —



Biographical Notes

- *Paul Natorp* (1854-1924), professor of philosophy at Marburg University, one of the most important representatives of the so-called Neo-Kantian school of thought. He was also one of the intellectual leaders of the German Youth Movement which arose at the turn of the century in protest against the cant and artificiality of the Victorian era.

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), professor of theology and religious philosophy at Marburg University, one of the founders of comparative religious studies in Germany. His main work "The Holy" and his essay on "Mysticism in East and West" as well as his studies of the philosophical systems of Ramanuja and his disciples established important categories of the study of world religions.

Count Hermann Keyserling (1880-1946) philosopher and essayist. His "Indian Travel Diary of a Philosopher" which appeared in 1921 was widely read at that time. He established the "School of Wisdom" at Darmstadt in 1920 at the invitation of the Duke of Hesse-Darmstadt. In 1921 he invited Tagore to lecture at this school. Keyserling wrote against the onesided rule of the intellect and advocated the cultivation of wisdom which is based on a deeper intuitive understanding of man and nature.

Rudolf Eucken (1846-1926), professor of philosophy at Jena University. He published several books on philosophy and religion

and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1908. He strove for a spiritual life based on an understanding of one's self and a universal appreciation of reality.

Heelmuth von Glasenapp (born 1891) professor of Indology at Berlin and Tuebingen Universities. His many books on Indian philosophy and religion have contributed to a better understanding of Indian thought by the general reader. He reviewed many of Tagore's poems and plays in contemporary newspapers.

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Theodor Heuss

Three Lectures in India

Jacques - Albert Cuttat

The Spiritual Dialogue of East and West



Rabindranath Tagore in Germany

Dietmar Rothermund

Education in Germany

Helmo Rau

Reflections on Indian Art

