

# **Focusing Cultural Affinity Among South Asian Cultures, Cutting Across Geo-spatial Barrier: Rabindranath Tagore and His Multi-dimensional Creativity**

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## **Abstract:**

In a jet – set globalized world where change is the only constant as an aftermath of phenomenal progress in science and technology, we are at ease to interact with various cultures, pertaining to various countries, nations and groups. But it is indeed amazing that even in the nineteenth century, a poet and litterateur of astounding magnitude in British ruled – India – Rabindranath Tagore, the first Nobel Laureate of Asia could visualize the idea of a one world across geo – political boundary. Notwithstanding his multiple visits to Europe and America, his fascination for Asian countries has been revealed through his five trips to Japan, China, Ceylon, Persia etc. In his attempt to trace the root of affinity among these cultures of South Asian countries, he had imbibed inspiration from their literature, art and above all lifestyle and this cultural interaction has been delineated in his travelogues like *Way to Japan*, *In Persia* etc. The Japanese style of short poem *Heiku* composed in two/three lines had impressed him so much that he started writing *Heiku* poems in Bangla. Japanese drawing, flower decoration, tea ceremonies etc. were so favorite to him that he requested his nephews to visit Japan just to get training in that art.

The most poignant expression of this cultural interaction between Tagore and South Asian countries was reflected in the idea of *Visva Bharati*, his cherished institution where South Asian impetus is distinctly visible. The dance technique, choreography and music which he invented for his musical and dance dramas reflect the profound impact of Sri Lankan *Candy* dance and other techniques. In the same token, Sri Lanka, bent on westernization at

the cost of their indigenous culture, could make a cultural revival under the influence of Tagore.

In the present paper, there will be a humble attempt to show how cultural pluralism among diverse South Asian cultures could materialize through the aegis of Tagore, how he could institutionalize these diverse influences in his institution through exchange programme of teachers and students and above all how this idea of ingrained oneness was permeated in his creative works, in essays, travelogues, art and fine arts like dance. Tagore's reception in South Asian countries and the impact exerted by him vice – versa can be cited as an example of cultural assimilation.

**Keywords:** Cultural Affinity, Transnationalism, Rabindranath Tagore, Visva-Bharati

It is rather in the fitness of things that in a jet-set globalized world where change is the only constant as a result of phenomenal progress in science and technology, both interaction and cultural assimilation of various cultures, pertaining to different countries, nations and groups will take place inevitably. Theoretically speaking, transnationalism has been defined as diffusion and extension of social, political and economic processes in between and beyond the sovereign jurisdictional boundaries of states. But when this interaction which is feasible for cultures pertaining to sovereign states, happen through the extraordinary genius of a multi-faceted iconic personality in British- ruled India, bereft of sovereignty in nineteenth century, this indeed becomes an astounding phenomenon. This icon was Rabindranath Tagore of India, who, notwithstanding his status of a second class citizen of a British colony, could set an example by visualizing the idea of a one world (where the

world meets in one nest) across geo-political boundary and imperialist hegemony.

Now the term „affinity“ used in the title of this article needs to be explained. Technically speaking, the term affinity means a liking or sympathy for someone or something especially because of shared characteristics. Tracing cultural affinity among nations is therefore not restricted singularly in the present era, but it had captured the imagination of many illustrious figures even in nineteenth century though presumably they were not theoretically well acquainted with the technical paradigm.

To gauge and assess the nature of mutual bonding between India and a few South Asian countries in nineteenth century, as spearheaded by Indian poet Rabindranath, it is imperative to have a fair idea of life and activities of the poet. Born in a culturally oriented family in 1861, he was the recipient of the most coveted Nobel Prize for his literary master piece *Gitanjali Song Offerings* in 1913. Apart from his repute as a prolific writer who excelled in almost all branches of literature like novel, short stories, serious essays, travelogues etc., he was an institution builder, educationist, a pioneer of social reformation movement and a dedicated soul, devoted to village reconstruction for the service of his country, steeped in poverty and ignorance of that time. In 1921, he established *Visva-Bharati*, a centre of international learning in Santiniketan to give shape to a university where east and west will meet in perfect cohesion. As a matter of fact, Rabindranath tried to implement in his university *Visva-Bharati* a conglomeration or fusion of ideal knowledge, imbibed from both East and West since its inception, as reflected in his essay *The Centre of Indian Culture* –

“And this is why the inner spirit of India is calling us to establish in this land great centers where all her intellectual forces will gather for the purpose of creation, and all her resources of knowledge and thought, Eastern and Western, will unite in perfect harmony”.

In an attempt to establish this bond of cultural affinity, Tagore invited scholars from both Orient and Occident to teach in

Visva-Bharati. Scholars of South Asian countries played a pivotal role as teachers in Tagore's university. In 1919, Dharmadhar Rajguru Mahasthabir, a Buddhist monk from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) taught Buddhist philosophy in Visva-Bharati. In 1924, Cheong Lin, a Chinese scholar joined as Professor of Chinese. He was the first Chinese teacher in Visva-Bharati. In 1928, Tan-Yun-San arrived at Santiniketan and through his efforts and insistence from Tagore, China Bhavan was established in 1937 at Visva-Bharati. It is apparent therefore that political bondage notwithstanding, Tagore had always tried to explore and establish a bond of cultural affinity with the neighboring South-Asian countries. He might be described as a colossal figure, representing transnationalism.

Tagore succeeded in promoting the idea of transnationalism in another way too. He was a way-faring poet. Tagore travelled all five continents and visited several countries (some on more than one occasion). But what was striking about Tagore was he had his own nature of familiarizing himself with the cultures and languages of the places he had been to; at the same time he used to do that by integrating all the good and positive aspects of the places in his personal self as well as in building institutions. It was a vice versa process. He was influenced by cultures of alien countries he visited and in the process impacted foreign cultures too.

It may be noted in this context that despite his several visits to Europe and US, the fact remains that Asia elicited his imagination and fascination to a great extent. His concept of Asia was based on the belief that just as India is rich in cultural as well as spiritual heritage, Asia too may boast of its prosperity that was not confined to any geographical location or any particular race, but to the entire human race. If we accept the term global south in a broader perspective, we will find that in his quest to trace cultural affinity among the Asian countries, he made five trips to Japan, then China, Persia; but most significant was his visit to Sri Lanka as he imbibed Sri Lankan influence not only in his creative endeavor, but simultaneously he was instrumental in a metamorphosis of Sri Lankan culture. Tagore cherished the idea of One Asia, highlighting thereby

that all Asian countries are intertwined with each other through common cultural affinity and this finally led him to the much-cherished internationalism (*visvabodha*).

A cursory look at the countries of global south which Tagore visited will help us to evaluate the binary relationship of mutual love and admiration, nurtured both by Tagore and general milieu of these countries. It is a fact that Japan at present does not belong to global south, but since in nineteenth century the demarcation hardly exists, we may take up the case of Tagore's interaction with Japan. In this particular instance we will find that steered by his friendship with Japanese artist Okakura, Tagore believed and accordingly propounded that since Asia is one and indivisible, though at present split, Asian unity was no dream and that the East could teach the West the blessings of spirituality which the former always nurtured as its blessed possession. Tagore made his first trip to Japan in 1916. In his travelogue *Japan Jatri* (*Passage to Japan*), Tagore had mentioned time and again his appreciation for Japanese Tea Festival as well as their space management. He introduced this celebration with tea in his ancestral house at Jorasanko in Calcutta and also later in Santiniketan where a house *Dinantika* was earmarked for this tea festival. Tagore believed that this sense of beauty, ingrained in the psyche of the Japanese nation lies at the bottom of their power. But more important is the fact that his quest for tracing cultural affinity among the Asian nations and attempt to strengthen it has found its most poignant expression in introducing Indian readers to the appreciation of Japanese poetry. He translated and composed *Heiku* poems, a Japanese form of poetry, marked by brevity and usually consist of 5-7-5 syllabic pattern. So enamored was Tagore by Japanese art that in a letter, addressed to his nephew *Abanindranath* in 1916, he unhesitatingly stated that fusion with vibrant Japanese art is essential for revival of Indian art. In fact, Tagore intended to infuse a new lease of life to Indian art by assimilating Japanese influence and as such invited Japanese artist *Campo Arai* to Santiniketan with a view to train Indian artists. He was keen to trace the root of affinity between the two ancient

civilizations-Indian and Japanese, with a desire to inculcate Japanese influence in Indian literature and art too. Time and again he emphasized the concept of immortal East –“In a word modern Japan has come of the immortal East like a lotus blossoming in an easy grace...”. In 1915, Tagore’s speech resonated the very concept of transnationalism – “I want to know Japan in the outward manifestation of its modern life in the spirit of its traditional past. I also want to follow the traces of ancient India in your civilization and have some idea of your literature if possible”. Despite his strong objection towards Japan’s excessive industrialization at the cost of his age-old spiritual values and aggressive nationalism, Tagore appreciated Japan’s sense of beauty, spiritual identity and wanted to inculcate them in the Indian way of life.

Cultural affinity with each other, as ingrained in Asian countries steered Tagore’s imagination and faith to bring them under one umbrella. This concept enamored Tagore to such an extent that he travelled Asian countries excessively even with his failing health in a mature age to find out the root of this mutual bonding. China, Thailand and Persia – all came under his travel schedule. But it was Sri Lanka, a small South Asian island which impacted him most and simultaneously where he made a visible contribution in the regeneration of Sri Lanka’s society and culture. Tagore had a special fascination for the island of Sri Lanka as he believed that the island of Sri Lanka had an innate connection with Bengal and it was often said and considered that these two had been born out of the same source. It may be noted that Sri Lanka just like India had been subjected to years of colonisation which resulted in a strong dependence on and adherence to the western model of life. Tagore on his visit to the island had realized the need for a cultural revivalism and recognition of the roots by Sri Lankan people, most of whom were oblivious about it. His endeavor was to inculcate in the people of Sri Lanka the idea of Pan-Asianism and to create an Asian mind that would hold on to the remnants of its ancient civilization and culture. His love for Sri Lanka was ignited by the prevalence of Buddhism in that country which was also an inspira-

tion for Tagore. He visited Sri Lanka in 1922, 1924, 1928, 1929 and 1934.

On his first visit to Sri Lanka in October, 1922, Tagore emphasized mutual cultural affinity between India and Sri Lanka and the impetus to strengthen it in contemporary perspective – “Although the political constitution of modern Ceylon (Present Sri Lanka) separates this country from India, it is no secret that its history, religion, language, morals, culture and everything else are closely linked to India... Although the spiritual bond between the two countries that was there in the past has collapsed, time has come to put that together again and strengthen it”.

The 1934 visit was most significant as in May, 1934, Tagore’s play *Shapmochan* (Redemption) was introduced and performed by students of Visva-Bharati which struck the chord of Sri Lankan heart and succeeded in promoting an interest for oriental dance, music, drama and their socio-historical legacy. In a society, bent upon imitation of western culture, this sudden overwhelming interest about its own culture, old form of song and dance was indeed amazing and Tagore created a revival of social and cultural ethos in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankans could feel that Tagore was trying to support them to find their cultural identity and thus in a way bolstering their national sentiment. Martin Wickremasinghe, a critic explained the significance and impact of the presentation *Redemption* on Sri Lankan milieu – “Tagore dance drama which was a visual presentation of an aspect of Indian culture made an impression on the educated section that were ignorant of their own language and culture”.

Simultaneously Sri Lanka had exerted its influence on Tagore too. Sri Lankan Candy Dance attracted Tagore to such an extent that he used this dance profusely in his choreography and technique in dance dramas, composed by him. In one of his most illustrious dance dramas *Shyama*, Tagore has experimented with this dance form in portrayal of the character „Kotal“ (guard).

On the other hand, Tagore’s educational ideas attracted Sri Lankans so much that he was requested to inaugurate a College in

Sri Palee, Horana which was modeled after the educational ideal of Tagore. At the inaugural ceremony of this school, slated for rural reconstruction Tagore said – “It reminds me of my own work in Bengal, this institution which you have started, and I feel that this will be a channel of communication of hearts between your island and our institution in Bengal. It makes me feel so happy”.

In his creative writings also, Tagore exhibited the influence of Sri Lanka. He wrote a poem *Kandiya Nach* (Candy Dance), embodied in his poetic collection *Nabajatak*, eulogizing Candy Dance of Sri Lanka. Tagore inspired many Sri Lankans to develop and appreciate their own tradition of music and dance. Ananda Samarakoon (1911-62) composed Sri Lankan National Song *Sri Lanka Matha* under direct impact of Tagore’s *Jana Gana Mana*, recognized as the Indian National Anthem.

The point which should be never lost sight of, is Tagore’s cherished international centre of learning *Visva-Bharati* was the cradle of South Asian teaching and learning. As early as in 1902, Hori San, a Japanese student came to study Sanskrit in the school, established by Tagore which was at that time at a nascent stage. Equally fascinating was the plan nurtured by Tagore and the pioneer Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose to get Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in the temples of Japan and China, copied by this young Japanese student. In 1919, Dharmadhir Rajguru Mahasthabir, a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka taught Buddhist Philosophy in *Visva-Bharati*. Many Sri Lankan scholars and students came to Tagore’s university *Visva-Bharati* in Santiniketan while a few Indian teachers like Santideb Ghosh were sent to Sri Lanka by Tagore to learn and teach dance techniques of both these neighboring countries.

However, the cultural affinity among the South Asian countries finds its zenith in the binary relationship of two countries – India and Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) presently. These two countries share identical culture, identical natural surroundings and one common language Bengali. Our poets like Tagore and Kaji Najrul Islam had inspired the people at every stage of their freedom



struggle against tyrannical aggression. Identical cultural bond has united these two nations and that is why Tagore's song – "My golden Bengal, I love you", (translation mine) has become the National Song of Bangladesh.

South Asian countries may be geographically separated from one another. But an underlying affinity of culture, ethics, and past heritage has unified them under the perception of One Asia. Tagore could feel it and utilized and fostered it in his creative endeavor. Transnationalism or cultural bonding among nations is plausible even in an apparently disadvantaged situation like subordination to a foreign power.

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