

THE BIRTH AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

In the family of the Tagores of Jorasanko RABINDRANATH was born on May 7, 1861, in the heart of Calcutta. He was the son of Maharishi Debendranath Tagore and the grandson of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. Rabindranath was the youngest of the Maharishi's fourteen children and he was the youngest of his seven sons. It has been mentioned earlier that the poet's grandfather Prince Dwarkanath Tagore was aristocratic in his life-style and had incurred heavy debts which his eldest son Maharishi Debendranath Tagore cleared when he inherited the property from his father. He lived a very simple and austere life. By the time Rabindranath was born, the family fortune had been recovered. But the lifestyle continued to be austere. The young Rabindranath was brought up like an ordinary middle-class boy. But there was a significant difference between Rabindranath and other boys of ordinary middle-class homes of Calcutta. Young Rabindranath was not allowed to have any social contacts with boys of his age in other middle class families.

The affluence and aristocratic culture surrounded young Rabindranath. As has already been noted, the atmosphere of the Tagore home was charged with the lively currents of cultural impulse, absorbent as well as creative. His father's fascination for the 'Upanishads', his outlook of a worshipful universality, his strong adherence to the fundamentals of Indian thought and culture, and his enthusiasm for constructive nationalism had made the Tagore home the centre of cultural revival in India. Naturally, young Rabindranath grew up keenly alive and awake to the world of Man and Nature around him.

There were two very powerful influences on Rabindranath. One was that of his father, Maharishi Debendranath Tagore and the other was that of Nature.

The poet's grandfather was a great man in his own right. He worked unceasingly for the upliftment of the masses, in the field of religion, culture and social reforms, through the Brahma Samaj. He was a rich landlord and amassed huge wealth through business transactions and the Tagores lived in luxury. His lavish lifestyle carried him the epithet "The Prince". But towards the end of his life he incurred heavy losses. As a consequence, on his death in 1846 in London he left behind his family heavily in debt. The poet's father, Maharishi Debendranath, was a thinker and philosopher. After the death of his father he not only carried forward his father's Brahma Samaj mission with great devotion and ability but also, like an able and true eldest son, cleared all his debts by adopting a very austere lifestyle. The Tagore home in Calcutta was comfortable and spacious. As far as material comforts and conveniences were concerned nothing was lacking in the Tagore household. It may not be out of place to mention that the poet's father was enlightened enough to cater to the intellectual and emotional needs of an extraordinarily talented son and provided his son with all that he could need. The influence of such an

enlightened and accomplished father, who miraculously blended his spiritual, social, cultural and political tastes with the mundane duties of his zamindari and business and the management of the teeming Tagore-household can be realized. The other influence of Nature will be discussed at the appropriate occasion.

Rabindranath was the fourteenth child of his mother. She could not give him much attention. From the fourth or fifth year he was put under the care of the servants, away from her mother's rooms. The servant, who looked after him kept him confined to his room and his contact with the outside world was through the window of his servant's first-floor room. He would look out for hours. Understandably the child was given to fancying about clouds and winds who became his playmates. Thus confined, the young child felt an irresistible urge to go out and travel far and wide. But Rabindranath was a lonely child.

EDUCATION & FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Rabindranath did not go through the usual academic grind i.e., he did not have regular schooling. However, his education began quite early. He was sent to several schools in Calcutta but it was of no use. He did not care for school-curriculum and his reading was desultory and haphazard. He spoke of schools in Calcutta with disgust and the time he spent in them he calls "penal servitude in Andamans". His brother, Hemendranath, educated him at home but Rabindranath was not happy with the rigid discipline of education. Rabindranath was sent to England at the age of seventeen, in 1878. He studied for sometime at the University of London under Prof. Henry Morley. It was here that he formed a lifelong friendship with Loken Palit, who always admired and encouraged Rabindranath. But the poet's stay in England did not do him much good. He came back only to be sent again in 1881, this time to study Law. But he returned home from Madras. And no further attempt was made to educate him.

In the truest sense of the term Rabindranath Tagore was home-bred. He had uncertain schooling for a few years in Calcutta and for about a year and a half in London. But it was at his home that he had been given a solid grounding in Bangla, Sanskrit and English as well as in the rudiments of science including astronomy. His childhood interest in music was also taken care of and he received training from some of the best music masters of the day who were either family friends or were hired to coach. He also received training in gymnastic including wrestling which was his daily routine. His training reminds us of John Milton who, besides his routine education, took instruction in mathematics, music, astronomy etc. Tagore's training in gymnastic and wrestling made his body strong and healthy. It is said that his poetry was the product of a very healthy mind housed in an uncommonly strong healthy and handsome body. That the school life was distasteful to young Rabindranath was indeed fortunate. It was also extremely fortunate that his home-education was so varied and useful for him. It was really the atmosphere of the Tagore home which worked miracles with the development of young Rabindranath's personality and versatile genius.

His caretakers in the Tagore-household gave Rabindranath his first

taste of literature. The elderly members of the family retinue would read aloud the poems of Krittivasa and Kasiram and would recite alliterative verses from Dasarathi Ray's poetry or would sing from the song of Madhu Kar. The pathos of Rama (Krittivasa) or the wonder of "Mahabharata" (Kasiram), the jingle of tripping lines (Dasarathi Ray) and sweet sentimentality (Madhu Kar) were the first impressions on the highly imaginative and impressionable mind of young Rabindranath. The recital of Kalidasa's 'Meghdoot' by his eldest brother, Dwijendranath was another very powerful influence on him. At this time Rabindranath did not know Sanskrit yet the music of the verses enthralled him. When he read the poem in original, years later, he was doubly impressed because he found in it an unmistakable echo of the adventurous fancy of his childhood when during the rainy season he had watched the clouds from the window of the first-floor room of the servant who used to be his caretaker.

Rabindranath had profound regard for some of the Jesuit Fathers of St Xavier's College, Calcutta. He had started writing poetry at an unusually young age and by 1875 his earliest writings in prose and verse had begun to appear in print. Madhusudan, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee were his forerunner in literature. They had given the Bangla Literature a start which other regional languages of India were to emulate soon.

There was yet another influence on the poet and it was the most powerful and profitable of all influences. It was the influence of Shrimati Kadambri Devi, wife of his elder brother, Jyotirindranath Tagore. She was a noble soul and almost a mother to the poet when his mother died in 1875. She was educated, enlightened, cultured and accomplished. She was a friend and companion, who encouraged and inspired the young poet. She sympathised with him and was his first admirer. It was she who saved him from the destructive effect of vanity and she made him his own critic. Unfortunately, she too died in 1884 and her death shattered the poet who wrote "Its blow has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an ever-lengthening chain of tears."

VARIED INFLUENCES

Apart from and besides the influence of the family, family-friends and caretakers there were many others which contributed towards the development of the poet's versatile personality. It must always be kept in mind that the Tagore family was the real fountain-head of the national movement which went hand in hand with the cultural revival. It was the period of Indian Renaissance. Hemchandra Banerji's poetry made deep impression on the poet's impressionable mind.

When the poet was twelve years old his father, Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, took the young boy on the long tour of his life. He went as far as the Himalayan Punjab (which is Himachal Pradesh today). The Himalayas, naturally, fascinated him and made repeated appearance in his early poetry. But it must be noted that Rabindranath was not a poet of the mountains. He was essentially a river-poet. The poet's earliest writings are about unrequited love. These are romantic narratives showing the influence of Indian and English poets he was reading at that time.