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Translation of 'Seasons of Life: A Panoramic Selection of Songs by Rabindranath Tagore'

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Preface

A project bordering on the impossible, one that was worked on sporadically over a very long time is at long last ready to awaken to its life in print. When I decided in the 1980s that Bengal's priceless literature ought to be given its rightful place in the world of letters in order for readers outside the Bengali language to have access to it, and that even a practitioner of engineering and science might summon the courage and commitment to offer his labors to it, I was most apprehensive about taking on what to me was the most sacred treasure in that domain — the lyrical songs of Rabindranath Tagore known to all beholden Bengalis collectively as *Rabindra Sangeet*.

Yet, despite my apprehensions, I worked on this daunting mission, off and on for many years. Given my primary field of work (optics and electromagnetics), it goes without saying that my rate of progress has been woefully slow, and given the impossibility of doing justice to Tagore's lyrical work, I have been persistently dissatisfied by my wholly inadequate effort. More than three decades in the making, this volume only offers one hundred and fifty songs taken from different thematic areas of the poet's music. Several, incidentally, resulted from my intermittent translations in connection with essays written for conferences on Tagore, commemorative books, personal requests on occasions such as weddings or doctoral dissertation research, and others taken from social and political commentaries written in response to world events.

In the task to keep alive the heritage of Bengal, beyond the support and inspiration received from my father, Suranjan Chatterjee, and my most dearly departed aunt, Anima Mukherjee, there are two other individuals I absolutely must acknowledge here. From the time in the early 1990s when they first came to know me as a fellow Bengali in Binghamton, New York, Dr. Arindam Purkayastha and his wife Deepa (whom fate took from us three winters ago) offered me unstinting encouragement towards all manner of writing related to our common Bengali heritage I might have taken on. Their faith in my abilities was far in excess of my worthiness; their generosity and kindness as they mentored and egged me on never wavered or waned. With Deepa Boudi, herself a great admirer of Rabindranath, it went to her very last year even as malignant cells were taking away bits of her precious life. Along with Arindam-da, the two lovingly lugged the entire collection of Tagore's works in Bengali from Kolkata to the U.S., and before long, five heavyweight boxes arrived at my doorstep. They entrusted to me the task of propagating Rabindranath with even greater seriousness than my own. My only complaint would probably be directed at Tagore himself: why, oh why, could I not adequately vindicate the trust of these purest of hearts, why indeed is the task wholly insurmountable?

For a journey this long, my indebtedness is also commensurately long. My greatest indebtedness would be to Rabindranath for filling my inner life with such ecstasy and joy even as the exterior might have passed through arid and harsh terrains

that I have felt a sense of meaning in existence that I know I otherwise would never have. My extended discussions with Rajat Chanda relating to anything and everything Rabindranath have only enriched further what I have always treasured as a lifelong gift. My literary interactions with Purabi Nandi (whose unmatched refined personality, and whose extraordinary capacity at storytelling and indeed writing deeply sensitive short stories I greatly miss ever since fate took her from us most unexpectedly four years ago) offered me a few years of intellectual nourishment. My other Rajat-da (Rajat Roy of Rahara in Bengal) also appeared comet-like in my life in the 1990s and filled it with untold riches. His intense interest in literature and culture was matched only by his great enthusiasm in film as a great medium of art (he absolutely abhorred film as cheap entertainment, which is where it had transitioned in India over the preceding decades). Rajat-da was as passionate about India and about downtrodden people as any human being I have known. I learned much from him over a tragically short length of time, and this included much about Rabindranath, Nazrul, Bibhuti Bhushan, Ritwik, Gunnar and Jan Myrdal, Mark Twain and so many others. Our interest in these and other subjects was mutual. And I must mention Shirley — my friend from my graduate school years. An inveterate liberal (who once ran for political office simply to stem the ominous rise of narrow and bigoted conservatism in America's cities and towns), Shirley would sometimes dig up Tagore from books she read.

I had originally planned for this book to see the light of day in 2011 to coincide with Tagore's sesquicentennial. Unfortunately, circumstances did not permit fruition of my goal. After a period of despondent hiatus, I found willing support from Jayanta Bagchi of P.M. Bagchi & Co., along with his brother-in-law (and mine), Debashis Sanyal, who came forward with goodwill and determination to bring this work to print. My heartfelt thanks to Jayanta-da and Debashis for their encouragement in carrying this project to its culmination. And along the way, the young artist, designer and architect, Tithi Sanyal, put together the very imaginative cover design for this volume and earned my admiration. Finally, I would be greatly remiss if I did not mention the insightful Foreword written for this book by the accomplished historian and author, Geraldine Forbes. Her generous words sent in my direction and of course highly informative summary of Tagore as a world figure have enhanced the profile of this book considerably. Gerry is an extraordinary scholar and more than that, a great human being. I shall always treasure her friendship.

I would sincerely hope that the product resulting from these efforts will reveal in some measure the beauty and grace of Tagore's mind and his creations that are a legacy for all humanity for all time to come.

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Dayton, OH
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Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore left behind a body of work unmatched within Bengali literature, and arguably within any other in the world. While this might seem to be as weeping accolade by an inveterate admirer, I doubt we would readily find another literary polymath who covered with great variety and depth everything from novels, short stories, poetry and plays, to literary and social criticism, music and dance drama with such consummate skill and path breaking novelty. Bengalees who are otherwise familiar with Voltaire, Goethe or Shakespeare, rather often speak with wonderment as to how one creative figure, who also led an extra-ordinarily busy life connecting with the increasingly interactive world around him (literally and figuratively), possibly found the time to create with such seemingly effortless abandon.

Yet, important as his oeuvre has been in bringing Bengali and Indian literature to a level of prominence hitherto unknown, and challenged and spurred as other creative figures from his own time and thereafter have been to rival or surpass the standard established by Tagore, it is known that Rabindranath himself stated somewhere that of all his varied works, it was his *songs* that would outlive all the rest.

As someone virtually nourished by Tagore's songs (commonly referred to as *Rabindra Sangeet* in Bengali discourse) from a very early age, and one who also has been, to a fair extent, exposed to Tagore's work in different genres, I tend to agree with Tagore's assessment. It is fairly well-established that Tagore, and especially his music, have been a ubiquitous part of Bengali life, within India or outside, for the better part of the past eight or nine decades. Even his detractors have been unable to minimize, much less eliminate, the indispensable presence of Tagore's songs within Bengali life.

Given the above absolute position of command held by his music over the Bengali psyche, much to the great bewilderment of many observers on the outside, it would be natural to expect that the exquisite lyrics in Bengali that are the very soul of his musical creations, would be available in worthy translations that would communicate to the non-Bengali audience the essential beauty and poetic vision that Tagore expressed in them almost effortlessly and with unsurpassed mastery.

But therein resides the prohibitive and essentially impossible challenge. As it is, great literary creations almost always suffer qualitative degradation whenever they are transported to a language different from the original. Even so, in the hands of masterly translators (often accomplished literary figures

themselves), many classic works of literature have found worthy and honorable renditions in other languages. In the main, though, outstanding literary translations, often the products of keen, skillful and passionate minds, have been essentially in the domain of prose — such as fiction, drama, criticism or travelogues. An intrinsically lyrical piece of work suffers brutally when rendered into a different language — no matter how sincere, skilled or able the translator. Some translators do attempt, with great effort, to channel the rhyme and lyrical spirit of the original into the new form, and on rare occasions, achieve some success (case in point: Sukanta Chaudhuri's rendering of Sukumar Ray's immortal *Abol Tabol* into English (*The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray*: Oxford University Press, 1997) has been a highly commendable effort).

Trying to do justice to Tagore's song lyrics in a different language, including English, is a project that no matter how well meant many would regard as a fool's errand. Yet, over the years since Tagore's own rendition of the *Gitanjali* songs, many have attempted to do so, and clearly relative to Bengali sensibility, the results have been less than spectacular.

The first time I came across one of Tagore's romantic songs rendered into an English poem of very high order was the dual version (Spanish and English) I found of *Tumi Sandhyara Meghamala* in Pablo Neruda's exceptionally successful *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition, 2003). Reading the sheer romanticism of *In My Sky at Twilight*, one does taste a measure of the spellbinding magic of Tagore's original, albeit without the inimitable lyrical quality. The palpable lack of more translations of this quality or impact has convinced me that it would take someone of Neruda's poetic stature, combined with equal proficiency in both Bengali and the language of transmission, to perhaps communicate in another medium the soul-stirring creations Tagore has gifted to the Bengali literary universe. Yet, as profoundly romantic *In My Sky at Twilight* is, Tagore's original in Bengali is still simply in a class by itself— inimitable, celestial, romantic to the core. Who else but Tagore could possibly create multiple alliterative juxtapositions such as *bijanajibananabihari* within the space of one song? Here was poetry and refined speech of an order simply impossible to replicate. Yet, what I find both fascinating and at the same time perhaps reassuring is the abundance of admiring readers the world over that express their sheer joy and love upon reading *In My Sky at Twilight* within Neruda's book (I find copious evidence of this on the pages of the internet). The vast majority of these admirers, ironically, are quite

unaware that this poem they so love and admire originated with Tagore in Bengali. And alas, I say to myself, *they will never know how much deeper and infinitely more uplifting the Master's work is in Bengali!* Here, for example, is one reader who writes at <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/in-my-sky-at-twilight/comments/>: Sarah Kester (5/29/2009 7:59:00 PM)—*This poem is so beautiful. It's my favorite Neruda poem that I've read so far. 'Huntress of the depth of my eyes' and 'my nets of music are as wide as the sky' are such beautiful lines. The beauty of his love . . . What an amazing talent!* Clearly, the admiring reader is unaware of this poem (song) having originated with Rabindranath Tagore; chances are, she may not even be aware of Tagore himself to begin with. And she is one of innumerable many who have glimpsed Tagore only via very circuitous routes, and then too while largely unaware of this phenomenally creative figure.

A parallel example to the above could also be proffered vis-à-vis Tagore's book of children's poems, *The Crescent Moon*, published during his frenzied post-Gitanjali years. Almost a century later, in an age of great technological breakthroughs and limitless mechanical and electronic aids purportedly intended to guarantee greater literacy and knowledge for the human mind (aims that I am yet to be convinced are being realized), I still discover on the pages of the internet genuine expressions of wonderment at how easily yet deeply Tagore reaches the heart and soul of a mother-and-child relationship. Here are two comments from <http://www.amazon.com/The-Crescent-Moon-Rabindranath-Tagore/product-reviews/1878424203> that express this simple, magical, soul-penetrating capacity of Tagore quite effectively: (written by A Customer, April 7, 1997)—*I have read several of Tagore's works but nothing has ever touched me as deeply as the lines in these poems about children and their loves. The one on the death of a child is my favorite. I lost my own child with leukemia several years ago and thought the tears had all dried up but these touching words of this great poetic master found some still tender areas. If these poems are so very beautiful in their English translations, I can only guess what they must sound like in the original rhythmic and lyrical Bengali language. Thank you for allowing me to review and recommend this book.* And again, (written by Abby, June 17, 2006)—*My mom read some of these poems to me as a child. When she was dying, I read them to her. She smiled when almost nothing made her smile. And then later in the process, they calmed her when nearly nothing else could calm her. These poems seem almost sacred to me. Smitten Bengalis have known for decades now that reading and feeling Tagore in their hearts is pure, celestial joy, and yet his message to all sentient beings is tied intimately to everything terrestrial,*

rooted in the grass, the trees, the skies, the seasons and the simple homesteads of this earth.

When it comes to Tagore's poems, which earned him the most well-known Bengali sobriquet, *Visva-Kavi* (World-Poet), there have been several commendable translations, including several by Tagore himself. The translations have been in a great variety of languages, and names such as Neruda, Meireles, Jimenez, Akhmatova, Gide and others readily come to mind. However, a significant gulf exists when it comes to Tagore's songs (which are lyrical poems, and indeed the selections used by Tagore in *Gitanjali* are essentially prose renditions of a rather small sampling of his songs that appear in the compendium *Gitabitan*). The magical combination of his supremely artistic and inspired words and the musical structure that lifts them to a higher plane is indeed impossible to regenerate outside Bengali.

I have often read highly unflattering assessments of Tagore's own translations of his songs in *Gitanjali*. Tagore himself was frequently one of his harshest critics. Not long after *Gitanjali* had been read before an august assembly of literary figures (including Yeats and Pound), Tagore reminisced, "... When I first translated them into English, I had not the slightest faith my English would be readable. Many even suspected that Andrews had done the translating. It embarrassed poor Andrews terribly. The day Yeats invited all the distinguished personages to Rothenstein's home for a reading of *Gitanjali*, I cannot describe to you how utterly embarrassed and uneasy I felt..." "Of course, a great many Bengalis I know have been far more critical.

Yet, over the years, I observe that it was not only the great literary stalwarts of 20th-century Europe (the list including an array of eventual Nobel laureates, including Yeats, Pound and Eliot) that were greatly stirred by Tagore's rendition of the *Gitanjali* songs. Many decades later, in a world beset with crass materialism and unmitigated violence and associated crudeness manifested in all aspects of life (from the shopping malls to the blood-stained halls of imperialism), there are still people (including stalwarts of Hollywood such as Martin Sheen, and metaphysical spokesperson for the affluent, Deepak Chopra) who are moved by the likes of *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, or *On the Seashore of Endless Worlds*, or *Thou Hast Made me Endless*. I am myself completely convinced that despite the impossibility of rendering his Bengali songs equally in another language, Tagore himself came

reasonably close to appropriately expressing the emotions of these works. Tagore's English rendering of the *Gitanjali* songs, in my view, was an *inspired* creation — an inspiration oddly enough acquired during a period of ailment on board a ship sailing to Europe.

Many well-meaning Tagore-admirers have attempted to improve Tagore's translations over the years, but I seriously doubt they have achieved that goal. I have discovered in recent months, however, that over the past six or seven decades, a number of his songs *have* in fact made their way to the Western musical tradition, especially in the sacred music category. This is actually quite a non-negligible record, and yet one that barely receives any recognition in the popular consciousness. I have discovered renditions of his songs into English and other languages, and several of these appear in Western notation. These further affirm that Tagore was received and established initially in the West as a devotional and mystical writer, and most of his songs in European languages are therefore from the *Puja* or devotional category. Even though Tagore's music appears to be virtually unknown in the West in recent decades, even a casual perusal of the internet makes it clear that for several decades since *Gitanjali* acquired worldwide fame, several classical composers in the West set a number of songs and poems from *Gitanjali* and *The Gardener* to music, and these were evidently performed to highly receptive audiences. The practice in fact continues to this day, via piano, flute and choral recitals.

The website <http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/t/tagore/> alone provides a fairly extensive compilation of resources related to Tagore and the corresponding compositions in several languages, including English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Russian and others. The vast majority of these are based on *Gitanjali*, but several also include *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Fireflies* and others. A great many more such compositions may be readily garnered from the internet with relative ease. In attempting to discover Tagore's presence in the West via musical scores, I have discovered a fairly abundant number, much to my surprise. There was even a musical rendition of Tagore's frequently-cited poem, *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, performed by a choral group. During the many years that I have regretted the paucity of familiarity with Tagore and his music outside Bengal and outside India, I was not aware of the compositions by Western musicians based on Tagore's poems, certainly to the extent I have now discovered.

The above finding has led me to the following conclusion. Tagore's music in its manifestations around the world may be classified in three broad categories (with several other sub-categories interspersed). The broadest, overwhelmingly familiar and most widely practiced of these is, of course, the ubiquitous *Rabindra Sangeet* (Songs of Rabindranath) in Bengali. These songs (which in Tagore's compendium of songs, *Gitabitan*, number over 3,000) were composed directly in Bengali primarily by Tagore himself, with a relatively small number having been composed by others of prominence with Tagore's consent. These songs are structurally fairly diverse, even though they represent a *style* that is uniquely Tagorean. To a trained ear, the rendition and atmosphere of a Tagore song is unmistakable. Yet, many a fiction ados of classical Indian music would be surprised to learn about the intricate classical foundation of many of Tagore's songs. Being a musical innovator and experimenter of the highest order, Tagore incorporated a variety of musical styles in the performance of the songs identified as *Rabindra Sangeet*. We will return to this again later. The second category consists of external sources (outside Bengal) as well as well-known musical traditions within Bengal from where Tagore derived the framework for setting the music for a considerable number and range of his songs. Both of these categories, incidentally, are essentially all Bengali listeners would regard as authentic *Rabindra Sangeet*. Properly rendered, they represent the style and spirit of how Tagore himself envisioned his songs to be performed to their fullness. And it is these songs of which I set out in this slim collection to capture in simple English the uplifting spirit and majesty that permeate the originals in Bengali. *Rabindra Sangeet* represents forme the very pinnacle of what stirs listeners to the very depth of their beings in terms of the message (crafted with extraordinary lyrical mastery bordering on the divine, and yet deeply human) and the melody. The third category is the one I have serendipitously discovered to be more prolific than I had imagined until I began to scour the internet during the writing of this preface. This category consists of a sizable number of Tagore's songs and poems (from sources extending from *Gitanjali* and *The Gardener* to *Fireflies* and *One Hundred Songs of Kabir*) composed by primarily classical musicians of the West (in ten or more European languages, and also other languages such as Turkish and Mexican) to be performed as chorales or as instrumentals based on the piano, organ, horn, flute or combinations thereof. Perusing websites including the one cited earlier, I have come across an excellent essay by Carlo Coppola (Rabindranath Tagore and Western Composers: A Preliminary Essay, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 2, THE

LYRIC IN INDIA (Summer, Fall 1984), pp. 41-61) that examines thoroughly the extent to which Western composers from as early as the 1920s to now have rendered Tagore's poems (and in some cases even his prose, akin to Goethe's) into musical compositions.

To quote from Coppola, "... tributes of composers in the form of musical settings of Tagore's poems live on. While Tagore's poems are no longer anthologized in books of western verse, his poems remain alive as western *avatars* in concert and recital halls wherever western music is performed." Very re-assuring commentary indeed — one that further affirms Tagore's assessment of the potential survivability of his songs (even if the compositions being cited here (to a considerable extent) consist of poems which otherwise are not necessarily part of Tagore's musical compendium in Bengali). Coppola then goes on to mention that at least 102 composers who have set Tagore's poems to western music have been identified. Of this vast number (which Coppola concedes may not be complete), mention may be made of the leading Czech composer, Josef Foerster (1859-1951), who found in Tagore echoes of his own sense of humanism and his inclination towards linking the music to the text. His Opus 96 from 1914, for instance, consist of five love songs based on Tagore's words (taken variously from *The Songs of Kabir*, *The Gardener* and *Gitanjali*), and Opus 108 from 1918 (dedicated to fallen brothers) is based in part on Tagore's words. Likewise, Leoš Janáček's (1854-1938) Opus 152 is based on poem 74 from *The Gardener*. This chorus was apparently inspired by Tagore's 1922 lecture in Czechoslovakia which Janáček attended (see the MTV reference below). Coppola also cites a number of younger composers drawn to Tagore works who later acquired acclaim as musicians. Several of these, it appears, were in their twenties when setting various Tagore poemsto music. Among these are Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) of France, who also composed the music for *The Post Office* (titled *Amal* after the protagonist in Tagore's play, per Andre Gide); Eric Fogg (1903-1936) of England, and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895-1968) and Giorgio Ghedini (1892-1965) of Italy.

Interestingly, Coppola identifies several women composers who have applied Tagore's poems to musical settings, their number (20%) outweighing the percentage of women composers in the west compared to men in general. Particularly notable among these is the Opus 34 by Augusta Zuckermann (1887-1981) of New York who composed Tagore's *Tell me if this be true* (*E Ki Shotto Shokoli Shotto* in Bengali) in 1918 under the pseudonym Mana-Zucca, primarily wary of the

prejudice against music by women composers. Others of note include Grazyna Bacewicz (1909-1969) of Poland, Elsa Barraine (1910-1999) of France, and Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912 -1990) of Australia. Ursula Mamlok (b. 1928) of Germany wrote *5 Songs from Stray Birds* in 1968 in memory of John F. Kennedy.

Another informative resource outlining in brief Tagore's influence upon western music is available within the MTV biographical sketch on Tagore as an artist, URL: <http://www.mtv.com/artists/rabindranath-tagore/biography/>. It cites Arthur Shepherd's (1880-1958) triptych for soprano and string quartet; Alexander Zemlinsky's (1871-1942) *Lyric Symphony* for soprano, baritone and orchestra, and which Zemlinsky compared to Gustav Mahler's (1860-1911) *Das Lied von der Erde*; Garry Schyman's (b. 1954) *Praan*, an adaptation of Tagore's *Stream of Life* from *Gitanjali* for a video, *Dancing 2008* by Matt Harding (b.1976); and Anglo-Dutch composer Richard Hageman's (1881-1966) highly successful *Do Not Go, My Love* from 1917.

The above discussion provides only the barest reference information on the use of Tagore's works in the western musical tradition, the scope of which is far more extensive than I ever knew previously. To this information, I would like to add two other resources which specifically discuss the musical and philosophical relationship between Tagore and the American composer John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951). The first is a 1968 Masters' thesis by Helen Briggs titled *Tagore, Carpenter and the Gitanjali Song Cycle*. In this thesis, which is 50 pages long with bibliography, Briggs summarizes Tagore's influence on Carpenter (who set to music six poems by Tagore from *Gitanjali* in 1913) as follows.

He was especially happy with the texts of Rabindranath Tagore, whose spirit he seems to catch more faithfully than any other composer. He has been penetrating in drawing from the poems the oriental warmth of color, the sensitiveness to mood. Through his music Carpenter has brought American thought into closer rapport with the poems of a Tagore and a William Sharp, with Negro folk-lore, and classic and romantic ideals of older civilizations. In the music Carpenter has left us is a clear and undistorted image of his personality. The song cycle Gitanjali, inspired by the poems of Rabindranath Tagore reveals his sensitive imagination, keen color sense, and romantic aspirations. The songs with their shifting, expressive harmonies and supple vocal lines reflect the lessons he learned through observation and emotional reaction. They established Carpenter, early in his career, as an authentic lyricist.

A second reference resource with which I will conclude this discussion is from the book, *John Alden Carpenter: A Chicago Composer* by Howard Pollack. The sixth chapter of this biography is titled *From Polonaise Americaine to Gitanjali*, and recounts at length the genesis of *Gitanjali* and Tagore's meteoric rise to fame in the Western literary world. Pollack then goes on to state that the simplicity of Tagore's poems, became known in the U.S. following the publication of six poems in 1912 by Harriet Monroe in *Poetry*, and Tagore's visits in the winter of that year to the home of Mrs. Moody near Urbana, Illinois. Tagore's works immediately "struck a chord" with Carpenter, who was apparently already deeply drawn to Hinduism and the Theosophical movement, which held special sway in Chicago following Swami Vivekananda's triumphant campaigns in 1893. Calling his own composition *Gitanjali*, Carpenter selected six poems from *Gitanjali* (which had yet to be published as a book) to include in the collection. The selections begin with *When I bring you colored toys* (no. 62), and then continues with *On the day when death will knock* (no. 90), *The sleep that flits on baby's eyes* (no. 61), *I am like a remnant of a cloud* (no. 80), *On the seashore of endless worlds* (no. 60), and *Light, my light* (no. 57). Later, in 1915 or so, Carpenter added *Pluck this little flower* (no. 6) to his collection. Pollack describes the childlike purity of a saint's world captured in Tagore's indescribably beautiful *On the seashore of endless world* with these words: *The cycle's next poem (On the seashore) was the one that sent Charles Freer Andrews reeling into the London night...for Yeats this poem spoke not only of children but of "saints" such as Tagore himself. The poem describes children at play "on the seashore of endless worlds." Their sea is not one of fishermen, pearl divers, and merchants, ... but rather a sea that "surges up in laughter." Its cosmic vision of worldwide joy, oblivious to greed and death, naturally spoke strongly to a world poised on the edge of cataclysm.*

The above moving tribute sums up precisely the message that Tagore communicates almost daily to the hearts and souls of smitten Bengalis who bathe in the celestial fountain of his live-giving words and melodies. For those outside the universe of the Bengali language, the profuse tributes above should at least provide an inkling into why Bengalis so obsess with Tagore. It is quite simply that Tagore's words, so inspiring to many in the English language, are considerably more lyrical, intuitive and imbued with beauty in his original Bengali. The songs composed by Tagore himself (and it is well-known how well-trained and gifted he was as a musician from a very young age) directly in the Bengali language created the most dominant style of Bengali music of the twentieth century (and arguably any other

century for that matter) that we collectively known as *Rabindra Sangeet*. It is perhaps not surprising at all that in the wake of (and also concurrent with) Tagore's musical creations, there arose in Bengal during the first few decades of the twentieth century several other *avantgarde* musical styles. In all likelihood, these appeared in reaction to the cultural upheaval that Rabindranath Tagore ushered in within the sphere of the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Few parallels exist elsewhere within India of such depth and variety of musical traditions being established within one language and culture in the space of only a few decades. Alongside *Rabindra Sangeet*, Tagore's contemporary Dwijendralal Roy (1863-1913, primarily known as a playwright) created *Dwijendra Geeti* at the heart of which was the spirit (as with most of his creations) of re-vitalizing Indian pride in the nation's glorious past and limitless future (with stirring numbers such as *Dhono Dhanne Pushpe Bhara* and *Jedin Sunil Jaladhi Hoite*). The intensely devotional works of Rajanikanta Sen (1865-1910) gifted Bengal with *Rajanikanter Gaan*, a style that was both original and at the same time in line with Bengal's long-standing tradition of devotional music along the lines of Baru Chandidas (b. 1408), Ramprasad Sen (1718-1775), Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1769-1821) and others. In Lucknow, meanwhile, expatriate Bengali musician Atulprasad Sen (1871-1934) created his own genre of Bengali songs that came to be known as *Atulprasader Gaan*, a collection that included such inspiring numbers as *Utho Go Bharata Lakshmi* and *Bolo Bolo Bolo Shabe*. Rising to stake a claim of his own in his own right within this firmament was the supremely creative Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1973), who established a musical tradition of his own classified as *Nazrul Geeti*, and experimented with a variety of other genres including devotional songs to Kali and songs of national and social consciousness. Each of these prolific musical styles is unique, structurally innovative, and blends words and music together along the lines of Tagore's work.

Ultimately, the present work attempts to capture in simple, non-rhyming prose the essential spirit of Tagore's songs as they exist in the *Rabindra Sangeet* compendium. Given that this task is prohibitively difficult, it is logical to question the wisdom of taking it up in the first place. For this translator, this effort goes back many decades. In my high school years, I recall being assigned the task of translating portions of Tagore's early dance drama, *Valmiki Pratibha* (The Genius of Valmiki). The project was both daunting and also fascinating, and along the way I came face to face with the sheer grace and mastery of Tagore's language — both the prose and more so the songs with their unmatched lyricism, and the virtually

impossible task of channeling it to English. I no longer have with me that early (and likely amateurish) effort; however, the experience convinced me that Tagore's priceless literary works and their inspirational impact were a legacy for all mankind, and that somehow they needed to be communicated to those outside the Bengali universe, preferably by someone equally adept at both Bengali and the language of translation. Some years later, while in the U.S.A. as a graduate student, I observed that few American students (undergraduate and graduate), including even those from the humanities (fields closer to the literary world than my own field of electrical engineering) had heard of Rabindranath Tagore, much less know about his phenomenal literary life or his historic role in forging the bond between East and West.

This relative obscurity of Tagore as a major literary and renaissance figure was further evident from any random walk through the aisles of most bookstores in the U.S., and even a great many libraries. The reasons for this obscurity have been explored and expounded by many over the years, and will not be pursued at length here. During my early years in North America, however, I was pleasantly surprised to find entire bookshelves devoted to translations of Tagore in Spanish (by Juan Ramon Jimenez) in a bookstore in Mexico City, where I also discovered sidewalk stashes of books for sale much like I was used to seeing in Kolkata during my years there. A few years later, I found further evidence of Tagore's more enduring presence in South America, when in response to a translation by me of an essay by a fellow Tagore enthusiast, Rajat Chanda, the Costa Rican author Alfonso Chacon R. wrote in the pages of the Bengali webzine, Parabaas, a spirited defense of the continuity of Tagore studies on that continent (see <http://www.parabaas.com/SHEET3/LEKHA16/forgotten.html>).

In spite of the obscurity and neglect implied above, I also found evidence in a variety of places within the U.S. that Tagore was frequently valued by creative people there such as artists and thinkers. During my years in graduate school I came across books on aging and mortality by the noted scholar Elisabeth Kübler-Ross that quoted Tagore often in chapter preambles. This did not surprise me at all, since Tagore himself suffered unimaginable personal losses during the prime of his life, and made frequent references to death in his writings, albeit in reassuring and uplifting terms (a potent example being the song *Marana Re Tuhun Mama Shyama Saman* from *Bhanusimha*, whereby a forlorn Radha invites Death as the beloved paramour Krishna). Around the same time, I came across the autobiography of the

folk-singer and activist, Joan Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With*, which actually begins with a quote from Tagore: *God honors me when I work, he loves me when I sing*. Yet another notable citation of Tagore I found in Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*, wherein the first volume, *Our Oriental Heritage* contained references to the two principal modern exemplars, Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. This volume, published in the early 1930s, nevertheless provides a glimpse into Tagore's powerful poetic and philosophical influence upon the Western world. In these pages, I found lines taken from Tagore's prolific works; in particular, I was drawn to Durant's interpretation of the song lyrics, *Tell me if this all be true, my lover*. In the song, Tagore expresses the incredulity felt by the divine paramour in the adulations of admiring devotees. Searching my recollection, I immediately recognized the original of this being the familiar Tagore song, *Eki Shotto Shokoli Shotto Hey Amar Chira Bhokto*. It re-assured me once more that my own absolute fascination with Tagore, whose presence and gifts have occupied my heart and nourished me for much of my life is not misplaced; in fact, it resonated in some of the finest minds in contemporary history. And instances of this are countless. Even under highly diminished linguistic transference, Tagore has the ability to capture the imagination of creative and sensitive minds.

In recent years as well, I have been periodically approached by Americans from different stations in life who have expressed sincere interest in Tagore. In the early 2000s, the wife of an American composer (Alan Higbee) from Cleveland, Ohio, contacted me by phone tell me they had come across my Tagore essay on the internet, and wanted to share three compositions with me. The three selections were *Bless the Child*, *The Flower School* and *My Song Will Speak*, all from *The Crescent Moon*. In 2004, a young American aerospace engineer from Ypsilanti, Michigan, who had also come across my essays on Tagore, invited me to participate on a panel at Eastern Michigan University in order to speak about Tagore's Universalism at a Peace Forum he had organized in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Around 2006, Cynthia Snodgrass from the University of Stirling in England contacted me regarding an English translation of Tagore's *Ayi Bhuvanamanamohini*, which was included in her dissertation work on prayer songs associated with Mahatma Gandhi's devotional sessions with his followers. These and other experiences have deeply touched and enriched me, and filled me with hope that Tagore's timeless work will reach far and wide across the world in the decades and centuries ahead.

Having dwelt at length upon the subject of the virtual futility of trying to translate Tagore's inimitable songs in Bengali into English or any other language, it would be logical (as implied earlier) to question my own motivation in embarking on the selfsame project. Part of this had to do with the fact that I observed the paucity of Tagore's literary works or his musical or philosophical legacy in the West, and especially in the United States during my years in graduate school. Having received great emotional, intellectual and inspirational stimulation from Tagore for virtually my entire life, I felt that communicating the spirit and impact of his songs in Bengali, *Rabindra Sangeet*, to those unfamiliar would not only be of service to humanity, but also be a small measure of my own tribute. Tagore's earliest impact upon my life occurred well before my tenth year. His monumental creations that stirred Bengal's and India's freedom struggle against British colonial rule, including *Ekla Cholo* (Walk alone) which moved Gandhi, *Nai Nai Bhoy* (Fear not, victory shall be yours), *Bidhir Bandhan Katbe Tumi* (Think you will tear apart what fate has bound), *Baanglaar Maati Baanglaar Jal* (May Bengal's earth and Bengal's water), and so many more, several decades after Tagore's passage and since India had gained freedom, resonated in my heart and soul like virtually nothing else. To listen to Suchitra Mitra perform *Ekla Cholo*, or *Krishnakali*, or *Sharthaka Janama Amar* (Blessed this birth of mine) — these were not only soul-stirring, they were life-transforming. To hear Hemanta Mukhopadhyay perform *O Amar Desher Mati* (Beloved soil of my land, I bow to you), or *Ayi Bhuvanamanamohini* (Peerless, alluring enchantress of the Earth!), or *Amader Jatra Holo Shuru* (Our journey has begun, O Boatman) was to feel Tagore speak directly to me with a voice beyond space and time. During this period of my early school years in Allahabad, I also became aware of the sweep and scope of the Bengal Renaissance of the 19th and 20th centuries, of which Tagore was unquestionably the centerpiece. Guiding me through this history of Bengal's re-awakening were my parents, in whose home Bengal and its astonishing accomplishments were never far from a child's reach, be it via literary magazines, or historical texts, or books, or simply the radio and newspapers. Of course, throughout these years, children such as me would already routinely perform Tagore's songs for children, recite his poems and enact a variety of his plays and musicals in cities and towns across Bengal and Bengali outposts throughout India.

When my father relocated to Kolkata in 1968 with my brother and me upon the untimely loss of my mother, my exposure to Tagore multiplied manifold.

Tagore indeed became the very center of my life, and that centrality has only intensified more than four decades later. During my middle school years, my older sister would come home from High School and sing *Momo Chitte*, *Niti Nritye*, or *Shonkotera Durbalata*, or *Kharabayu Boye Bege* as she worked or played around the house, and it would feel like an indescribably beautiful world opening up. And on the radio, the public theaters, city-wide cultural shows we would hear the songs and words from *Shapmochan*, *Chitrangada*, *Bisarjan*, *Devatar Graash*, or in the movie theaters there would be screenings of *Kabuliwallah* or *Kashudhita Pashaan*, and my young heart, already drawn in deeply, would be left wondering how so much beauty and imagination could possibly emanate from this limitless treasure chest that was Rabindranath to us. During the transition from middle to high school, I would be awakened practically every morning before leaving for school by celestial renditions of Tagore's words via the sonorous and gentle baritone of Hemanta Mukhopadhyay on the radio. *Tomar Duar Kholar Dhwani Oyi Je Baje* — Hemanta would sing. Then, too, there would be *Tomar Shur Shunaye Je Ghoom Bhangao*, *Shey Ghoom Amar Romoniyo*. I cannot adequately describe how these words, ringing in the air as the early morning light filtered into our tropical bedroom, would stay with me all day, literally bathing my soul in indescribable joy. Tagore made my every day — at home, on the double-decker buses going to school, attending events throughout the year, spending time at the libraries, strolling the lanes and by lanes of Kolkata, discussing any and all topics under the sun with friends — rich with depth, adding meaning to everything sad or disturbing, puzzling or enthralling in life. I recall the innumerable times Tagore would comfort me when things would happen that might leave me feeling hurt. I had a physics teacher who I presume had high expectations of me. Normally, he would strike fear amongst most students in the class with his pop quizzes and the like, but I typically managed to handle them well. He was known for taking the knuckle to anyone who failed to answer his random question, complete with the (almost) sadistic query, "Are you seeing mustard flowers yet?" Such a misfortune never happened to me. However, there were many occasions when he would haul me up, and bombard me with not one, not two, but a flurry of questions in a row, expecting that I would stumble somewhere along the way. Fortunately, I never once stumbled, but nevertheless felt quite shook up for being singled out in this manner. It was only much later I realized that he was probably training me to withstand intense competition. But, caught up in the

moment, I felt deeply harassed and terrorized, thinking this was so unfair. When I felt down in this manner, Tagore spoke to me time after time with the words, "*Tumi More Pow Nai, Pow Nai Porichoy.*" In Tagore's language, it was really me telling my teacher, "*Sir, you simply do not know me; some day you will know who I am.*" That line offered me the strength to believe in myself. Whenever I felt injustice stalking the world, Tagore came to me in cascades with words of such reassurance that it always felt like the darkest cloud had lifted. Of course, I observed this was true of Bengalis in all walks of life, and was manifested in the newspapers and magazines all the time. When Lal Bahadur Shastri, a much-loved Prime Minister passed away unexpectedly, I recall reading the words under his photograph in *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* taken from *Nai Nai Bhoy, Hobey Hobey Joy*, to the effect, "*Jani Jani Tor Bondhono Dore Chhinre Jabe Bare Bar.*" Another time, the same newspaper adorned a picture of a frolicking group of children entering a great mansion through a massive and ornate wrought-iron gate with the words, *Amra Shabai Raja* (We are Sovereigns, Every One of Us). Such power, such magnificence of thought — not one living soul was small in his eyes. Later, when I was in engineering school (IIT, Kharagpur), my singing Tagore's songs actually may well have rescued me at times from the infamous ragging or hazing of freshmen by seniors that was a notorious practice in that institution. I especially remember one unrelated incident that has stayed with me all these years later. On one occasion, there was an outdoor concert put together by Azad Hall (my dormitory or hall of residence) as part of the annual Spring Festival. There, I was given the opportunity to perform a Tagore song (incidentally, I would rather frequently be part of Hall cultural events during my years there). The song I sang on this occasion was *Shudhu Tomar Bani Noy Go Hey Bondhu*. I do not know for sure how well my rendition went (after all, I had never received any formal training in music); any applause afterwards I likely attributed to routine audience reaction. However, several days (it might even have been weeks) later, a non-Bengali friend approached me somewhere on campus and told me, "Monish, remember that Tagore song you sang at the Spring Fest for Azad Hall? I did not catch or understand all the words, but the passion and depth of what it conveyed moved me very deeply." This was triumph for me — I had managed to light up one heart with the touchstone of Tagore's inspiration.

During my youthful and adult years, *Rabindra Sangeet* acquired its identity within my heart via the works of Suchitra Mitra and Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, of whom I have written briefly earlier. Alongside these two influential performers, I

have been equally enthralled by such masters as Pankaj Mullick (whose role as one of the pioneers of Tagore's music in the early years is well established), whose rendition of *Gagane Gagane Aponar Mone*, *Joubana Sharashi Nire*, *Emono Diney Tare Bola Jaye* and many others are to me the works of a *sadhaka*. Likewise, I cannot think of anyone else equaling Kanika Bandyopadhyay's *Baaje Karuna Soore* or Ananda Dhara Bohichhe Bhubane. When it comes to Tagore's songs of pure romance, to me no one seems to surpass Chinmay Chattopadhyay, who simply infuses life into numbers as far-reaching as *Tumi Sandhyara Meghamala* (this is the original to the widely acclaimed *In My Sky at Twilight*), which, I am convinced, would win sensitive minds such as Neruda and Ocampoover far more emphatically than it already did via Tagore's poem rendered into English. To listen to Chinmay Chattopadhyay perform *Amar Mone Kyamone Kore*, *Bhalo Jodi Basho Sakhi*, or *Ami Chini Go Chini Tomare* — is to feel the romance of Tagore's heart that far transcends the physical and transforms it into a yearning for the subtle and something infinitely more divine. Tagore was the one supreme master I have ever known who rose to halcyon heights in practically every avenue of the human mind, whether he wrote about *Puja* or devotion, the inspirations of *Prakriti* (nature, which he highlighted profusely with depth and vision almost without any parallel), the human struggle worldwide against tyranny and injustice (through prolific essays), *Swadesh*, representing love of one's land or people, or *Prem* — the romance which was at the very core of his being. Then, too, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was Debabrata Biswas, who re-defined stylized renditions of *Rabindra Sangeet*, and became a brand-icon in his own right. His powerful baritone breathed life into powerful numbers such as *Akash Bhora Surjo Tara*, *Mahabishwe*, *Mahakashe*, or *Boro Asha Kore Eshechhi Go* that acquired unsurpassed popularity. It was the extraordinary filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak who first brought the song *Kyano Cheye Achho Go Ma* as performed by Debabrata Biswas to my attention in his path-breaking film *Jukti, Tokko Aar Goppo*. Its message of despair reaches the very depth of one's being. In this sterling pantheon of outstanding exponents of *Rabindra Sangeet*, I must also include such stalwarts as Shantidev Ghosh (*Khanchar Pakhi*), Ashoketaru Bandyopadhyay (*Lakshmi Jakhan Ashbe*), Sumitra Sen (*Amar Shokol Dukher Pradeep*), Kanan Devi (*Jhara Pata Go*) and Rajeshwari Datta (*E Parabase Ke*), and also worthy inheritors such as Sharmila Roy Pommo (who sang *Ontoro Momo Bikoshito Koro Ontorotoro Hey* with appropriate beauty and solemnity in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*), Swagatalakshmi Dasgupta (whose *Marana Rey Tuhun Mama Shyama Samaan* is truly soul-stirring, and who has

demonstrated as well as anyone else the use of Western (especially Irish and Scottish) music in some *Rabindra Sangeet*), Rezwana Choudhury Bannya (*Tomar Shurer Dhara*) and Pijush Kanti Sarkar (whose *Neela Anjana Ghana Punja Chhayaye* and *Visva Veena Rabe* are true standouts). The preceding is of course by no means a complete list. Mention must also be made at this stage of the frequent use of Bengal's very own *Baul* and *Bhatiali* traditions in *Rabindra Sangeet*. The eminent philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta in fact described Tagore as *the greatest of the Bauls of Bengal*. Songs including *Amar Sonar Bangla* (now the national anthem of Bangladesh), *Graam Chhara Oyi Ranga Matir Path* and *Aami Kaan Pete Royi* are outstanding examples of this genre.

Thus in the preceding pages I have outlined my personal motivation and inspiration in putting together this modest collection of Tagore's songs rendered into prose translations in English over a long period of time, in the sparse spaces between pursuing an academic career in engineering and science, and alongside striving to lead a life of conscious activism in speaking out against tyranny and oppression around the world by imperial and narrow, fanatical forces — a pursuit in which once again Tagore has held my hand and kept me focused on the task at hand at all times. I realize that my effort, even if sincere to the utmost, is still wholly inadequate, and the work herein anyhow is but a small sampling of Tagore's vast oeuvre. The work presented here is categorized along the lines of the broad topical groups found in the *Gitabitan*. Forty five songs are from *Prem* (romance or love); forty one are from *Puja* (devotional); sixteen from *Vichitra* (intrigue); ten from *Swadesh* (homage to the motherland); twenty from the nature selections, of which nine are from *Basanta* (spring), seven from *Varsha* (the rains), and two each from *Sheeth* (winter) and *Grishma* (summer); one more is from *Prakriti* (nature) in general; eight are from various dance dramas and musicals; two from *Prem O Prakriti* (nature's love); three from *Anushthanik* (ceremonials). Three selections have been taken from a special group of songs that Tagore composed very early in his life (his early twenties). These songs, collectively called *Bhanusimha Thakurer Padavali* (the title being a pseudonymous play on Tagore's name, implying Lord of the Suns) were styled after the *kirtana*, *bhajan* or *bhakti* songs popular throughout India depicting the divine love between Krishna and his paramour, Radha. While Tagore rarely treated religious themes in his works (except for philosophical conversations or intrigues

from the Indian epics or classics), in this collection, he deftly romanticizes Radha's forlorn lamentations to her fellow maidens in Vrindavan, using a version of *Vrajabuli*, a classical language from the Bihar (and part of Nepal) region of India. The song, *Marana Re* (O Death, You are to Me akin to Krishna) epitomizes Tagore's lifelong embrace of death as the natural obverse of life. Throughout these translations, I have attempted to use straight forward everyday style of speech; thus I have use you/your consistently instead of thee/thine (departing thereby from Tagore's own usage in *Gitanjali*).

My effort will have found fruition if and when at least some sensitive spirits outside the domain of Bengali will have found in them echoes of their most heartfelt thoughts and emotions; after all, it is more than anything else in these qualities that Tagore stands at the vanguard of human civilization at its most exalted, and reaches out beyond space and time. Tagore in my mind, after all, was the ultimate Universalist who actually lived, spoke, wrote about and practiced this universalism within a life that stood at the crossroads of an India caught between its multihued and multifaceted past and its awakening to the modern age ushered by Western science. I truly believe that the scope and realization of Rabindranath Tagore is still very much in its infancy, and in the unexplored future that awaits human destiny, Tagore will hold a place of prominence as one who took pleasure in life with all its wonders and creation with all its mystery and majesty, and envisioned a world without "narrow domestic walls" where tireless striving aims for human perfection. And in fulfilling his dream of an India (and a world) where humanity offers salutations to "the seashore of Bharata's great humanity" (*Hey More Chitto*), Troy Organ Wilson's assertion in *The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man* that Tagore was "the best that Hinduism has produced" will have proven right, albeit with the necessary clarification that Tagore's Universalism extended well beyond religions or narrow regional or sectarian alignments.

Monish R. Chatterjee
Dayton, Ohio
December 2013



Songs of Love :
Prem

ভালোবেসে, সখী, নিভুতে যতনে
 আমার নামটি লিখো—তোমার
 মনের মন্দিরে।
 আমার পরানে যে গান বাজিছে
 তাহার তালটি শিখো—তোমার
 চরণমঞ্জীরে।।
 ধরিয়া রাখিযো সোহাগে আদরে
 আমার মুখর পাখি—তোমার
 প্রাসাদপ্রাঙ্গণে।
 মনে ক'রে সখী, বাঁধিয়া রাখিযো
 আমার হাতের রাখী—তোমার
 কনককঙ্কণে।।
 আমার লতার একটি মুকুল
 ভুলিয়া তুলিয়া রেখো—তোমার
 অলকবন্ধনে।
 আমার স্মরণ-শুভ-সিন্দুরে
 একটি বিন্দু ঐকো—তোমার
 ললাটচন্দনে।।
 আমার মনের মোহের মাধুরী
 মাখিয়া রাখিয়া দিয়ো—তোমার
 অঙ্গসৌরভে।
 আমার আকুল জীবনমরণ
 টুটিয়া লুটিয়া নিয়ো—তোমার
 অতুল গৌরবে।।



Lovingly, my love, with intimate care
Inscribe my name tenderly
Upon the temple of your mind.

The song that plays within my heart
Catch the spirit of its rhythm
Upon your dancing feet.

With loving care and tender touch
Capture my garrulous bird
In your palace courtyard.

Dearest, remember to keep this string bracelet
Wrapped in the glowing radiance
Of your gold-bedecked wrist.

A single blossom from my ivy vine
Errantly pluck to decorate
Your glorious braids.

Vermillion red as heavenly love
Let a mark of it in my memory
Embellish your forehead.

The sweetness of this obsessive love of mine
Wear it around you, imprison it
In the aura of your fragrance.

The passion of my life and death
Take it all with great hunger
To your incomparable glory.

(Song # 34 , Prem, Gitabitan)

