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Rabindranath Tagore in Indonesia An Experiment in Bridge-Building

The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) set out from Calcutta on a three-and-a-half-month Southeast Asian tour on 12 July 1927.¹ He was accompanied by the noted philologist Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the artist, photographer and architect Surendranath Kar, and the painter and musician Dharendra Krishna Deva Varman.² The party sailed from Madras to Singapore on the French ship *Ambois*. After a month's stay in Singapore and Malaya, Tagore arrived in Batavia via Sumatra on 21 August. The poet and his party soon left for Bali and spent the two weeks from 26 August to 8 September there. Thereafter Rabindranath returned to Surabaya and visited different places in Java from 9 to 30 September, on which date he left Batavia for Singapore. On his way back to India the poet paid a brief visit to Siam, that is, modern Thailand.

¹ Known in Bengal as Rabindranath Thakur. 'Tagore' is an Anglicized form of the surname used by the poet in his English signature. He belonged to the Thakur Bari (house of Tagore), which was culturally the most advanced family in Calcutta in the nineteenth century. For bibliographical information on Tagore's life and work see below, note 3.

² Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1890-1977) started his career as a university lecturer in English literature in Calcutta. In 1926 he obtained a D.Litt. degree for a dissertation entitled *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* under the supervision of Dr L.D. Barnett of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Apart from English, he knew French, German, Italian and Spanish. Among Indian languages he had a knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi, besides his mother tongue, Bengali. He did not read Dutch, but could converse in broken Malay. While in Java, he noted down from scholars he met there the correct spelling and pronunciation of Dutch and Indonesian words and names. Surendranath Kar (1892-1970), vice-principal of the Kalabhavana (Art School) at Santiniketan, was the photographer of the team, but was a painter and architect in his own right. He made a large number of sketches during his Indonesian tour and was responsible for the architectural design of many buildings in Santiniketan, including Tagore's residence, Udayan.

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Introducing Rabindranath Tagore: his place in India's culture and politics

The appearance of Rabindranath Tagore as a creative writer of great power within the British colonial framework demands rethinking about the different social consequences of Western colonial rule in different countries in Asia. More specifically, there was a difference in elite formation between India and Indonesia.³ The English East India Company in the seventeenth century could avail itself of the services of an existing group of middlemen consisting of commercial agents, middle-class landowners and educated officials. In Indonesia the marked presence of Chinese agents somewhat delayed the rise of an indigenous elite. Western education too was late in coming to the Dutch East Indies. Whereas in India the three metropolitan universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were already functioning by 1857, in Indonesia university-level education was not available till the 1920s. The *Rechtshogeschool* (Law College) was established in Batavia in 1924. It was not a university in the strict sense of the word, though eminent scholars with the stature of university professors provided a high standard of education here.

The Tagore family settled in colonial Calcutta (founded in 1690) as suppliers to foreign ships. They prospered and threw up a remarkable figure like Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), the grandfather of the poet Tagore. Dwarkanath was an industrial and business entrepreneur in his own right. He owned extensive areas of land as well as indigo factories, shipping concerns, salt, saltpetre, sugar and tea businesses, coalmines and banks. Dwarkanath was well educated and accomplished. He was taught English at one of the Eurasian institutions in Calcutta, Sherbourne School. He also acquired a knowledge of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. In the early 1840s Dwarkanath visited Europe, travelling via Italy and France to England, where he inspected factories and docks and, because of his accomplishments, was admitted to the inner circle of friends of Queen Victoria. A good pianist and a fine singer, Dwarkanath impressed the great Orientalist Max Mueller with his singing of Italian and French songs. He earned a reputation as a patron of the arts and learning in England and India.

The glory of the Tagore family was short-lived. The Carr-Tagore & Co. and the Union Bank which Dwarkanath had built up, collapsed in 1848.

³ For differences in elite formation, see Arun Das Gupta 1996:107-14, 1997:150-60, 1998:129-41. For Western education in India and Indonesia, see Spear 1981:680, 719; Hall 1968:752, 757; Ricklefs 1981:150-2, 156-8. For the history of the Tagore family and the life of Rabindranath Tagore, see Kripalani 1980:13-32, 80-105, 151-81, 282-315, and 1981; Kling 1981; Tagore 1943, 1980, and 1985. The standard Bengali-language biography of Rabindranath Tagore is Mukhopadhyay 1953-1994; see also Pal 1982-2001. On the school in Santiniketan, see Uma Das Gupta 1975-76. For the Bengal Renaissance, see Susobhan Sarkar 1979. For the politics of Tagore, see Sumit Sarkar 1973. On Gandhi and Tagore, see Rolland 1924; Raychaudhuri 1999.

His son, Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), was able to overcome the crisis in family fortunes by dint of exceptional perseverance and strength of will. Having paid off his father's debts, he refrained from entering on fresh business ventures. The Tagores continued as a notable land-owning family till the time of Rabindranath Tagore. A basically religious person, Debendranath took up the unfinished work of Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833), the pioneer religious reformer of Bengal. In 1843 Debendranath formed the Brahmo Samaj, thereby launching the Brahmo reform movement, which influenced the poet Rabindranath at an impressionable age. The Brahmos were reformed Hindus, who shed idolatry and adopted congregational prayer, as that among Christians but directed to a formless God (Nirakar Brahma). Rabindranath, writing about the formative forces in his life, identified three distinct cultural currents in contemporary Bengal, namely, besides Rammohan Roy's religious reform movement, the literary revolution inaugurated by the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1858-1894) and the growing national awareness. These were elements in the cultural ferment in Calcutta, marked by the appearance of a galaxy of gifted writers, artists and musicians, inspired reformers, and ardent nationalists. Commonly known as the Bengal Renaissance, it was India's cultural response to the West – a phenomenon of far greater magnitude than the cultural movement Boedi Oetomo (Beautiful Endeavour) in Java or the May Fourth Movement in China, which were similar cultural responses to the West. It was a prolonged intellectual movement that existed for more than a century, from 1814, when Rammohan settled in Calcutta, to 1941, when Rabindranath Tagore died. Once the depth and scope of this nineteenth-century renaissance is gauged, Rabindranath Tagore appears to be just the tip of an iceberg. Nevertheless, coming at the end of a long process of cultural evolution, he created a world all his own through his writings and other work. Modern Bengal culture is a product of the Tagore era, which is not yet completely over.

A restless boy, Rabindranath avoided formal school education – something he never regretted in later life. He lived his long life as the subject of a colonial state, but his tremendous creativity was not curbed by the constraints of foreign rule. A tireless writer, Tagore turned out an endless stream of poems, songs, plays, short stories, novels, dance dramas, and serious essays on literature, society and politics. His collected works run to thirty-three volumes. Although he did not have prolonged training as a singer under the supervision of a guru, he composed more than two thousand songs, which are still sung today, through the innovative use of classical ragas and Western tunes. A distinguished modern painter, he has about two thousand paintings to his name. That he wrote in Bengali does not make him a provincial writer. Indians who speak other languages are familiar with his works through

translations. Many were attracted by his constructive work at Santiniketan. Like Gandhi, he was regarded as an important nation builder.

It is in this context that one should judge Tagore's activities at Santiniketan, where he founded a school in the ashrama style in 1901.⁴ He offered a nationalist alternative to mainstream Western education imparted through the English medium. Tagore's endeavours to combine the wisdom and learning of the East and West drew attention from Indian as well as other Asian intellectuals. The school in Santiniketan expanded into an educational complex which included an art school (Kalabhavana), a school of music and dancing (Sangitbhavana), a research department (Vidyabhavana), and, in the adjoining village of Sriniketan, a centre of rural reconstruction. In 1921 was founded the international university Visva Bharati (World University), which comprised the above-mentioned institutions and which was to become a meeting-place for Indian and international scholars. Education received the highest priority in Tagore's nation-building programme. Gandhi, in fact, used to call him Gurudeva, the supreme teacher.

To meet the needs of a growing school with poor resources was a daunting task. Clearly the Santiniketan ashram demanded all the poet's attention. Despite all his preoccupations, however, Rabindranath was not unaware of what was happening in Indian politics. Nationalist self-consciousness first manifested itself in regional vernacular literatures. Bankim Chandra Chatterji, the greatest nineteenth-century Bengali literary figure, was the first to give the concept of Indian nationalism a concrete formulation through his novels and essays. The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, was a forum in which Western-educated Indians could voice the rightful wishes of the Indian people. Tagore was first drawn into nationalist politics at the time of the Swadeshi Movement (1903-1908), which arose in protest against the partitioning of the province of Bengal by the British rulers with the deliberate intention of weakening Bengali politics. Tagore composed a number of patriotic songs, which were sung in the streets of Calcutta and in the villages and towns of Bengal. He favoured 'Constructive Swadeshi' through *atma-sakti* (self-reliance) without going in for a direct confrontation with the British, and tried to keep his school in Santiniketan free from nationalist politics. By 1911, when he was fifty, Tagore was recognized as the foremost poet of Bengal. In 1913 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his book of poems *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). In recognition of his eminence as a poet, King George V of England conferred a knighthood on him in 1915. In 1919 Tagore returned this title in protest against the tragic killing by British soldiers of hundreds of unarmed Sikhs at Amritsar. This incident brought him into prominence

⁴ Santiniketan was originally an ashram founded by Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore, near Bolpur, a railway station about 90 kilometres north-west of Calcutta.

as a leading Indian spokesman. Much of this was known to the Dutch and Javanese intellectuals who invited the poet to visit Indonesia in 1927.

Sources of information

At this point I should give a brief explanation of the source materials I have used for this article. They include Tagore's own letters, written in Bangla (Bengali), from Malaya and Indonesia as contained in *Java Jatrir Patra* (see Tagore 1961), and Chatterji's detailed diary of the Indonesian tour, also written in Bangla (Chatterji 1964). *Java Jatrir Patra* was first printed, along with the *Paschim Jatrir Diary* (Diary of a Traveller to the West), in *Jatri* (A Traveller) in 1929 and was reprinted on the occasion of the Tagore Centenary in 1961. The poet's letters from Malaya, Bali, Java and Siam, written between July and October 1927, are also to be found in English translation in the (English-language) *Visva Bharati Quarterly* (including the *Visva Bharati News Letter*), 5-6, October 1927 to January 1929. Chatterji's diary with reports of the tour was first published by the Book Company in Calcutta in 1940, after being serialized in the Bengali journal *Prabasi* (of which Ramananda Chattopadhyay was editor) between Bhadra 1334 (September 1927) and Aswin 1338 (October 1931). I refer in this article to the enlarged edition published in 1964, a 700-page book written in Bengali without any English translation. With its wealth of details, it stands out as an important source in its own right on elite groups and cultural organizations interested in Tagore's visit to Malaya, Indonesia and Siam in 1927. The reader is also referred to *Prabasi*, Sraban 1334 / July 1927 and Bichitra Aswin 1334 / October 1927 to Aswin 1335 / October 1928.

From these materials it is possible to reconstruct a reliable account of Tagore's tour. I am aware that many Dutch and Indonesian newspapers and periodicals also contain reports and photographs of the Tagore visit to the then Dutch East Indies, but the information on the Indonesian side does not seem to have been fully processed. It became clear to me during my stay in Jakarta as a visiting teacher at the University of Indonesia in 1979-1981 that the Tagore visit then was well-nigh forgotten. It therefore came as a pleasant surprise to learn from the noted Indonesian historian and social scientist, the late Paramita Abdur Rachman, that Rabindranath Tagore happened to have been the first Indian she had ever met as a child. I discovered some material on the subject in the Museum Pusat in Jakarta. However, a thorough search in Indonesia and the Netherlands is likely to yield a great deal more information.

I have found it convenient to retain the colonial spellings of personal names and titles and institutional names as Chatterji found them in 1927.

Purpose of the Indonesian tour

Why did the Indian poet undertake this tour and how was it organized? Chatterji (1964) called it a cultural mission from Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan. The mission had two aims. Firstly, to study the remains of Indian civilization in the antiquarian relics as well as the life and the living arts in Indonesia and Farther India. Secondly, to bring about close cultural cooperation between India and these regions through an appreciation of the ideals of Visva Bharati. Chatterji's understanding of the purpose of Rabindranath's Southeast Asian tour is correct, if a little incomplete.⁵

The reader ought to bear in mind that Tagore was a widely travelled poet. He went on foreign tours as many as twelve times.⁶ To put his travels in Southeast Asia in a proper perspective, one has to understand the nature of his interest in the area. For quite some time he was curious about Bali, probably because the Hindu religion and culture were still alive in that island. Rabindranath was fascinated by the generally accepted fact of the migration of Hindu colonists to Malaya, Indonesia and Indo-China, and was unaware of the criticism of the Greater India idea. He longed to see for himself what could be seen of the remains of ancient Indian culture in these countries. The chief motive behind his Southeast Asian journey was a desire to discover Indian culture in India's Southeast Asian frontier area. At a send-off given him by eminent Calcuttan scholars, Tagore said that he was going on a pilgrimage to India beyond its modern political boundaries (Tagore 1927). Another objective of this visit was to discover the Asian cultural identity.⁷

In this context the visit of the Indian poet to the Netherlands in 1920 proved to be of great significance. In a brief but informative article entitled "Tagore in Holland" (1961), the noted Dutch critic, novelist and playwright Ben van Eysselstein tells us that Tagore's work was read in English translation in the Netherlands even before he became famous as the first Asian writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. It is remarkable that the outstanding Dutch writer Frederik van Eeden translated *Gitanjali* into Dutch in the very same year. Van Eeden translated more than ten books of Tagore's between 1913 and 1923, including *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon*,

⁵ Chatterji explained the purpose of the visit in his preliminary report on the tour (see undated extracts from this report in file Java, Rabindrabhavana Archives, Santiniketan). For the educational system in Santiniketan see Uma Das Gupta 1975-76.

⁶ Members of the Tagore family travelled a great deal. Grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore visited England, France and Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. Father Debendranath Tagore travelled extensively in India and reportedly went to Canton once. Rabindranath first visited England at the age of seventeen, and between 1878 and 1925 went on seven foreign tours. See Tripathi 1967.

⁷ File Java, Rabindrabhavana Archives, Santiniketan, Tagore Archives.

Sadhana, and *The Home and the World*. These works, writes Van Eysselstein, were re-creations rather than mere literal translations. Two other writers who translated Tagore into Dutch were Henri Borel and Raden Mas Noto Soeroto. The latter, a Javanese nobleman and the grandson of the head of the autonomous principality of Jogjakarta, Pakoe Alam V, was also a poet in his own right. Among other things, Noto Soeroto wrote a biographical sketch of Rabindranath Tagore and a book on Tagore's educational ideal.⁸ Madelon Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis' highly informative and illuminating article on Noto Soeroto (1993) fully corroborates all this, and tells us a great deal more besides. This is not the place, however, to dwell at length on Noto Soeroto's crucial position in the intellectual world of the Netherlands in and around 1920, when the Tagore visit drew an enthusiastic response from writers there. Djajadiningrat shows conclusively that Noto Soeroto, because of his Dutch and Javanese antecedents, in a way prepared the ground for the Indian poet's visit to Indonesia in 1927. His close friend and associate Soeriosoepto, an accomplished Javanese nobleman, also contributed to this by translating some of Noto Soeroto's Dutch-language writings on Tagore into Javanese. Soepto, as the later Mangkoenegoro VII of Surakarta, actually played host to Rabindranath Tagore and his party in 1927, when Noto Soeroto was away from Java. It is important to note also that Noto Soeroto, as Djajadiningrat points out (personal communication December 2001), not only had connections with intellectuals in the Netherlands and the leading figures of Boedi Oetomo in Java, but also was in close touch with politically interested Indonesian students in the Netherlands. They included Soewardi Soerjaningrat (the later Ki Hadjar Dewantoro), who along with Soepto and others played a leading role in Boedi Oetomo, which had thrown up the intellectuals who were interested in Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Java in 1927. Kalidas Nag, a noted Indian historian who briefly visited Indonesia in 1924, was pleasantly surprised to find that Rabindranath's works were known in Java through translations by persons like Noto Soeroto. Apart from distinguished writers, various student bodies in the Netherlands, like the Indische Vereeniging (Indonesian Students' Union) and the Chinese Students' Association Chung Hwa Hui, were eager to meet Tagore, in a desire to assert through him their Oriental Asiatic identity.⁹ He was regarded as the eminently suitable cultural figure to be the spokesman of the East. In those days the East-West dichotomy was not yet unfashionable, but was a universally accepted fact.

⁸ Van Eysselstein (1961:309-12) mentions that Noto Soeroto named his eldest son after his literary and spiritual guru: Rawindra Noto Soeroto.

⁹ On Indonesian and Chinese student organizations in the Netherlands eager to meet Tagore, see file Java, Rabindrabhavana Archives, Santiniketan, Tagore Archives.

Tagore had already been to China and Japan, but Indonesia held a special attraction for him. Here he took upon himself the task of restoring the lost cultural ties with India. While he addressed audiences in different towns in Java, he established contact with Dutch and Indonesian archaeologists and educationists in order to work out a plan for an exchange of scholars and artists between Indonesia and his university at Santiniketan. Today Rabindranath Tagore is hardly remembered as the first person to launch a cultural exchange programme. Nonetheless, he was a pioneer bridge-builder between India and Indonesia in our period.

Ideals of Visva Bharati

Chatterji said that the idea behind Tagore's Southeast Asian tour was to prepare the ground for cultural cooperation with the region through appreciation of the ideals of Visva Bharati. What ideals did he have in mind? Tagore had founded the university at Santiniketan with the idea that it should be 'one nest for the world' – *yatra visvam bhabatyeka nidam* (where the world makes its home in a single nest).¹⁰ It was envisaged as a world university where scholars of different nationalities would come together. International scholars, artists, educationists and agricultural experts did respond to Tagore's invitation to spend some time with the students of the ashram. Thus Sylvain Lévi from France, M. Winternitz from Prague, G. Tucci from Italy, C.F. Andrews, W. Pearson and L. Elmhirst from Britain, and Hori San and Okakura from Japan, along with many distinguished persons from different parts of India, gathered around the poet at his school in Santiniketan.¹¹ Himself an ardent nationalist, Rabindranath Tagore opened a door to the world. He called for international cooperation in the arts, education and culture at a time when India, led by Gandhi, was locked in an enormous non-violent combat with the British administration in India. Tagore's endeavour to forge a closer unity between East and West ran counter to the spirit of non-cooperation generated by the Gandhian movement. Despite negative criticism, Tagore persisted in his efforts to achieve cultural exchange and in his experiments in international co-existence.

It was not easy for a poet to run a school all by himself. A concrete way of supporting the ideals of Visva Bharati was of course by giving the institution financial support. Fund-raising was an open aim of Tagore's Southeast Asian tour. He turned to Indian businessmen who had settled in Southeast Asian countries for contributions for a cultural enterprise that was totally different

¹⁰ See Tagore's writings in *Visva Bharati and its Institutions*, 1961, Santiniketan: Visva Bharati.

¹¹ On international scholars at Santiniketan, see Uma Das Gupta 1975-76:30, 35.

from Sun Yat-sen's, who sought the support of overseas Chinese for an avowedly political cause.

Organization of the tour

In this article I wish to take a close look at Rabindranath Tagore's Indonesian tour because it represents a serious attempt at establishing a two-way traffic in scholarship and the arts between India and Indonesia. How was the tour arranged? One striking thing about it is that it was privately organized and not officially sponsored.

The initiative for the invitation to the Indian poet was not taken by the Netherlands East Indies government but by a cultural society for the promotion of literature and the arts, the *Kunstkring* (Art Circle), in Batavia. The Java Instituut was also associated with the project, and right from the beginning the Dutch Indonesian government archaeological service (*Oudheidkundige Dienst*) was closely involved with the tour.¹² The noted Dutch musicologist Arnold Bake, who had been to Santiniketan, acted as mediator.¹³ The British Indian government did not stand in the way of the tour, and the Dutch authorities in Indonesia did all they could to make the visit easy and comfortable for the Indian poet and his party, even though they were a little nervous about it because of recent communist uprisings in Indonesia, as Bake warned Tagore.¹⁴ The Dutch colonial government did not want the poet's tour to advantage the rebels. However, the poet's assurance that he would keep out of politics reassured the local authorities.

It is not surprising that the Bengali poet received this invitation from Java. Cultivated circles in Java, both Dutch and Indonesian, were familiar with Rabindranath's work. Moreover, his nationalist school at Santiniketan was a source of inspiration for many intellectual nationalists in Java.¹⁵ For an insight

¹² Chatterji, Preliminary Report, file Java, Rabindrabhavana Archives, Santiniketan, Tagore Archives. According to Djajadiningrat (personal communication December 2001), Mangkoenegoro VII was Chairman of the Java Instituut and was one of the persons involved in its foundation in 1919.

¹³ Arnold A. Bake (1899-1963), who studied music at Santiniketan supported by a grant from the Kern Instituut in Leiden (where Bake's letters concerning his trip to Indonesia from July to November 1927 to prepare Tagore's tour are kept in Kast F48/4; personal communication Bart Barendregt), was accompanied by his wife, Corry Bake-Timmers. Both were in Indonesia at the time of Tagore's visit.

¹⁴ See Bake's letter to Tagore, 28 July 1927, file A. Bake, Rabindrabhavana Archives, Santiniketan.

¹⁵ Hall 1968:752; Nagazumi 1972:6-49, 151-160; Djajadiningrat, personal communication December 2001; Nag 1960:683.

into the background of Rabindranath Tagore's reception in Java, it is necessary to know something about the above-mentioned Boedi Oetomo movement. The cultural-nationalist organization Boedi Oetomo, like the Bengal Renaissance in India, represented a cultural awakening in Java which preceded and accompanied the nationalist movement. Founded in 1908 by a member of the lesser gentry known as 'Dokter Jawa' Wahidin Soedirohoesodo, in cooperation with students at STOVIA (a medical training school for native doctors), it was aimed at arousing a Javanese consciousness. Right from the beginning, Wahidin Soedirohoesodo and the student leader Soetomo advocated a blending of western education and Javanese culture. Akira Nagazumi (1972) gives an excellent description of the composition, aims and interests of the leadership of the organization as well as the movement itself. Boedi Oetomo would not have been what it was, however, without the patronage and support of the Pakoe Alam house of Jogjakarta, one of the four autonomous Javanese ruling houses. Jogja was chosen as the location for Boedi Oetomo's first congress, as this was 'where the heart of Java beats'. Of special importance was the part played by Pakoe Alam V, one of the founders of Boedi Oetomo. The organization was the heart of a primarily cultural movement without any political orientation. Soon, however, avowedly political groups and associations appeared in Java and there were attempts to bring politics into Boedi Oetomo, though these were unsuccessful. By the time Rabindranath Tagore and his party arrived in Java in 1927, the Boedi Oetomo movement was past its peak but the enthusiasm for combining western knowledge with traditional Javanese culture was still strong. Tagore was a symbolic figure for those who sought to integrate modern education with indigenous culture as an alternative to a totally Western education. This explains why Soewardi Soerjaningrat (Ki Hadjar Dewantoro), the founder of the Taman Siswa school in Jogjakarta, was eager to meet the poet during his visit to that city.¹⁶ The Dutch government, however, recognizing Tagore's stature as a Nobel prizewinner, did not leave the initiative for arranging the poet's visit to nationalist groups, but let the Kunstkring, a dependable cultural association comprising members of the Dutch and Indonesian elites, take the responsibility for inviting him. In all this the role of Bake must have been crucial.

At the Indian end, leading industrial-merchant families like the Birla and Bajoria provided funding for the trip.¹⁷ In Indonesia the long-settled Indian business communities of Batavia, Surabaya and elsewhere warmly welcomed the poet and gave generous contributions for *Visva Bharati*.

¹⁶ Soewardi Soerjaningrat is held in high esteem by modern Indonesians as a pioneer nationalist educationist. Classified by the Dutch as a political activist, he was exiled to the Netherlands. He founded the Taman Siswa (Garden of Pupils) school in Jogjakarta later, in 1922. See McVey 1967.

¹⁷ File Java, Rabindrabhavana Archives, Santiniketan; Chatterji 1964:488.

Batavia-Surabaya-Bali

Tagore crossed over from Penang to Belawan in Sumatra on 17 August 1927. Having spent a few hours in Medan, he left for Java on the boat *Plancius* on the same day, arriving in Batavia on 21 August. Among the welcoming party for the poet were Mr and Mrs Bake, Dr F.D.K. Bosch and Dr Hoesein Djajadiningrat, an eminent Javanese scholar who had studied law and Sanskrit in the Netherlands.¹⁸ The Kunstkring organized a reception for the poet. At this gathering and at the dinner given by the British Consul in Batavia, Mr Crosby, the Indian party met a cross-section of the local community of intellectuals and Indian and Chinese businessmen. The Indian visitors then hurried off to Bali, as the poet had been advised not to miss the chance of seeing the rare spectacle of a cremation ceremony for a Hindu prince. Rabindranath and his entourage arrived at Boeeleng (Buleleng) in Bali on 26 August, having stopped over briefly in Surabaya on the way.

The Bali itinerary

From Buleleng the poet travelled to Bangli via Singaraja and Kintamani. He next visited Karang Asem in East Bali and spent time to rest at the hill station of Tampak Siring. He then was invited to the palace of the Raja of Gianyar. The party moved on to Badung or Den Pasar, whence they visited Ubud and Mundu before returning to Buleleng.¹⁹ It was quite an intensive tour of Bali. The breath-taking beauty of the scenery overwhelmed the poet and his companions as they moved across the island. Bali, with its cremation rituals, large crowds of people at ceremonies, processions of women carrying religious offerings on their head, drama, dance and song performances, bustling market-places, and pageantry opened up incredible vistas of sound and colour to them. It was all something to be seen to be believed. Anyone who has been to Bali will agree that the island casts its spell on all outsiders without exception. For Rabindranath Tagore and his party there was, however, something else besides. The sight of Hindu ceremonies and festivals was both exciting and intriguing for the Hindu visitors from India. Bali unveiled to the Indian travellers something of their own lost culture as captured in a frieze. That the Indians were literally enthralled is borne out by Chatterji's ecstatic, detailed report of the tour. Tagore's own reaction as recorded in his letters was no less

¹⁸ Frederik David Kan Bosch (1886-1967) was director of the Dutch East Indies Archaeological Service and wrote extensively on the archaeology of Sri Vijaya; Hoesein Djajadiningrat (1886-1969) was the first Indonesian to obtain a doctorate from a Dutch university.

¹⁹ Chatterji, extracts, file Java, Rabindrabhavana Archives, Santiniketan.

enthusiastic. This is what he wrote: 'Along every village road processions of men and women were arriving with multifarious offerings. Some puranic age seemed to have come back to life before our very eyes, some picture from the Ajanta caves come out from the realm of art into the realm of life to revel in the sunshine.' (*Visva Bharati Quarterly* 5:325, = Tagore 1961:463.)

In Bali there were no lectures scheduled for the poet. However, he found the encounters with the rajas of Bangli, Karang Asem and Gianyar rewarding. He was taken out on a motor ride to Karang Asem by the raja of that district, Hida Anake Agoeng Bagoes Djelantik, who was also the local magistrate. Because they did not have any language in common they were not able to have much conversation. As they were driving along, a patch of blue sea became visible through an opening in the forest. At that point the poet was startled to hear the raja break the silence by uttering the Sanskrit word *samudra*. The raja, seeing that this was surprising and pleasing to his eminent guest, went on to recite the other Sanskrit names for the sea: *sagar, abdhi, jaladhya*. Then he said: 'Saptasamudra, saptaparat, saptaban, sapta-akash' (Seven seas, seven hills, seven forests, seven skies). A little later he recited the names of the Indian rivers Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada, Godavari, Kaveri, and Saraswati. India's geography seemed to be imprinted on the Balinese mind. By falling back on Sanskrit as a language of communication, the Balinese raja seemed to be giving recognition to an ancient bond with India (Tagore 1961: 56; Chatterji 1964:308).

Rabindranath was looked upon in Bali as a Mahaguru, not in the sense of a university professor but of something reminiscent of the ancient Indian Hindu sage Bharata Guru Agastya. The raja of Karang Asem, who had a philosophic cast of mind, wanted the poet to interpret some passages from the *sastra* (Balinese religious texts) for him. Chatterji, with his knowledge of Sanskrit, helped out as much as possible. The raja then surprised his Indian visitors by asking a philosophical question. He asked what, if the worship of gods, the building of temples, the performance of funeral ceremonies and the observance of social codes cannot be the final aim in life, man's ultimate quest should be. Chatterji replied by asking the raja to answer the question himself. Then came the startling reply: 'Dewa Dewa tida apa, Nirvana satu' (Gods and their worship are immaterial, Nirvana is the supreme goal) (Chatterji 1964: 378). Tagore was greatly touched and in his poem on Bali referred to this encounter as follows: 'We said the same mantras together, pondered over the same question of Nirvana'.²⁰ The visit of the great Indian poet touched a deeper chord in the raja. A sudden spiritual arousal could only occur in the presence of an Indian guru.

²⁰ Chatterji 1964:325-6, translation mine. For an incomplete translation of the poem 'Bali', see Kabir 1966.

For Tagore Bali was a great deal more than a grand spectacle. Here, in this distant island, he was rediscovering India in his own way. Much as he enjoyed what he saw, he sensed deeper down that something had gone wrong with Bali in the past. Balinese cultural life seemed to lie entrapped in an archaic manifestation. The Balinese seemed to be acting out an ancient play in an endless cycle of repetitions. They had lost the power to break out of the mould. Though Rabindranath had come to Southeast Asia ostensibly in search of the remains of ancient Indian civilization, he was anything but a revivalist. In fact, he was plainly disturbed by what he found in Bali. A modern man with a forward-looking mind, Tagore was convinced that the present has a superior claim over the past. In this connection he wrote: 'The past was a great one [...] But still it is after all the Past and its duty was to fall behind the Present, not to come in front of it and stop the way of its self-manifestation. Now the present reduced to a mere steed of the past has to own defeat.' (Tagore 1961:49.)

Surabaya

On its return trip from Bali the Indian party arrived in Surabaya on 9 September 1927. Although Tagore's visit to Bali and Java was not a conducted tour in the strict sense of the word, high government officials and scholars delegated by the authorities constantly kept him company. When Tagore stopped off in Surabaya for a few hours on his way to Bali, he was taken by Bake to meet the local Resident. In Bali, the Resident of Bali and Lombok, L.J.J. Caron, attended the poet and the scholars G.W.J. Drewes, Samuel Koperberg and R. Goris, among others, accompanied him.²¹ In Surabaya, as throughout his stay in Java, the poet was attended by many members of the Javanese elite. He became acquainted with old aristocratic families and made contact with Indonesian scholars, other intellectuals, and nationalist leaders. He and his group were invited to stay with the former Mangkoenegoro VI of Surakarta, who had voluntarily resigned as such and was now living in Surabaya to look after his sugar export business. The poet was charmed by his hospitality.²²

²¹ G.W.J. Drewes (1899-1993), one-time director of Balai Pustaka in Batavia, was an authority on medieval Islam and Javanese literature. Samuel Koperberg was Secretary of the Java Instituut and had met Chatterji previously on a trip to Calcutta. Roelof Goris (1898-1965) was a specialist on Hindu ceremonies and rituals in Bali in particular and Hinduism in Indonesia in general.

²² Tagore 1961:8, *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 6:170. What Chatterji wrote about the princes of Surakarta, whom he referred to as rajas, and the four autonomous principalities of Java was based on what he heard from Dutch informants (Chatterji 1964:423). According to Djajadiningrat (personal communication December 2001) the Mangkoenegoro's status was independent of the Soenan, while his territory was almost as large and as old as those of the Soenan and the Sultan of Jogjakarta.

Also in Surabaya, intellectuals with nationalist sympathies were able to meet Tagore without interference from Dutch officials. Raden M. Harjo Soejono, the son of the Mangkoenegoro, who spoke excellent English and associated with Dr Soetomo and his circle, on 10 September gathered together about fifteen educated Javanese for a meeting with Tagore and the other Indian guests, at which a reporter from the Dutch newspaper *Indische Courant* was also present. These Javanese included doctors, lawyers, merchants, newspaper editors, and former government officials who, like Soetomo, had resigned their functions as a sign of non-cooperation and to whom Chatterji referred as Swarajists. The Swarajists had their own organizations, such as the Surabaya Indonesische Studieclub and its branches. They constituted a small but crucial group of highly educated intellectuals, many of whom had fluency in more than one European language besides Dutch. To Tagore they represented a challenging group of committed young men caught in a battle of ideologies. In reply to Tagore's call for a meeting of East and West, these young Javanese raised the question of whether such a union was possible in the face of continuing dominance and exploitation by the west. Tagore replied that there could not be any union along the path of universal competition for power and material goods, but that a meeting was possible on the intellectual and spiritual plane through an effort to understand one another. The discussion lasted two hours. The Surabaya intellectuals were eager to get as much out of the visitors as they could.

On 11 September Suniti Chatterji was asked by the Indonesische Studieclub to give a talk on the history of Santiniketan, ancient and modern education in India, and Tagore's ideas on the subject. On the same evening Tagore himself gave a talk on 'What is art?' at a distinguished gathering of the local Kunstkring (Chatterji 1964:418-20).

Surakarta

A long and tiring railroad journey took the Indian visitors to Surakarta. Despite failing health, the poet roughed it in the September heat in parts of Java where electric fans had never been heard of. Surakarta was the seat of one of the royal houses of Java and a centre of traditional Javanese art and learning. Rabindranath Tagore was the guest of honour of Mangkoenegoro VII, who was a cultivated man and a patron of Javanese culture and all that was best in it.²³ During his five-day stay in Surakarta (12-17 September) the poet was treated to a variety of Javanese dance, music and shadow play per-

²³ For information on the place of the Mangkoenegoro in Javanese culture, see Djajadiningrat 1993:41-72.

formances. He was also invited to the palace of the Soesoehoenan (Soenan for short) here. In 1927 the Javanese dance tradition was in full vigour, and the Indians had a chance to attend some of the choicest performances. His own letters show that the poet was deeply stirred by what he saw. Commenting on a dance performed by two young girls, he wrote:

One of the same two girls was now dressed as a boy with a clown's mask. It was wonderful, the way in which the beauty of the dance-movement and the costume and ornaments was kept intact, while the tone of the voice, the manner of singing and the gestures were all expressive of broad farce and moreover in keeping with the sex of the mask. I could not have imagined it possible that such refinement on the one hand and such clownish abandon on the other, could go together. It is because the dance is their chief means of artistic expression, that they can give rhythmic beauty also to the ludicrous. Even the ungainliness they cannot allow to be ugly, for their very demons have to dance. (*Visva Bharati Quarterly* 6:173, = Tagore 1961:89.)

Tagore was to return to the idea that dance was the basic Javanese form of expression again and again. Chatterji, who kept a detailed record of all the performances during the tour, informs us that the dances presented at the courts of both the royal houses included:

1. Wireng Pandji henem (*orde dans*) – based on an old Javanese historical tale;
2. Wireng Raden Hindradjit kalijan Wanara Hanoman – enactment of a fight between Prince Indrajit, the son of Ravana, and the monkey Hanuman, from the Ramayana;
3. Bekaan Golek – dance performed by a girl;
4. Wireng panah hoedoro – dance portraying a fight with bows and arrows between Abhimanjoe and Wersokoesoemo, son of Sambo;
5. Wireng Raden Werkoedoro kalijan Praboe Partipejo – a fight between Prince Brikodoro, or Bhima, and Lord Pratip;
6. Pertilan Langendrijo – Menak Djinggo den Damar Woelan – a fight between Menak-jingo and Damar-bulan, from a Javanese fable;
7. Temben and Batjak-dojok – a mask-dance play;
8. Wedojo – a dance performed by nine girls.

On 16 September the Indian party was invited to the house of Prince Koesoemajoedo to watch a typical Javanese shadow-theatre, or Wajang Poerwa, performance (Chatterji 1964:431-2, 446). This, too, was a memorable experience for Rabindranath. In his letter of 17 September the poet gives the following reaction and interpretation.

The life of man with its joys and sorrows, its trials and triumphs courses along in waves of form and colour and sound. If we reduce the whole of it to sounds, it becomes rich music. Similarly, if we leave out everything else except its motion, it becomes pure dance. Whether it be rhythmic melody, or only rhythmic move-

ment, it has a progress which influences our consciousness into a similar flow and keeps it alive and awake. Any deep realisation involves a rhythmic stimulation of our consciousness, and these people have kept alive the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, with the constant swing of such movement. Like waves of emotion they stream over their lives in a continuous cascade. It is as if in their eagerness to taste the delights of these, they have naturally evolved this form of self-education eminently suited to their own temperament.

About the moving shadows on the lighted screen Tagore writes:

[...] they were a form of story-telling by movement, just as was their dance. For it became clear that their dance, also, is not intended to display the beauty of motion, but it is their language – the language of their history and their annals. Their gamelan also is but a tonal dance, [...] it also is not intended to express musical beauty, but is only a setting for the rhythm of their dance. [...] we were taken over to the dark side where the women were seated. Here the pictures or their manipulations were no longer visible, but only the shadows dancing on the lighted screen, like the dance of Mahamaya on the body of the prostrate Shiva. We see the creation only when the Creator, who abides in the region of light, conceals himself behind it. He who knows that with the created forms the Creator is in constant connection knows the truth. He who sees the process of creation apart from the Creator, sees only Maya. There are seekers of truth who would tear away the screen and go over to the other side – that is to say they want to see the Creator apart from his creation – and nothing can be so empty as the Maya of their illusion. This is what I felt as I looked at this show. (*Visva Bharati Quarterly* 6:178, = Tagore 1961:96-7.)

Intellectual and educational contacts

As I write this, the person I miss most is my guru, the late Claire Holt of Cornell. An authority on the Indonesian arts, she gave me and my fellow-students a most interesting and informative course on Indonesian art and showed us her fascinating collection of slides of Indonesian paintings. Although the cultural study of Indonesia has advanced a great deal since 1927, I do believe that Claire Holt would have loved to know what Rabindranath Tagore had to say about art and culture in Indonesia. Unfortunately Tagore was primarily known to her and the rest of the world as the writer of *Gitanjali*, a book of devotional lyrics that had won him the Nobel Prize. That he was also a composer of two thousand songs, a painter in his own right, an innovator of *nritya-natya* (*nritya* = dance, *natya* = theatre or play) as a form of dance drama, a novelist, and an educational experimenter is not generally known. But how many care about Tagore and what he was to the Bengalis and Indians?

I am not writing this article with the idea of projecting Rabindranath Tagore's versatility as a creative person. My aim is to draw the attention of Indonesianists who have chosen to turn away from India on the ostensible

grounds of objective evaluation of the Indonesian culture as an autonomous reality. The question is whether India can reasonably turn away from West and Central Asia and still arrive at a correct understanding of its own culture. Or whether it would be right for Vietnam to look away from China and turn upon itself. Tagore, in trying to understand the Indonesian world, drew upon his rootedness in Indian culture, which in a sense forms Indonesia's outer boundary. While trying to reconstruct India's past in the light of extant Indian elements in traditional Indonesian arts, he did not ignore Indonesia's predicament as it was caught in the process of coming to terms with the modern West. In fact, he was curious to discover for himself the exact nature of the shift from the traditional to the modern way of life and thinking effected by the Dutch and the Indonesians. Leading representatives of the Indonesian elite were eager to meet Tagore precisely because he was known as a path-breaking experimenter who combined traditional Asian ideals with modern Western education. They were not much concerned about Tagore's rediscovery of India in Indonesia.

As well as attending dance, drama and shadow-play performances, Rabindranath and his companions loved to stroll through the corridors and galleries of the Javanese royal palaces. Tagore's letters from Java are full of descriptions of the effortless artistry of the day-to-day life of the occupants of the sprawling palaces. Above all else, the aesthetic design underlying Javanese life made a lasting impression on him. At the time the Indian party was travelling across Bali and Java, much of the older culture was still intact. Some day, it is to be hoped, Tagore's letters and Chatterji's detailed account will be recognized as important source material for the cultural history of Indonesia in the late nineteen-twenties.

In Surakarta a packed programme kept the Indian visitors busy from early morning till late night. Receptions, literary gatherings, lectures, and visits to various institutions followed each other in endless succession. Useful contacts were made inside and outside the palace. On the day the Indians arrived in Surakarta (12 September) the well-known Javanese scholar Dr Radjiman joined them to accompany them to many gatherings and other functions.²⁴ In the evening there were dance performances and dinner at the palace, on which occasion Tagore's poem on Java, which had been translated into Javanese by the Mangkoenegoro himself, was sung by local singers. The next day a visit to the Java Instituut was arranged for the Indians. Here they met the celebrated young Dutch scholar of medieval Javanese religion and literature, Dr Theodore Gautier Thomas Pigeaud (Chatterji 1964:429). At a grand reception on the evening of 14 September a typewritten programme

²⁴ Chatterji 1964:423-7. Dr Radjiman was an active member of Boedi Oetomo (Nagazumi 1972: 45-6) and in Surakarta soon became a consultant on traditional Javanese culture.

with a folder containing Tagore's poem on Java in English and Dutch translation, autographed by the poet and the Mangkoenegoro, was distributed. The Indians made the acquaintance of the Dutch engineer J.J. Moens (who was also well informed on Hindu culture in Indonesia) and the noted architect T. Karsten, who were also interested in Javanese religion, art and architecture. A lecture was organized at the local Kunstkring, where Tagore spoke on India's attitude to the problem of conflict between nations. Chatterji was asked to give a talk on Tagore's educational ideals at a Protestant Teachers' Training College. On 16 September the Indian group met the famous Dutch authority on ancient Hindu culture in Indonesia, W.F. Stutterheim, who was then the director of a school for Javanese students (Chatterji 1964:430-3, 440-3). The latter expressed himself in favour of introducing Sanskrit and Kawi at his school. Also the subject of the possibility of Indian cooperation for the interpretation of recently discovered Balinese inscriptions came up for discussion. Next the poet was taken to the Van Deventer School for Javanese girls – of which the Mangkoenegoro was a patron. He was shown round the classrooms and the boarding-house, which he liked very much. Before his departure for Jogjakarta, he was given a reception with Javanese poets at the Contact Club. Poems from his *Katha o Kahini* (Stories and Fables) were recited in Dutch and Javanese translation. The reply of a Javanese poet to Tagore's poem on Java was also read out and sung.

The Surakarta experience was a high point in Tagore's visit to Java. Without seeing the performances at the Javanese courts for themselves, the Indians would not have known what great heights of perfection Javanese dancing had attained. They might have mistakenly believed that the ancient Indian dance had been preserved in its original form in far-away Java. The affinity between Javanese and Indian dancing is indisputable, but at what point in time the Javanese dance and drama departed from the classical Indian model to develop their own distinctive style is still unknown. Rabindranath Tagore's letters and Chatterji's diary testify that being exposed to Javanese enactments of stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata was a thrilling experience for the Indians. In spite of their own natural orientation, the Indian visitors could not but recognize the originality of the art of Java. Their minds were full of Surakarta as they travelled on to Jogjakarta, the other great centre of Javanese culture and education.

Off to Jogjakarta

On 18 September Tagore's three young companions, Deva Varman, Kar and Chatterji, left for Jogjakarta by car together with Samuel Koperberg. The poet's departure was postponed a little, as he was requested to stay on for a

while to open a road named after him, Tagorestraat.

Rabindranath's letters concerning Jogjakarta are less detailed than those about Surakarta, as much time was taken up visiting Java's antiquarian remains there. Chatterji, however, gives graphic descriptions of the Prambanan and Borobudur reliefs, as well as of other nearby sites. F.D.K. Bosch and P.V. van Stein Callenfels provided constant company and guidance. The Indian visitors were delighted to discover that the Siva and Brahma temples of Prambanan contained in their terrace walls sculptured reliefs of Ramayana scenes the likes of which were not to be found in any Indian temple. Concerning the episodes from Krishna stories carved in another frieze on the Vishnu temple, which the Dutch scholars were in the process of comparing with the Bhagavata text, Chatterji learned from Bosch that there were divergences between the reliefs and the text. Thus the episode of Krishna's dalliance with the milkmaids of Vrindavana (Krishnalila with the Gopinis) from the Bhagavata is not found in the Javanese reliefs, which on the other hand contain representations of stories that are not found in the text. Likewise, many Puranic tales unknown in India are represented in the Prambanan reliefs. This was an intriguing discovery.

The Prambanan temple complex, also known as Candi Loro Djonggrang, was in a very poor condition. Although large portions of temple wall were still standing on their high plinths, all three structures had their upper part missing. Broken fragments lay scattered all over the grounds and the nearby shallow river bed. The Indian party was here just in time to watch a stage in the incredible feat of reconstructing the temples. This daring engineering project, in which archaeologists, art historians and engineers worked together, was in progress right then. On the one hand the Dutch historians were delving deep into the Indian Silpasastra to uncover the ancient Indian temple-building canons, on the other hand the engineers, who had to give structural considerations most weight, were relying on the intuition of the Javanese craftsmen, who unerringly put the broken fragments together as in a giant jigsaw puzzle. It is a miracle story of cross-cultural collaboration, and full credit goes to the Netherlands East Indies government for sponsoring the scheme.

Tagore arrived at the Prambanan site a little exhausted from the car drive from Surakarta. Unlike Chatterji and the others, he was not an indefatigable sightseer. He climbed the stairs of the Siva temple with difficulty and sat down to have a look around. The Prambanan temples and their layout on the banks of a small stream pleased him a great deal. He joined the tea party beside the temple, which Van Stein Callenfels, with his irrepressible humour, for which he was affectionately nicknamed Tuan Reksoso (Mr Demon) or Werkodara (Bhima), kept amused (Chatterji 1964:455-62).

The Indian guests arrived in Jogjakarta around 11.30 in the morning.

Here they received hospitality from the Pakoe Alam, who was second to his overlord the sultan. At the palace a Serimpi dance, a group dance for four girls at a time, was performed in the evening. Rabindranath thought this was the best dance he had seen so far in Java. Dinner was served at the Pakoe Alaman at eleven, a rather unusual hour for the poet. In the course of the dinner the Indian guests learned that young Indonesian Muslim boys were now going to India, besides Mecca, for the further study of Islam. Pakoe Alam talked about the presence of Indian elements in Indonesian culture. He claimed, however, that mysticism, born out of a certain introversion, was the fundamental characteristic of Javanese culture.

On 19 September Chatterji and Deva Varman visited the Tjandis Loembeng, Sewoe, Plaosan and Kalasan accompanied by Bosch and Van Stein Callenfels. They took another trip to Prambanan, where they made the acquaintance of a Mr Van Haan, the engineer then in charge of the restoration of the ruined Prambanan temples.

Apart from the remains of ancient Hindu-Buddhist temples and stupas, Jogjakarta was famous for its nationalist educational institutions. The Indians in fact came into contact with members of the Dutch and Javanese elite who were devoting themselves to the advancement of education in Indonesia, as well as the preservation of the traditional arts. There were a number of institutions grouped under Darmo Sedjati, a kind of religio-cultural council. They included Krido Bekso Wiromo, a centre for Javanese dance and music under the direction of Goesti Pangeran Ario Tedjokoesoemo, a member of a royal family; Wanito Oetomo, a women's society aiming at the advancement of women through education in the home sciences; Taman Siswa, a nationalist coeducational kindergarten headed by Raden Mas Soewardi Soerjaningrat; and Habirando, a training school for *dalang*, with Raden Mas Ario Gondhoatmodjo as president. The Indians visited all four institutions and were impressed by the efficiency of these nation-building organizations.

After dinner at the Pakoe Alam's palace the poet was invited by the *patih*, or chief minister of the sultan, to attend a Ramayana dance performance to be given by the boys in his family and of the royal house. In this dance drama the Ramayana story was enacted from the beginning to the episode of the slaying of the giant bird Jatayu by Ravana. The dancing was accompanied by singing, and a little boy played the part of Sita. Tagore had seen Javanese dancing in Surakarta and thought it exquisite, but he was no less impressed by what he saw here. As he watched the performance, he mused about the characteristic Javanese attitude to life and art. In his letter of 20 September 1927 he wrote:

What we call play-acting consists chiefly of words supplemented by a representation of events and emotions. But this was not so here. The main thing with the Javanese is the display of pictures and rhythmic movements, pictures that are not

intended to represent anything, but to charm the mind, for which purpose, even a wide divergence between what is shown and what is to be seen in real life, is accounted no obstacle. For instance, men actually get about erect on their legs, but in these plays all their moving has to be done squatting, and that not in the usual way, but in dance motion.

They have evidently imagined for themselves a world in which this is the ordinary method of progress. Had this imaginary world of crouching inhabitants been one of broad farce, one could have understood it. But this is not at all the case. It is, on the contrary, a world of high epic! They evince thus but scant respect for Nature, but Nature does not, as might have been apprehended, revenge herself by making them ridiculous. They have achieved their bold project of making even a travesty of Nature beautiful. It is as if they would defiantly proclaim that it is the picture of their own making, and not nature, they desire to exhibit. (*Visva Bharati Quarterly* 6:276-7, = Tagore 1961:104-7.)

A striking thing he observes about the Javanese mind is that it refrains from enquiring into the meaning of acts and words.

We outsiders ask them the meaning, they say they do not know, it suffices for them that their craving for aesthetic emotion (*rasam*) is fulfilled. That is to say, it is not meaning, but some inner satisfaction that they ask. A Dutch savant on another occasion remarked to me that these people do not care about the religious significance of the ceremonies of worship they perform; here also it is the *rasam* that they are after. This may perhaps be explained by saying that they have within them their own idea of Beauty of Perfection, and any external performance that is attuned to it evokes a response from it and gives them joy – a joy that may surely be called spiritual. (*Visva Bharati Quarterly* 6:277, = Tagore 1961:104-7.)

Tagore belonged to a culture which looks for significance in things. The unexpected phenomenon of people avoiding the search for meaning was something that called for observation and comment.

The structure of the Borobudur left the poet unimpressed, though he liked the individual sculptures.

It is so cut up in galleries, one above the other, and its pinnacle is so disproportionately small that in spite of its size, it lacks in dignity. It looks like a mountain with a diminutive stone cap. It was perhaps intended as a mere repository for the stone figures – hundreds of Buddhas and sculptured pictures representing the Jataka stories – like a huge tray with these sculptures heaped thereon. For, when taken up one by one, they are extraordinarily good. I specially liked the Jataka pictures – crowds of figures depicting the multifarious play of the daily life of the times, but nowhere tainted with obscenity or vulgarity. In other temples I have seen images of gods and goddesses, or scenes from the sacred epics. But here we have life in its work-a-day aspect, be it king or beggar. (*Visva Bharati Quarterly* 6: 374-5, = Tagore 1961:115-7.)

Out of Hinduism and Buddhism, Rabindranath had a preference for the lat-

ter. Brought up in a Brahma atmosphere in Calcutta, he had become critical of the rituals and practices of orthodox Hinduism and he felt personally drawn to the great Buddha and his message of compassion for all living creatures. Looking at the Borobudur stupa, he had a deep appreciation for the spirit behind the building of this great Buddhist shrine. He finished writing a long poem on the Borobudur while sitting on the porch of the *pasangrahan* at the foot of the monument. It was the second of his three memorable poems on Indonesia.

On 24 September, the last day of their stay in Jogjakarta, the Indian visitors entered a relatively unknown terrain, that of Islamic modernism. Jogjakarta was an important centre of Islamic reformist education, which sought to combine the Islamic identity with nationalism. A Marathi-speaking resident of Bombay, Mirza Ali Baig, who acted as a link between Javanese and Indian Muslims in the context of religious self-awareness and educational experimentation, came to see the poet and to invite Chatterji to look around in the quarters of the principal organization, Muhammadiyah. Mirza, who knew a little Sanskrit, was in favour of preserving all that was beautiful and elegant in traditional Javanese culture. Chatterji writes that there were thirty-two Dutch-Javanese schools and sixty primary schools in Java under Muhammadiyah sponsorship. He talked to young Muslim boys who had been to India to study Arabic and Persian. He was also taken on a visit to a Muslim girls' school, founded by a Mrs Dachlan. The girls were taught the Arabic prayer for *namaz* without, however, being informed of its meaning (Chatterji 1964:482-3).

The return journey

Jogjakarta was the last important stop in Java for Rabindranath and his party. They made brief stops on their return trip in Bandung and Batavia, arriving in Bandung, accompanied by Pigeaud and Koperberg, in the evening of 24 September. This cool mountain resort gave the poet a much-longed-for respite from the hot Javanese and Balinese summer. The next evening he gave a talk on art at the local Kunstkring. On 26 September the Indian party visited a theosophical teacher-training centre in nearby Lembang. At this school, called Goenoeng Sari, the poet attended a pan-religious prayer meeting with readings from the Koran and Bible and the Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu scriptures.

The Bandung visit turned out to be something really special because of an unscheduled meeting with the young Indonesian nationalist political leader Soekarno. The poet had generally kept clear of political contacts in Indonesia, since he had promised the Dutch authorities to do so. Here in Bandung, with no Dutch officials present, Koperberg took the initiative to

introduce Soekarno and two other young Sundanese activists to the Indians. Soekarno spoke good English. It became clear in the course of the conversation that the young Indonesian nationalists were keeping a sharp eye on the Indian political scene. They knew a great deal about Gandhi, Chittaranjan Das, Motilal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu. The poet and his companions were much impressed by the charming young leader.

On that same day the poet left by train for Batavia, where he stayed from 27 to 30 September. At a last Kunstkring meeting on 29 September he read his poems in Bengali and in English translation to the assembled members. He furthermore made the acquaintance of Mr Maclain Pont, the archaeologist in charge of the excavations at Majapahit in East Java. Another important meeting took place between Chatterji and the famous Javanese scholar Poerbatjaraka, who had studied Sanskrit in the Netherlands and had done research on Agastya, the incarnation of Siva Guru. Rabindranath, accompanied by Surendranath Kar, left Batavia for Singapore on his way to Bangkok in the morning of 30 September. Chatterji stayed behind for a lecture assignment at the Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen. The poet composed his famous poem on Bali, 'Sagarika', in which he paid tribute to that island and to the Indonesian people, on board the ship *Mijer* on 1 October (Chatterji 1964:487, 492, 498).

The significance of the tour

What did the visits of the Indians to different places in Bali and Java achieve? What did they mean to the Indian visitors themselves and to their Indonesian hosts? For obvious reasons, each side got different things out of the tour. Tagore's presence made the trip specially important for the Indians.

The journey is well covered in letters and diaries written in Bangla. Out of the 25 letters published in Tagore's *Java Jatrir Patra*, 12 deal with Bali and Java, and much of this has appeared also in English translation. Out of Chatterji's 700-page account published in 1964, 376 pages are devoted to Bali and Java. Records of the visit on the Dutch and Indonesian side remain to be explored. Clearly the Indian visit aroused much enthusiasm in Indonesia at the time, but has now passed out of memory.

Tagore's plans for setting up a programme of cultural exchange between India and Indonesia did not materialize. Although a few persons went on exchange visits, the idea did not catch on on any significant scale.

To grasp the significance of the tour, one has to have an understanding of the viewer as well as of the viewed. For those who do not read Bangla it will be difficult, if not impossible, to understand Tagore's and Chatterji's cultural standing in its full extent. Tagore, known to the world as a writer of

devotional hymns, was an eminent exponent of Indian culture. Chatterji, a giant of a scholar, had a thorough knowledge of Indian history, religion and art. In Indonesia, both were thrilled by what they believed to be a continuation of Indian religious and artistic traditions. Yet both also appreciated the presence of indigenous elements that had drastically transformed the Indian tradition. For Tagore, known for his quest for symmetry and harmony in art and literature, as well as in nature and the human world, it was not easy to accommodate the odd and the angular, the unusual and seemingly unnatural. However, because of his enormous openness to new experiences, he was able to take everything in his stride. During the tour, he usually worked deep into the night to write up his experiences in his poetic and sensitive letters.

Bill Dalton (1976:19) ascribes the statement 'I see India everywhere, but I do not recognise it' to Tagore, though I have not been able to trace the source of this remark. While the first part of this statement is correct, the second is misleading. Tagore directly understood and enjoyed much of what he saw in Bali and Java. Of course he saw most of it as a variation on Indian art and religion. Not so clear, however, was the nature of Javanese culture, the sophistication and the stylized character of the Indonesian performing arts, which expressed themselves in a different idiom. In this respect the constant presence of Dutch and Indonesian experts and their unfailing help and guidance was most useful. The Indian party was fortunate in meeting numerous Dutch and Javanese scholars who had made the study of Javanese art and religion their life's work. It is nothing short of a miracle that on the Dutch side such experts as Bosch, Van Stein Callenfels, Koperberg, Stutterheim, Pigeaud, Drewes and Moens, and on the Indonesian side the scholars and educationists Djajadiningrat, Poerbatjaraka, Soewardi Soerjaningrat, Mangkoenegoro VII of Surakarta and the Pakoe Alam of Jogjakarta were all available for consultation at the time. Tagore gratefully acknowledged the special attention he received from the Dutch experts at Borobudur, saying:

I was immensely pleased with the simplicity and warm-heartedness which accompanied their scholarship. [...] They have dedicated their lives to make the dumb figures speak. It is to their love of knowledge for its own sake that their strenuous labours are due, for the history and culture of India, the study of which they have made their life's work, [...] we must accept them as our Gurus if we would understand India in its completeness. (*Visva Bharati Quarterly* 6:375-6, = Tagore 1961:117.)

Clearly Tagore believed he was looking at India when he was walking along the galleries of Borobudur. At the same time, when confronted with the strong Javanese personality and individuality in Javanese dance dramas and shadow plays, he accepted this with grace and deep appreciation. He had set out from India to study the particular form of Indian culture as it was found

in India's Southeast Asian frontier region on the spot. When he found himself treading a rather unfamiliar terrain, however, he was not disappointed. On the contrary, he drank eagerly from the streams of Indonesian indigenous culture, which comprised a creative combination of Indian and Javanese elements. The reason he was able to accept everything Java had to offer was that he recognized it as a region from the epics. He suggested that 'island India' might appropriately be named 'Vyas Indies', after the legendary author of the Mahabharata, Vedavyas (Tagore 1961:94). Notwithstanding what he had learned from the Dutch and Indonesian scholars about the distinctiveness of Javanese culture, he could not shake off his Indian bias. He was constantly looking to India for comparison on major and minor points, and in the process gained a fuller understanding of his own culture. Looking back from the frontier proved fruitful.

The encounter with modern Indonesia with its educational experiments and nationalist politics was no less instructive. It is significant that educationists like Soerjaningrat and Stutterheim were eager to meet the poet and that young political activists like Soekarno, Soetomo and others wanted to enter into a dialogue with him. It appears that India and Indonesia at one point in their history extended the hand of friendship to one another. For one brief moment they looked each other in the eyes and recognized an ancient bond and the possibility of a new partnership. The chance of a lifetime came and was missed, as the visit of Rabindranath Tagore to Java and Bali testifies.

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