Rabindranath Tagore:

An Adult Developmental Perspective

By Gail S. Eisen

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Resident Director, Stanley House (Baits International Houses)

This report is intended as a review of the life of Rabindranath Tagore, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Whenever possible, an attempt has been made to analyze Tagore's life experiences in relation to the principal concepts of adult development discussed in our course. Due to the absence of any autobiographical materials, information for this report was obtained from four biographical accounts. Hence, any conclusions which I have drawn regarding the psychological impact of Tagore's life experiences must be recognized as inferences based upon these secondary sources.

Rabindranath Tagore was born on May 7, 1861, at the ancestral home of the Tagore family in Calcutta. His childhood and youth were characterized by remarkable stability derived from a cohesive and insular extended-family experience. The fourteenth child of Debendranath and Sarada Tagore, Rabindranath was born into an atmosphere of wealth and creative artistry. His elder siblings were surrounded by a brilliant intellectual and cultural circle, and many were actively engaged in music composition, acting, singing, and journalism.

As young children, none of the Tagore offspring were allowed to wander beyond the gates of Jorasanko, the family mansion. When Rabindranath was small, he and his cousins of similar age were relegated to the care of servants. His father was a very religious man (he was known as "Maharisi" - "great saint") and lived somewhat aloof from the family. He traveled frequently and occasionally invited Rabindranath to accompany him on his sojourns, which were a source of great excitement to the child.

The young Tagore felt a close bond with his mother, but she was ailing throughout his youth and was thus unable to participate fully in his daily activities.

Despite the affluence of the family, whose income was derived from several estates located throughout India, the Tagore children were brought up without extravagance. They were provided with no unnecessary toys or possessions, and were encouraged to use their imaginations to invent new toys from familiar materials. Further, the parents encouraged all of their children to reserve time every day for contemplation, study, and creation.

Rabindranath's early experiences at Jorasanko allowed ample opportunity for solitude and reflection. He developed a deep appreciation for beauty, a special love for the changing seasons (he was especially fond of rain), and a strong respect for the human and animal kingdoms. Rabindranath did possess a longing to learn of the vibrant and colorful world barely visible beyond the gates of the household, but his mobility was severely restricted. Hence, he was forced to use his imagination to conjure up visions of the intrigue and adventure which he was certain lay beyond the family gates.

The only truly stressful experience in Tagore's early childhood occurred when the youngster was sent to school. He apparently found formal education to be unduly rigid and unimaginative, and although his parents attempted to enroll him in several different schools, Rabindranath consistently rebelled against the stifling teaching methods imposed by instructors.

After repeated episodes of truancy, his elder brothers decided that his innate curiosity and keen observational abilities might enable him to educate himself. A private tutor was engaged to assist the child in acquiring language skills, and he quickly displayed an unusual flexibility in the mastery of several languages. He composed his first poem at the age of eight and eventually received an exceptionally broad education from the diverse literary, musical, and dramatic events occurring within the confines of the household. By his early teens, he had become a regular contributor of poems and stories to a Bengali literary magazine which had been founded by an elder brother.

In many respects, Tagore's early life appeared unusually serene and comfortable. The cultural and artistic opportunities available within the extended family household enabled him to form an early vision of a possible literary vocation, while his carefree, reflective life undoubtedly enhanced the development of his powers of observation and insight.

Yet sorrow did intrude, at least once, upon the child's imaginative world. When Rabindranath was fourteen, his mother died, and this "off-time" life event (see Neugarten, 1968) caused him tremendous sadness. His mother's death was to be the first of many early bereavements which he would encounter throughout life.

At the age of seventeen, Rabindranath was sent to England. He studied English literature at London University for one year, but pursued no formal course of study. He was apparently pleased to have the opportunity to widen his circle of friends and found himself intrigued by the music and art forms of the West.

Tagore's vocational "life-structure," described by Levinson and his colleagues (1974), was not crystallized until he reached the age of nineteen. At that time, his family decided that he should be sent back to England to study law. Although he did not have a strong affinity for the prospect of a legal career, the young man was willing to acquiesce to the wishes of his elders. He was scheduled to travel with a cousin for the long journey by ship. While en route to England, his cousin became extremely ill on the boat. The pair elected to return home, and Tagore decided, apparently at that instant, that he was not willing to pursue a legal career.

After this incident, the young Tagore began writing seriously while helping to manage the family estates in East Bengal. During this time, he attempted a series of literary experiments with varied forms of writing. He was particularly fond of working with opera and with musical experiments which integrated English and Irish melodies into the traditional Bengali musical framework. In 1882, at the age of twenty-one, Tagore achieved fame among the Bengali writers of the time with the publication of a book entitled Evening Songs.

Even as a very young writer, Tagore displayed a particular genius in the use of the metaphor (he once compared the earth after sunset to a widow) and was a pioneer in utilizing a simple and common written style. He was adept at investigating the relationships between characters and continually expressed a vision of the wonder of ordinary people and events.

Tagore was married in 1883, and for the first fifteen years

of marriage the couple lived in Bengal, surrounded by relatives. He derived much happiness from family life and shared a strong attachment to his wife. Five children were born during this period, and he is described as a devoted husband and father.

To speak of Tagore's early adult years in terms of the developmental models of the West invariably poses difficulties, for the rhythm and structure of Tagore's life in Bengal bears little resemblance to the growth patterns envisioned by the theorists of the West. When life-span psychologists Daniel Levinson and Erik Erikson describe the developmental period of entry into adulthood, they enthusiastically embrace the notion of separation from the family. They regard the establishment of both psychological and physical distance from the parental unit as a signal of positive developmental growth. This conception has its roots in the historical experiences of North America and Anglo-Saxon Europe. In these regions, major cultural emphasis has been placed on the values of independence, productivity, and financial success, and the extended family unit has given way to a smaller and more isolated nuclear family structure.

This Western model does not speak to Tagore's experience. With the exception of periodic travel episodes, he was never separated from the many members of his extended family. It is probable that at no time did he even conceive of leaving the family unit on a permanent basis. Before his marriage, he had lived at the family estate in Calcutta, and during the first years of marriage, he and his wife had lived in harmony amidst many relatives. Nor was financial independence an overriding value in his philosophy of life. When he began to contemplate

the establishment of a school on the family property at Shantiniketan, he visited his father to ask for money to launch the project. Mutual aid and strong familial bonds were a natural part of Tagore's experience, and these same values still predominate in much of India, the Middle East, Africa, and other traditional societies of the world. It is important to recognize that the developmental models revered as sacred in the West are to a great extent culture-bound, and it is thus impossible to generalize these developmental task sequences to individuals who have not been immersed in the distinct set of "mainstream American" social values. Alienation from these mainstream norms and values may be just as pronounced for a U.S.-born member of an ethnic or religious sub-culture as for individuals heralding from a traditional society.

Tagore wrote extensively during his early years of marriage, publishing several books, songs, plays, and dramatic poems. He also became involved with social and charitable activities at this time, and for a brief period was a member of a religious organization devoted to the support of various social reforms.

Two major causes are thought to have occupied Tagore's imagination during the initial years of his marriage: a movement to establish Bengali as the official medium of instruction in the schools, and his concern for improving life among the poor Bengali villagers. He lobbied strenuously on behalf of both of these causes and his efforts met with remarkable success. Tagore also became engaged in public speaking efforts during this period, and his interests assumed a more nationalistic

perspective.

An examination of Tagore's literary themes reveal a slight shifting during these years. Whereas earlier writings emphasized the inter-relatedness of man and nature and celebrated the wonder of ordinary events, his principal themes during this period embraced the concepts of self-sacrifice, love of justice, and service to the country. He maintained a preoccupation with the essential unity of all life, while growing more willing to recognize and reject the falsity around him. He hoped to encourage people to yearn for a higher plane of existence, and he spoke out against the materialistic striving and the competitive ethic which were so rapidly seducing the nations of the West.

From a developmental perspective, this early period of marriage could be defined as the "Settling Down" phase described in Levinson's model. Tagore derived deep contentment from family life and attained prominence in his vocation, while several major civic and national causes emerged as being worthy of his involvement.

This marriage-phase may also be interpreted as overlapping both the sixth and seventh stages of Erikson's (1950) model, for Tagore was both receptive to fusing his identity with others (e.g., wife, children, literary associations, civic leaders) and evidenced a clear interest in generativity. He was actively engaged in a search for ethical solutions to national and international problems, and he hoped to favorably influence future generations with his literary and philosophical contributions.

The next decade of his life found him even more engaged in

issues of generativity and the guidance of future generations. In 1900, at the age of forty, Tagore was overcome with restlessness. He sensed that the time was approaching for him to launch a serious program of human service, but he was uncertain as to what this program should entail.

As his children grew and began to discover the world around them, Tagore began to reflect upon the optimum way to educate them. Perhaps recalling his own frustration with institutional constraints and the rigidity imposed by his instructors, he became interested in establishing a school based upon his distinctive ideals of education. He presented the concept to his father and asked if the elder Tagore would be willing to provide funding to establish a school at Shantiniketan, a piece of family property near the Himilayas. Maharisi favored the idea, and in 1901, Tagore and his family moved to the property to launch the project.

The school program was designed to embrace a comprehensive ideal of education aimed at individual growth and the development of wide sympathies. Children were taught goodness in behavior toward humans and animals and were encouraged to learn by exploration and experimentation. Music and drama played a central role in the life of both students and teachers, and Tagore authored many songs and dramatic works specifically for use at the school. Students were encouraged to develop a respect for individuals possessing different languages and customs, and Tagore strove to recruit foreign-born instructors for the academic program. He envisioned a school which was "a home and a

temple in one" and, consistent with this spirit, he required all teachers to live at the school with their families as a part of the larger educational colony.

An atmosphere of vitality prevailed, with home-like affection between older and younger students and all teachers committed to the musical, dramatic, and play-time activities of the pupils. Tagore strove to erase the false distinctions between work and play which had tainted his early educational experiences; at the same time, he actively encouraged responsibility and self-government among his young students.

Tagore was convinced of the importance of living and working with Nature and believed that the beauty of the natural world can play a positive role in the development of the intellect and the emotions. Classes at Shantiniketan were typically conducted outside, under the shade of trees. The teaching staff possessed a deep respect for solitude and encouraged students to make time for reflection. In fact, students were taught to sit in silence for a quarter of an hour at sunrise and at sunset every day. The children were never told what to think about and were not questioned afterward; the idea was simply consistent with Tagore's philosophy that times of quiet are therapeutic for the body, mind, and spirit.

During this and all subsequent stages of Tagore's life, issues of generativity literally consumed his existence. He participated in every dimension of the Shantiniketan program, maintained a vigorous writing schedule, and slept only rarely. He displayed a special sensitivity to children and asserted that teaching must have <u>life</u> in it, in harmony with the needs of young

learners. By early middle age, Tagore had served as a mentor to countless students and instructors at the school, as well as to a host of writers in his own country and abroad and to a number of emerging national leaders within India.

It is difficult to know if Tagore possessed a vision of a "Personal Ladder" as described in Levinson's model. One is never privy to information about a definite life-plan or a "dream" based upon biographical accounts of his experience. It is likely that Tagore's dream encompassed a distinctively spiritual vision of international fellowship, in contrast to the dreams of personal fame, material success, and individual achievement commonly mentioned in Western developmental models. His goals appeared largely selfless and a devotion to humanitarian ideals seemed to dominate his existence.

During the period in which Tagore established his school, he was confronted by countless difficulties and traumas. He had refused to charge any fees for attendance at Shantiniketan during the first several years of its operation, and economic hardships were mounting. At one point, his wife sold her jewels to help finance the project. The early years of the 1900's were particularly painful. In 1902, when he was forty-one, his wife died. Only six months later, one of his daughters died at the age of thirteen. In 1904 a close friend who had been intimately involved with school affairs died, and in 1905, Tagore's father died. Two years later, in 1907, his youngest son, Sami, died at the age of thirteen from an attack of cholera. This unrelenting sequence of early bereavement and cumulative loss must have been

devastating. Many other individuals would have withdrawn from life in utter despair, but Tagore bore his losses courageously and eventually redirected his energies toward social pursuits.

At about the time of his bereavement, he began to increase his involvement in political affairs. He was a strong proponent of Indian crafts and industries and produced several articles between 1900 and 1905 in support of this position. Tagore advocated non-violent resistance toward the colonial powers at a time when the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi were little known in India.

He continued his work at the school, while also beginning a program of translation of his poems to English. He composed the national song of Bengal at about this time and in 1912-1913 visited England and the United States. Tagore was first introduced to Western audiences through the publication of Gitanjali, a book of poetry. His fame spread widely after this time, and in 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was the first Nobel Laureate of non-European origin.

In 1915, Tagore was given a knighthood, and in this same year he met Gandhi for the first time, when Gandhi visited the school to live for a short period of time. Tagore would resign his knighthood several years later, after the Battle at Amritsar provoked deep feelings of disillusionment.

By 1919, Tagore was consumed by a new spirit of restlessness. His school for children had been operating smoothly for several years and his thoughts were leaning toward the establishment of another type of school devoted to International fellowship. In December of 1921, Tagore formally

opened the campus of Vishva-Bharati, a "world-university" on the grounds of Shantiniketan.

Designed as a gathering place for students of world culture, Vishva-Bharati attempted to erase the boundaries dividing Eastern from Western institutions of higher education. The university was composed of departments of Eastern language, literature, and religion, as well as a broad-based health and medical services department and a rural reconstruction center. One of Tagore's primary objectives in founding the university, as expressed by Bhattacherje (1961) was "to seek to realise in a common fellowship of study the meeting of the East and the West, and thus ultimately to strengthen the fundamental conditions of world peace through the establishment of free communication of ideas between the two hemispheres" (p.53). Tagore was thoroughly devoted to the ideal of International fellowship and cooperation and turned over to Vishva-Bharati, by way of a trust deed, his Shantiniketan properties, the Nobel Prize monetary award, and the copyright to his Bengali books.

In the 1920's, Tagore was faced with another series of multiple bereavements, this time among relatives and friends of similar age. From 1919 until 1936 he traveled extensively in an effort to promote Vishva-Bharati throughout the world and to raise funds for the school. At the age of seventy, Tagore added a new creative pursuit to his life -- painting.

Tagore's poetry and prose do not reveal a sense of fear or anxiety about death. On the contrary, his work conveys a feeling of acceptance and awe, characterized by a profound reverence for

the mysteries of the unknown. He envisioned death as a crown in this life and believed that in death "the unknown will appear as ever known" (see Sykes, 1943). Rabindranath Tagore died at the age of eighty in the ancestral home in which he was born.

Throughout his life, Tagore evidenced a high degree of emotional integration, a selfless love for others, and a highly developed spiritual sense. All of these qualities are components of the positive resolution of Erikson's (1950) eighth and final stage of life, that of "Ego Integrity." It seems likely that Tagore was able to reflect back upon his life with considerable serenity and satisfaction. His life-structure was essentially stable and his values were durable. It appears that Tagore experienced little of the psychological distress of middle age rooted in the internal or external upheavals characterizing Levinson's middle-aged American subjects. A life-cycle assessment of Rabindranath Tagore presented in Mukerji's biographical text entitled Tagore: A Study (1943) confirms this impression:

> Tagore's life has little or no 'drama'. No absorbing passion but in his own creation, no cycles of boom, crash and depression in private fortune, no greater struggle against odds than the usual one against the philistinism of illiterate literateurs and semi-literate worshipers broke up the steady tenor of his living. The Nobel Laureateship was not an unexpected phenomenon, nor was the conferment by the Oxford University of the Doctorate in Literature . . . . Tagore had many bereavements and private and public disappointments, but they did not stigmatise his work, barring one volume, The Smaran, which was occasioned by the death of his wife. On the contrary, he almost always succeeded in concerting them eventually into the materials for a deeper

> apprehension of the spirit and for nobler expressions of the joy which, in his opinion, pervaded the universe . . . . Tagore's life-pattern was essentially melodic, with numerous improvisations indeed, but it was built around the regnant notes . . . . (p. 4)

Samples of some of Tagore's short verses, including some reflections on death, appear on the concluding page.

Excerpts from Stray Birds (1916)

If you shed tears when you miss
The sun, you also miss the stars. (6)

God expects answers for the flowers
He sends us, not for the sun and the earth. (26)

"You are the big drop of dew under the lotus leaf,
I am the smaller one on its upper side,"
Said the dewdrop to the lake. (88)

"In the moon thou sendest thy love letter to me,"
Said the night to the sun.
"I leave my answers in tears upon the grass." (124)

The leaf becomes flower when it loves.
The flower becomes fruit when it worships. (133)

The water in the vessel is sparkling;
The water in the sea is dark.
The small truth has words that are clear;
The great truth has great silence. (176)

Life has become richer by the love
That has been lost. (223)

God waits for man to regain his childhood in wisdom. (300)

Thoughts on Death:

This life is the crossing of a sea
Where we meet in the same narrow ship.
In death we reach the shore and go
To our different worlds. (242)

Death belongs to life as birth does.
The walk is in the raising of the foot
As in the laying of it down. (268)

At this time of parting wish me good luck, my friends.
The sky is flushed with the dawn and my path lies beautiful.
Ask not what I have to take there. I start on my
Journey with empty hands and expectant heart.
Because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well.

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