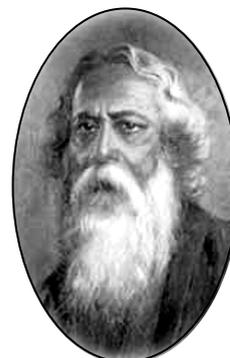




## Puri and the Poet Tagore

*Gurukalyan Mahapatra*



**This article is a tribute to Rabindra Nath Tagore's 150th birth anniversary. Indians here and abroad have celebrated his 150th birth anniversary. Tagore was closely associated with Odisha (old name Orissa) and had to manage his zamidaries. He had ties with Puri also. We are reproducing the article of the ex-Chief Editor, Utkal Prasanga which was published earlier in our Magazine for readers' interest and references. Poet Tagore's song Janagana Mana Adhinayak is India's National Anthem. Besides he was the first Indian who received the prestigious Nobel Prize and the centenary of Nobel Prize is going to be celebrated next year i.e. in 2013.**

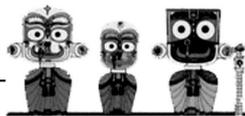
**-Editor**

'I have come to Puri. I am the invited guest of those who are now at the helm of the affairs of Orissa. There is something novel in this fact. In older days, they who were kings or heads of the state, use to honour the meritorious, thereby honouring their own countries and governments. By this liberality, they used to keep contact with human culture and admit the universal heritage in the development of faculties. We have learnt the modern system of political administration from the English. The talented have no place in it. The statesmen of Europe wield the outward aspect of that power which is based upon economic and administrative laws. They can not have the right to govern the spirit that lies underneath but it is needless to argue that having acknowledged and paid due regard to it, a noble environment can be created for the government. In oriental system of administration the scope for acknowledgement of the individual talent has, however, not been neglected.'

The poet of the Universe, Kavi Guru Rabindra Nath Tagore once expressed this in a letter to his former Secretary Dr. Amiya Chakravarti. While at Puri Tagore appreciated

not only its sea breeze, but also the then Orissa Government's unique hospitality. Hence in the same letter, he mentioned - 'Let me now tell you about myself. I have no work here, nor am I of any use to anybody. Those who are taking care of me here, expect no material advice from me. That salutary and refreshing effect with which the sea breeze is touching my body and mind is the very symbol of the hospitality of the newly responsible Orissa Government. Administrative procedure has created no obstacle to it, nor has it been affected by budgetary economy. Sitting on the first floor of the Circuit House, I have unhesitatingly given myself upto pure idleness. The ministers here, having noticed the tired condition of my health, come everyday to encourage me to spend my days without any purpose. The mentality of admitting human relationship even in the midst of heavy pressure of work is still inherent in our country; and this has been felt by me specially after I have come over here.'

Tagore loved the people of Odisha as well as appreciated its administration, which is found in the concluding para of his letter. Thus he



concludes, 'From a distance I have formed an idea about the love of the people and the efficiency of those who are at the helm of the administration of Orissa at present, and now I am appreciating it from close quarters.'

In 1939, Sri Biswanath Das, the then Chief Minister (called Prime Minister also) of Orissa had invited Rabindra Nath Tagore to visit Orissa. Besides, Chief Minister Das went to Calcutta to attend a meeting of All India Congress Committee in the same year. During his stay there, he personally met the poet to pay respect. Tagore told him that he was happy to know from the papers about the progress of Orissa under the popular ministry. Tagore referred his connections with Orissa for a century and said, '*I belong also to Orissa. I entertain goodwill, love and affection for the people of Orissa .....*'

Mr. Biswanath Das requested him to visit Orissa personally to see the progress of Orissa and Tagore agreed to his proposal. After returning to Cuttack (as Cuttack was old capital of Orissa) Chief Minister Das wrote a letter to the poet on behalf of the government and people of Orissa to visit this province, not as a guest of anybody but as a State Guest. But the then Governor of Orissa (first Governor) Sir John Hubback did not like the idea of making a non-official person a State Guest. But the ministry of Biswanath Das insisted that Tagore should be treated as a State Guest. The then Chief Minister Mr. Das sanctioned the necessary amount of expenditure out of his discretionary fund and asked the Collector of Puri to look after the arrangements.

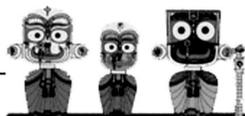
Poet Tagore then reached Puri on 19th April in 1939. He was received there by the ministers and government officials. The poet stayed in the Circuit House as the guest of the State Government. But all his engagements were cancelled for few days as the poet suffered from

slight fever and the doctors advised him complete rest.

At Puri on 8th May, 1939 the poet was given an ovation on behalf of the women of Orissa. The next day i.e. on 9th May, the poets' birthday was also celebrated there with enthusiasm. A function was held in a well decorated pandal after the opening song. The poet was welcomed with the chanting of Vedic hymns by the Pandits of Sanskrit College. Flower, sandal paste, vermilion and coconuts were offered as a mark of respect.

The then chairman of Puri Dist. Board a well known writer and the compiler of Odia Encyclopaedia, Mr. Gopal Chandra Praharaj welcomed the poet and presented him a filigree casket on behalf of various cultural organisations. Pandit Raghunath Mishra also read an address of welcome in Sanskrit. Well known Odia writer and freedom fighter Mrs. Sarala Devi (no more today) also welcomed in Odia. At last the poet expressed his satisfaction and gratitude for the cordial reception which was accorded to him. Prof. Pravat Mukherji writes that *Tagore in his reply to the reception, said that he had been warmly received in many countries of the world, but the reception which was given that day by the people of Odisha touched his heart, as it was according to the traditional Hindu style. Tagore also said, 'he would always cherish the memory of that welcome so spontaneously accorded by the people of Odisha.'*

On his birthday, prior to that meeting two Odia poets met Tagore at the Puri Circuit House and recited poems in Odia which they addressed to him. They were Kalindi Charan Panigrahi and Chandra Sekhar Das of Jajpur. Panigrahi was a famous writer of Orissa and his poem was appreciated by *Tagore, who observed that there was close affinity between Odia and Bengali*



poems. Das another poet of Jajpur who also met the poet Tagore was blessed. Tagore even wrote a few lines in Bengali for him. The English translation of those lines are -

*O' my unknown admirer,  
Today you have become known.  
With my blessings I repay  
My admirer your loan.*

During his stay at Puri, the Raja or the king of Puri and the Superintendent of Jagannath temple, bestowed upon the poet Rabindra Nath Tagore, the title *Parama Guru* (the great teacher). As the poet was indisposed that ceremony was not held publicly. The Dewan (Manager) of the king therefore came down to Circuit House in a procession to bestow that title. First of all the panegyric was read out in holy Sanskrit language. Then the camphor garland, head dress and a pair of silk cloths were offered as a mark of respect by the chief priest of the king on his behalf. Tagore in his speech expressed great pleasure for the honour accorded to him.

Though Tagore left Orissa in the second week of May, 1939, while he was at Puri, he had composed three poems. They are (1) *Pravasi* (The outsider) (2) *Janmadin* (The birthday) (3) *Epare Opare* (This side and that side)

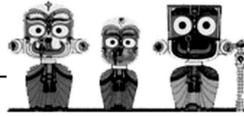
In his first poem *Pravasi*, Tagore describes himself as a man of the world and he does not consider anybody to be alien. The theme reveals that he is united with all men of the Universe on a board of intimate relationship. Those who are materialistic and engrossed with worldly affairs, have lost the communion with their souls. They are satisfied to stay within the narrow confines of their own four walls and they have no carving to hold communion with the Universe. The message of the poet was that the curtain of oblivion between the little self and the greater self disappears and we are again united

with the universe. This is truth, the entire Universe is our home.

In his poem 'Janmadin' the poet regrets that the people know him only as a poet and never try to know his entity. This narrow vision gives only a divided picture and the deity who lives in the heart of the poet, laughs at this fragmentary narrow conception, writes Prof. P. Mukherjee.

But his (Tagore's) poem 'Epare Opare' was an emotional poem. The poet had a feeling that he had lost all contacts with the noisy world on the other side of the highway. He lives at a distance of reality in life and looks for life's fundamental meaning. How he fights with lonely mind has been depicted in this poem.

Rabindra Nath Tagore also visited Puri earlier on 12th Feb. 1893. Probably this was his first visit to Puri. At that time he visited Puri alongwith the then District Judge B.L. Gupta and his wife. Gupta was visiting Puri for his inspection work. Sitting over a palanquin, Tagore enjoyed the journey to Puri. By that time he was young. It is also learnt that in 1891 December, Tagore visited his Pandua Estate in old Cuttack district of Orissa on behalf of his father. This perhaps was his first visit to Orissa. However, on 12th February 1893 when Tagore first visited Puri. It was very much enjoyed by him. Thus he narrates his experience in a letter, 'The road lies beyond the Kathjuri (a river of Cuttack city). The white sands are glittering. In English it is called the bed of river. It is bed indeed. It is like a bed abandoned at dawn - a bed of undulating sands, formed by the movement and force of the river currents. This crumpled bed has not been smothered by a hand with care. On the other side of this long stretch of sand at one end and a narrow stream of crystal clear water is flowing. It has been described in Kalidasa's *Meghdoot* (Utara Megh, Sloka 28) that the separated wife of Yaksha was almost lost



at the edge of her lonely bed, like the moon of the dark fortnight appearing at its most attenuated stage at the last edge of the east. The sight of this river at the fag end of the rains provides another simile for a pining woman.'

Tagore wrote in this letter, 'the road from Cuttack to Puri is good. It is high with low-lying fields on both sides. There are big shady trees, mostly mango. At this time all the mango trees are in blossom, filling the way with fragrance. Some villages are seen surrounded by mango, pippal, banyan, coconut and palm trees.

Tagore narrates, at places covered carts are standing on the banks of shallow rivers. There are confectioners under palm-leaf thatches. Inside the huts in rows, under the trees on both sides of the road, the pilgrims are taking their meals. The beggars are shouting in strange languages, whenever they see fresh batches of pilgrims or carriages or palanquins'.

He also wrote about the pilgrims entering to Puri. He wrote, 'as one approaches nearer to Puri, the pilgrims are seen in greater numbers. Covered carts are moving in lines. People are found lying down, looking or gossiping together on the banks of tanks. On the right side of the road there is a big spire of the Jagannath temple is seen. Suddenly at one place, crossing the line of trees and bushes, the wide stretch of sandy sea-beach and the azure line of the sea become visible.'

With B.L. Gupta and his wife Tagore paid a courtesy visit, called on the then District Magistrate of Puri, E.H.C. Walsh. But the District Magistrate Walsh was busy and Tagore and Gupta's family were informed to meet him next day. But D.M. Walsh and his wife both were sorry subsequently as they came to know that the District Judge and his wife wanted to meet them.

Next day Walsh met them and expressed regret. Alongwith Gupta couple, he also invited Tagore to his house. Tagore was reluctant. But Gupta again requested him to accept his invitation as he had apologised. Prof. P. Mukherjee writes that *Tagore in a letter had referred to that incident and blamed the habit of Indians to wait at the doors of the Europeans either to flatter or to seek jobs.* The next day, Tagore was received by the D.M. of Puri, Mr. Walsh. Both of them sang songs. From Puri, Tagore alongwith his nephew Balendranath came to Bhubaneswar and visited Khandagiri caves and the temples of Bhubaneswar.

When Tagore was staying in Orissa, he had taken a plot of land on lease at Puri from the Board of Revenue. But the State Government wanted to take back that plot of land from him. The then Collector of Puri A. Garrett had written a letter to Tagore about this. Unfortunately the date of the letter is missing. But Garrett thrice officiated as the Collector of Puri from 1900 to 1902. This was the copy of that letter.

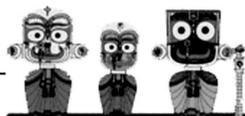
To

Babu Rabindranath Tagore,

I am to inform you that the Board of Revenue have made allocation of sites in the Balukhand Government estate, Puri, for European and Native quarters and that separate places drawn out distinguish one from other. The site you have in the estate consequently falls in the European quarters. So the Board desire to take it back from you, giving you, equally good site in exchange in the Native quarters. An early reply is solicited.

Yours truly,

A. Garrett  
Collector



Rabindranath Tagore, the 'Gurudev' as Gandhiji used to call him, though a Bengali, was closely associated with Orissa like that of Netaji in many ways. Both Tagore and Netaji had houses in Cuttack city.

Former Chief Minister and well known writer Harekrushna Mahtab also came in contact with Tagore. He loved and respected both Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore and once wrote 'both Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindra Nath represent an age which seems to have gone. Both these saints have passed into that limitless age in which Vyasa, Valmiki and a host of others lived and flourished .... Gandhiji and Rabindranath may today be appearing as having receded to the remote past, but they have provided the background for the working out of India's destiny. The knowledge which science bestows now on man is bound to require some controlling force so that he may not go astray. That force has to be sought from the teachings of Rabindranath and Gandhiji.

Dr. Mahtab met Tagore at Puri but describes his (Tagore's) Puri visit in a different way. He wrote in his autobiography 'Sadhanar Pathe (The austere way of life) that the then Congress Government of Orissa invited Tagore as the State Guest to Puri for more than a month. Tagore was also felicitated there at Puri. A special train was arranged for the students of Orissa to meet Tagore. But those who were on strike never had allowed the students to meet the poet. Mahtab writes, he (Mahtab) told them that they would repent in future as they could not meet the poet.

Tagore was invited to Puri as the State Guest, prior to that he was invited to Egypt as the State Guest. Nowhere else he was invited as the State Guest, says Dr. Mahtab in his autobiography. He also mentions that Tagore was quite delighted while he was in Puri but when he came to know the behaviour of some students,

he (Tagore) remarked 'a fruit is going to ripe, allow sometime for this and do not detach the fruit from the tree before its maturity.'

Rabindra Nath Tagore was born on 7th May in 1861. He was the fourteenth and youngest son of Maharsi Debendranath Tagore. He received prestigious Nobel Prize for his literary masterpiece 'Geetanjali' (a collection of devotional songs) in 1913. Two modern Odia poets one Bhaktakabi Madhu Sudan Rao and another Kantakabi Laksmikanta Mohapatra were inspired by Tagore and wrote two similar books Kusumanjali and Jiban Sangeeta respectively, which are rare creations in Odia literature. For a stint Tagore was the State guest at Puri. He had come to Puri earlier as evident from his letters. All these events are interesting and important from historical point of view and I am avid for more information on this.

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5. Some letters of Rabindra Nath Tagore.
6. Some materials were collected from Biswanath Das's family members and others.
7. Materials were collected from M.M. Praharaj, IPS, DG, Police, Odisha & Er. P.K. Kanungo, Cuttack.

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