

An Idealist on the Lectern: Rabindranath Tagore's Lectures and Speeches in English

Fakrul Alam*

"Tagore's enormous merit consists in this that he was at once a great idealist and a practical man of action".

Aldous Huxley, "Reflections on Tagore"

Abstract: Almost as soon as the English *Gitanjali* was published, Rabindranath Tagore found himself responding to countless invitations to give lectures and speeches in English on all sorts of topics around the world. The four volumes of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* record fully the remarkable range of topics covered by Rabindranath in these lectures and speeches. They reflect his intense idealism, his unwavering commitment to humanism as well as his fervent belief in the world of the spirit. They reveal his passionate nature and remind us that he rose to the occasion time and again to critique nationalism and narrow-mindedness and promote internationalism. What I propose to do in this paper is analyze these speeches to bring out their dominant themes and reveal their stylistic qualities, comment on their contemporary relevance and reception, and show how they are typical of the *viswa-kabi* or the universal poet, intent on bringing his message of unity and brotherhood to international as well as national audiences.

I

In his speeches, as in everything else that he did, Rabindranath Tagore was the idealist par excellence as well as a practical man of action. Whether in Bengali or English, he used the lectern or the dais, as he did the printed page or the stage, to urge his audience to listen to his remarkable and original ideas on a wide variety of topics, almost always because he had a message to deliver or an insight to articulate that would make life better or more beautiful through art or thought-filled action. Indeed, it will be difficult to find another man in human history who spoke so often and so eloquently in so many parts of the world on diverse occasions and on assorted subjects that were not only topical but were also timeless. By the turn of the nineteenth century, he had become a well-known speaker in Bengal on diverse subjects and of course he commanded public attention throughout India after being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913.

* Dr. Fakrul Alam is Professor of English at the University of Dhaka.

However, he had ascended the dais in the west even before he was thus distinguished and he continued to use the English language to spread his message about the life of the spirit and the need for brotherhood and to convey his disdain for mechanical modes of living and aggressive inhuman actions till old age rendered him too frail to travel or lecture in the parts of the world that used to greet him as the wise man of the east and even tolerate his tendency to deliver oracular pronouncements about crises in contemporary civilization.

The amazing thing to note here is that Tagore did not merely speak fluently on hundreds of occasions in Bengali for that would be expected of the man who dominated the literature of his people for almost four decades in his lifetime but that his collected lectures, speeches and talks in English literally run into hundreds and hundreds of pages and were delivered over two decades in four continents. Volume Two to Four of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* encompass the bulk of his lectures, speeches, addresses and talks and testify to the infinite variety of his topics and the unbounded energy and immense commitment with which Tagore responded to the unending invitations that came his way. In addition were the many lecturing trips that he had himself initiated to raise funds for his educational mission.

The somewhat misleadingly titled "Essay" section of Volume Two thus begins with the *Sadhana* lectures that he had delivered in the United States between October and April 1913. This is followed in the volume by the lectures collected in *Personality* that were composed during his highly successful speaking tour of America undertaken from September 1916 to January 1917. If these lectures reveal Tagore fitting into the mould that the West seemed to have had ready for him as the savant who would come from the east to console, heal and give guidance to spiritually forlorn and war-weary people, *Nationalism* (1917), the next book comprising his addresses in Japan and the USA, demonstrates that Tagore was quite ready to break out of that mould and badger westerners and the Japanese about what they did not want to hear—the predatory, expansionist, self-centered and jingoistic strain in these people that had been not merely engulfing them in wars but were also feeding their seemingly insatiable appetite for further political and economic expansion. Volume Two of the *English Writings of Tagore* also includes "The Centre of Indian Culture," a lecture that is memorable for two reasons: it shows that not a few of his English lectures were composed for delivery in the sub-continent as well as the west; it is also significant as his first sustained exposition of the ideals behind Visva-Bharati. The volume concludes with the many informal lectures that Tagore gave in China and that were then compiled on the basis of newspaper reports and printed as *Talks in China*. Altogether this book collects the over three hundred folio-size pages of speeches and lectures that Tagore gave from 1913 to 1924.

Volume Three of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* comprises of approximately 600 pages of lectures, addresses and speeches that he composed from 1913 to 1937 and a few public addresses that he himself translated or had rendered by others into English. They conclude with his parting messages to the world. The work begins with *The Religion of Man*, the title he used for the Hibbert lectures that he delivered in Oxford in May 1931 to articulate his very original take on religion. These lectures are followed by another series collected under the title *Man* that he delivered at Andhra University in 1933. The rest of the lectures of the volume encompass everything from formal lectures and addresses to informal talks and speeches given on various occasions and even on the radio in India, the United States, England, continental Europe, China, Japan, Iran and Iraq. The subjects of these lectures include everything from Indian philosophy and aesthetics to his ideas about nationalism, imperialism, economics and education, internationalism, east-west and east-east relations, woman's place in the world, communal disturbances, his intellectual forerunners and the people and the world that he was about to leave behind.

The first three volumes of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* are massive in themselves and the result of the indefatigable energy and lavish attention paid by Professor Sisir Kumar Das with the backing of India's Sahitya Akademi to collect his works in various genres strewn across continents and assorted print mediums for posterity. But the thousands of pages of these three volumes were not enough to encompass all of Tagore's productions in English. This is why Nityapriya Ghosh saw into print the fourth volume of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* in 2007. This book too is monumental: it has, among other things, well over a hundred folio-size pages of lectures, addresses and talks Tagore gave in English over the years at home and abroad that were overlooked in the earlier volumes. As before, some of them had been translated from Bengali but the majority consisted of speeches he had given between 1920 and 1930 in different parts of India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, Canada and South America.

Given the extent of his lectures in English, it may surprise anyone unacquainted with Tagore's background that he started speaking publically in English with reluctance and considerable diffidence. In a letter written to his daughter Bela in February 1913 he reveals wryly that he began lecturing in the English language in America that year—a country he describes as “having a mania for listening to lectures” (*Letters*, 109)—because the Americans he met in Urbana, Illinois while visiting his son immediately after his triumphal English visit—kept insisting that he gave a lecture to them on his beliefs until he was trapped into giving one. To his surprise, he adds, when he finished reading out his lecture, “everyone” congratulated him so that he found the courage from then on to deliver five lectures in total in this American trip (111). In another letter, written to Ramananda Chatterjee in May that year, he confesses self-deprecatingly how

“the lure of money and fame” made him accept invitations to more such lectures in America (115). While the letter appeals to Chatterjee to help him edit his work since he wrote “the language without knowing it, almost by guesswork” it also indicates that he was now paying attention to crafting his English in his speech. As he puts it, “I wrote the essays with some attention to their sound” and perhaps that is why “people who have listened to them have liked them” (115). Writing to his favorite niece Indira Devi Chaudhuri a few days later, he reflects with some amazement how his English lectures “got written almost miraculously” for he was well aware that his control over the English language was still tenuous (118). In other words, he appeared to have discovered as he continued with his lectures that they had developed a flow on their own, which is something they apparently did not have when he first embarked on the task of writing them in Illinois. While he makes clear in a few letters that he was driving himself to complete his lectures in America to generate funds for his educational institutions, it is also clear from at least one of them that he was impelled to lecturing in America because of a world at war in which “the fires of destruction are burning” everywhere, making him feel he could have a role to play in making history “anew.” Or as he puts it, “at this moment I too have some deeds to do, I can no longer remain here in my little corner” (198). To phrase it somewhat differently, his letters suggest that he felt driven to lecturing on most occasions as someone who was destined by history to do his bit to restore unity to a fractured world.

Anyone familiar with the standard English biographies of Tagore will understand easily enough why he believed for a long time that his lectures could make a difference to a world seemingly bent on self-destruction. To be sure, not everyone was impressed by them. Bertrand Russell, for instance, was scathing after hearing one of them in London in June 1913 for he declared that “it was unmitigated rubbish—cut-and-dried conventional stuff about the river becoming one with the Ocean and man becoming one with Brahma,” (Dutta and Robinson, 177), but then given his angle on religion it is not surprising that he was inclined to be unsympathetic. However, someone as intellectually astute as Ellery Sedgwick, the distinguished editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, said after hearing Tagore deliver a lecture at Harvard: “I gained an impression of the wisdom of the East and West such as I have never heard before or since” (ibid, 173). It is relevant to point out here that when the *Sadhana* lectures came out in book form in 1913, it was reprinted eight times within a year; clearly enough people were willing to not only listen to the lectures but also read them in print form.

Tagore’s second lecture tour of America in 1916 was a phenomenal success. In fact, the man who had organized it, James B. Pond, felt that it was “an unparalleled triumph” (Kripalani, 271). To Tagore’s credit and the discomfiture of not a few of those present in these mostly sold out events, he opted to talk mainly about the evils of nationalism, which at times often seemed in his

presentations synonymous with imperialism, unbridled economic expansionism and rampant consumerism instead of spirituality or poetics, as could have been expected of the author of *Gitanjali* and the *Sadhana* lectures. Certainly, the reporter of the *Minneapolis Tribune* was not happy with the tone of the lectures for as he so caustically put it, Tagore had castigated Americans "at \$ 700 per scold" while appealing to them for help that would allow him to finance his educational mission "at \$700 per plead" (Dutta and Robinson, 204). However, Dutta and Robinson's biography, which is very useful for the way it has collected contemporary western reactions such as that of the Minneapolis reporter, also enables us to see that there were other and more complex responses among those present. For instance, W.B. Yeats's father, J. B. Yeats, wrote to his famous son that Tagore's "gift of expression is marvelous. But he is much too abreast of his times" (Dutta and Robinson, 208-9).

It is indeed fortunate for students of Tagore that Dutta and Robinson's biography reprints quite a few such responses to Tagore lectures from those present. From their work we learn that Dean Inge of London's St. Paul's Cathedral had noted in 1913 the favorable impression the lecturer made on him despite his reservations about the message delivered in the lecture entitled "The Realization of Brahma." The Dean wrote, "It was a beautiful exposition of pure mystical doctrine, but I could not help feeling that there was no concrete filling of the idea of Brahma" (Dutta and Robinson, 173). Seven years later, a French writer called Gaston Denys Revier, responded to Tagore's lecture in Brussels by writing that he had witnessed "a face like that of Christ" speaking while the audience behaved like "one common humanity" listening to Tagore (128) as he gave his presentation on a subject dear to him, "The Meeting of the East and the West" (228). When Tagore lectured before Mussolini in Rome in 1926, a reporter noted how "the sonorous voice of the poet...mingled with the pealing of bells from a nearby church" until the audience, "perceiving a symbolic blending of the voice of Rome with that of mystic India, was deeply moved and broke into warm and persistent applause" (267-68).

True, Tagore's third lecture tour of the United States, undertaken between winter 1920 and spring 1921 was a failure, primarily because Americans apparently had not forgiven him for his "Nationalism" lectures and for his outspoken denunciation of the British and rejection of knighthood after the Amritsar massacre.¹ Similarly, the Japanese seemed not to have forgiven him for his hectoring of them in the same lectures and on other occasions in his first two visits to the country, for afterward he found little opportunity to give public lectures there. In China too in 1924, he encountered some opposition when he spoke out against the tendency he saw in the country to ape the nationalistic excesses of the west and of Japan, though, on the whole, his talks were received with considerable enthusiasm in the country.

In general, Tagore found most audiences in Europe, North America and Asia eager to listen to him. Certainly, the public kept flocking to his lectures during most of his many visits to the west. Thus after his failed third tour of America, he found Germans overflowing lecture halls in his visit to the country in 1921. And in Canada, on April 29, 1929, the small town of Victoria in British Columbia saw 2,000 people attending a Tagore lecture even as, "3,000 of them waited outside, waited in pitiless rain for a chance to hear him" (283). From Dutta and Robinson's biography we learn too that Tagore's Hibbert lectures in Oxford, on which he apparently worked very hard in the summer of 1930, were delivered before a packed hall that had "standing room only" (291). Their biography also records a Scottish visitor's amazed response to hearing Tagore speak in Kronberg castle, Elsinore some weeks later: as the visitor put it, there was "something strange in an Oriental lecturing in perfect English to a Danish audience, in a Danish castle which owes its fame to the greatest Englishman of all times" (291). And if America had been frosty to the poet in the winter of 1921, it made up for its indifference by the rousing reception he was given there in 1930. When he spoke at Carnegie Hall in New York in what was his last visit to the country in an auditorium which could hold 4,000 people, "thousands had to be turned away" (299).

In short, Tagore's English lectures commanded enormous attention in his lifetime. As Kripalani notes too, he took to lecturing with a zeal that suggested that he almost felt that "the world had become his stage" (310). At least this can be said about the poet's lectures: he invested a great deal of himself in them and hoped to gain a lot through lecturing. They should therefore command at least some attention as we celebrate his sesquicentennial and try to come to terms with him anew and revalue his legacy. The time is right, then, to find out what is distinctive about them and why they succeeded in attracting so much attention in his time. The sesquicentennial, surely, is also the right time to determine if they are of any relevance to us now and to identify some of the lectures that we need to pay attention to given our current preoccupations and obsessions.

II

The first and most important point to be made in any attempt to revalue Tagore's lectures is that they were composed by an idealist who believed that he had a role to play in his time. He is also convinced that idealism is indispensable for human welfare and that new ideas emerging from timeless ideals can transform the world. Tagore sees himself as carrying on the tradition of the ancient *rishis* of India who spread the message of the unity of being throughout Asia. On his first visit to Japan, he is thus full of hope and offers his "salutation to the sunrise of the East" as a *rishi* of his time "destined once again to illumine the whole world" (II, 374). Lecturing on nationalism in Japan in 1916, he acknowledges that he is aware of the dangers of being perceived as too idealistic in a nation obsessed in

ignoring its heritage in the rush for modernization. As he puts it in the concluding paragraph of his lecture, "I know what a risk one runs from the vigorously athletic crowds to be styled an idealist in these days, when thrones have lost their dignity and prophets have become an anachronism" (*English Writings*, II, 452). And yet, as he brings his lecture to an almost epiphanic ending, he notes that while watching the sunset over Yokohama in this visit to Japan on the day before he presumably penned his lecture, he had felt "the music of eternity" welling up "through the evening silence" and felt too that "the sky and the earth and the lyrics of the dawn and the dayfall [sic] are with the poets and idealists, and not with the marketmen [sic] robustly contemptuous of all sentiments" (452). Lecturing in Japan on international relations once more in another trip in 1924, he decries the tendency of the "prosperous nations of the west to suspect idealism" (473), suggesting that only jaded and self-centered people lack faith in the ideals essential to keep peace on earth (II, 473). In this lecture he hints once again that he knows that he is in the tradition of the messengers who have often been scorned and ignored but who must persist in warning civilizations bent on self-destruction.

The second aspect of Tagore's lectures that makes them distinctive and gives at least a few of them enduring value is that they come from a vision of life on earth that sustained him and allowed him to evade despair. As he explains in his first lecture series *Sadhana* (1913), it is a vision that came to him because of a legacy. He intimates in the lecture that he had inherited from a family immersed in the texts of the Upanishads a belief in "the great harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the world" (281). In lecture after lecture he tried to communicate this vision to a global audience while highlighting whatever appeared to be blocking humanity from sensing it in the name of progress or civilization. Art, as he discloses in a passage from his second series of lectures, *Personality*, emanates from the artist's realization of this unity, for he is someone who is "conscious of its inexhaustible abundance" (362). If anyone wonders where and how Tagore found the strength to deliver his messages with such conviction through his artwork as well as his lectures, and why he embarked on international tours to soothe and hector the world outside India by turns, the answer must surely be not the pursuit of fame and not only the need to raise funds for his institutions but primarily this bedrock of his belief. To contextualize his compulsions, one can quote another sentence from the 1917 volume of lectures titled *Personality* where he pointed out that God has chosen the poet to articulate this vision of the unity of creation because "the earth and the sky are woven with the fibers of man's mind, which is the universal mind at the same time" (376). In a speech on the "First and Last Prophets of Persia" given to the new History Society of New York in December that exists only in summary form, he pays his homage to one of them by saying it was their mission to affirm "the spiritual unity of man" (628).

A third aspect of the lectures that make them of enduring value is his exemplary position in taking up what Edward Said has claimed to be one of the key obligations of anyone devoted to the life of the mind—speaking truth to power. If what gives Tagore's lectures their importance is his commitment to the unity of being, his belief in humanity and his focus on the earth as the only place for love, what vivifies his speeches and lectures and makes them exemplary even now is his outspoken denunciation not only of nationalism but also of cultures of conspicuous consumption and the ravages left on earth in the wake of rampant capitalism. At times Tagore's stance here anticipates even the strictures of Michel Foucault as when he talks in a speech delivered in America of the mechanical, self-perpetuating and carceral system created globally by imperialism that consisted of "the military organization, the magisterial offices, the police, the Criminal Investigation Departments, [and] the secret spy system". The purpose of the system, he is sure, is to subjugate whole peoples (II, 426). Talking spiritedly about nations on the warpath or bent on domination and aggressive modes of action that he felt the Japanese had taken up as models, he declares to them with epigrammatic clarity "True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste" (II, 368). Later in the same lecture, he takes recourse to apocalyptic imagery that is not unlike Yeats's in "The Second Coming" in denouncing the sight of western nations destroying each other. He laments in it on how after "centuries of civilization" these nations keep

fearing each other like the prowling beasts of the night time, shutting their doors of hospitality, combining only for the purpose of aggression or defense; hiding in their holes their trade secrets, state secrets, secrets of their armaments, making peace offerings to the barking dogs of each other with the meat which does not belong to them; holding down fallen races struggling to stand upon their feet; counting their safety only upon the feebleness of the rest of humanity; with their right hands dispensing religion to weaker peoples, while robbing them with their left."(II, 371)

Turning to his Japanese audience, he asks them as a fellow Asian, "Are we to bend our knees to the spirit of this civilization" (ibid)?

The fourth aspect of the lectures that make quite a few of them invaluable in our time is Tagore's eco-consciousness. It is his belief that it is nature's healing power that we must turn to and uphold against those who would despoil it the name of progress. That is why in the 1919 lecture titled "The Message of the Forest" delivered in Bangalore he urges his audience to affirm the "divine presence in the water and the air" by keeping them "pure and healthful" (III, 309). The 1924 lecture titled "The Schoolmaster" and other lectures on education keep insisting on schooling that keeps the student in touch with nature and that takes the ancient *tapovans* of India as models. In a lecture delivered in Italy in 1926 titled "City and Village" he is prophetic about the environmental depredation that is inevitable in the wake of capitalism's notion of progress. In a

passage that is not unlike the fable presented in the opening pages of Rachel Carson's 1962 environmental classic, *Silent Spring*, Tagore goes on to compose his own tableau of an earth stripped barren by the machinery of progress:

They exhausted the water, cut down the trees, and reduced the surface of the planet into a desert riddled with pits. They made its interior a rifled pocket, emptied of its valuables. At last one day, like a fruit whose pulp has been completely eaten by insects which it sheltered, the moon became a lifeless shell, a universal grave for the voracious creatures who had consumed the world to which they were born (III, 117).

In a similar mood he delivered a lecture at the University of Dhaka in 1926 titled "The Rule of the Giant" where he depicted the Ganges that he had recently visited as a "carcass" of the river of his childhood since its once unique beauty now "lay dead and desecrated, tortured by cloven-footed commerce" (572). In the same lectures he warns against the marauding nature of what we have later come to recognize as military-industrial complexes and the statistical manipulations carried out on behalf of war-mongers and capitalism by self-serving experts. In this lecture he clearly offers a take on globalization and its discontents that is very prescient by declaring that "henceforth all our problems are world problems" (III, 573). In a passage that reminds one of the positions taken up by the likes of Chomsky, Said or Roy, he declares: "The money that is recklessly lavished in order to manufacture and maintain the unproductive military doll has to be forcibly snatched away from the hungry, the sick, from the tillers of the soil, who must sell their plough-bullocks to make their contribution" (ibid).

Some of the lectures and talks appear at times as nothing short of uncanny. It is as if he is talking in them about events that are happening in this the twenty-first century and underscoring their significance for us in our time. Here, for example, is an incident that took place in an Afghanistan village that claims his attention in the lecture called "Civilization and Progress" collected in his 1925 volume *Talks in China*. His source here is a report in the American weekly called the *Nation* where he had read about the bombing of Mahsud villages in Afghanistan by some British airmen who were then forced to land amidst the villagers when their plane crashed only to find themselves escorted to safety by the villagers. Tagore notes that the whole incident should not be seen as a tribute to western valor and as the naivety of the Afghans as is implied in the reporting. Instead, he would like his audience to see this episode as a testimony of the way westerners have unleashed their "mechanical power of wholesale destruction" in an "ethereal region of the earth" (II, 623) at the cost of their humanity and contrast it with the humane responses of the hospitable Afghans.

The fifth aspect of Tagore's lectures that surely makes them of immense contemporary relevance is his commitment to internationalism and his belief that it is the humanness of the sort displayed by the Afghani villagers that must be the

basis of initiatives to take the world out of the mess created by imperial ambitions. If he was against nationalism's excesses, capitalism's ravages and the chicanery perpetrated by those touting globalization, he had an unwavering faith in internationalism. This was no doubt what drove him to endless lecture tours where he could articulate passionately his plea for east-west and east-east amity. Indeed, he lectured compulsively out of an intense conviction that the way one could negate the excesses of nationalism was to commit oneself to the betterment of the universe through cross-cultural networks. In a talk titled "To Students" that he delivered in China in 1924 he tells them, "Bring out your light and add it to this great festival of lamps of world culture" (II, 606). In "International Relations," a lecture he read out in Japan in 1924, he points out that the kind of idealism he is inspired by does not direct him away from the world but towards it. As he phrases it, "The Kingdom of Heaven is here on this earth. It is there, where we realize our best relations with our fellow-beings, where there is no mutual suspicion and misunderstanding—there is the Kingdom of Heaven, in the spirit of comradeship and love" (III, 474). Though he had been criticized for preaching against nationalism in his earlier trip to the country, he is certain that the course of recent history has vindicated his efforts on behalf of offsetting whatever deters universal fellowship. In another lecture titled, "On Oriental Culture and Japan's Mission" delivered in his last trip to the country in 1929, he sounds very much like Edward Said in rubbishing westerners who tend to talk "glibly of the Oriental mind and culture" and urges his audience instead to contribute their best to internationalism because "All real great things belong to all countries" and because "great hearts...rise far above the soil that supports them and from that height, which is in the heart of the eternal, they can scan the distant horizons and realize the fundamental unity in all differences around them" (607). In a speech delivered in Canada in 1929 which he deemed his "farewell" address to that country, he is emphatic about the role it must play in the world, "She must ever hope to be able to win the heart of the world not by material force or cunning diplomacy but by offering the best that she produces—even like what occurred in the golden ages of India when her messengers reached far distant lands, carrying the gifts of love and wisdom, the message of emancipation, acknowledging common human fellowship at the risk of danger and death" (IV, 581). In another speech that he gave in London in 1930, he declares unequivocally, "Interdependence is in the nature of man and is his highest goal" (IV, 594). And in what he composed as one of his final messages to humanity in December 1940, he denounces the callousness that led to the Second World War, reminding Indian of the supreme message that came out of the country after Buddha—"maitre,—universal sympathy and fellowship with others" and the culture of sharing the best a people can produce with other peoples. Or as he puts it, "True civilization offers invitation to all in its rejoicing, barbarism prides itself on exclusivism." (IV, 610)

The sixth aspect of Tagore's lectures that make them especially relevant for us at this time is his warning to Indians of the excesses of consumer capitalism

launched in the name of modernization. In the lecture titled, "City and Village," that he originally delivered in Italy in 1926 and then rewrote for publication in India he thus emphasizes how "civilization" was becoming "a vast catering establishment" and how the insatiable maws of western capitalism depended upon enticing endless victims to its folds. With great prescience, he declares that in "Asia and Africa a bartering" was going on "whereby the future hope and happiness of entire peoples are sold for the sake of providing fastidious fashion with an endless train of respectable rubbish" (II, 512). Tagore returns to the idea in "Wealth and Welfare," a lecture that Sisir Kumar Das believes he originally read out in Japan in 1928. Here he not only goes back to the lecture he delivered in Italy but extends its main argument by suggesting at its opening that the modern age was seeing improved living standards for "negligible [sic] small section of the community" (II, 622) at the expense of the vast majority. He is very critical of this "disproportionate enlargement of the particular section" that "conceals the starved pallor of the entire body" (625). In a lecture titled "To the Youth of Hyderabad" he suggests that there are aspects of western civilization that are worth assimilating but that they could not or should not "borrow the western mind nor the western temperament" in the rush of modernization (III, 672). With epigrammatic brevity, he tells them, "life never imitates, it assimilates" (ibid).

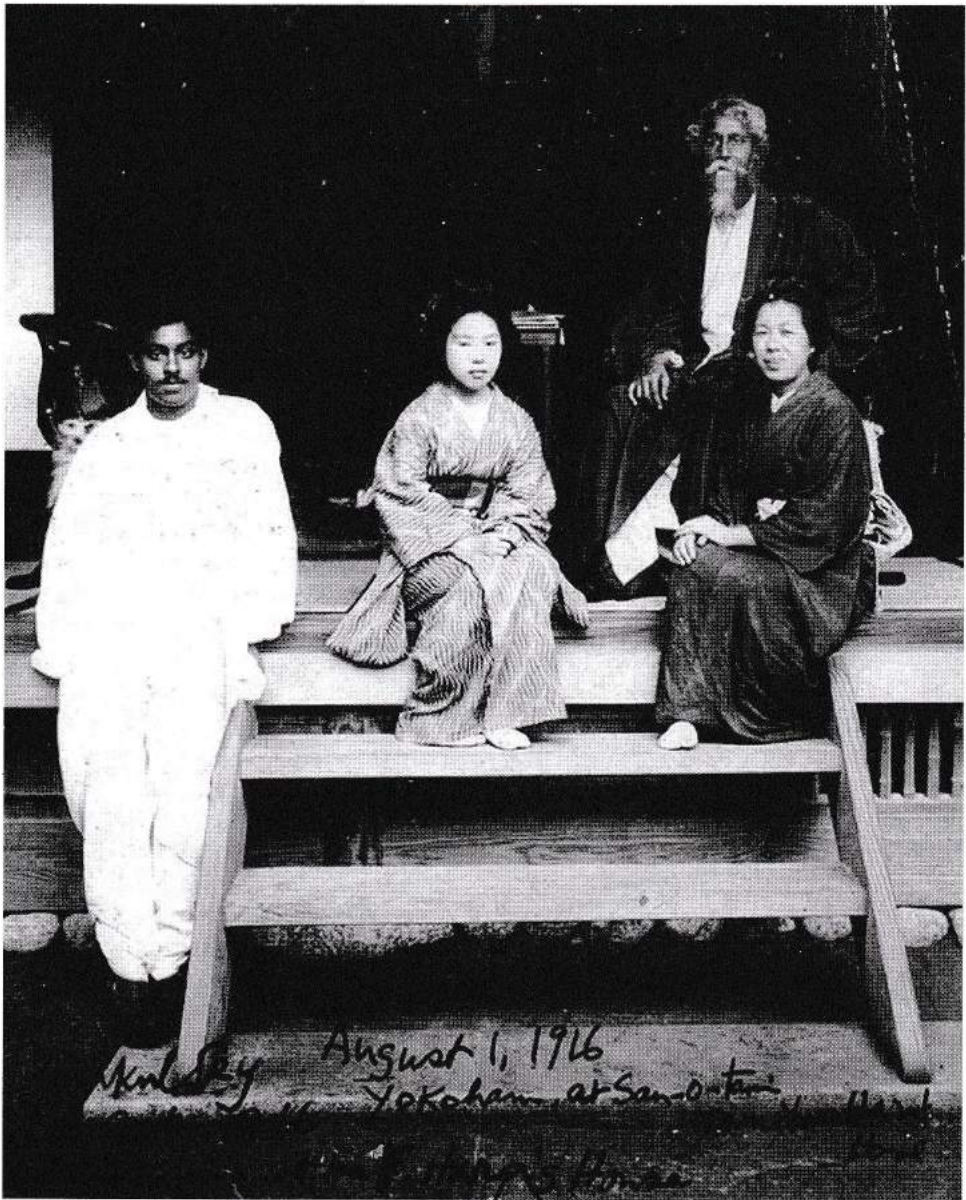
The last point that I would like to stress, however, is not about the contemporary relevance of Tagore's lectures but about the way he evolved as a lecturer over the years. As in all the other genres that he worked in and everything he did in life, he continued to evolve as a lecturer, being temperamentally unable to work in the same vein forever. The earliest lectures, that is to say the ones collected in *Sadhana*, apparently partly written by him and partly based on translations done by people close to him can be rambling and repetitive and show little or no awareness of the audience. However, the second series of lectures published as *Personality* four years later in 1917 reveal that the lecturer is beginning to take the audience into his ambit and is at times casting his lectures in the form of sermons. The *Nationalism* lectures, also published that year, opt to be hard-hitting and resort to graphic images and rhetorical flourishes. In them he appears bent on goading his audience into an awareness of the obtuseness with which they have been clinging to nationalistic sentiments that were impelling them to accelerate to the destruction of the world. In contrast, it is amazing to see how Tagore constructed the fairly long 1919 lecture, "The Centre of Indian Culture," on the basis of a cluster of images chosen from nature to highlight the sort of education that he considers ideal because it is organic and the offshoot of India's geography and rooted in the subcontinent's landscapes. Eventually, he evolved a form of lecturing that was unique—impassioned, poetic and direct. As his biographer, Krishna Kripalani suggests, one finds in the mature lectures "the distinctive Tagorean blend of poeticizing, philosophizing and sermonizing" (232).

Ultimately, we have to say that Tagore turned to lecturing compulsively and did so endlessly because he felt that what he wanted to say was important for a world that was in the crisis mode. But he did not want to be seen as just another professional speaker. In "The Voice of Humanity," a lecture delivered in Italy in 1925, he tells his audience that he would not want them to see him as someone speaking from a height. What he would like to emphasize is that, "When I speak, I speak *with* my surroundings and not *to* my surroundings" (III, 519, Tagore's emphasis). His greatest desire, he tells those present is to "blend" with their hearts, transcending the difficulties of talking to them in a language that was foreign to him as well as to them, to make the world other than it was. To Iranians, too, he claimed in a 1932 speech his disinclination to be a preacher speaking at people from the elevation afforded by a public platform; he would rather deliver poetically or musically messages of a new dawn and of "a new humanity" (II, 650). The common mission of all writers of all the nations of the world, he asserts in another speech given in this tour is "to achieve goodwill between man and man, [and to] establish a secure foundation of fellowship which will save humanity from suicidal wars and the savagery of fanatical superstitions" (658). In a lecture delivered at Osaka in June 1924 that exists through notes taken by Leonard Elmhirst he confesses that he never took to western modes of speech-making and that he really wanted to take to the stage in a country like Japan because he wanted desperately to tell the Japanese where they were going wrong despite his misgivings about his ability to communicate his message effectively to them in the English language. It was imperative to do so even if he was aware of the impossibility of communicating effectively or being understood fully and appreciated by all for his resolve. As he puts it, "I have often gone through my engagements—I have spoken, and I have gone away surprised in finding that what I had to say remained unspoken. Nevertheless, the idealist in him felt compelled to stand up on the lectern on this and other occasions, for though he may be "like the rain clouds that often gather on the horizon and take their departure without disburdening the rain which they have brought with them" he would have to say what he had to say (IV, 505). And his message to the Japanese? Not to follow the west blindly and lose sight of beauty and humanity, for "great empires arise and vanish and so does great wealth like that of Greece—they are reduced to dust, but the products of life and spirit, which they have the immortal value of beauty and tenderness, they never die... [for] that which you create from your spirit will be claimed by all humanity and for all time" (IV, 507). Surely it is a message delivered in myriad forms by Tagore, but often most directly and potently in his English lectures abroad and that is what makes so many of them worth reading once again in our time. .

¹ However, Kripalani notes at least one exception in his book, citing a New York journal dated November 22, 1920 which reports that when the lecture titled "A Poet's religion" was delivered in the Boston Public Forum that day, "Never had the Forum had as large an audience as that which turned out to hear the famous writer from the East. Hundreds were turned away" (295).

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Rabindranath Tagore and Mukul Dey with 'Kiyo-san' and another Japanese lady at Tomitaro Hara's 'Sankeien', Yokohama, Japan August 1, 1916.