

## **When Buddhism met the Brahma Samaj: My Family's Interactions with Rabindranath Tagore and Shantiniketan**

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I belong to a Buddhist family having my ancestry in the Comilla-Chittagong region of East Bengal, now Bangladesh.

My great-grandfather was Diwan Bahadur Banga Chandra Bhattacharya of Tripura when Tripura was a princely state and he was a close friend of Bengali poet, novelist, short story writer, dramatist, painter-of-sorts and Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. My great-grandfather was fluent in Sanskrit, Pali and Arabic, among other languages. A very erudite man, after retiring from Tripura Court, he settled in Comilla where he built a large Zamindari house. My great-grandfather was an orthodox and puritan Buddhist. He was uncompromisingly opposed to idolatry. This, in fact, was one of the key reasons why he and Rabindranath Tagore became friends.

Rabindranath Tagore was a Brahma, a splinter group of Hindus who opposed idolatry. His grandfather, Dwarakanath Tagore, was a close friend of Raja Rammohan Roy, the founder of the movement. Raja Rammohan Roy abolished the evil practice of burning Hindu widows and also called into question the Hindu practice of idolatry. In fact, he wanted to root out idolatry from Hinduism. He founded the Brahma Sabha for this purpose. After his demise, Rabindranath Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore, merged the organisation that he had founded into the Brahma Sabha ushering in the Brahma Samaj. Commonly called Maharshi, or great saint, just as Rabindranath Tagore was commonly called Gurudev, Debendranath Tagore bought a tract of land in Birbhum district from the Zamindar of Raipur and called that place Shantiniketan. The old place, adjoining Shantiniketan, is Bolpur and nearby Zamindars were located at places called Surul and Taltoar, apart from Raipur.

Rabindranath Tagore called my great-grandfather 'Diwan Bahadur ji' as a mark of respect. My great-grandfather was the inspiration behind Rabindranath Tagore's writing the atmospheric novel 'Rajarshi' in which Rabindranath Tagore condemned the practice of many Hindus of sacrificing animals before wrathful deities. Rabindranath Tagore had positioned this novel as his protest against idolatry and against slaughtering of animals before Hindu gods and goddesses, usually goddesses. Since the backdrop of this novel was Tripura, Rabindranath Tagore needed data regarding the history of Tripura and also data about its royal family. It was my great-grandfather who gave helped him out with these data. Also, as I have mentioned before, because my great-grandfather and Rabindranath Tagore were on common ground as regards their anti-idolatry stance, their friendship became deep, so much so, that my great-grandfather sent his sons Jitendra Chandra Bhattacharya and Hemendra Chandra Bhattacharya to Rabindranath Tagore's fledgeling educational institution at Shantiniketan.

Thus, it came to pass that my grandfather, Jitendra Chandra Bhattacharya, and my great-uncle, Hemendra Chandra Bhattacharya, found themselves under the tutorship of Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan. There were not many students at Shantiniketan then and Rabindranath Tagore's educational institution was not a recognised educational institution in those days. So, my grandfather and my great-uncle had to return to Comilla for their Matriculation Examination. By that time, both my grandfather and my great-uncle had become freedom fighters.

My grandfather, Jitendra Chandra Bhattacharya, was imprisoned by the British for his patriotic activities before his Matriculation Examination. He wrote his examination in prison. He was tortured by the British every time he was imprisoned by them.

My grandfather got himself admitted to a college in Kolkata, got into trouble over his nationalist activities and travelled to Sriniketan near Shantiniketan to immerse himself in grassroots rural development work. He did not intimate his plan to my great-grandfather or Rabindranath Tagore, but since he was already well-known in the Sriniketan-Shantiniketan area, word went to my great-grandfather in Comilla that my grandfather had been seen in Sriniketan. Worried that my grandfather was losing out on his college education, my great-grandfather asked Rabindranath Tagore to intervene. Accordingly, Rabindranath Tagore sent for my grandfather and wanted to know what he was doing.

My grandfather told Rabindranath Tagore that he wanted to engage in national development by contributing to the nation via rural development. "Then, you want to miss out on your college education. That is the long and short of it, is it not?" Rabindranath Tagore countered. "Then Jit (short for Jitendra and the name by which my grandfather was addressed by his elders), listen to me. If India could be freed by not becoming a graduate, then, considering the number of Indians who are not graduates, India would have become independent already.

Therefore, the best course of action for you would be to go to Calcutta (the then name of Kolkata), enrol in a college and pass the examinations.”

Accordingly, my grandfather returned to Kolkata and enrolled in Bangabasi College, where nationalist activities were tolerated, and graduated from the University of Calcutta, continuing his studies thereafter.

Later, my grandfather established himself in business. He founded the House of Labour in East Bengal to encourage youths towards business and enterprise. He also came under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, whom he met several times. He took my father, a young boy at that time, to meet Mahatma Gandhi at Barrackpore in the northern suburbs of Kolkata when Mahatma Gandhi was residing there. My father recalled that when he bent down to pay his respects to Mahatma Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi put his hand on my father's head and said in Hindi “Beta, sachcha patriot bano” which means “Son, be a true patriot.”

However, my grandfather was deeply dismayed by the acrimony between Mahatma Gandhi and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. He agreed with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose that India, in its illiterate state, could not function as a true democracy and a period of benevolent dictatorship was needed after freedom was obtained from the British to uplift India after which India could transition to a democracy. He proposed to Mahatma Gandhi that there should be a social revolution to accompany the attainment of freedom from the British. My grandfather was greatly influenced by the French Revolution. Mahatma Gandhi told my grandfather that the social revolution would take place after India had obtained its freedom from the British. He said that he had already started the social revolution in a small way by calling untouchable Hindus 'Harijans'.

Since I was her eldest grandson, my grandmother was very fond of me and often reminisced the past to me. She used to say that police raids on our Comilla house usually took place just before the crack of dawn, when it was still dark, that all residents were asked to get out of the house at the start of the raid and that the house was a sheer mess after the police had left. She also attended Rabindranath Tagore's evening meetings several times along with the rest of the family including my father. An interesting detail, which has not come to public attention yet and which I heard from my grandmother and father, is that Rabindranath Tagore frequently wrote his short stories without naming them. On many an evening, he read out his latest short story to his audience and then invited suggestions for a suitable title. Different titles would come up from the audience and Rabindranath Tagore used to choose the one that he thought was the best fit for the short story in question. This is not to say that Rabindranath Tagore never named a short story himself. He obviously did. But no record has been kept as to which are the short stories that Rabindranath Tagore named himself and which are the short stories which have been named by Rabindranath Tagore's audience.

My father was born in 1928. Rabindranath Tagore died in 1941. In this period, my family's longest stay at Shantiniketan was in 1939 when my grandmother was convalescing from a serious illness. Since my family belonged to Rabindranath Tagore's inner circle, so to speak, they obviously saw a lot of Rabindranath Tagore then. Rabindranath Tagore, being an anti-idolater to the core, obviously did not allow any Hindu festivals in Shantiniketan. Even the biggest festival of Hindu Bengalis, Durga Puja, was not permitted by him. Therefore, the Hindu Bengalis of Shantiniketan used to go to the Zamindari house at Surul to participate in the Durga Puja festivities.

Being a businessman, my grandfather travelled extensively to all parts of undivided India on business. Acting impulsively, in 1947, he took a decision to abandon East Bengal and come to Kolkata leaving all his property in East Bengal behind. Soon after settling in Kolkata in 1947, my grandfather realised that he had been chasing a mirage. Strongly disillusioned, he severed all ties with politics and with the Indian National Congress. Dissatisfied with the way independent India was going, he used to repeatedly say "I committed a historic blunder by defecting from East Bengal. This is not the independence I fought for."

I have been to Shantiniketan a number of times with my father and the rest of my family. Once, my grandmother, a very old lady by that time, went with us. My father took me to the Zamindari houses of Raipur, Surul and Taoltoar, which are somewhat off the beaten track. In Raipur, we met an old gentleman and his wife, who were relatives of Lord Sinha. The British, hoping against hope that the conferment of British titles on Indians would help stem the rising tide of Indian nationalism, made Mr. Sinha, a member of the Zamindari family of Raipur, Lord Sinha. Ultimately, of course, this was of no avail and India became independent. The Zamindari house was in a somewhat dilapidated state but the old gentleman, proud to belong to an illustrious family, maintained a register of visitors on which my father signed and penned his comments. We talked with the couple for some time – all their relations were in Kolkata – and then returned to Shantiniketan.

However, my father's most nostalgic moment was reserved for the moment when he showed me the spot when he had met Rabindranath Tagore for the last time in his life. This was just a few months before Rabindranath Tagore's death in 1941. One of the rather strange things about Rabindranath Tagore, and one that several people are not aware about, was that he liked to change houses, in the same compound however. This last meeting took place in a spacious room on the first floor of the house Rabindranath Tagore was then staying. As usual, my grandfather and my grandmother were also there on that occasion. My father told me that, he, a young boy, asked Rabindranath Tagore to bless him. Rabindranath Tagore wrapped my father in the arms of the wide cloak that he was wearing – at that point in his life, Rabindranath Tagore invariably wore a loose, long, full-length cloak. Then, Rabindranath

**Tagore touched my father's head and blessed him. Soon thereafter, my father, my grandfather and my grandmother boarded a train for Kolkata. They were not to see Rabindranath Tagore again.**

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