



*Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 97–112

PETER D. MCDONALD

## Rabindranath Tagore's সমাজ/Samaj/Communities of Song

CITE AS:

Peter D. McDonald, 'Rabindranath Tagore's সমাজ/Samaj/Communities of Song', in *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 97–112 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30\\_04](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30_04)>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)

Except for images or otherwise noted, this publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

**ABSTRACT:** What happens when songs or lyric poems, composed at particular moments, become state anthems, performed again and again across generations? This essay addresses this question through the extraordinary figure of Rabindranath Tagore, who, despite his radically anti-statist vision of community, composed songs that became the celebrated national anthems of India and Bangladesh.

**KEYWORDS:** Tagore, Rabindranath; Chaudhuri, Amit; Joyce, James; Baul; 'Jana Gana Mana'; 'Amar Sonar Bangla'; anthemization; anti-statism

---

# Rabindranath Tagore's সমাজ/Samaj/Communities of Song

PETER D. MCDONALD

1

Ideally, you would not be reading this. You would hear it as a talk that would open with me playing two songs. (You can still hear them if you have a moment, on YouTube.)<sup>1</sup> The point of this initial listening exercise? To underscore the experiential difference between reading lyric poems and listening to songs, but also to remind you of our deep, biocultural embeddedness in language. Let us assume that, like me, you have no Bangla, the language of the songs, and that you are, consequently, able to respond simply to the melody as an almost wholly aesthetic experience, the pure sound of words devoid of meaning. Perhaps you experience only a stream of rhythmic phrases, since you may struggle to differentiate the words as such, given what the neuroscientists tell us about how quickly we lose our capacity to hear 'foreign' sounds in the early stages of language development.

---

1 Shemaroo, 'Jana Gana Mana', YouTube, 7 August 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtMF973tXIY>>; VocalNationalAnthems, 'Amar Shona Bangla', YouTube, 9 May 2010 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVjbVPPF02o>> [both accessed 21 March 2023].

2

For the vast populations of India and Bangladesh, 1.4 billion and 169.4 million respectively as of 2021, this kind of listening would be impossible. They would hear the words, sentences, and rhythmic lines as resonantly meaningful sounds. More than that: they would hear the familiar, rousing melody–rhythm–meaning complexes of their national anthems: ‘Jana Gana Mana’ (literally, ‘Thou Art the Ruler of the Minds of All People’) and ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’ (My Golden Bengal), both by the Indian polymath and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). This is especially true for Bangla speakers, although, as Tagore deliberately used a Sanskritized form of his own first language for ‘Jana Gana’, drawing on a lexicon Bangla shares with many other Indian languages, especially Hindi, the evocative immediacy of its meanings would be clear to most Indian citizens.

True, as the Indian writer-musician Amit Chaudhuri commented in early 2023 after releasing his own version of ‘Jana Gana’ to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of India’s independence, the anthemization of songs can itself become an obstacle to hearing. ‘There’s a tendency for pieces of music that are associated with nationalism or religion not to be looked at as an artistic artefact’, he said in an interview for *The Hindu*; ‘we cease to think of them as aesthetic objects.’<sup>2</sup> His own experimental version, which intersects without fusing with the Austrian jazz keyboardist and composer Joe Zawinul’s ‘In a Silent Way’ (1970), is intended to reawaken this more primordial kind of listening, giving ‘Jana Gana’ a new life for Indian and world audiences alike.<sup>3</sup>

3

Anthemization has other effects too. While granting the songs an exceptional public status as official expressions of statehood, evident most obviously in the rules of decorum governing their performance,

---

2 Bhanuj Kappal, ‘“My Music Is Based on Convergences”: Amit Chaudhuri on his New Compositions’, *The Hindu*, 19 January 2023 <<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/music/amit-chaudhuri-writer-singer-music-single-album-in-a-silent-way-jana-gana-mana-75-india-independence/article66395879.ece>> [accessed 21 March 2023].

3 Amit Chaudhuri, ‘In a Silent Way/Indian National Anthem’, YouTube, 9 January 2023 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xL6uhjEcHIQ>> [accessed 21 March 2023].

the process also unmoors them from their origins, changing their meaning, even their form. This has consequences at every level, beginning with individual words. Consider only the most conspicuous word the two anthems share: বাংলা 'Bangla'/'Bengal'.

In 1905, when Tagore composed the original five-verse 'Amar Sonar Bangla', the title word referred to a multifaith, ethnolinguistic region, itself then part of the Bengal Presidency, the largest administrative subdivision of British India. The anthem version, a reworking of the first two verses, is mainly a lyric evocation of this geographical locality, figured as a beloved 'Ma' (Mother), in all its lived, sensuous reality. Here are lines 4–9 of the anthem in Syed Ali Ahsan's official English translation:

In Spring, Oh mother mine, the fragrance from  
your mango-groves makes me wild with joy —  
Ah, what a thrill!  
In Autumn, Oh mother mine,  
in the full-blossomed paddy fields,  
I have seen spread all over — sweet smiles!<sup>4</sup>

Only the final lines of the second verse hint at the darker history out of which the song originally arose: 'If sadness, Oh mother mine, casts a gloom on your face, | my eyes are filled with tears!' This references the anguish of Bengal's first partition under the British (1905–12), which Tagore and many others vigorously opposed. The full-length version makes this explicit in its last line, alluding directly to the boycott of foreign goods — 'a hanging rope disguised as a crown' — that underpinned the Swadeshi (literally, 'own country') campaign against partition.<sup>5</sup> More painful and permanent divisions would follow, as the regional Indian state of West Bengal and the Pakistani state of East Pakistan were carved out of undivided Bengal in 1947, with the latter eventually emerging as the independent nation state of Bangladesh in 1971. So, the 'Golden Bengal' evoked is inevitably different if we identify the first-person 'my' voice as a protesting Rabindranath-figure

4 VocalNationalAnthems, 'Amar Shona Bangla'.

5 Rabindranath Tagore, 'My Golden Bengal', trans. by Anjan Ganguly <<https://www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/rs-a2/aamar-sonaar-bangla-ami-english-translation.html>> [accessed 21 March 2023].

in 1905 or as a Bangladeshi collective affirming their solidarity as citizens today.

In 'Jana Gana', Bengal is one of seven regions of the subcontinent — the others are Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravida (South India), and Odisha — described as responding to the call of the 'dispenser of India's destiny'. Again, at the time of composition — in this case 1911 — the word referred to the recently and still-partitioned region of the Bengal Presidency, which would, like Punjab, suffer another traumatic division in 1947 — by contrast, Sindh was wholly absorbed by the new state of (West) Pakistan, while all the others became part of the new federal Indian Republic. Again, too, 'Jana Gana' is only the first verse of Tagore's original five-verse song entitled 'Bharata Bhagya Bidhata' (Dispenser/God/Ruler of India's Destiny), which is, like 'Amar Sonar Bangla', haunted by a charged political moment: the elaborate Imperial/Delhi Durbar organized for George V's visit to India as the new king-emperor on 12 December 1911. The song was Tagore's affronted response to being asked to compose something for the occasion. 'That Lord of Destiny,' he later explained, 'that Reader of the Collective Mind of India, that Perennial Guide, could never be George V, George VI, or any other George.'<sup>6</sup> The later verses confirm this. While the second shifts from the diversity of India's regions to its many religions — 'Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Muslims, and Christians' — the next two detail the travails of its history, which includes periods of 'darkness' and 'ghastly dreams'. Yet these are all ultimately redeemed by the 'blessings' of the variously figured, notably supra-sectarian 'Eternal Charioteer', loving 'Mother', and 'King of Kings', and by the prospect of a post-imperial dawn to come: 'victory' for the 'dispenser', as the refrain has it, though a pointedly non-violent, anti-militaristic one — all we are told is that 'the morning breeze carries the breath of new life.'<sup>7</sup> Appropriately, the song was first performed in public at the Calcutta (now Kolkata) meeting of the Indian National Congress on 27 December 1911, two weeks after the Durbar. By then,

---

6 Quoted in Monish Chatterjee, 'Tagore and Jana Gana Mana', 31 August 2003 <<https://countercurrents.org/comm-chatterjee310803.htm>> [accessed 21 March 2023].

7 Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Morning Song of India' <[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Morning\\_Song\\_of\\_India](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Morning_Song_of_India)> [accessed 25 July 2023]. This is Tagore's own translation, which dates from 28 February 1919.

there was a small but significant victory to note: amid all the imperial pomp of the Durbar, George V had also rescinded the 1905 partition of Bengal.

It is not just the artistry of the songs that gets lost in anthemization, then. Abridged and cut adrift from the provocations that occasioned their composition, their polemical energies go too.

4

Tagore did not live to see the destiny dispensed to India and Bengal in 1947, so it is impossible to know what he might have made of the post-imperial order from which three independent states eventually emerged on the subcontinent. Nor can we ever know how he might have responded to the unique distinction he achieved as the official laureate of two states: 'Jana Gana Mana' was formally adopted in 1950, 'Amar Sonar Bangla' in 1972. What we can do, however, especially in an essay collection dedicated to rethinking lyric communities, is consider the ways in which the songs, in their original, unabridged, and so polemical form, refract the radical, multifaceted, and always evolving idea of community Tagore developed across his later writings, an idea that was at once political and something else — let's call it poetic for now. Having established these connections, we can then revisit 'Sonar Bangla' and 'Jana Gana' not just as state anthems but as Tagore songs.

Tagore worked through his disillusionment with the Swadeshi movement in a variety of forms. While *Gora* (1910; trans. 1924) and *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1916; trans. 1921) represent the most sustained novelistic articulations of his critique, he used the expository mode of his celebrated 1917 lectures on nationalism to voice his concerns in more direct political terms, presenting an alternative vision that was at once anti-colonial, anti-nationalist, and non-statist. India is inevitably central to his argument, though in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, countering the 'racial unity' he considered characteristic of 'Western Nationality', he pointed to its historic and exemplary diversity, arguing that it had 'produced something like a United States of a *social* federation, whose common name is Hinduism'

— ‘social’ in his lexicon meant ‘voluntary’, ‘civic’, or ‘non-statist’.<sup>8</sup> Although derived from the Hindu tradition, this supra-sectarian, poetic-philosophical, rather than specifically theological, idea finds its lyrical avatar in the dispenser who unifies the many regions and religions of the subcontinent in ‘Bharata Bhagya Bidhata’. On the other hand, with the rigid hierarchies of the caste system in mind, Tagore took issue with Hinduism’s ‘idolatry of dead forms in social institutions.’<sup>9</sup> This combination of respect for India’s ancient inheritances and critique, all conducted in a spirit of secular revisionism, was characteristic of the reformist nineteenth-century Brahmo Samaj (Brahmo Society/Community) in which the Tagore family played a leading part. The idiosyncratic brand of humanism Tagore himself developed, which he later called ‘the Religion of Man’, owed much to this intellectual movement and the larger ‘Bengal Renaissance’ out of which it emerged.<sup>10</sup>

For Tagore, the ‘idolatry of dead forms’ an unreformed Hinduism fostered was dangerous because it blinded India to the fact that ‘in human beings differences are not like the physical barriers of mountains, fixed forever — they are fluid with life’s flow, they are changing their courses and their shapes and volume’, always part of a ‘world-game of infinite permutations and combinations’.<sup>11</sup> He feared a similar idolatry, this time focused on the national community as such, might come to dominate the anti-colonial struggle against British rule. ‘Because we have failed to see the great character of India in relation to the world as a whole,’ he wrote in 1921, ‘we have been inclined in our thoughts and actions to follow a much diminished idea of it, an idea bred of our calculating minds, which casts no light. Nothing great ever

---

8 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Nationalism in India’, in *Indian Philosophy in English*, ed. by Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 21–36 (pp. 23, 30; my emphasis). I have cited this collection because it provides a valuable larger context for Tagore’s lecture.

9 Ibid., p. 33.

10 See Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1931). For more on these lectures, and on Tagore generally, see Peter D. McDonald, *Artefacts of Writing: Ideas of the State and Communities of Letters from Matthew Arnold to Xu Bing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); supplementary website: <<https://artefactsofwriting.com/>> [accessed 25 July 2023].

11 Tagore, ‘Nationalism in India’, p. 30.

comes of this kind of thinking.<sup>12</sup> The ‘calculating mind’ tends, in Tagore’s book, not only to be preoccupied with deciding what best serves any community’s interests in some rationalistic sense, but with turning all it touches into a countable thing or reified fetish. Although he felt no one was immune from this kind of thinking — he saw evidence of it among academic literary critics, for instance — he believed political activists and state-makers were particularly prone to its allure.

As a product of the ‘calculating mind’, the sovereign, self-determining, Europeanized modern state could, in his view, never grasp, let alone articulate and promote, this labile, unpredictable aspect of diversity. This is why he put his faith not in the state, whether colonial or post-colonial, European or Asian — in the lectures he was famously critical of Japan’s imperial ambitions — but in civil society and the very different ‘ideals that strive to take form in social institutions.’<sup>13</sup> As an educationalist who founded an alternative school and university in Bengal, he chose to express his own ideals institutionally through centres of learning committed to creative expression and to forms of interculturality that would not only open India to the world but enable India to cast its own diverse lights abroad. Visva-Bharati, the university he set up in 1921, was dedicated, as he declared in an early mission statement, to upholding ‘India’s obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India’s right to accept from others their best.’<sup>14</sup> The name, as Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson explain, is ‘a compound made from the Sanskrit word for universe [or world] and Bharati, a goddess in the *Rig Veda* associated with the Hindu goddess of learning, Saraswati’ — literally, ‘Universal/World Learning’, in other words. Visva-Bharati was, he wrote, committed to ‘the creation of new thought by new

---

12 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Satyer Ahaban’ (The Call of Truth), in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 18 vols (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1991), XII, p. 585. For a different translation and interpretation, see Ashish Nandy, *Illegitimacy of Nationalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 81. Nandy reads this as an articulation of Tagore’s ‘universalism’, whereas I take it to be an expression of his commitment to the intercultural. I am grateful to Rosinka Chaudhuri for her retranslation of these sentences and for her comments on many other aspects of this essay.

13 Tagore, ‘Nationalism in India’, p. 32.

14 Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 220.

combinations of truths' and to using the 'shock' of the 'foreign' to strengthen 'the vitality of our intellect' — here the 'our' referred to India as a diverse 'social federation' open to the world, not as a sovereign, geographically bounded nation state.<sup>15</sup> Rejecting both 'the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism' and 'the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship', he insisted that all cultures not only exist but flourish, and, indeed, survive, interculturally.<sup>16</sup> Seen from the perspective of the 1920s, this was a declaration of faith in a more equitable, decolonized, and post-nationalist world to come, since, as he always recognized, his educational ideals were incompatible with the injustices of colonial rule.

As his intervention in an educational dispute in Bengal in the 1930s showed, these convictions not only shaped his critique of the state and state-led international relations — all 'machinery' in his lexicon. They affected how he understood intercommunal relations and language. The highly charged quarrel, led by 'Bengali Muslims' committed to 'Persianizing and Arabicizing' Bangla textbooks, centred on language teaching in schools.<sup>17</sup> 'Every language has a vital framework of its own', Tagore wrote in 'The Bengali of Maktabas and Madrasas' (1932), but 'there is no civilized language that has not absorbed some foreign vocabulary through many kinds of interaction with a variety of peoples'.<sup>18</sup> Why, he asked, pushing the underlying logic of the dispute one step further, did the textbook reformers not seek to 'sanctify the language of English school readers by sprinkling them with Persian or Arabic?'<sup>19</sup> By way of illustration, and in a gesture of mock solicitude, he

15 Ibid., pp. 220–22. This kind of thinking also underpinned Tagore's innovative conception of world literature as set out in his talk/essay 'World Literature' (1907). For contemporary accounts of this key intervention, see Peter. D. McDonald, 'Seeing through the *Concept* of World Literature', *Journal of World Literature*, 4 (2019), pp. 13–34; Rosinka Chaudhuri, 'Viśvasāhitya: Rabindranath Tagore's Idea of World Literature', in *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, ed. by Debjani Ganguly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 261–78.

16 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Nationalism in the West', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994–96), II (1994), pp. 418–22 (p. 419).

17 Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Bengali of Maktabas and Madrasas', trans. by Tista Bagchi, in *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 358–60 (p. 359).

18 Ibid., p. 358.

19 Ibid., p. 359.

offered as an example his own rewritten version of the opening lines of John Keats's poem *Hyperion*. He acknowledged that the subject of the poem itself posed a problem for purists since it came from 'Greek mythology'. Yet

if, despite that, it is not to be eschewed by the Muslim student,  
let us see how its beauty is enhanced when Persian is mixed in  
with it:

Deep in the *saya-i-ghamagin* of a vale,  
Far sunken from the *nafas-i-hayat afza-i* morn,  
Far from the *atshin* noon and eve's one star,  
Sat *bamoo-i-safid* Saturn *Khamush* as a *Sang*.

The lines appear as follows in the original:

Deep in the *shady sadness* of a vale  
Far sunken from the *healthy breath* of morn,  
Far from the *fiery* noon, and eve's one star,  
Sat *gray-hair'd* Saturn, *quiet* as a *stone*.<sup>20</sup>

The absurdity of the fake-hybridized version proved his point: 'no Maulvi Sahab [i.e. respected Muslim scholar] will attempt this sort of Islamisation of English literary style in a state of sanity', just as no one in their right mind would 'dispute linguistic rights over the sun', claiming that 'that the Hindu Bengali's *surya* is the true sun and the Muslim Bengali's sun is merely *tambu*'. Having said this, he ruled nothing out. For all his efforts to defuse tensions by trying to leaven the fraught debate with humour, he added, presciently given the horrors of partition that were just fifteen years away: 'Communal conflict has taken many different forms in different countries of the world; but the grotesque shape that it has taken in Bengal makes it hard for us to hold our heads high.'<sup>21</sup>

There is one final aspect of Tagore's political thinking to consider which, as Partha Chatterjee notes, centres on his use of the term '*svadés*'

20 *Hyperion*, l. 1–4, in John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. by H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 221 (my italics, marking the counterparts of the Persian elements in Tagore's version).

21 *Ibid.*, p. 360.

(literally, 'one's own country').<sup>22</sup> Although the word echoes 'Swadeshi', it takes on a very different, even contrary, meaning in Tagore's later writings, following his growing doubts about anti-colonial nationalism. For him, the *dés* (also romanized as *desh*, as in 'Bangladesh') is neither a geopolitical territory or economic zone, nor a fate of birth. It is an achieved, creatively fashioned country of the mind, or, as Chatterjee has it, 'the product of our imagination'. This is how Tagore put it in 1921:

The certain knowledge that I have a *dés* comes out of a quest. Those who think that the country is theirs simply because they have been born in it are creatures besotted by the external things of the world. But, since the true character of a human being lies in his or her inner nature imbued with the force of self-making (*ātmaśakti*), only that country can be one's *svadés* that is created by one's own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the idea of community the constitutional machinery of the state typically produces, an artefact of the 'calculating mind' preoccupied with externalities, the *svadés* is an inward condition for Tagore, creatively brought into being by each individual and, in the case of the poet-songwriter, by each act of composition. This is an imagined community of song, in other words, which is at the same time a singular creative act 'imbued with the force of self-making'. Again, in Tagore's lexicon, 'creative' or 'creation' has a specific resonance, associated with his idea of knowledge achieved through an exploratory 'quest', in contrast to 'construction', which follows a rulebook and is linked to the 'calculating mind'.<sup>24</sup>

Having clarified some of Tagore's thinking and terminology, we can return to 'Sonar Bangla' and 'Jana Gana/Bharata' in their original, unabridged form as Tagore songs and as something more: expressions

---

22 Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 103. Chatterjee gives one of the richest recent accounts of Tagore's later political thinking, though he makes no reference to the poetry. For another take on the issues, which does discuss the anthems, see Poulomi Saha, 'Singing Bengal into a Nation: Tagore the Colonial Cosmopolitan?', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.2 (2013), pp. 1–12.

23 Trans. by Chatterjee, *Lineages*, p. 104.

24 Tagore, 'Literature', in *Selected Writings*, pp. 49–50 (p. 49).

of *svadés* in his sense, that is, as artefacts of a unique creative ‘quest’, reflecting, in each case, his ‘own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort’.

5

With ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’, it is not the lyrics that offer the best point of entry but the melody, which Tagore adopted from ‘Ami Kothay Pabo Tare’ (Where Shall I Meet Him), a song originally composed by his local postal worker/messenger Gagan Harkara, who was also a Baul singer. This specifically Bangla and exclusively oral tradition, usually thought to date from the fifteenth century CE, not only influenced Tagore’s creative practice. It shaped his self-understanding as a poet-songwriter — it would not be too much to say he saw himself as a modernist Baul.<sup>25</sup> Associated chiefly with itinerant ‘beggars — deprived of education, honour, and wealth’, this ‘popular religious sect of Bengal’, as he called it in ‘An Indian Folk Religion’ (1922), itself constituted a bridge between two transformative traditions in his account, one ancient and Eastern, the other modern and Western: Buddhism, at least in its original oral and pre-institutionalized form, and liberal democracy, at least in its ideal form.<sup>26</sup> For Tagore, this was the Buddhism that ‘declared salvation to all men, without distinction’, promising freedom from ‘the thralldom of the self’, and delivered ‘neither in texts of Scripture, nor in symbols of deities, nor in religious practices sanctified by ages, but through the voice of a living man’, the Buddha.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, though now like the modern ‘idea of democracy’, the ‘simple theology’ of the Baul preached ‘faith in the individual’, ‘trust in his own possibilities’, and a belief in the inherent ‘dignity of man.’<sup>28</sup>

Eschewing all institutionalized and written forms of religion, whether of the church, temple or mosque, and all hierarchies ‘imposed by the society of the learned, of the rich, or of the highborn’ — including caste — the Baul also rejected otherworldly transcendentalism,

---

25 See McDonald, *Artefacts*, pp. 173–90.

26 Rabindranath Tagore, ‘An Indian Folk Religion’, in *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 67–90 (p. 83).

27 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

favouring an embodied freedom or self-overcoming in the here and now.<sup>29</sup> According to their 'mystic philosophy of the body', Tagore wrote, the deity, understood as the ultimate object of a wandering or questing desire, which could be another person or a humanistic ideal, was an immanent meaning- and value-giving experience, open to all in equal measure — 'not only that God is for each of us, but also that God is in each of us'.<sup>30</sup> Hence the longing voiced in Harkara's song, which Tagore cited in 'An Indian Folk Religion':

Where shall I meet him, the Man of my Heart?  
He is lost to me and I seek him wandering from land to land.  
I am listless for that moonrise of beauty,  
which is to light my life,  
which I long to see in the fulness of vision, in gladness of heart.<sup>31</sup>

In Bangla, the *maner mānus* (Man of my Heart), a central Baul topos, is a gender-neutral figure of the beloved, the one who, as Tagore put it, 'gives expression to infinite truth in the music of life'.<sup>32</sup> As this suggests, Tagore's own humanistic 'Religion of Man' owed as much to the folk traditions of the Baul as it did to the intellectual project of the Brahmo Samaj. Since 2008, the Baul songs have been included on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, an accolade Tagore would no doubt have regarded as long overdue.

Heard as a modernist rewording of a Baul song, 'Amar Sonar Bangla' turns into something more than protest responding to the provocations of a charged historical moment and something other than straightforward lyric evocation of place. While the first two verses, which form the anthem, celebrate the local seasons and landscape in the guise of a generalized first person, the third reveals the voice to be a more specific, biographical individual recalling their childhood experience of visceral immersion in the 'dirt and soil' of the region. The fourth then reverts to a rural scene in the present with 'cattle grazing in the field', 'calling birds', and the harvest, before concluding with a declaration of solidarity, again centred on rural village life:

---

29 Ibid., p. 88.

30 Ibid., pp. 80, 86.

31 Ibid., p. 79.

32 Ibid.

‘All your shepherds and farmers are my brothers.’ Following Tagore’s understanding of the Baul’s ‘mystic philosophy of the body’, this is ‘My Golden Bengal’ as a maternal figure of the beloved *maner mānus* who dispenses meaning and value in the world — ‘Bless me with your dust’ — while fostering a local ‘Unity in Diversity’: Bengal as a lyrical, Baul-inspired Tagorean *svadés*, in other words, which, in the heat of the moment, served as a powerful protest against partition.

On this account, it is not difficult to see why ‘Sonar Bangla’ might be so amenable to anthemization. By articulating a moment of happy conjunction between Tagore’s inner poetic *svadés* and the outer politics of the Swadeshi movement, it has all the qualities of an anthem in the making. Much the same could be said of ‘Bharata Bhagya Bidhata’, which Tagore in his own translation called ‘The Morning Song of India’. True, its addressee, the ‘dispenser of India’s destiny’, does not appear to owe much to the *maner mānus* of the Baul tradition. With its eclectic references to Aruna, the charioteer of the Hindu sun god Surya, and the Christian/Muslim ‘King of Kings’, ‘Morning Song’ is more solidly in the reformist and high-cultural Hindu tradition of the Brahmo Samaj. This is true melodically as well, as it is based not on a Baul song but on variants of classical ragas, including Kedar and Alhaiya Bilawal. Yet the dispenser is also figured as a nurturing ‘mother’, recalling the maternal Bengal of ‘Sonar Bangla’, and as an immanent, unifying power, ‘the ruler of the minds of all people’, whose name echoes ‘in the hills of the Vindhyas and Himalayas, mingles in the music of the Jamuna and Ganges and is chanted by the waves of the Indian Sea’ — recall Tagore’s reference to the ‘music of life’ in his account of the Baul tradition. Again, we might ask, is this India as a Brahmo-Baul inspired Tagorean *svadés* readily open to anthemization and so difficult to reconcile with the anti-nationalist and non-statist vision of community outlined in the 1917 lectures?

6

To address this question, we can turn to another poem from the same period, which is more explicitly indebted to the Baul tradition and more clearly in line with Tagore’s own political thinking. Poem 106 of the original Bangla *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings, 1910) is, perhaps

tellingly, not among those Tagore chose for the self-translated English edition of 1912–13 that made his name internationally and sealed his reputation, particularly in Europe and America, as an unworldly Eastern mystic. As the fifth verse shows, the poem is, like ‘Sonar Bangla’ and ‘Bharata’, explicit about the ongoing anti-colonial struggle and trauma of partition — it is dated 2 July 1910 — and, like ‘Bharata’, it looks to the promise of a post-imperial future. Here are the lines in Ketaki Kushari Dyson’s 2010 translation:

My mind, be strong to endure this affliction  
and listen to unity’s call.  
Your sense of fear, embarrassment, humiliation —  
banish them, conquer them all.  
The intolerable pain will come to an end.  
Behold what a huge new life is about to be born!<sup>33</sup>

As the mode of address indicates, this is an internal dialogue poem with the I-voice apostrophizing itself (‘my mind’) in a motivational spirit. It opens with ‘Gently in this hallowed place | wake up, o my mind.’ From the start, this place, like the locality of ‘Sonar Bangla’, is at once physical and affective, sacred and secular. The deictics also make it specific: the ‘now’ of utterance is a particular juncture in colonial history experienced from an equally particular location ‘on *this* seashore of India’s grand | concourse of humankind’ (my emphasis).

Yet poem 106 is not just the Rabindranath I-voice speaking to itself. Having located the lyric moment in time and space, or, more accurately, at a particular point in an endlessly changing time-space continuum, the I then introduces another addressee, a version of the Baul’s immanent *maner mānus*, in the second section of the first verse:

Here I stand and stretch my arms,  
saluting God-in-Man;  
in grand rhythm, with great delight  
I praise Him as best I can.

Like the eclectic, supra-sectarian dispenser of ‘Bharata’, this figure, who is resolutely of the here and now, unifies the diverse ‘streams of humanity’ who have flowed, and are still flowing, across the subcontinent ‘in

---

33 Rabindranath Tagore, *I Won’t Let You Go: Selected Poems*, trans. by Ketaki Kushari Dyson (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2010), p. 152.

impetuous cascades to lose themselves in the sea'. The second verse then begins to name them as the 'Aryans and non-Aryans', 'Chinese and Dravidians', as well as 'Scythians, Huns, Pathans, Mughals', and 'the West'; while the sixth and final verse adds 'Hindus and Muslims', 'Brahmins' and 'outcastes', 'Christians', and 'you, English people'. Given the colonial injustices intimated in the penultimate verse, the inclusion of 'the West' and 'the English' is pointed. Despite all the trauma, the I, now speaking for a collective 'we', accepts 'gifts' from 'that store' too, insisting 'we shall give and receive, mingle and harmonise', since 'there's no turning back | on this seashore' — again recall the Swadeshi boycott of foreign goods.

'Only that country can be one's *svadés* that is created by one's own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort', Tagore wrote in 1921. Poem 106 is among the richest poetic, indeed, metapoetic articulations of his own inner *svadés*. It is also one of the clearest lyric formulations of the intercultural vision of community he outlined in his 1917 lectures and of the educational ideals on which he founded Visva-Bharati. As such, it stands as a key companion poem to 'Amar Sonar Bangla' and 'Bharata Bhagya Bidhata'. On the one hand, a Tagorean country of the mind is, as poem 106 and 'Sonar Bangla' each insist in their own ways, always also a country of the finite body, of localized colours, languages, musical traditions, and visceral experiences, the lived reality of which exposes 'the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism'.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, to be a citizen of this unique inner *svadés* is not just to be acutely conscious of history's many oceanic, sometimes nightmarish, cross-currents, as 'Bharata' maintains, but to be actively engaged in shaping its future as an ongoing, intercultural experiment and as a permanent guard against 'the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship'. What we have, in other words, is a non-statist Tagorean community of song, where human differences are inevitably both autochthonous and 'fluid with life's flow', part of a 'world-game of infinite permutations and combinations'. The reason? 'A Tagore song', as Amit Chaudhuri put it in the interview about his own intercultural version of 'Jana Gana', is 'the

---

34 As Saha, 'Singing Bengal', pp. 3, 14–15, rightly points out, this means Tagore does not fit the Euro-American model of cosmopolitanism for which Martha Nussbaum and others have tried to claim him.

result of a conversation between [a] multiplicity of traditions, made possible by a world in which there are multiple journeys to take.<sup>35</sup>

7

By intersecting with Zawinul's 'In a Silent Way', and the Miles Davis jazz tradition with which it in turn intersected, Chaudhuri's 'Jana Gana' is a contemporary updating of and homage to Tagore's Baul-inspired journeying. Tagore had allies in his own time too. The deliberately foreignizing, interlingual *svadés* James Joyce fashioned in *Finnegans Wake* (1939) is *sui generis*, but, as I argue in *Artefacts of Writing* (2017), the resemblance to Tagore's is uncanny, especially when it comes to questions of the body, language, culture, community, colonialism, and the state. The convergences are fortuitously but promisingly prefigured in *Gora* (1910), where the eponymous HCE/Shawn-like figure, who is initially a fervent Hindu Brahmin, turns out to be adopted and of Christian-Irish origin — think also of Leopold Bloom's immigrant background and complex Jewish-Irishness in *Ulysses* (1922). The difference of course is that Joyce did not go on to become the official laureate of two states. Yet, as the expression of a uniquely Joycean *svadés*, the *Wake* stands, like Tagore's later writings, as a permanently vigilant counter to any narrowly statist idea of community — its ideal reader is (or will be) a 'Europasianised Afferyank' — and, like poem 106, as well as 'Bharata' and 'Sonar Bangla' in their unabridged form, it lives on as a powerful shadow anthem for any decolonized citizens of somewhere who are, like the Baul, also at home anywhere on 'ourth'.<sup>36</sup>

---

35 Kappal, 'My Music Is Based on Convergences'.

36 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 18, 191.

Peter D. McDonald, 'Rabindranath Tagore's সমাজ/Samaj/Communities of Song', in *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, ed. by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti, *Cultural Inquiry*, 30 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2024), pp. 97–112 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30\\_04](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-30_04)>

## REFERENCES

- Chatterjee, Monish, 'Tagore and Jana Gana Mana', 31 August 2003 <<https://countercurrents.org/comm-chatterjee310803.htm>> [accessed 21 March 2023]
- Chatterjee, Partha, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)
- Chaudhuri, Amit, 'In a Silent Way/Indian National Anthem', YouTube, 9 January 2023 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xL6uhjEcHIQ>> [accessed 21 March 2023]
- Chaudhuri, Rosinka, 'Viśvasāhitya: Rabindranath Tagore's Idea of World Literature', in *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, ed. by Debjani Ganguly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 261–78 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009064446.014>>
- Dutta, Krishna, and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995)
- Joyce, James, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber, 1975)
- Kappal, Bhanuj, "'My Music Is Based on Convergences": Amit Chaudhuri on his New Compositions', *The Hindu*, 19 January 2023 <<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/music/amit-chaudhuri-writer-singer-music-single-album-in-a-silent-way-jana-gana-mana-75-india-independence/article66395879.ece>> [accessed 21 March 2023]
- Keats, John, *Poetical Works*, ed. by H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970)
- McDonald, Peter D., *Artefacts of Writing: Ideas of the State and Communities of Letters from Matthew Arnold to Xu Bing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198725152.001.0001>>; supplementary website: <<https://artefactsofwriting.com/>> [accessed 25 July 2023]
- 'Seeing through the Concept of World Literature', *Journal of World Literature*, 4 (2019), pp. 13–34 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00401001>>
- Nandy, Ashish, *Illegitimacy of Nationalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994)
- Saha, Poulomi, 'Singing Bengal into a Nation: Tagore the Colonial Cosmopolitan?', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.2 (2013), pp. 1–12 <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.36.2.1>>
- Shemaroo, 'Jana Gana Mana', YouTube, 7 August 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtMF973tXIY>> [accessed 21 March 2023]
- Tagore, Rabindranath, 'The Bengali of Maktabs and Madrasas', trans. by Tista Bagchi, in *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 358–60
- *I Won't Let You Go: Selected Poems*, trans. by Ketaki Kushari Dyson (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2010)
- 'An Indian Folk Religion', in *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 67–90
- 'Literature', in *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 49–50

- ‘The Morning Song of India’ <[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Morning\\_Song\\_of\\_India](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Morning_Song_of_India)> [accessed 25 July 2023]
- ‘My Golden Bengal’, trans. by Anjan Ganguly <<https://www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/rs-a2/aamar-sonaar-bangla-ami-english-translation.html>> [accessed 21 March 2023]
- ‘Nationalism in India’, in *Indian Philosophy in English*, ed. by Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 21–36
- ‘Nationalism in the West’, in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994–96), II (1994), pp. 418–22
- *The Religion of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1931)
- ‘Satyer Ahaban’ (The Call of Truth), in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 18 vols (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1991), XII, p. 585
- VocalNationalAnthems, ‘Amar Shona Bangla’, 9 May 2010 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVjbVPFeo2o>> [accessed 21 March 2023]