

Chakraborty, Subhas Ranjan and Shyam Sundar Bhattacharya (ed.) 2018. *An Encounter Between Two Asia Civilizations. Rabindranath Tagore and the Early Twentieth Century Indo-Japanese Cultural Confluence*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society. 160 pp. Hb.: 850 INR. ISBN: 9381574790.

Book review by

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This edited volume takes up the subject of Rabindranath Tagore's multiple visits to Japan between 1916 and 1929 against the larger background of the Indio-Japanese historic and cultural connections, touching upon a broad range of subjects, from art history, poetry to Pan-Asianism, aggressive nationalism as well as culture as soft power. The first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, Tagore became possibly the most travelled personality of his day, undertaking as many as twelve world tours, effectively spending more than a tenth of his lengthy life, close to nine years, abroad. While his travels to Europe and America alongside his encounters with countless individuals there have been well documented and discussed in academia, his relationship with—and attraction to – far-eastern countries, those of China and Japan, has received far less attention, and yet, Japan is the one country he visited the most number of times of all the countries he travelled to. The centenary of Tagore's first visit of Japan in 1916 was thus seen as an opportunity to organise a conference on the topic, the proceedings of which – thirteen contributions alongside an illuminating introduction written by the volume's editors Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty and Shyam Sundar Bhattacharya—make up for the content of the book. The idea of the conference and the publication was 'to explore the entire spectrum of the cultural and intellectual encounters between these two ancient civilisations through using [Tagore's] visits as a context' (p. xiv).

Tagore's travelogues, speeches, letters and essays regarding his experience and understanding of Japan thus comprise the primary material, so inevitably there is overlap and repetition of quotations and basic facts across the papers. This is particularly true of the early part of the book, where the subject is taken up in more generic terms, either giving an overview or zooming in on Tagore's first encounter with Japan. Later contributions, however, engage a more focused approach, tackling specific subjects, ranging from Tagore's critique of nationalism (Bhattacharya and Banerji), the influence of Japanese art on Tagore's art education in Santiniketan (Kumar), the impact of *haiku* on his poetics (Niwa), to Rabindranath's perception of Japanese women (Keeni), the role of culture in diplomacy (Banerji), and so on. No matter how specific the angle of individual contributions, underlying most—if not all—of authors' particular concerns, there is the unifying impulse, as Bhattacharya has put it, to seek out the "larger perspective" of Tagore's visit(s) in Japan, alongside their "historical significance".

Tagore was indeed no casual globetrotter; he knew how to take advantage of global fame the highest literary accolade had brought him and would use this public platform to spread his universalist—anti-nationalist—message of peace and cross-cultural amity. This ultimately meant being both laudatory and critical with respect to any one country, including Japan. In his speeches he would therefore stress his admiration for Japan's art and aesthetics, her emergence into the modern world in the face of European dominance, while at the same time voice the most stringent critique of the country's nascent militarism and imperialist ambitions, heeding Japan to resist selling out to the worst of European political culture. The latter stance predictably alienated him from a section of Japan's intelligentsia, who disapproved of his radical anti-nationalist stance, disqualifying him as a member of a "defeated", "slave nation" (India under the British). General reading public, on the other hand, embraced his poetry and writings from the start, a trend that continues to this day.

Conversely, as pointed out by various contributors in this volume, early-twentieth century Japan played an important role in the imagination of Indian intelligentsia, underscored by Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905. With political nationalism on the rise in India – for a short while, Tagore even participated in the 1905 Swadeshi movement, before he became disillusioned with its Hindu revivalist mode – Japan became something of 'an example of modernisation and empowerment against Western imperialist forces' (p. 5). Coupled with ideas of Asian unity as voiced by Okakura Kakuzo (1862-1913) in his book *The Ideals of the East* (1903), this gave rise to nothing short of an alternative culturo-political vision that would change the global geopolitical balance.

While this vision remained unfulfilled, a lasting impact as regards the modern history of intellectual and artistic exchanges between the two cultures did materialise on a smaller scale: primarily through a host of individual artists (Yokoyama Taikan, Shunso Hishida for example) and students, who came to Tagore's world university *Visva-Bharati*. Incidentally, as Supriya Roy informs us, 'the first discussion of his world university took place in Japan in 1916' (p. 43). Tagore, always keen for foreign influences to rejuvenate trends and traits in India, saw the interaction with Japanese art and craftsmanship as imperative. The result was a profound impact on generations of Indian artists, from Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose to Benodebehari Mukherjee.

Needless to say, this is a long overdue publication, rich in detail and insights that shed new light on Tagore's relationship with Japan in particular and far-eastern cultures in general. Most of the contributions tend to be more descriptive rather than analytical, and sometimes the overarching categories of "East" and "West", for example, which Tagore was prone to use, indiscriminately enter the discourse of the authors themselves. Motivated by an explicit concern to evaluate the historical significance for both the countries, this volume raises interesting questions about the relationship between (remarkable) individuals and their real—as well as imagined—role in bringing "cultures", even "civilisations", closer together in potential amity and understanding. One would hope the publication will lead to further critical reflection on the subject.