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From 82-year-old Musicologist to Anti-imperialist Hero: Metamorphoses of the Hungarian Tagore in East Central Europe

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Abstract

Tagore's reception in various countries in East Central Europe has long been the subject of academic studies. Making an attempt to observe the similarities and dissimilarities of Rabindranath's reception in these culturally very rich countries the paper investigates two understudied phases of Tagore's reception in the region, namely the initial puzzlement at the announcement of the Nobel Prize in 1913 and the repercussions of world politics on Tagore's image in the early years of Indian independence, which coincide with the early years of Communist rule in East Central Europe.

Keywords: Tagore, Hungary, reception, East Central Europe, communist block, orientalism, translation

1 Tagore in East Central Europe

The cultural encounter between 'East' and 'West' has been the subject of an enormous amount of scholarly work in recent decades. Most studies, however, investigate British, French and German 'Orientalisms' while the cultures of East Central Europe, roughly the Eastern part of the European Union, with languages hopelessly decorated with diacritics and inaccessible for most of the academic cosmopolis, have received relatively little attention in post-colonial discourse. However, this colourful region, often perceived to be part of the Orient during past centuries, has much to offer to a student of cultural encounter or of reception history.

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The response to Tagore in various countries in East Central Europe has long been the subject of academic studies done mostly in a national framework. (See for example the writings of the Tagore in Other Lands (Radhakrishnan 1961: 297–367); as well as Petrović 1970; Wojtilla 1983; Shurbanov 1989; Bose 1956, 1991; Neacșu 1998; Walter 2006; Nikolaev and Nikolaev 2009 etc.) In 2007 I also produced a book that included investigating Tagore's connection to Hungary (Bangha 2007). In this article, partly relying on some recently discovered material, I am revisiting the question of Tagore's reception in a broader light. Using the high amount of 'national' Tagore studies I intend to encourage my colleagues to move forward from the national framework by taking into consideration the similarities and dissimilarities of Rabindranath's reception in these geographically small but culturally very rich countries.

A cursory look at the national studies shows that Tagore's popularity in the region came in three waves between which there were periods of amnesia. The Indian poet was discovered right after the Nobel Prize in 1913 and celebrated as a person who heralds the end of Europe's cultural hegemony and widens the cultural horizon of the Europeans. During the years of the First World War not much attention was given to Tagore.¹ In the years following the war he was celebrated not just as an outsider who denounces the warmongering of the Europeans but rather as a 'Sage, Prophet and Poet' with a message from the spiritual East. His visit to the region in 1926 was the last phase of a popularity that hardly any intellectual enjoyed in Europe. In sharp contrast with the early 1920s, he fell into oblivion in the region up until 1955.² The third wave of popularity came when Rabindranath was rediscovered in 1955 under entirely different circumstances. At his centenary in 1961 he was celebrated as an anti-imperialist hero in the communist block. The interest since then has been moderate again.

The following figure illustrates the popularity in the region in terms of Tagore-books published up to 1961.

¹ The staging of his *Post Office* in October 1915 in Zagreb is an important exception.

² One should, however, mention that in countries such as Bulgaria and Latvia many new translations appeared between 1927 and 1930.

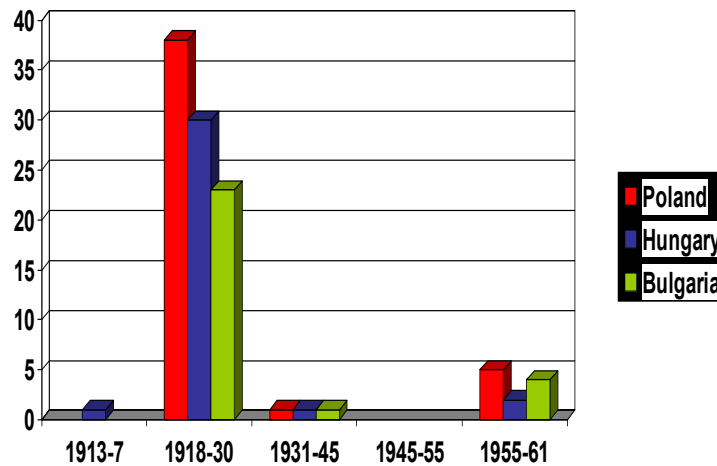


Figure 1: First editions of Tagore books published in Poland (44), Hungary (34) and Bulgaria (28) between 1913 and 1961.³

As can be observed from Figure 1 the initial enthusiasm for Tagore in East Central Europe was rather modest in the three countries examined here but they made up for their lack of interest in the twenties. The amnesia at the wake of World War II is in sharp contrast with the Tagore cult after the First World War. However, Tagore witnessed a renaissance there after 1955.

2 The First Reactions

In this chapter, focussing on Hungary, I am going to talk about some of the first reactions to Tagore's Nobel Prize. The Indian poet had been so unknown at that time that the first articles about him misspelled his name, misread his age (52) and confused him with the musicologist Raja Sourindra Mohan Tagore (1840–1914),

The Nobel Prize for literature, this year, was awarded by the committee to Rayen Dranatto Tagore. Tagore is a musical composer and a historian of music. He lives in Calcutta and he is eighty-two. (*Világ* 14 November 1913 and *Pesti Hírlap* 14 November 1913)

Although the next day the correct details arrived it is not without interest to reflect on this short piece of news. European discourse on the Orient at that time was not

³ The list of Hungarian books was prepared by me. Statistics for Poland rely on Walter 2006, while that of Bulgaria on Nikolaev and Nikolaev 2009.

inclined to acknowledge that Asia can possess a living modern culture. As has been spectacularly emphasised by Edward Said to the global public in his *Orientalism* the ‘Orientalist discourse’ worked with such stereotypes about the Orient as timeless or old, effeminate, anarchic etc. The image of an 82-year-old Oriental fitted well into the stereotypes of the age. Moreover, Tagore, who just a few years ago looked like a middle-aged man full of strength, accepted the role of the old prophet Europe cast upon him, even if at times he felt uncomfortable in it. (Radice 2005)

After the initial reports of the Nobel Prize, Hungarian intellectuals reflect on the change in the scene of world literature initiated by Tagore's Prize.⁴ Two weeks after the announcement a leading Hungarian poet, Mihály Babits, published the prose translation of three poems from English and wrote an article about Tagore, whom – following Yeats – he compared to St. Francis of Assisi (Babits 1913). Another leading poet, Dezső Kosztolányi, without reading much from Tagore, meditated on the end of the hegemony of the European culture (Kosztolányi 1913). After the Nobel Prize the strange-sounding name of Rabindranath Tagore started to feature in Hungarian life. So much so that a way of testing drunkenness became to pronounce the poet's name: the person who was able to do it was proven not to be drunk.⁵ Soon, in 1914 Ferenc Kelen, the Hungarian translator of Schopenhauer and Oscar Wilde, produced a volume of Rabindranath's poems in Hungarian (Kelen 1914).

As we are going to see, it was not easy for Rabindranath to be detached from the aged Calcutta musicologist. Sándor Kégl (1862–1920), the Vienna-, Paris-, Oxford- and Cambridge-educated professor of Persian at the University of Budapest, wrote an article on Tagore. According to Kégl the poet's father, Mohun Rabindranath Tagore, was a “well-learned nobleman who is expert in music and who laid the scientific foundations of Indian musicology.”

Kégl's article (Kégl 1914) was produced with mixed feelings. Kégl was among the first Hungarians to acknowledge that Indian literature was produced not only in Sanskrit but also in modern languages such as Hindi, Hindustani and Bengali. According to him “Bengali literature is in such a boom that one and a half thousand works appear on it every year” (Kégl 1914: 450). Along with this he also mentioned that the English and European influence is present in the Bengali novels and that Bengalis are full of national pride. Kégl's writing shows that Bengali culture was so unknown to the Hungarian public that even one of the leading Orientalists was full of mistakes and prejudice when he wrote about it. According to Kégl, Rabindranath

⁴ The English translation of the five early responses, those of Babits, Kosztolányi, Gerő, Kégl and Karinthy, will be published in Bangha (in print a). A detailed analysis of these responses is in Bangha (in print b).

⁵ *Világ* 5 March 1914. This custom survives till the present day.

Tagore was the author of *Bande mataram*, “the Sanskrit poem which gathered entire India under one flag” (Kégl 1914: 453). Kégl recognised the meeting of East and West in Tagore, however, he was sceptical about its outcome saying that “the Eastern mind accepts Western ideas with difficulty and when it takes them, it assimilates them badly” (Kégl 1914: 452). Although he was far from enthusiastic he had to account for the Nobel Prize saying that Tagore was not a bad poet since “there is sincerity in his poetry”. Tagore’s mysticism was praised but also considered a limitation in his art,

It is obvious that he did not read European poetry in vain, yet he is following the way of his ancestors. Although it gained enrichment from the West, Tagore is strongly permeated by the spirit of old Indian poetry. He is almost completely occupied with that one strong feeling, the deepest possible for an Easterner: religious mysticism. This makes the reading of his poems tedious for a European, and they will mostly be enjoyed sporadically in anthologies. (Kégl 1914: 453)

Kégl’s last idea is puzzling at first reading. Due to their mysticism why should Tagore’s poems be best enjoyed in anthologies? This preconception of the Hungarian Islamologist is a late echo of the approach of the influential French Arabist, Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838). According to de Sacy Eastern culture cannot stand the touchstone of European taste and therefore it needs to be presented and interpreted for Westerners, and because of its vastness it can only be approached in chrestomathies (cf. Said 2003: 128–129). According to Edward Said “every major Arabist in Europe during the nineteenth century traced his intellectual authority back to him” (Said 2003: 129).

The dominant literary movement of the first half of the 20th century was the one marked with the name of the literary magazine *Nyugat* (Occident) that endeavoured to modernise Hungarian literature by taking inspiration from the best achievements of modern Western European literature. Even if the leading exponents of this movement, Babits and Kosztolányi, were enthusiastic about Tagore in their first reactions, their generation did not pay much attention to Eastern literatures; East of Hungary only Russian literature formed part of their literary horizon. The Western orientation of this powerful movement can be taken as one of the reasons responsible for the emerging negligence or antipathy towards Tagore.

The most interesting piece of the emerging Tagore-antipathy is to be found in the writing of Frigyes Karinthy, the best Hungarian literary parodist of the 20th century. Karinthy has produced excellent caricatures of the leading literary figures of his time and later collected them into the volumes of *Így írtok ti* (*This is how you write*).

In his short piece *Pályázom a Nobel-díjra* (*I am applying for the Nobel Prize*)⁶ (given in the Appendix) Karinthy produced a parody of Tagore. Although in the English translation of the *Gitanjali* there is hardly any Indian word or cultural reference, the Hungarian humorist explains the success of Tagore's poems by the exotic nature of his poetry.

3 Popularity and Amnesia between the Wars

The second and the highest wave of Tagore's popularity came shortly after the First World War. This period of his fame has been exposed to relatively more research than the preceding and the subsequent phases and I am not going to discuss it in detail. It is, however, interesting to compare the first two phases of popularity. Unlike the third wave in 1956–1961 that markedly disconnected itself from the approach in the twenties, the second peak in the early twenties remained unselfconsciously linked to the still remembered reputation of Tagore established in 1913–1914.



Photo 1: Tagore listening to Gipsy music in Budapest in 1926.

Notwithstanding the continuity, several major differences can be observed between the two phases separated from each other by war and reputation. In 1913–1914 only Tagore's Nobel Prize and poetry was commented upon – and it was mostly done by leading progressive writers. An extraordinarily high number of his books representing a wide range of genres were made available in 1921–1922 mostly by indifferent translators who saw in Tagore a business opportunity. Earlier Tagore was celebrated as a mystic writing about the human soul's search for God but in the twenties he also became a prophet, who could show the way forward to an entire

⁶ I was not able to find the first publication of this text. The reference to Tagore's recent Nobel Prize indicates that it must have been written in 1913 or early 1914. The text I consulted is from Karinthy 1921.

civilisation devastated by war. After a short phase of enthusiasm in 1913–1914 the self-assured orientalism returned to discourses about Tagore. In the twenties, a disillusionment within European culture did not allow orientalist discourse to creep in so easily. There were also a small number of writers from Hungarian territories lost in the war who found in Tagore a powerful critic of Western warmongering and imperialism. As has recently been demonstrated by Ana Jelnikar, the positive approach to Tagore of people who felt oppressed by Western Imperialism was an example of what Patrick Colm Hogan calls situational identification, “where we develop an immediate sense of intimacy with someone as we intuit shared feelings, ideas, references, [and] expectations.” (Hogan in Jelnikar 2008: 15; see also Jelnikar’s paper in this volume.)

This phase of extraordinary popularity was followed by a period of amnesia starting in the late twenties. It is however, important to mention that this amnesia also had remarkable exceptions. In 1937 Karel Čapek’s radio-broadcast *Message of Goodwill* from Czechoslovakia was addressed in Asia to Tagore and in 1942 the Polish-Jewish children’s author and pedagogue Janusz Korczak staged Tagore’s *Post Office* in the Orphan House of the Warsaw ghetto – just a few days before their evacuation to an extermination camp.

An important document of this period is Rózsa Hajnóczy’s voluminous book, the *Fire of Bengal* (1943), about her three years in Santiniketan as the wife of a visiting professor.⁷ The *Fire of Bengal* is a mixture of novel and travelogue and notwithstanding the author’s superficial acquaintance with Bengali culture the book has become the most popular Hungarian book about India and ran into eleven editions between 1943 and 1985. With a superimposed love story it gives a realistic account of the life in Santiniketan in the early 1930s. The author presents Tagore as a tired old man. The presentation of the poet as a vulnerable human figure would have been inconceivable in the 1920s. However, due to the popularity of the book this image has been presented to generations of Hungarian readers. With its sense of wonder at India, its exotic romanticism, mysticism and critique, the *Fire of Bengal* superseded Tagore’s own works in Hungarian as the most widely-read book about India.

4 Reception in the Communist Block

Another little-studied aspect of Rabindranath’s reception relates to his treatment in the Communist block after the Second World War. Right after the war there was a chance

⁷ The book has also been translated into English by Éva Wimmer and David Grant and edited by William Radice 1993.

for Tagore to emerge again as a figure that condemns European warmongering and helps people in their spiritual quest. The fact that he was included into the prestigious *Vigilia anthology of religious poetry* first published in 1947 and a booklet by Count Beatrix Széchenyi written in exile and published in 1953 hint towards this possibility:

If one studies Tagore's literary or philosophical works, in almost every chapter one finds Brahmanical or Buddhistic aspects... Not only do stars of ideas shine from Tagore's works, but also the pure wellsprings of a religious soul burst up as invincible geysers. They spring up from the depths to the heights. Those who want to bathe in these geysers gain cure for their illnesses. (Széchenyi 1953: 14)

During the first years of Indian independence (1947–1955) India was viewed with suspicion from the communist regimes. At that time the same ideas were repeated from various countries. One such idea was that India was not independent. “In 1949 Nehru declared India to remain part of the British Empire” (Makai 1952: 24) as it was declared in Budapest in 1952, while the following lines appeared in Czechoslovakia in 1953, “We firmly hope that this long-suffering and exploited nation achieves its independence... the day of the final liberation of the people of Bengal is approaching” (Blaskovics and Majumdar 1953: back cover). During these years Nehru was denounced as “the representative of the Indian high bourgeoisie” who “allied up with imperialism against the Indian workers and farmers” (Makai 1952: 23–24). The “deeply reactionary” Gandhi “glorified cow-worship and religious fanaticism and his foremost aim was to stop the strengthening of the class-consciousness of oppressed Indians” (Makai 1952: 23). The Bengali freedom-fighter Subhash Chandra Bose was none other than “one of the Japanese agents.”

There was, however, positive attitude towards the Communist Party of India and towards the Progressive Writers Association. Notwithstanding its negative dictatorial aspects it was the communist literary policy that discovered Indian realism and started translations long before the West discovered postcolonial writings. It was at this time that the first non-Tagore translations from modern Indian languages appeared. Now translations were done not simply from English or German but also from Russian and sometimes also from the original. The highly developed Indian realist writing fulfilled propagandistic purposes. They served as a more dramatic illustration of the suffering of the oppressed than contemporary Western writing could produce.

During these years Tagore was forgotten and that is why a Hungarian translation of Bengali short stories from Czechoslovakia introduces itself with the following words:

This is the first time that the Bengali nation, a nation of sixty million people, can express itself after centuries of oppression... For the first time Hungarian readers can have a work translated from Bengali and for the first time we can hear a

realistic message about the life of the Bengali people and about their fight for independence. (Blaskovics and Majumdar 1953: back cover)

The primacy of Bengali writing among the literatures of India was still asserted:

Bengali literature is beyond doubt the first among the literatures of the many modern languages of India. It is not only because of its extensiveness and technical accomplishment, which is greatly due to the elasticity and pleasing musicality of the Bengali language, but also because of the fact that Bengali poets and writers were the pioneers of Indian intelligentsia and the destroyers of the radically idealistic notion of literature and of its petrified traditions... (Blaskovics and Zbavitel 1953: 7)

Although Tagore was not translated during this period, he was not attacked as Gandhi or Nehru had been. The only voice in favour of Tagore in Hungarian translation was that of the Czech Dušan Zbavitel working in Prague:

This has already been proved by the writers and poets of the last century lead by Rabindranath Thakur, who was a fierce enemy of petrified traditions and of fascism. He was the friend of the Soviet Union, and a vociferous critic of British imperial oppression. (Blaskovics and Zbavitel 1953: 7)

In the mid-fifties, however, Soviet relationships with India underwent an unexpected change. The establishment of Indo-Soviet friendship was marked by Khrushchev's visit to India in 1955. Together with the political reconciliation came the rediscovery of Tagore as an emblematic figure of India's anti-imperialistic struggle. In the Hungary of 1956 Tagore had an outstanding career. In February a representative exhibition of modern Indian paintings included Tagore's art, in May an appreciative article was published about him in one of the leading dailies and in October a bust of his was installed and an alley was renamed after him in Balatonfüred near the sanatorium where he was recovering in 1926. The attitude established in 1956 was maintained at the Tagore centenary when Tagore, the progressive, anti-fascist writer was celebrated:

The way that Rabindranath Tagore later found viable was not the cloud-adventure of transcendentalist denial of life. He again made a commitment against colonial tyranny and threw his previously acquired knighthood down at the feet of the British. During a visit to Germany and Italy Rabindranath Tagore recognised with disgust and dread that Fascism was the greatest danger threatening mankind and leading to war. At the same time his visit to the Soviet Union made him a friend of the Soviet people... In his articles and poems he protested against Fascist aggression in Abyssinia and China... Tagore had come a long way from the Brahmanical thought to realise the only possible way for the writer, the artist to materialise his dreams about peace was only by joining the international front of people with his talent, with his enthusiasm and with the persuasive force of his art. (Franyó 1961: 8)

Some new translations of Tagore's poetry appeared presenting him as the poet of the workers. The following one is the retranslation of the Hungarian version of the *People at work* (*Orā kāj kare*)⁸:

Although their power grew enormous
Coincidence helped and later
The people cut through with united force
The dark web of colonies.

This fettered word is over for ever;
And in spite of useless rumbling of weapons
We take our people to the great perspective
Of centuries, where it will shine forth.

That never shirks — always, day and night,
For long centuries has been living on his work.
Glory to our workers! We will never
Forget how much suffering there was! (Franyó 1961: 8)⁹

Writing under strict censorship Tagore's love for freedom could also be evoked in coded messages against the hegemony of Marxist ideology:

The unquestionably pure, upright and lofty thoughts of Tagore are permeated by the idea of peace, mutual respect and understanding. He raises his ideas against blind, vindictive and partial rationalism... we should quote the words of the heroine of his novel *Gora*, 'It must not be expected that people are forced to renounce their faith, ideas, or community just in order to be together with people who are different from them'. (Csertői 1961: 5)

⁸ The original is poem Nr. 10 in *Ārogya* (*Orā kāj kare*), which came out as Nr. 121 in the English *Poems* (Tagore 1943: 204–207. The Hungarian version by Zoltán Franyó was published in *Kisalföld*, the daily of the town of Győr (4 July 1961, p. 8).

⁹ Translated into English by I. Bangha.

5 Conclusion

Tagore's reception is approximately similar in most countries of East Central Europe. In this article I tried to examine some moments of reception in Hungary in view of a broader regional context.

In 1913 Rabindranath surprised European readership as an Oriental Old Man heralding the end of Europe's cultural hegemony. The initial enthusiasm lasting only for a few months in Hungary, when leading writers wrote enthusiastically about him, gave way to perplexity and then to oblivion. In the 1920s Tagore became a prophet with a spiritual message showing hope to a civilisation immersed in materialism and drenched in blood. In the 1950s he became an anti-imperialist thinker with a progressive social message.

The fluctuations in Tagore's fame show how vulnerable the reputation of the first bestselling modern Asian poet was to European fashions and to ideologies. At the same time, the fact that Tagore's oeuvre lends itself to interpretations so different from each other shows the truly universal nature of the Indian poet's writing.

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