



First Annual Christmas Lecture 2021

Thursday, December 16, 2021

By
Rev. Fr. Dr. J. Felix Raj, S.J.



PARASMANI
Centre for Research & Social Outreach

Ratan Pally, Shantiniketan
(A Unit of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata)

First Annual Christmas Lecture

Date : 16.12.2021

:Venue :

**Parasmani
Center for Research and Social Outreach
Ratan Pally, Shantiniketan**

Programme Schedule

11 : 30 a.m. : Emcee welcomes the guests

11 : 35 a.m. : Rabindrasangeet and Lighting of the Lamp

11 : 40 a.m. : Short Introduction about Parasmani
by Rev. Dr. Mourlin Fernando

11 : 50 a.m. : Talk on “**Christ in the Eyes of Tagore**”
by Rev. Fr. Dr. J. Felix Raj, S.J.

12 : 20 p.m. : Q/A Session

12 : 30 p.m. : Brainstorming Session on Parasmani

12 : 50 p.m. : Vote of Thanks

12 : 55 p.m. : Closing Rabindrasangeet

JESUS CHRIST IN THE EYES OF TAGORE

1860s – A Decade of Historical Moments

- SXCK started its journey in 1860
- Tagore was born in 1861
- Brahmabandhav Upadhyay in 1861
- Swami Vivekananda in 1863
- William Butler Yeats in 1865 (Tagore's friend for 25 years)
- Bramachari Rewachand Animananda in 1868
- Gandhi in 1869

Tagore at St. Xavier's

Tagore was admitted to St. Xavier's School, Kolkata at the age of 14 in 1875. He studied here until April 1876. He was uncomfortable with formal schooling and so left the school after a short while. His short period at Xavier's left a deep impression on him. The person who seems to have had the greatest impact on young Tagore was a Jesuit Father, Alfonso de Penaranda, who was a Spanish Jesuit.

Thirty-six years later, at the age of fifty, Tagore remembered his stint at SX due to one particular person and an insignificant event. He himself has acknowledged it in his autobiography:

One precious memory of St. Xavier's I still hold fresh and pure ... this is the memory of Father De Peneranda. He had very little to do with us – if I remember right he had only for a while taken the place of one of the masters of our class. He was a Spaniard and seemed to have an impediment in speaking English. It was perhaps for this reason that the boys paid but little heed to what he was saying. It seemed to me this inattentiveness of his pupils hurt him, but he bore it meekly day after day. I know not why but my heart went out to him in sympathy. His features were not handsome, but his countenance had for me a strange attraction. Whenever I looked on him, his spirit seemed to be in prayer, a deep peace seemed to pervade him within and without.

We had half an hour for writing our copybooks; that was a time when, pen in hand, I used to become absent-minded and my thought wandered hither and thither. One day, Father De Peneranda was in charge of this class. He was pacing up and down behind our benches. He must have noticed more than once that my pen was not moving. All of a sudden he stopped behind my seat. Bending over me he gently laid his hand on my shoulder and tenderly enquired: 'Are you not well, Tagore?' It was only a simple question, but one I have never been able to forget." (Tagore Rabindranath: *My Reminiscences*, Translated by Surendranath Tagore (1917) London: Macmillan, 1933)

On the occasion of the sesquicentenary of SXC in 2010, the Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh visited St. Xavier's. He was presented a painting about the above event in the life of Tagore. The painting was done by Mr. Paresh Maity, and sponsored by the Ananda Bazar Patrika.

The painting shows Rabindranath in his boyhood days, a compassionate hand touching him, the face of Fr. De Peneranda. This is set against the fully-grown profile of the face of Rabindranath, reminiscing the memory of the above event. There is also a suggestion of classroom benches and desks into which the boy Rabindranath seems to almost dissolve, indicating perhaps his 'absent mindedness'. The paper boats suggest perhaps the wandering thoughts of Rabindranath. The merging of the grown up face of Tagore and the face of Fr. De Peneranda probably indicates how deeply Rabindranath was touched by this simple gesture.

In 1927, at the age of 66, he agreed to a request to serve as patron and Vice-President of the St. Xavier's School Alumni Association, and even autographed his photo 'with tears in his eyes'. He also presented to St. Xavier's a white marble bust of Jesus Christ which is still preserved in the Principal's Office. He had brought this bust from Germany from one of his visits.

It is believed that Tagore's faith in God, his understanding and his relation to God as Father, and his deep respect for Jesus Christ were all influenced by what he imbibed at St. Xavier's from the Jesuit Fathers.

I want to raise three issues here for an ongoing reflection amongst us.

- 1) One can be an extraordinary performer in the theatre of the world even without formal schooling, like Tagore was;
- 2) There needs to be sufficient amount of informality, and room for praxis – reflection and application in our curriculum/ syllabi to bring out the best in students in our educational institutions; and
- 3) Some people, like the Jesuit Father Peneranda, and later Tagore himself, are perhaps the best teachers of the text called life.

What is the type of relationship that exists today between teachers and students in our schools, colleges and universities? How much influence do we exercise upon them?

The beginnings of Visva Bharati University (Santiniketan) :

Visva Bharati is a Central University of national importance. Tagore founded it in 1921 and called it Visva Bharati, which means the 'communion of the world with India'. Tagore was not comfortable with the word 'University', since it translates to 'Visva Vidyalaya', which is smaller in scope than Visva Bharati. It was a college until 1950 after which it was upgraded and renamed as Visva Bharati University.

What were the beginnings of this great university ?

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay and his friend, Brahmachari Rewachand Animananda founded the Sarasvata-Ayatana in the tradition of the Vedasat Shimla Street (Swami Vivekananda's birthplace), Calcutta in 1900. Their idea was to revive the ancient ideal of 'acharya' and "shishya". There were twelve boys with Animananda as their teacher. The boys sat on mats. They paid no fees; the teacher received no salary; knowledge could not be purchased.

One morning, Rabindranath Tagore, who was then hailed by Upadhyay as the 'World Poet of Bengal', visited the new school and Upadhyay himself received the honoured guest. Tagore was highly pleased with the school. Later Upadhyay visited Santiniketan on Tagore's invitation. The vast fields, huge Sal trees and the quiet abode captivated him.

At Tagore's request, Upadhyay, who addressed Tagore as GURUDEV, decided to shift the school at Shimla Street to Santiniketan to set up an ashram, with Animananda as the teacher. Tagore, known

as Rabi Babu, himself received Animananda and his twelve boys at Bolpur in December 1901. Tagore's two sons, Rathindranath and Samindranath joined the other boys.

Animananda did not like the idea of going to Bolpur, as that would mean missing his daily Mass, which he prized above the whole world. However, on Upadhyay's insistence, he agreed on condition that he would be allowed to come down to Calcutta, every Sunday, to attend Holy Mass. The generous welcome of the poet, and the free atmosphere which he created, removed all hesitancy and Animananda put his heart and soul into the work.

That was the beginning of today's Visva Bharati, Santiniketan. This wonderful collaboration of a poet and a philosopher was not meant to last. Brahmabandhab's political sentiments proved too strong to allow him to remain for long. In addition, his and Animananda's connection with the school at Santiniketan ceased about a year after its commencement.

Jesus Christ and Rabindranath Tagore

Jesus and Tagore have many things in common. They were great spiritual leaders and teachers of their time and continue to be. They have had significant impact on people and the world.

They had similar visions, similar ideas and teachings. There are volumes of publications associated with them. The two books that have made them what they are today are the New Testament (Bible) and Gitanjali respectively. The NT is prose and the Gitanjali, poetry.

If you read the Tamil Yesu Kaviyam (Jesus Epic), a traditional epic on the life of Jesus Christ by the poet Kannadasan, you will find it to be very similar to Gitanjali (Song Offerings).

Let me focus on Tagore's writings on Jesus. He has written a considerable amount on Jesus Christ and has made numerous references in his speeches and writings to Christ and, also to Christianity.

1. That the Birth of Jesus made a deep impression on Tagore is evident from his poem, 'The Child'. It is the only major poem by Tagore in English. It was written in July 1930 when he visited the village of Oberammergau in Munich, Germany to watch the traditional passion play.

The poem is in ten sections and the actions pause and heave like the eternal waves of the sea. The poem blends the cultural contexts of the East and the West, of impressionistic descriptions and profound prophecies.

He later translated it into Bengali as Sisutirtho (Pilgrimage to Childhood) in Punashca where he hails the Birth of Jesus Christ. This impression on Tagore's mind is further borne out by his translation of Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' (TirthoJatri) in search of the Divine Infant. Tagore had confessed to having liked Eliot's poem. The obvious reason being that the scene of the Nativity seems to have deeply moved him.

The Child

Sections 9 & 10:

The first flush of dawn glistens on the dew-dripping leaves of the forest.

The man who reads the sky cries:

'Friends, we have come!'

They stop and look around.

On both sides of the road the corn is ripe to the horizon,

The glad golden answer of the earth to the morning light.

The current of daily life moves slowly

between the village near the hill and the one by the riverbank.

The potter's wheel goes round; the woodcutter brings fuel to the market,

the cowherd takes his cattle to the pasture,

and the woman with the pitcher on her head walk to the well.

But where is the King's castle, the mine of gold,

the secret book of magic,

the sage who knows love's utter wisdom?

'The stars cannot be wrong,' assures the reader of the sky.

'Their signal points to that spot.'

And reverently he walks to a wayside spring

from which wells up a stream of water, a liquid light,

like the morning melting into a chorus of tears and laughter

Near it in a palm grove surrounded by a strange hush stands a leaf-thatched hut

at whose portal sits the poet of the unknown shore, and sings:
 'Mother, open the gate!'
 A ray of morning sun strikes aslant at the door.
 The assembled crowd feels in their blood the primeval chant
 of creation:
 "Mother, open the gate!"
 The gate opens.
 The mother is seated on a straw bed with the babe on her lap,
 Like the dawn with the morning star.
 The sun's ray that was waiting at the door outside falls on the
 head of the child.
 The poet strikes his lute and sings out:
 'Victory to Man, the new-born, the ever-living!'
 They kneel down, — the king and the beggar, the saint and the
 sinner,
 the wise and the fool, — and cry:
 'Victory to Man, the New-Born, the Ever-Living!'
 The old man from the East murmurs to himself:
 'I have seen!'

[<https://www.tagoreweb.in/Verses/the-child-201/the-first-flush-of-dawn-3852>]

2. Tagore wrote a poem on Jesus Christ on Christmas day in 1939. The English translation goes like this (by Sreechandra Banerjee):

One day those who killed him,
 In the name of the King
 They have come back as devotees in the temples,
 Assailant calls the soldier
 'Kill him, Kill him', yells,
 The yell mixes with prayer hymns
 Says he is in great pain,
 This cup is full of poison,
 Throw it away.

Tagore wrote these lines during the period of his long illness at the age of 78, and as he was nearing his death. The poetry he wrote in

these years is among his finest, and is distinctive for his preoccupation with death. Probably he contemplated on the suffering and death of Jesus whom he loved deeply.

3. Let us have a glimpse of their understanding of God. Jesus addressed God as Father and taught His disciples to call God as Father.

One such example is 'The Jesus' Prayer (Mathew 6:8-13)

Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. So you should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,
 Hallowed be your name.
 Your kingdom come,
 Your will be done on earth
 As it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 And forgive us our debts,
 As we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from evil.
 Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours.

Tagore also describes God as Father, Master and Lord and offered Him his beautiful prayer songs. Tagore's prayers go like this: Gitanjali 35 and 36:

G. 35: Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high.....
 Into the heaven of freedom my Father let my country awake.

G. 36: This is my prayer to thee, my lord - strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart.

Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.
 Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.
 Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might-

Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love.

4. Jesus and Tagore were leaders of counter-culture, bold and very vocal. Jesus preached :God does not dwell only in Churches and Temples; He is right there in the midst of His people.

‘So when you are offering your gift at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go first make peace with your brother, and then come back and present your gift’ (Mat.5:23) Or

‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’ (Mat.25:40). Or

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind. This is the first and greatest commandment’.

And the second part of it is like :

‘Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments’ (Mat.22:36-40).

Tagore has a similar message in Gitanjali No. 11:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?

Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!

He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground
and where the path maker is breaking stones...

Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense!

What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?

Meet him and stand by him in toil and in sweat of thy brow.

5. For Jesus and Tagore, God was a generous Giver and a Lover of the poor. Let us consider a few examples.

While preaching about Divine Providence, Jesus said:

‘I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and what you are to wear...Look at the birds. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them... Think of the flowers growing in the fields; they never have to work or spin...not even Solomon in his entire royal robes was clothed like one of these ... Now if that is how God clothes the wild flowers...will he not much more look after you...Your heavenly Father knows you need them all’ (Mat. 6:25-33).

Gitanjali No. 1 brings out Tagore’s experience of a generous and caring God:

Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure.

This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again,
and fillest it ever with fresh life.

This little flute of a reed thou hast carried over hills and dales
and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new.

At the immortal touch of thy hands

my little heart loses its limits in joy
and gives birth to utterance ineffable.

Thy infinite gifts come to me only on these very small hands of mine.

Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill.

In his sermon on the mount, we see the teachings of Jesus about God’s love for the poor:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’.

For Tagore God is a Master Musician and a Singer. He takes delight in singing His praises. His songs bring out the deep union he has had with the Divine Master. Look at the following song where he addresses God as his friend:

Gitanjali 2:

‘When thou commandest me to sing
it seems that my heart would break with pride;
and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes.
All that is harsh and dissonant in my life
melts into one sweet harmony—
and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across
the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing.

I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song
thy feet which I could never aspire to reach.

Drunk with the joy of singing

I forget myself and call thee friend who art my lord’ (Gitanjali: 2)

Tagore sings of the manifold gifts of God in Gitanjali No. 14:

‘... Day by day thou art making me worthy of the simple, great gifts
that thou gavest to me unasked

this sky and the light, this body and the life and the mind
saving me from perils of over much desire.

...Day by day thou art making me worthy of thy full acceptance
by refusing me ever and anon,

Saving me from perils of weak, uncertain desire’.

6. Jesus preached with authority. While announcing God’s Kingdom, He also denounced evil. He preached against unjust practices, spoke against the leaders - Scribes and Pharisees as fools, hypocrites. — He preached to the people:

‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach’” (Mat.23:1-3).

‘... the hour is coming when you will worship the Father
neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...The true
worshippers
will worship the Father in spirit and truth; that is the kind of
worshipper
the Father seeks. God is spirit and those who worship
must worship in spirit and truth’ (John 4:21-24)

In the same way, Tagore was critical of certain aspects and superstitious practices of his own society:

‘Our country is the land of rites and rituals, so that we have more faith in worshipping the feet of the priest than the divinity he serves... From the solemn gloom of the temple, children run out to play in the dust, God watches them play and forgets the temple...’

In 1908, Tagore wrote, ‘Patriotism can’t be our final spiritual shelter. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live’.

He remained deeply critical of nationalism, a position that pitted him against Mahatma Gandhi.

“I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than country. To worship my country as a god is to bring curse upon it,” Tagore wrote in his 1916 novel, *The Home and the World*.

Tagore had warned Gandhi that there remained a thin line that divided nationalism and xenophobia. Tagore and Gandhi met in July 1921 at his home in Calcutta, where the two had a long and argumentative conversation about what Tagore described as the ‘bondage of nationalism’.

In the then influential Calcutta journal, *Modern Review*, Tagore wrote about an international desire to ‘achieve the unity of man by destroying the bondage of nationalism in order to achieve the unity of man’.

[\[https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/national-anthem-flag-in-theatre-rabindranath-tagore-supreme-court-4406145/\]](https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/national-anthem-flag-in-theatre-rabindranath-tagore-supreme-court-4406145/)

India, he argued, didn’t have a ‘real sense’ of nationalism and noted that ““even though from childhood I had been taught that

the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity'".

Other writings of Tagore

In May 1933, Tagore wrote to Mahatma Gandhi, '...In every important act of his life Buddha preached limitless love for all creatures. Christ said "Love thy enemies"' and that teaching of his found its final expression in the words of forgiveness he uttered for those who killed him...'

In 1937, E.J. Thompson was writing a book about Buddhism and wrote to Tagore, 'To me it is increasingly clear that what the world needs is to take both Buddha's and Christ's teachings... The subtle and many-colored beauty of your own wonderful life interprets their teachings, and I am glad that I have known you'.

Tagore replied in his letter of the same year, '.... I agree with you that both Christ and Buddha embodied in their lives the only true principles that can work for men's common good; Buddha's insistence on the renunciation of greed creates the necessary condition of the mind in which the love of others ceases to conflict with one's own good.

Do you know I have often felt that if we were not Hindus...I should like my people to be Christians? Indeed, it is a great pity that Europeans have come to us as imperialists rather than as Christians and so have deprived our people of their true contact with the religion of Jesus Christ...What a mental torture it is to know that men are capable of loving each other and adding to one another's joy, and yet would not!"

The spiritual depth and universal vision of a first century Teacher and Master are seen echoing in the verses of a twentieth century poet. Tagore's writings reflect Jesus' teachings.



Rev. Dr. J. Felix Raj, S.J.

A Short Profile of Father Felix Raj

Father Dr. John Felix Raj, SJ is a Jesuit priest in Kolkata. He is the Founder Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Economics at St. Xavier's University, Kolkata.

He was the Rector (1996 – 2002) and Principal (2009 – 2017) of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata.

During his tenure as the Principal of St. Xavier's College, Father Raj had initiated a rural campus of St. Xavier's College, in Raghobpur (25 KM from the city of Kolkata) in South 24 Parganas in 2014.

Under Father's committed leadership and democratic governance, St. Xavier's College, Kolkata secured the highest score of 3.77 CGPA out of 4 in the NAAC accreditation declared on 24 January 2017.

His initiative, "College to Village and Village to College" at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata is a novel effort in education. He has also introduced this project at St. Xavier's University, Kolkata.

Father Felix Raj is the recipient of 14 awards including Banga Bibhusan and Siksha Ratna awards from the Government of West Bengal, Nihil Ultra award from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata and Xavier Ratna award from Xavier Institute of Engineering, Mumbai.

Father Felix Raj is a prolific writer, and has authored and co-authored ten books and has written numerous articles in journals, magazines and newspapers.