

# **Rabindranath Tagore's Syncretistic Philosophy and the Persian Sufi Tradition\***

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## **Preface**

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) has been praised by a number of Bengali Muslim authors for his sympathetic portrayal of Islamic concepts and ideals, and it is well known that some of his works of prose and verse were influenced by Persian poetry and Sufism. Tagore's father knew Persian and could recite the poetry of Ḥāfīz (d. 1389) by heart. Tagore himself was also deeply influenced by the Persian classical poet. In the last decade of his life, Tagore described his admiration for the great Persian Sufi poets, visiting the tombs of Ḥāfīz and Sa'dī in Shiraz.

In this essay, I will discuss the spiritual milieu of the Persianate culture of nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal in an attempt to shed light on the extent of the influence of Persian Sufi ideas on this milieu in general and Tagore in particular. Attention will also be given to other aspects of Tagore's religious syncretism: Bāul mysticism and its lyric poetry, Sahaja Buddhism, Vedanta philosophy, the Upanishads and a few other currents of Eastern thought. Lastly, I will explore Tagore's relationship with Persian Sufi concepts and poetry and discuss the effect of his visit to Iran and his encounter with the poet Ḥāfīz.

## **I. Introduction: Tagore's Literary and Spiritual Milieu**

Tagore was born into a rich and vibrant intellectual and spiritual environment in the bosom of a remarkably talented family. His grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) was a wealthy landowner known as the 'Prince', who had consorted with writers in London of the likes of Charles Dickens, had audience with the Queen, met the distinguished orientalist Max Müller in Paris, and was known for his love of art and

literature.<sup>1</sup> In turn, Tagore's father Debendranāth Tagore (1817-1905) was an outstanding personality and religious philosopher, so deeply versed in the Upanishads that he was known as the 'Saint' (Maharishi). When Debendranāth's autobiography was translated into English and published in London in 1914, the great historian of mysticism Evelyn Underhill<sup>2</sup> praised the book in her introduction as being of the same calibre as "The few classic autobiographies bequeathed to us by certain of the mystics and saints: Suso, Madame Guyon, even the great St Teresa herself. It is essentially of the same class as the *Testament* of Ignatius Loyola, the *Journal* of George Fox."<sup>3</sup>

Despite his aristocratic upbringing and hereditary wealth, Debendranāth Tagore's primary interests were mystical and metaphysical. He later became the main missionary responsible for the development of the ideas of the Bhāhmo Samāj Hindu Unitarian reform movement founded by the social critic, author, diplomat and reformer Rammohun Roy (1772-1833).<sup>4</sup> Although the main focus of this essay is the influence of the Persian Sufi tradition on Tagore, a word about Roy will be relevant here.

Born into an orthodox Brahman family, Roy was the leading reformist leader of Bengal, and indeed, the whole of Hindu India, in the early nineteenth century. From early childhood he was sent to a Muslim madrasa in Patna to be educated in Arabic and Persian, where he gained a perfect mastery of both languages and became versed in Muslim scholastic theology (*kalām*), Qur'ānic exegesis, jurisprudence, Islamic philosophy and classical Persian poetry.<sup>5</sup> He wrote tracts criticizing Hindu polytheism and idolatry from an Islamic viewpoint. He even dressed like a Muslim and observed

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<sup>1</sup> Subrata Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore* (Dehli: Permanent Black 2007), 201. See also Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *Rabindranath Tagore, I Won't Let You Go: Selected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books 2010), 29.

<sup>2</sup> *The Autobiography of Maharishi Devendranath Tagore*, trans. Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi (London: Macmillan & Co.: 1914).

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography of Maharishi Devendranath Tagore*, p. ix.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. Hopkins, "Bhāhmo Samāj," in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995), vol. 2, pp. 299-300. See also Dusan Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature* (A History of Indian Literature IX/3; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1976), pp. 213, 247; Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabhat Candra Ganguli, (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj 1900; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1960), p. 511.

<sup>5</sup> Reeta Bagchi, *Vision of Raja Rammohun Roy* (New Dehli: Kanishka Publishers 2004), chap. 3.

Islamic etiquette in both his private and public life.<sup>6</sup> Being deeply impressed by the tolerance of Sufism and the ecumenical vision of the Persian Sufi poets, he composed Persian poetry and prose, and often quoted Persian poets, especially Ḥāfiz, to great effect in his Persian writings. He founded and published the first Persian newspaper in Bengal, a weekly called the ‘Mirror of News’ (*Mir’āt al-akhbār*).<sup>7</sup> When the newspaper closed, the final issue featured two verses by Ḥāfiz.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that while Roy’s first published writing was in Persian, one of the main literary languages of the day, such cosmopolitan erudition was entirely typical of the Persianate culture in which all of the Bengali elite of the era were steeped.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he wrote nothing in his mother tongue Bengali – or Sanskrit or Hindi, for that matter – until twelve years after he had carried on with his Persian writings.<sup>10</sup>

In his late teens, he travelled to Benares where he learned Sanskrit thoroughly and studied the Vedas. He then spent several years in Tibet in the company of the followers of the living Dalai Lama,<sup>11</sup> absorbed in the study of the Vedanta, the Upanishads, and Tantric Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> In his mid-twenties he devoted himself to learning English, eventually gaining employment in the Civil Service of the East India Company in Bengal in 1817.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in his fifties he retired from business and devoted himself to scholarly, literary, and spiritual pursuits, voicing the wish to spend the rest of his life in retirement, studying the Vedanta and Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*.<sup>14</sup> The basic tenets of Roy’s attitude towards religious diversity in the Brāhmo Samāj movement which he founded at this time have been summed up by Sophia Dobson Collet as follows:

<sup>6</sup> Bagchi, *Vision of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, 183. However, he was forced to stop publishing it in 1823 due to British censorship, so that it lasted only 16 months.

<sup>8</sup> *Dīwān-i Khwāja Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiz*, ed. Parvīz Nātil Khānlārī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Khawārazmī 1359 A.Hsh./1980), *ghazal* 278: 9. An English translation of the Persian closing notice is reproduced in Collet, *Life and Letters*, 455-56.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Prof. Thibaut d’Hubert (University of Chicago), who read an earlier version of this essay, for pointing this out to me. See his “La réception d’un succès littéraire persan dans les campagnes du Bengale: une traduction de Jāmī par le poète Ābdul Hakīm,” *Bulletin d’Études Indiennes*, No. 24-25 (2006-2007), 121-38 (121). The impact of Persianate culture upon the multicultural milieu of Bengal in this period is discussed in more detail below in part II.

<sup>10</sup> Bagchi, *Vision of Raja Rammohun Roy*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Mojibur Rahman, “Raja Rammohun Roy,” *Indo-Iranica*, XXXII/3-4 (1979), 37.

<sup>12</sup> A good overview of Roy’s various religious positions can be found in F. Bhatatcharya, *Les intellectuels Bengalis et l’impérialisme britannique* (Paris: Collège de France, Publications de l’Institut de civilisation indienne, fasc. 78: 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Dilip Kumar Biswas and Prabhat Candra Ganguli, (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahma Samaj 1900; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1960), 23

<sup>14</sup> Baboo Kissory Chand Mitter, “Rammohun Roy,” in idem., *Rammohun Roy and Tuhfatul Muwahhiddin* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co. 1975), 15.

As a result of his study of different religious systems Rammohun had gradually lost faith in all crude outward forms of popular worship and had reached the conviction that the *essence* of all religions, worth the name, was the same. This for him, consisted of faith in one God and service to humanity.<sup>15</sup>

The influence of Roy on Tagore's religious ideas would require a separate study but suffice it to say that the Bengali poet venerated Roy, believing him to have been "the only person in his time, in the whole world of man, to realise the significance of the Modern Age."<sup>16</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore, the youngest of the family, grew up among thirteen siblings (having seven brothers and five sisters), many of whom were quite gifted in their own right, becoming distinguished poets, novelists, and musicians themselves.<sup>17</sup> Tagore later would recall in his *Reminiscences* that he grew up in a family where there was an overabundance of poetry.<sup>18</sup> From a young age he immersed himself in English romantic poetry, particularly Byron, Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, and was also a great admirer of the two great American transcendental writers, the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson and the poet Walt Whitman, both of whom exercised a formative influence on his thought and verse.<sup>19</sup> As a writer, Tagore belonged to the generation of the late Victorian poets Tennyson, Browning and Robert Bridges, and largely shared their literary style.

During Tagore's childhood, the men and women of learning in Bengal were obsessed with spiritual issues. Spirituality and metaphysical debates permeated the literary culture of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Calcutta.<sup>20</sup> Questions concerning God, the afterlife, ritual observances, the meaning of faith and the relationship of reason to revelation were the focus of debate in intellectual circles. In Tagore's early twenties, the ecstatic mystic Śri Ramakrishna was all the rage of the Calcutta élite. When the latter's disciple Swami Vivekananda, came back from a triumphant lecture tour of America, France and England, Tagore was present at the ceremony welcoming his return to

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<sup>15</sup> Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, 245.

<sup>16</sup> Rahman, "Raja Rammohun Roy," 44. For an overview of Roy's impact locally on Bengal and internationally on major social and literary movements and thinkers in Europe and the United States, see Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance*, chap. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance*, 202.

<sup>18</sup> Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance*, 202.

<sup>19</sup> V.A. Shahane, "Rabindranath Tagore: A Study in Romanticism," *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1963), 53-64; and idem., "Rabindranath Tagore and the Romantic Tradition, in T.R. Sharma (ed.), *Essays on Rabindranath Tagore in Honour of D.M. Gupta* (Ramnagar, Ghaziabad [India]: Vimal Prakashan 1987), 65-77.

<sup>20</sup> William Radice, "Atheists, Gurus and Fanatics: Rabindranath Tagore's 'Chaturanga' (1916)" *Modern Asian Studies* 34, 2 (2000), 409.

Bengal.<sup>21</sup>

Although it is clear that although Tagore was not himself as thoroughly involved in mystical practice and contemplation as Vivekananda or his own father, he was far from being a secular intellectual basking in the pleasures of the mind at the expense of the raptures of the spirit. He maintained regular exercises of meditation and his prose and verse were steeped in mystical sentiments and metaphysical disquisitions. In his introduction to *Gitanjali*, his friend the Irish poet W.B. Yeats, records how “every morning at three—I know, for I have seen it—he sits immovable in contemplation, and for two hours does not awake from his reverie upon the nature of God.”<sup>22</sup> In *Sadhana: The Realization of Life*, Tagore acknowledges his debt to the spiritual practice of daily worship that was part of his upbringing.<sup>23</sup> In a letter written in 1921 to Rev. Charles Andrews (1871-1940), one of his closest friends, Tagore confirms the importance of meditation in his life:

I am by nature impatient, anxious and often fretful and therefore I never wish to miss the daily opportunity of coming into touch with the Truth which is Peace. It has saved me so long from utter breakdown, from the tyranny of the insignificant, from the fetters of the fragmentary. The load of the immediate needs and the distractions of the miscellaneous at once lose their weight when you bring them to the Eternal. ...I believe in *yoga*, not only for attaining spiritual truth but for keeping up the equilibrium of life that helps our energy to sustain its rhythm which is the harmony of work and rest. Yoga is the transmutation of our dynamic self into static peace for some time, in order to create that lucid serenity which is the mirror of the Eternal.<sup>24</sup>

Tagore himself was in every sense a ‘Renaissance man’. He was not only a poet and dramatist, but a philosopher, painter, musician, composer and songwriter. He composed more than two and a half thousand songs<sup>25</sup> and is today celebrated above all as the author of the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh. Indeed he was the main

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<sup>21</sup> Radice, “Atheists, Gurus and Fanatics,” 414, 421.

<sup>22</sup> *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* (London 1913), p. x. Cited by Shahane, “Rabindranath Tagore: A Study in Romanticism,” pp. 62-63.

<sup>23</sup> This is proven by the opening lines from his preface to *Sadhana*: “Perhaps it is well for me to explain that the subject-matter of the papers published in this book has not been philosophically treated, nor has it been approached from the scholar’s point of view. The writer has been brought up in a family where texts of the Upanishads are used in daily worship; and he has had before him the example of his father, who lived his long life in the closest communion with God, while not neglecting his duties to the world, or allowing his keen interest in all human affairs to suffer any abatement.” Also cf. W.S. Ugruhart, “The Philosophical Inheritance of Rabindranath Tagore,” *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1916), 398-413

<sup>24</sup> Cited by P.C. Chaudhury, *C.F. Andrews: His Life and Times* (Bombay: Somaiya Publications Ltd. 1971), 28.

<sup>25</sup> Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (London: Picador 1997), 385.

‘Renaissance man’ behind the ‘Bengali Renaissance’ that took place during the last decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> Speaking of Tagore’s impact on early twentieth-century Bengal, Ezra Pound’s hyperbolic praise, penned in 1912, expressed this truth succinctly:

Bengal is a nation of fifty million people. The great age of Bengali literature is this age in which we live. And the first Bengali whom I heard singing the lyrics of Tagore said, as simply as one would say it is four o’clock, “Yes, we speak of it as the Age of Rabindranath.”<sup>27</sup>

Tagore’s creative genius, which one scholar has characterized as being one of “multidisciplinary creativity,”<sup>28</sup> did not recognize any boundaries, whether those of the mundane constraints of academic disciplines or religious distinctions of denominations and sects; he constantly condemned narrow-mindedness in all its manifestations:

The sectarian thinks  
That he has the sea  
Ladled into his private pond.<sup>29</sup>

As a playwright, novelist and poet, Tagore dominated the Bengali literary stage for more than fifty years, from the last decade of the nineteenth century to his death in 1941.<sup>30</sup> Between his Bengali and English verse, he figures as one of the most prolific poets of his land, his output as a poet and dramatist exceeding 150,000 lines, although he was almost equally important in Bengal as a social reformer, political activist, university chancellor, dramatist, novelist, philosopher, mystic...

In the West, his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his spiritual lyrical poem called *Gitanjali* – ‘Song Offerings’, translated into English by himself from the original Bengali (with a little help from W.B. Yeats)—secured his place in the most successful writer in the history of his country. Having become the first member of any Asian nation to win the Nobel Award, Tagore consequently became the most famous literary name outside the Western world.<sup>31</sup> Some of the greatest intellectuals, scientists and men of letters of the West, including W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Romain Rolland,

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<sup>26</sup> Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance*, chap. 8, section v.

<sup>27</sup> Ezra Pound, “Tagore’s Poems,” *Poetry* (Vol. 1, No. 3 (Dec. 1912), 92.

<sup>28</sup> Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance*, 214.

<sup>29</sup> Tagore, *Fireflies* (New York: Macmillan 1928), p. 209. Cited by Donald Tuck, “The Religious Motif in the Poetry of Rabindranath Tagore” *Numen*, Vol. 22, Fasc. 2 (1974), 98.

<sup>30</sup> Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature*, 246.

<sup>31</sup> Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature*, 261.

Stefan Zweig, Bertold Brecht, and Count Hermann Keyserling feted and celebrated his work. He influenced some of Europe's greatest poets, including Juan Ramón Jiménez<sup>32</sup> and, to a lesser extent, Rainer Maria Rilke.<sup>33</sup>

*Gitanjali* was translated into French (by Andre Gide), Swedish, Dutch, Spanish (by Jiménez), German and Danish, and went into numerous editions over the ensuing years.<sup>34</sup> Ezra Pound remarked in a review of Tagore's poetry that "the appearance of the poems of Rabindranath Tagore, translated by himself from Bengali into English," as "an event in the history of English poetry and world poetry... He teaches his songs and they are sung in Bengal more or less as the troubadours' songs were sung in Europe in the twelfth century. And we feel here in London, I think, much as the people in Petrarch's time must have felt about the mysterious lost language, the Greek that was just being restored to Europe after centuries of deprivation."<sup>35</sup> In a speech given at a dinner in London in honour of Tagore in 1912, W.B. Yeats observed that "To take part in honoring Mr. Rabindra Nath Tagore is one of the great events in my artistic life. I know of no man in my time who has done anything in the English language to equal these lyrics."<sup>36</sup>

## II. Islam, Persian Literature and Poetry in Tagore's Bengal

The sources of Tagore's religious and spiritual thought are multifaceted, varying from Hindu Vaiṣṇava traditions<sup>37</sup> to the reformist Brāhmo Samāj movement, as well as native Bengali mystical teachings such as those of the Bāuls, and Unitarian Christianity, along with various Western literary, philosophical and religious traditions and doctrines. Although Persian Sufi ideas constitute a significant feature of Tagore's philosophical and mystical thought, these aspects are generally disregarded by critics of his writings. Nonetheless, during his lifetime, which was riven by sectarian struggles between

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<sup>32</sup> R. Johnson, "Juan Ramon Jimenez, Rabindranath Tagore, and 'La Poesia Desnuda'," *the Modern Language Review*, vol. 60, No. 4 (1965), 534-46; Graciela P. Nemes, "Of Tagore and Jimenez," *Books Abroad*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1961), 319-323

<sup>33</sup> See Martin Kämpchen, "Rabindranath Tagore in Germany," at: <http://www.parabaas.com/rabindranath/articles/pMartin1.html> (accessed July 10, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Uma Das Gupta, *Ravindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Oxford: OUP 2004), 64.

<sup>35</sup> Ezra Pound, "Tagore's Poems," *Poetry* (Vol. 1, No. 3 (Dec. 1912), 92-93. Of course, as is well known, Pound later adopted a highly critical opinion of Tagore's worth as a poet, on which see Harold M. Hurwitz, "Ezra Pound and Rabindranath Tagore." *American Literature*. Vol. 14, No. 3 (1962), 53-63.

<sup>36</sup> Harold M. Hurwitz, "Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore." *Comparative Literature*. Vol. 16, No. 1 (1964), 57.

<sup>37</sup> See R.N. Dandekar, "Vaiṣṇavism," in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995), vol. 15: 168-71.

Muslims and Hindus, Tagore rose above all this to ever gain the admiration of Muslim writers in Bengal. Among these can be mentioned the popular poet Golam Mostafa (1897-1964), who in a 1922 article about Tagore, commented:

There are great similarities in contents and ideals of what poet-emperor Rabindranath has expressed in his lyrics. Any Muslim can accept these concepts without hesitation. No other poet of Bengali language has ever uttered these expressions of Muslim heart. ...We did not find any hostility towards Islam in the vast literature produced by Tagore. On the contrary, there is so much of Islamic content and ideals in his writings that he can be called a Muslim without hesitation. It is not too much to say that the concepts of idolatry, pluralism, atheism, re-incarnation, renunciation, etc., which are considered as totally opposed to Islam, are also non-existent in his writings.<sup>38</sup>

Commenting on Tagore's ecumenical reach, another Bengali Muslim scholar declared that he "was the only prominent political or literary personality of the region who conscientiously kept supreme impartiality in conflicts that pitted Hindu and Muslim communities against each other in Bengal."<sup>39</sup>

Islam is represented in many of Tagore's prose writings, and in some of his short stories, Muslims figure as their lead characters.<sup>40</sup> Given that Tagore was not raised as an orthodox Hindu but as a member of Roy's Brāhmo Samāj Unitarian church that had been influenced by Sufism and that the majority of the people in Bengal were Muslims before the establishment of Pakistan, it would seem that his ecumenism and universalism led him to tend to portray the Muslim characters in his novels, plays and poems in a favourable light.<sup>41</sup> The impact of Islamic thought in general and the Persian Sufi tradition in particular on Tagore was significant. But in order to understand just how important it was, it will be necessary first to outline the history of the Persian language and literature in Bengal up to his time, before addressing the topic of how ideas drawn from the Persian Sufi tradition influenced his religious syncretism.

With Persian having been its main literary language over the centuries, Bengal was

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<sup>38</sup> Cited by Mahmud Shah Qureshi, "Literary Assessments of Tagore by Bengali Muslim Writers and Intellectuals," in Kathleen M. O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell (eds.), *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon* (Visva-Bharati: Kumkum Bhattacharya 2009), 396.

<sup>39</sup> Mahmud Shah Qureshi, "Literary Assessments of Tagore by Bengali Muslim Writers and Intellectuals," 391.

<sup>40</sup> Qureshi, "Literary Assessments of Tagore by Bengali Muslim Writers and Intellectuals," 406.

<sup>41</sup> Anisuzzaman, "Claiming and Disclaiming a Cultural Icon: Tagore in East Pakistan and Bangladesh," in Kathleen M. O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell (eds.), *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon*, 381.



regarded as “the easternmost haven of Indo-Iranian culture on the Indian subcontinent”<sup>42</sup> by Muslims in the Middle East. “Without proper knowledge of Persian,” one scholar pointed out, “it is difficult to go through the past history and to understand the culture of Bangladesh. One has to learn Persian if one wants to know the past glory and grandeur of Bangladesh.”<sup>43</sup>

When Bengal was first conquered over eight centuries ago in 1206 by the Turkish Muslim ruler Muhammad Khalji, Persian became the official language of state.<sup>44</sup> For the next one hundred and fifty years Persian culture continued to permeate the country. The golden age of Persian literature in Bengal commenced during the ensuing Tughlid era, beginning with the reign of Ghiyāth al-Dīn A‘zām Shāh (1389-1400). During the Husayni Shahi period (1494-1538) Persian continued to hold the status of being the official language of Bengal.<sup>45</sup> Mīr Sayyid Ashraf Jahāngīr Simnānī (d. 808/1405), an important Sufi author who flourished around the time of Ḥāfīz, noted that there was no town and village in Bengal where Sufi saints had not come and settled.<sup>46</sup>

From the sixteenth century onwards, as the Muslim Bengali poets “attempted to adapt the whole range of Perso-Islamic civilization to the Bengali cultural universe,”<sup>47</sup> Persianate literary forms and styles as well as Islamo-Iranian theological and religious concepts permeated Bengali philosophical, theological and literary writings, effectively creating what one scholar has described as “une littérature en langue bengalie d’inspiration persane.”<sup>48</sup> An assimilation between Sanskrit Hindu and Perso-Arabic Islamic ideas of the divine simultaneously occurred. The sixteenth-century Bengali poet Hājī Muḥammad thus identified Allāh with the Sanskrit Gosāi (Master), while the eighteenth century poet ‘Ali Rajā identified Allāh with Nirājan (Sanskrit: ‘One without

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Eaton, “Bengal. i. Persian Muslim elements in the history of Bengal,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 4, 137.

<sup>43</sup> M. Kalim, “Persian Writings in Bengal and their Impact on Socio-Cultural Life,” *Indo-Iranica*, XXXVII/1-4 (1984), 80.

<sup>44</sup> Kalim, “Persian Writings in Bengal,” 73. For a good review of various aspects of Muslim culture in Bengal, see also Tony Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence: Conceiving Muslim-Hindu Encounter Through Translation Theory,” in *History of Religions*, XL/3 (2001), 260-87. (I am indebted to Prof. Thibaut d’Hubert for this reference).

<sup>45</sup> Kalim, “Persian Writings in Bengal,” p. 75. See also Muḥammad Kalīm Sahasramī, “Khidmatguzārān-i fārsī dar Banglādīsh” (Dhaka: Rāyzanī-yi Jumhūrī-yi Islāmī-yi Īrān 1999). (I am indebted to Prof. Thibaut d’Hubert for this reference).

<sup>46</sup> Abdul Karim, “Advent of Sufis in Bengal,” in Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, ed., *Contemporary Relevance of Sufism* (New Dehli: Indian Council for Cultural Relations 1993), 113; see also Hafiz Md. Tahir Ali, “Persian Studies in Bengal: Problems and Prospects,” *Indo-Iranica*, XXXVIII/1-2 (1985), 53.

<sup>47</sup> Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), 276.

<sup>48</sup> Thibaut d’Hubert, “La réception d’un succès littéraire persan...” 121.

colour'). As Muslim theological ideas merged with local Bengali lore and culture,<sup>49</sup> Muslims as well as Hindus would read the *Mahabharata*, while Bengali poets who wrote in Persian used symbolism from the love story of Radha and Krishna when recounting the romance of Joseph and Zulaykha.<sup>50</sup> "The authors of this literature, Bengali Muslims, consciously presented Islamic imagery and ideas in terms readily familiar to a rural population of nominal Muslims saturated with folk Bengali and Hindu religious ideas."<sup>51</sup>

With Akbar the Great's (reg. 1556-1605) conquest of Bengal in 1576, Persian became "the language of conversation among the educated classes... dominating the literary and cultural life" of the land.<sup>52</sup> This permeation continued all throughout the Mughal period (1526-1858). Even after the English took over the administrative control of Bengal in 1757, the cultivation of the Persian language by the intellectuals and the socio-political elite carried on at a reduced rate.

Knowledge of Persian was a *sine qua non* for good employment in early nineteenth century Bengal. One might say that Persian was as much the *lingua franca* of the Indian Subcontinent at this time as French was the international language of diplomacy and letters in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and Russia. In fact, Persian remained the official language of Bengal up until 1837 when it was replaced by the British with English,<sup>53</sup> with Bengal figuring as a vibrant cultural centre for Perso-Islamic civilization. The first books ever published in the Persian language (long before any texts were printed in Iran) were printed in Bengal during the first two decades of the nineteenth century by English orientalists at Fort William College.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the earliest ever printed edition of Ḥāfiẓ's *Dīvān* appeared under the imprimatur of the East India Company in Calcutta in 1791. Over the course of the nineteenth century several more editions of his *Dīvān* were published in India long before they appeared in print in Iran.<sup>55</sup> A host of Persian poets flourished in Calcutta, the cultural capital of Bengal during the nineteenth century, which rivalled and more often than not outshone Dhaka (capital of present-day Bangladesh).<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 276.

<sup>50</sup> Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 277.

<sup>51</sup> Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 278. On this issue, see also Carl W. Ernst in his "Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages," *Iranian Studies*, XXXVI/2, (June 2003), 173-95.

<sup>52</sup> Kalim, "Persian Writings in Bengal," p. 76.

<sup>53</sup> M. Firoze, "Calcutta: A Rendevous of Persian Poets in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," *Indo-Iranica*, XLII/3-4 (1990), 77.

<sup>54</sup> Firoze, "Calcutta: A Rendevous of Persian Poets," p. 77. Most of these were works by Persian poets such as Sa'dī, Niẓāmī and Jāmī.

<sup>55</sup> Bahā al-Dīn Khurramshāhī, "Printed Editions of the *Divān* of Hafez," *EIr*, XI, pp. 479-80.

<sup>56</sup> Firoze, "Calcutta: A Rendevous of Persian Poets," pp. 78-86.

Since the entire composite culture of northern India was steeped in both Persian literary models and the ideals of Persian Sufism,<sup>57</sup> it comes as no surprise that there was a significant interest in Persian language and literature studies and Sufi teachings in the literary and mystical circles to which Tagore's father Debendranāth Tagore and grandfather belonged. In his *Reminiscences*, Tagore recalls how his entire boyhood days were steeped in Persianate modes of life, customs and manners: "In those days the fashions in food and dress of our recent Mahomedian conquerors had not become obsolete...the outdoor costume of men consisted of the Musalman type of *Achkan* and *Jibba*."<sup>58</sup> The Tagore family were called "Pīr-'Alī Brahmins," (Brahmins who follow as their spiritual master 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib [d. 40/661])<sup>59</sup> alluding to the impact of the Persian Sufi tradition on the family. With his pursuit of Persian in his early years,<sup>60</sup> as Edward Thompson noted, Tagore "was proud of Islam's contribution to Indian culture, of which he considered it an integral part."<sup>61</sup>

Hafiz Tahir Ali, former Head of the Department of Arabic, Persian and Islamic Studies at the Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan which Rabindranath Tagore founded, observes that one of the associates of Debendranāth Tagore by the name of Grish Chandra Sen (1835-1910) "used Persian Sufi literature as a means to teach Brahmo Samaj and to inculcate into the followers of this sect an ethical and devotional spirit. With a view to achieve this goal he translated a good number of Persian ethical and mystical works like *Gulistan* and *Bustan* of Sa'di, ghazals of Hafiz Shirazi, *Mathnawi Gulshan-i-Raz* of Mahmud Shabistari, *Tadhkirat-ul-Awliya* of Khwaja Farid-uddin Attar, Letters of Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri, etc."<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere, Tahir Ali elaborates in more detail about the influence and presence of the Persian language in general and Ḥāfiz in particular on the Tagore family and the Brāhmo Samāj movement:

<sup>57</sup> Sarwar, "Persian: The Essence of Composite Culture in India," *Indo-Iranica*, XLVII/1-4 (1994), pp. 73-79; see esp. his citation of K.A. Nizami, 75.

<sup>58</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan & Co. 1961), p. 123. Cited by Saleem Ahmed, "Hafiz and Tagore: A Study in Influence," in T.R. Sharma (ed.), *Essays on Rabindranath Tagore in Honour of D.M. Gupta* (Ranagor, Ghaziabad [India]: Vimal Prakashan 1987), p. 236. The earliest known-photograph of Tagore (aged 12 in 1873) shows him outfitted in a *Jibba* robe like a Persian nobleman of the Qājār period; reproduced in Dyson (trans.), *Rabindranath Tagore, I Won't Let You Go: Selected Poems*, 24.

<sup>59</sup> This is the literal etymology of the term. For an exploratory discussion of the term, see Ahmed, "Hafiz and Tagore," 235, n. 10.

<sup>60</sup> Saleem Ahmed, "Hafiz and Tagore," 237.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Oxford: OUP 1948), p. 12. Cited by Saleem Ahmed, "Hafiz and Tagore," 237.

<sup>62</sup> Hafiz Md. Tahir Ali, "Importance of Persian Sufi Literature in Modern India," *Indo-Iranica*, XLVII/1-4 (1994), p. 41

Raja Ram Mohan Roy [Rāmmohan Rāy (1774-1833)], the founder of the Brahma Samaj, used Persian as a vehicle to preach his religious and reformative ideas. He wrote his famous book *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin* in Persian, and also brought out a Persian newspaper namely *Mirat-ul-Akbar* which was the first Persian newspaper in India. Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, with some other persons, also published newspapers ‘Bengal Herald’ and ‘Bangadoot’ which contained Persian sections too. ... Rabindranath Tagore’s father Maharishi Devendranath Tagore, an ardent preacher of Brahma Samaj, was a devotee of Hafiz Shirazi. Hafiz enjoyed popularity in Bengal even in his lifetime. ... Maharishi used to quote the couplets of Hafiz so frequently in his conversations, letters and writings that it seemed as if he was hafiz of the *Diwan-i-Hafiz*. Besides *Upanishad*, *Diwan-i-Hafiz* played a vital role in moulding Maharishi’s religious thoughts. He used to recite Brahma Sangit and poems of Hafiz till midnight forgetting all worldly things. Ajit Kumar Chakraborty is of the opinion that Maharishi was so much impressed by Hafiz that, perhaps, he did not accept the impact of the Vaishnav poets of Bengal. Maharishi’s bell, which he used during prayer contained the following couplet of Hafiz:

*Mara dar manzil-i janan chih amn u ‘aysh chun har dam  
Jaras faryad midarad kih bar-bandid mahmilha.*

The bell is preserved in the Rabindra Museum, Santiniketan.<sup>63</sup>

This same verse by Ḥāfiẓ became Debendranāth Tagore’s mantra that he repeated during the final days of his life.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, throughout his lifetime, he had treated the *Dīwān* of Ḥāfiẓ as a sacred text which he regularly recited during his nocturnal meditations:

At night I used to leave my bedroom windows open; and I enjoyed the cold night wind very much indeed. Wrapping myself in a blanket, and sitting in bed oblivious of all else, I spent half the night reciting hymns and the verses of Hafiz.<sup>65</sup>

Many of the foremost intellectuals and mystics of Tagore’s lifetime knew Persian and were as well versed in the Sufi classics in Persian as they were in the Sanskrit classics, the drama of Kālidāsa and the Upanishads. It was said that the Brahmins of Bengal used to dress like the Sufis and would read Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* during Tagore’s day.<sup>66</sup> Indeed,

<sup>63</sup> Hafiz Md. Tahir Ali, “Persian Studies in Bengal: Problems and Prospects,” *Indo-Iranica*, XXXVIII/1-2 (1985), p. 55. A literal translation of the verse would be: “What security and joy is there for me at the beloved’s way-station, when every moment the bell clangs: ‘Fasten on the camel-litters’ belts!” (*Dīwān-i Ḥāfiẓ*, ed. Khānlarī, ghazal 1: 4).

<sup>64</sup> This is the view of his daughter Satyendranath Tagore, who translated his autobiography. See her “Introductory Chapter by the Translator,” *The Autobiography of Maharishi Devendranath Tagore*, trans. Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi (London: Macmillan & Co.: 1914), p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> *The Autobiography of Maharishi Devendranath Tagore*, (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd.: 1961), p. 250. Cited by Saleem Ahmed, “Hafiz and Tagore,” p. 237-38.

<sup>66</sup> Hafiz Md. Tahir Ali, “Importance of Persian Sufi Literature,” p. 41

the very Bengali tongue they spoke contains substantial Persian elements.<sup>67</sup> Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), for instance, in addition to Bengali and English, knew Urdu, Hindi, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. Aside from his spiritual attainments, he was an accomplished vocalist who could sing Hindi, Urdu and Persian poetry.<sup>68</sup> The literary form of the Persian *ghazal* and Persian poetic metres were even utilized in poetry by the Bengali poet Nazrul Islam, a contemporary of Tagore.<sup>69</sup>

However, the influence of Persian thought and Sufi imagery on Tagore must be viewed in the context of native Bengali poetic and spiritual traditions: medieval North Indian Sant poetry (as his English translations from the Hindi poetry of Kabīr, who was deeply influenced by Sufi ideals and imagery,<sup>70</sup> show<sup>71</sup>), medieval Bengali Vaiṣṇava poetry, the Upanishads, and most important of all, the modern mystical troubadours of Bengal – the Bāuls.<sup>72</sup> Since the latter happens to be the lyrical tradition most akin in its ideals, philosophy and expression to the Persian Sufi poets, it will be helpful if we first review the impact of the Bāul mystical tradition upon Tagore.

### III. Bāul Mysticism and Persian Sufism in Tagore's Religious Syncretism

The Bāuls belonged to the lower ranks of both Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal, and were comprised of a mixture of ordinary labourers and wandering mendicants and singers.<sup>73</sup> The Sanskrit etymology of the word *bāul* simply means

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<sup>67</sup> There are up to 9000 Bengali words of Persian origin according to Shaikh Ghulam Maqsd Hilali, *Perso-Arabic Elements in Bengali*, ed. Muhammad Enamul Haq (Dhaka: Central Board for Development of Bengali 1967). See Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 277.

<sup>68</sup> Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance*, p. 172.

<sup>69</sup> Kalim, "Persian Writings in Bengal," p. 78.

<sup>70</sup> Ch. Vaudeville, *Kabir* (Oxford: OUP 1974), p. 94. "Kabir uses a language which is so saturated with Sufi ideas," the great scholar of medieval Indian Sufism Khaliq Ahmad Nizami points out, "that it is difficult to deny the influence of Muslim mystic tradition on his mind. Nearly two hundred Arabic and Persian words have been found in his work, and these words are from Sufi lore ... No one ignorant of the Sufi tradition could have used this terminology with such confidence and clarity. The *Gulistan* and *Bustan* of Sadi, the *Pandnama* of Khwaja Fariduddin 'Attar and the *Mathnawi* of Jalaluddin Rūmī, supplied to Kabir the warp and woof of his mystic thought." – Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, "Impact of Sufi Saints on Indian Society and Culture," in Hameed, *Contemporary Relevance of Sufism*, 152-53

<sup>71</sup> Rabindranath Tagore (trans.), *Songs of Kabir* (New York 1916).

<sup>72</sup> Carol Salomon, "Rabindranath Tagore," in (ed.) Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopædia of Religion*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995), vol. 14, 245. His thought and verse were also heavily influenced by Christian Unitarianism, German Idealism, American Transcendentalism, English Romanticism, not to mention Shakespeare and Milton, but none of these are my subject here.

<sup>73</sup> Atis Dasgupta, "The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition," *Social Scientist*, XXII/5-6 (1994), 72.

“mad,”<sup>74</sup> although one of the possible derivations of the word is the Arabic *awliyā'* (saints, friends of God), a term used for advanced Sufi adepts in Islam. The Bāuls are non-conformist, anti-sectarian and highly anti-clerical mystics. In sum, completely antinomian.

Bāuls proceed in a direction opposite to that followed by the general run of the unaware people. They avoid all forms of institutional religion in which the natural piety of the soul is overshadowed by the useless paraphernalia of ritualism and ceremony on the one hand and pedantry and hypocrisy on the other. It is for this reason that the Bauls and other Sahajiyas call their path *ulta-sadhan* (i.e. ‘the reverse path’) and denote the process of their spiritual advance as the method of proceeding against the current (i.e., *ujan sadhan*).<sup>75</sup>

Tagore’s encounter with the mystics of the Bāul tradition and their poetry first occurred in 1890 when he took charge of his family estates in Shelidah in what is now Bangladesh. The Bāul songs which he heard there, celebrating the longing for the Supreme One who resides in one’s heart and not in any temple or in images, deeply affected him. Their ideas and imagery soon appeared in his poetry.<sup>76</sup> During the early 1890s Tagore kept the company of a certain Bāul *guru* by the name of Lālan Phakir who lived near his family estate, and collected an entire notebook of the master’s songs.<sup>77</sup> A Hindu of Kāyastha caste, Lālan had undergone much of his spiritual training with a Muslim Sufi master who had adopted him,<sup>78</sup> thus becoming steeped in Muslim Sufism. After his encounter with Lālan, Tagore’s interest in the Bāul lyrical mystical tradition continued to grow throughout the ensuing decades. Four decades later in 1931, in an appendix to his work entitled *The Religion of Man*, Tagore reprinted an erudite article on the Bāuls by Kshitimohan Sen.<sup>79</sup> Confessing how enchanted he was by the love mysticism and lyricism of the Bāuls, Tagore writes:

I had often heard from wandering village singers, belonging to a popular sect of Bengal, called Bauls who have no images, temples, scriptures, or ceremonials, who declare in their songs the divinity of Man, and express for him an intense feeling of love. Coming from men who are unsophisticated, living a simple life in obscurity, it gives us a clue to the inner meaning of all religions. *For it suggests that these*

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<sup>74</sup> Edward C. Dimock, “Rabindranath Tagore—‘The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal’,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, XIX/1 (1959), 36.

<sup>75</sup> Dasgupta, “The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition,” 72-73.

<sup>76</sup> Salomon, “Rabindranath Tagore,” 245

<sup>77</sup> Dimock, “Rabindranath Tagore—‘The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal’,” 35.

<sup>78</sup> Dimock, “Rabindranath Tagore—‘The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal’,” 35, n.15

<sup>79</sup> Dasgupta, “The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition,” 71.

*religions are never about a God of cosmic force, but rather about the God of human personality.*<sup>80</sup>

The idea of the immanence of God in the human personality, which was a key doctrine of the Bāuls, soon became Tagore's keynote mystical idea.<sup>81</sup> Atis Dasgupta underlines the influence of the Bāuls on Tagore, noting that in the chapter, 'The Man of My Heart' in *The Religion of Man*, the poet describes how he was attracted to one of the basic philosophical features of the Baul songs – the concept of *maner manush* or 'Man of My Heart'.

While Tagore was stumbling upon the formal constraints of the monotheistic Brahma church of which his father was the leader, he "came to discover that in my conduct I was not strictly loyal to my religion, but only to the religious institution.... After a long struggle with the feeling that I was using a mask to hide the living face of truth, I gave up my connection with our church. About this time, one day I chanced to hear a song from a beggar belonging to the Baul sect of Bengal ... What struck me in this simple song was a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete, full of crude details, nor metaphysical in its rarified transcendentalism. At the same time it was alive with an emotional sincerity. It spoke of an intense yearning of the heart for the divine which is in Man and not in the temple, or scriptures, in images and symbols. The worshipper addresses his songs to Man the ideal, and says:

Temples and mosques obstruct thy path,  
and I fail to hear thy call or to move,  
when the clerics and priests angrily crowd round me.

He does not follow any tradition of ceremony, but only believes in love. According to him, 'Love is the magic stone that transmutes by its touch greed into sacrifice.' He goes on to say:

For the sake of this love  
heaven longs to become earth  
and gods to become man."<sup>82</sup>

The Bāul mystico-lyrical tradition was indebted both to the Sahajiyā movement in Tantric Buddhism and Islamic Sufi philosophy, vocabulary from both sources being found in Bāul lyrics.<sup>83</sup> There are at least four major tenets of Sufism found in the syncretistic mysticism of the Bāuls which permeated Tagore's poetic and philosophical

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<sup>80</sup> *The Religion of Man* (London: Macmillan & Co.: 1920), pp. 16-17. Italics mine.

<sup>81</sup> See Shahane, "Rabindranath Tagore: A Study in Romanticism," 59, for an examination of this side of Tagore's thought.

<sup>82</sup> *The Religion of Man*, 68-69. Cited by Dasgupta, "The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition," 71-72.

<sup>83</sup> Dimock, "Rabindranath Tagore—'The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal,'" p. 36.

oeuvre:

1. **Music.** Music is an extremely important means to attain spiritual communion among the Bāuls, in which respect they are very indebted to the Sufis' use of song, verse and dance (the discipline of *Samā'*) to attain ecstasy.<sup>84</sup>
2. **The Interior Spiritual Guide.** Stress is placed on the interiorization of spiritual guidance, leading to the concept of the 'master of the heart' who is the true *guru* within, reflected in the doctrine of the 'invisible master' (*shaykh al-ghayb*) in the Persian Sufi tradition.<sup>85</sup>
3. **Erotic Spirituality.** Tagore was an admirer of the Hindu Vaiṣṇavi tradition of Sahaja, to which Bāul spirituality is closely aligned, and which is found expressed especially in the songs of Chandidas. In the Sahaja cult, as Ananda Coomaraswamy puts it, "the adoration of young and beautiful girls was made the path of spiritual evolution and ultimate emancipation. By this adoration we must understand not merely ritual worship but also 'romantic love'."<sup>86</sup> A similar tradition called *shāhid-bāzī*, 'Adoration of the Witness',<sup>87</sup> was also prevalent in Sufism. The primary exponent of this form of erotic spirituality in Bengali mysticism was a Sufi called 'Ali Rajā (1759-1837) whose writings represent the "highpoint of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā influence among the Sufis" and whose works may be described as "a mixture of Sufism, Nāthism and Sahajiyā."<sup>88</sup> In Rajā's writings, one finds an erotic mysticism which attempts the sublimation of sexual love and desire (*kāma*) into the sentiment of divine love (*prema rasa*).<sup>89</sup>
4. **Antinomian Syncretism.** Sahaji mystical poetry transcended religious boundaries, being utilized by Muslim as much as Hindu mystics, so that Vaiṣṇavism and Sufism merged so far as to be indistinguishable from one another.<sup>90</sup> David Cashin in his *The Ocean of Love: Middle Bengali Sufi Literature and the Fakirs of Bengal*, devotes an entire chapter to the immense literature of the "Muslim Vaiṣṇava Poets," who were the Sufi poets in Bengal who wrote on Hindu Vaiṣṇava themes, combining imagery and ideas from Tantric yoga and the Bāul lyricism.<sup>91</sup> M.E. Hak writes that from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Sufism in Bengal had become "in many respects identical with Tantrikism, Yogiism, Nāthism and other similar systems of indigenous

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<sup>84</sup> Dasgupta, "The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition," p. 74.

<sup>85</sup> Dasgupta, "The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition," pp. 75-77. On the notion of *shaykh al-ghayb* in Sufism, see Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, III: *Les Fidèles d'amour, Shi'ism et soufisme* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 1972), 14ff.

<sup>86</sup> M.E. Hak, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh 1975), 52. Cited by Cashin, *The Ocean of Love*, 20 from Coomaraswamy's famous essay, "Sahaja" in his *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays* (New York: Sunwise Turn 1924), 104.

<sup>87</sup> Leonard Lewisohn (ed.), *Hafiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry* (London: I.B. Tauris 2010), 43-55.

<sup>88</sup> David Cashin, *The Ocean of Love: Middle Bengali Sufi Literature and the Fakirs of Bengal* (Stockholm: Association of Oriental Studies, Stockholm University 1995), 174.

<sup>89</sup> Cashin, *The Ocean of Love*, 172-82.

<sup>90</sup> Cashin, *The Ocean of Love*, 234.

<sup>91</sup> Cashin, *The Ocean of Love*, chap. 8



thought and asceticism.”<sup>92</sup>

Tagore so seamlessly blended the foregoing elements in his prose and verse that one scholar has called him “the greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal.”<sup>93</sup>

Concerning music, suffice it to say that most of the poetry of Tagore, who was the major song-writer in Bengali of his day, was written to be sung as much as read.

The second element – the interior spiritual guide – pervades all of Tagore’s prose and verse. “The revealment of the infinite in the finite, which is the motive of all creation, is not seen in the perfection of the starry heavens... It is in the soul of man,” he wrote in *Sadhana*.<sup>94</sup> When asked by Albert Einstein if he believed in the Divine as isolated from the world, Tagore replied: “Not isolated. The infinite personality of Man comprehends the Universe. There cannot be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the truth of the Universe is human truth.”<sup>95</sup>

Regarding the element of erotic spirituality, it is well known that sexual yoga is “the *sine qua non* of the Bāuls’ religious path.”<sup>96</sup> The Bāuls “believe their humanism is all the more firmly grounded for having perceptible support in their own bodies and that their desire to experience the bliss of non-phenomenal reality has the means of accomplishment in a physical ritual.”<sup>97</sup> Tagore knew of this aspect of their esoteric teaching, which can be found reflected in his poetry; it was also central to the philosophical doctrine of his close friend W.B. Yeats, which in this respect was influenced by Persian Sufi mysticism.<sup>98</sup> These famous verses from *Gitanjali* perhaps best summarize the attitude that Tagore shared with Persian Sufis and the Bāuls, namely, that experience of the Divine and vision of Divinity cannot come through ascetic renunciation but rather through the refinement and sublimation of sensual experience:

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of  
Freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.  
Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine of

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<sup>92</sup> M.E. Hak, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh 1975), 21.

<sup>93</sup> Shashibhushan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults as a Background to Bengali Literature* (Calcutta 1946), p. 215. Cited by Edward C. Dimock, “Rabindranath Tagore—‘The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal’,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1959), 33.

<sup>94</sup> Tagore, *Sadhana* (New York 1913), p. 41. Cited by Dimock, “Rabindranath Tagore—‘The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal’,” 42.

<sup>95</sup> Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, Appendix II, 221.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Capwell, “The Esoteric Belief of the Bauls of Bengal,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXXIII/2, (1974), 256.

<sup>97</sup> Capwell, “The Esoteric Belief,” 256

<sup>98</sup> Shamsul Islam, “The Influence of Eastern Philosophy on Yeats’s Later Poetry,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, XIX/4, (1973), 285-86.

various colours and fragrances, filling this earthen vessel  
to the brim.  
My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy flame  
and place them before the altar of thy temple.  
No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of  
sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.  
Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy, and all  
my desires ripen into fruits of love.<sup>99</sup>

In *Sadhana*, he reiterated the same idea in prose:

The *Vaishnava* religion has boldly declared that God has bound himself to man, and in that consists the greatest glory of human existence. In the spell of the wonderful rhythm of the finite he fetters himself at every step, and thus gives his love out in music in his most perfect lyrics of beauty. Beauty is his wooing of our heart; it can have no other purpose. It tells us everywhere that the display of power is not the ultimate meaning of creation; wherever there is a bit of colour, a note of song, a grace of form, there comes the call for our love.<sup>100</sup>

Lastly, the fourth element – religious syncretism – pervades all of Tagore’s writings, and his own unitarian eclectic mysticism combines Vaiṣṇava and Bhāhmo Samāj religious ideals and ideas, which feature prominently in his ‘Religion of Man’ lectures, later published as *The Religion of Man*,<sup>101</sup> and is perhaps the most clearly visible in his *Gitanjali*, as the following famous verses, which paraphrase a Bāul song,<sup>102</sup> show:

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!  
Come out of thy meditations and leave aside thy flowers and incense! What  
harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?<sup>103</sup>

Tagore’s greatest testimony to the syncretistic philosophy of the Bāuls appears in the following passage concerning their contribution towards bettering the cause of Hindu-Muslim relations in India:

The elites in our country who call themselves educated have been exploring tactical measures for Hindu-Muslim amity out of their own compulsions. They have taken the training of history in schools which are alien to us. But the real history of our country

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<sup>99</sup> *Gitanjali*, no. 73, cited in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (eds.), *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (London: Picador 1997), 357.

<sup>100</sup> Tagore, *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life* (New York 1916), ch. V: Realisation in Love, 33.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph T. O’Connell, “Bengali Religions,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade *The Encyclopædia of Religion*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan 1995), vol. 2, 103-04.

<sup>102</sup> See Dimock, “Rabindranath Tagore—‘The Greatest of the Bāuls of Bengal’,” p. 37.

<sup>103</sup> *Gitanjali* (New York 1930), song 11. Cited by Dimock, *ibid.*

bears testimony to the devotion for synthesis which has been shared by the common people as the innermost truth in their emotional depths. This devotion can be located among the Bauls—their syncretistic tradition emerging as a common heritage of both the Hindus and the Muslims who came close without hurting each other. Such a confluence did not end in a meeting or a committee. This blending has produced songs. The language and music of these songs is melodious with a suavity which is untutored and natural. The voices of both Hindus and Muslims have converged to make the songs resonate as a chorus, without giving anybody a chance for provoking a confrontation between the Koran and the Puranas. This confluence is the real reflection of the Indian civilization, while the confrontation exposes the uncivilized edges. The inspiration for the higher process of civilization has been relentlessly at work in the depths of the village milieu of Bengal, unnoticed by the institutional educational system of schools and colleges. This innermost inspiration has prepared the basic ground for a common anchorage for both Hindus and Muslims. The Baul songs spring from this deep-rooted anchorage.<sup>104</sup>

As the above passage proves, Tagore’s preoccupation with the social problem of Hindu-Muslim relations in India led him to seek out the ecumenical elements in Islam that would serve to effect a workable synthesis between the two faiths comprehensible to all humankind. Tagore, like Rammohun Roy before him, was to find in the Persian Sufi poets of Islam exactly the same type of esoteric religious synthesis and unity of theological divergences that he had already discovered in the Bengali Bāul poets.

#### **IV. Ḥāfīz, Sufism and Tagore’s Journey to Iran in 1932**

As we have seen above, the verse of Ḥāfīz was constantly on the tongue of Tagore’s father, and quoted throughout his Persian writings by Roy, founder of the Indian unitarian religious movement, Brāhmo Samāj. The first of the key verses of ecumenical import by Ḥāfīz quoted by Roy in his *Gift to the Unitarians (Tuhfat al-muwahiddin)*, are the following:

Let’s forgive the seventy-two sects for their ridiculous  
Wars and misbehaviors. Because they couldn’t take in  
The path of truth, they took the road of moonshine.<sup>105</sup>

And with another ecumenical verse by Ḥāfīz, Roy concludes his treatise:

<sup>104</sup> Muhammad Mansuruddin, *Haramoni* (in Bengali), first published in 1927 (reprinted by Bangla Academy, Dacca, in 1976), cited by Dasgupta, “The Bauls and Their Heretic Tradition,” p. 82.

<sup>105</sup> *Jang-i haftād u du millat hama rā ‘udhr binih / chūn nadīdand ḥaqīqat rah-i afsāna zadand. – Dīvān*, ed. Khānlārī, ghazal 179: 4. Translation by Robert Bly and Leonard Lewisohn, *The Angels Knocking on the Tavern Door: Thirty Poems of Hafez*, (New York: HarperCollins 2008). The verse was cited in Roy’s *Tuhfat*: see Baboo Kissory Chand Mitter, *Rammohun Roy and Tuhfatul Muwahiddin* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co. 1975), 12.

Cause no distress and grief to another;  
Then go and do as you wish – for in  
Our Holy Law no other sin than this exists.<sup>106</sup>

Roy prefaced his quotation of this verse with the following remarks that give a good indication of the broad-minded religious ecumenism and anti-clerical atmosphere in which Tagore's grandfather, father and family were steeped:

The individuals of mankind with reference to those who are deceivers and those who are deceived and those who are not either, amount to four classes:

*Firstly* – A class of deceivers who in order to attract the people to themselves wilfully invent doctrines of creeds and faith and put the people to troubles and cause disunion amongst them.

*Secondly* – A class of deceived people, who without inquiring into the fact, adhere to others.

*Thirdly* – A class of people who are deceivers and also deceived, they are those who having themselves faith in the sayings of another induce others to adhere to his doctrines.

*Fourthly* – Those who by the help of Almighty God are neither deceivers nor deceived.<sup>107</sup>

Although Tagore had travelled all over the world, including the Far East, he had yet to visit Iran. Despite his profound familiarity with classical Persian poetry, he knew of the land of the poets only in literature. In chapter five of *The Religion of Man*, which was devoted to ancient Iranian religions, Tagore wrote with great respect and admiration of Zoroastrianism, declaring Zarathustra to have been “the greatest of all the pioneer prophets who showed the path of freedom to man, the freedom of moral choice, the freedom from the blind obedience to unmeaning injunctions, the freedom from the multiplicity of shrines which draw our worship away from the single-minded chastity of devotion.”<sup>108</sup> Celebrating the commonality of Persian and Indian religious ideals, he concluded:

It has been a matter of supreme satisfaction to me to realize that the purification of faith which was the mission of the great teachers in both communities, in Persia and in India, followed a similar line. ... Zarathustra spiritualized the meaning of sacrifice, which in former days consisted in external ritualism entailing bloodshed. The same

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<sup>106</sup> *Mabāsh dar pay-i āzār u har chih kh"āhī kun / kih dar sharī'at-i mā ghayr az īn gunāhī nīst.* – *Dīvān*, ed. Khānlārī, ghazal 76: 6. Ḥāfiẓ repeats exactly the same moral message elsewhere (ghazal 67: 10), stating even more bluntly that, “eternal salvation lies in causing no soul distress.” (*Dilash bih nāla mayāzār va khatm kun Ḥāfiẓ/ kih rastigārī jāvid dar kam-āzārī-ast*).

<sup>107</sup> Mitter, *Rammohun Roy and Tuhfatul Muwahhiddin*, p. 21.

<sup>108</sup> *The Religion of Man* (London: Macmillan & Co.: 1920), p. 74.

thing we find in the *Gita*, in which the meaning of the word *Yajna* has been translated into a higher significance than it had in its crude form.<sup>109</sup>

Given Tagore's interest in ancient Iran and Zoroastrianism, his admiration for Persian literature and Ḥāfiz, and his ecumenical wish to find common ground in the religious ideals of Islam and Hinduism, when he received an invitation from Reza Shah Pahlavi to visit Persia on April 11, 1932,<sup>110</sup> despite his advanced age (70) and ill-health he eagerly accepted it.<sup>111</sup> Accompanied by a small entourage of Bengali intellectuals, including the poet Amiya Kumar Chakravarty and writer Kedar Nath Chattopadhyay,<sup>112</sup> Tagore flew to Karachi and from there travelled to the port of Bushire in the Persian Gulf, where the governor of the city greeted him with these verses from a famous *Qaṣīda* by Sa'di:

*Ayyuhā al-nās jahān jā-yi tan-āsānī nīst*  
*Mard-i dānā, bih jahān dāshtan arzānī nīst*  
*Khuftigān rā chih khabar zamzama-yi murgh-i saḥar*  
*Ḥayawān rā khabar az 'ālam-i insānī nīst*

People! the world is not a place to rest and relax.  
How hard it is to find a single wise man in the world!  
How can those sound asleep understand  
the melodious song of dawn's bird?  
The brute has no apprehension of the human world.<sup>113</sup>

He wrote a travelogue in Bengali about his journey to Iran called *Parashye* (In Persia), which, as Sugata Bose points out, is "much more than a diary or a travelogue by an acute observer of cultures. It is the closest thing to a real history among Tagore's writings based not just on philosophical musings but fairly solid empirical research."<sup>114</sup> In Iran, he had several encounters with Reza Shah, with whose personality he was profoundly impressed, remarking that, "One can never see without light. In Persia one

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<sup>109</sup> *The Religion of Man*, p. 81.

<sup>110</sup> J.N. Sarkar, "Tagore and Iran (A few side-lights on Tagore's Discovery of Persia)," *Indo-Iranica*, XXXIX/1-4 (1986), 75. See also Afshin Marashi, "Imagining Ḥāfez: Rabrindranath Tagore in Iran, 1932," in *Journal of Persianate Studies*, III (2010), 46-77, for an erudite discussion (albeit, heavily influenced by the methodologies of cultural materialism and New Historicism) of the socio-cultural significance of Tagore's voyage to Iran.

<sup>111</sup> Reza Shah had been responding to Tagore's request to him to endow the Chair of Persian Studies at his university in Shantiniketan. – Bose, "Rabrindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism," 26, n. 30.

<sup>112</sup> Bose, "Rabrindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism," 7.

<sup>113</sup> *Kulliyāt-i Sa'dī*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Furūghī (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr 1363 A.Hsh./1984), 708. Sarkar, "Tagore and Iran," 79, gives an English paraphrase of these verses but not the original cited above.

<sup>114</sup> Bose, "Rabrindranath Tagore and Asian Universalism," p. 17. For a translation of the travelogue, see Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq: 1932*, trans. S. Tagore and S. Ray (Calcutta 2003).

can see there was light under Reza Shah Pahlavi.”<sup>115</sup> He extolled Reza Shah’s “taking the poison out of sectarian rancour,” admired the king’s secularization policies, judged him to be a man of “natural greatness,”<sup>116</sup> observing how “sanguinary religious intolerance” was thus being swept away and “education freed from stupefying priestly influences.”<sup>117</sup> At Tagore’s request, the Shāh of Iran in turn agreed a gesture of goodwill to endow a Professorship of Persian at Tagore’s Visva-Bharati University in Santinkitan, where the great scholar of pre-Islamic Persian literature Prof. Pūrdavūd, was appointed to be the first occupant of its chair.<sup>118</sup>

The poet was charmed by the hospitality lavished upon him by the Iranians. “There was absolutely no occasion,” Tagore asserted, when the Persians made him “feel that they belonged to another society or religious community.”<sup>119</sup> “For the Persians,” Tagore wrote, “my identity has another special feature. I am Indo-Aryan... I have a blood relationship with them.”<sup>120</sup> Tagore’s visit to Shiraz and the tomb of Ḥāfiẓ there proved to be the highlight of his visit to Persia. “My pilgrimage would have been incomplete without this visit,” he wrote, “especially when this ancient [Persian] people has been reborn and is feeling an irresistible urge of creative activity and moving to complete fulfillment of the grandeur and freedom of a positive self-expression. It is a source of inspiration in my life. This evening of my life has been filled to the brim.”<sup>121</sup>

Meditating beside the tomb of Ḥāfiẓ, Tagore recalled to his hosts that Ḥāfiẓ was one of a very few Persian poets of his day to have mentioned Bengal in their poetry, appropriately quoting a line by the poet that displayed the cosmopolitan reach of his poems:

This itinerant Persian verse  
sent errant on Bengal ways  
is delicious and rich enough  
for Indian parrots to crunch  
its luscious, sugary chunks.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Sarkar, “Tagore and Iran,” 80.

<sup>116</sup> Tagore’s words cited Sarkar, “Tagore and Iran,” 80.

<sup>117</sup> Sarkar, “Tagore and Iran,” 80-83.

<sup>118</sup> Saleem Ahmed, “Hafiz and Tagore,” 240.

<sup>119</sup> Tagore’s words cited in *Parashye* (In Persia), 451, by Bose, *art cit.*, 18.

<sup>120</sup> *Parashye* (In Persia), 451. Bose, *art cit.*, 18.

<sup>121</sup> Tagore’s words cited Sarkar, “Tagore and Iran,” 81-82.

<sup>122</sup> *Shakkar-shikan shavand hama ūṭiyān-i hind/ z’īn qand-i pārsī kih bih Bangāla mīravād – Dīwān-i ... Ḥāfiẓ*, ed. Khānlarī, ghazal 218: 3; Browne, *Literary History*, III, 283.

In order to understand the significance of this verse for Tagore during his visit to Ḥāfiz’s mausoleum, a brief digression into the long literary history and scholarly criticism of the *ghazal* in which this verse occurs is required. It is clear from the *ghazal*’s final verse that the poem had iconically and imaginatively linked the two nations of Persia and Bengal:

Never cease to sigh and long for the séances  
Of the court of Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn  
Ḥāfiz, for all your work advances  
Through cries and sobs and lamentation.<sup>123</sup>

Legend has it that the ruler of Bengal: Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn A‘zām Shāh (1389-1400), a great patron of Persian culture and letters, had invited Ḥāfiz to his court at Sonargaon,<sup>124</sup> but Ḥāfiz politely declined his invitation by composing a *ghazal* commencing with these enigmatic verses:

*Sāqī ḥadīth-i sarv u gul u lāla mīravād/ v’īn baḥth bā thalātha-yi ghassāla mīravād*

Saqi, the tale of the cypress, rose and tulip is ongoing and the discussion  
It evokes concerns three morticians’ rites of purification.<sup>125</sup>

Medieval exegetes of the Ḥāfiz’s *Divan* explain the provenance of this verse by telling us that the ruler of Bengal had three favourite concubines, respectively named Cypress, Rose and Tulip. Once when he fell deathly sick and his court physicians proved incapable of curing him, he requested that the concubines bathe his body in preparation for his final funeral rites.<sup>126</sup> Miraculously, however, at their hands he recovered. The other ladies of the harem took to taunting the girls for being lowly ‘bathing girls’ (*ghassāla*). The sultan found this amusing and extemporized the first half-couplet of this verse, but when he and all his court poets proved unable to complete his couplet, he sent a letter with gifts to Ḥāfiz in Shiraz, entreating him to compose the second hemistich, which the poet duly executed in the masterly manner seen in the above couplet, then going on to complete the entire *ghazal*. However, if the verse be interpreted as a coded romantic tale alluding to these three concubines, then one would have to translate it thus:

<sup>123</sup> Ḥāfiz, *zih shawq-i majlis-i Sultān Ghiyāth-i Dīn/ Khāmush mashāw kih kār-i tu az nāla mīravād*.

<sup>124</sup> Kalim, “Persian Writings in Bengal and their Impact on Socio-Cultural Life,” 74.

<sup>125</sup> M. Kalim, “Hafiz Shirazi and Bengal,” *Indo-Iranica*, XXXVIII/1-2 (1985), 42-43.

<sup>126</sup> Saleem Ahmed, “Hafiz and Tagore: A Study in Influence,” in T.R. Sharma (ed.), *Essays on Rabindranath Tagore in Honour of D.M. Gupta* (Ranagore, Ghaziabad [India]: Vimal Prakashan 1987), 234-35.

Saqi, the tale of the Cypress, Rose and Tulip goes on:  
This discussion concerns those three washing women.

We find two similar versions of this tale about Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn narrated in the grand mystical commentary on Ḥāfiẓ's *Dīvān* written in India circa 1026 A.H./1617 by Abū'l-Ḥasan 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khatmī Lāhūrī.<sup>127</sup> Lāhūrī first informs us (and in this respect most modern commentators concur with his opinion) that the term *thalātha-yi ghassāla* refers to the Greek custom of drinking three draughts of wine in the morning to purify the digestion,<sup>128</sup> in which case the verse should be literally translated as:

Saqi, even though the tale of the cypress, rose and tulip goes on  
– Yet this discussion really about those three morning draughts goes on.

The first citation of the tale of Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn and his three concubines who served as bathing girls in modern times was given by the literary historian Shiblī Nu'mānī, then repeated with great caution by Edward Browne.<sup>129</sup> Several later Iranian scholars, from Qāsim Ghanī onwards, rejected it as being, historically speaking, highly improbable, if not impossible.<sup>130</sup> However, the tale was then subjected to a separate study by Prof. M. Kalim, who adduced a number of compelling reasons why the verse probably did refer to the Sultan of Bengal.<sup>131</sup> Prof. Kalim's reasons, however, were refuted and rejected on different historical grounds two years later by Prof. J.N. Sarkar.<sup>132</sup> In his critical edition of Ḥāfiẓ's *Dīvān* published around the same time, P.N. Khānlarī adduced a number of different reasons why the tale now appeared more credible, but only if we assume that the sultan in question was Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh II (reg. 725-752/1324-1351) and not his son Ghiyāth al-Dīn A'ẓam Shāh (reg. 792-812/1389-1409).<sup>133</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Lāhūrī, *Sharḥ-i 'irfānī-yi ghazalḥā-yi Ḥāfiẓ*, edited by Bahā' al-Dīn Khurramshāhī, Kūrūsh Manṣūrī, and Ḥusayn Muṭī'ī-Amīn, (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatra 1374 A.Hsh./1995), II, 1298-300.

<sup>128</sup> Lāhūrī, *Sharḥ-i 'irfānī*, II, 1298. For modern scholarship in support of this interpretation see also Ḥusayn 'Alī Haravī, *Sharḥ-i ghazalḥā-yi Ḥāfiẓ*, (Tehran: Nashr-i Nū 1367 A.Hsh./1988), II, 938.

<sup>129</sup> *A Literary History of Persia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1906-30), III, 286-87.

<sup>130</sup> There are two reasons for this. Firstly, Sulṭān Ghiyāth al-Dīn assumed the throne in the same year (1389) which is generally accepted by scholars as the date that the poet passed away. Secondly, the Sulṭān Ghiyāth al-Dīn that Ḥāfiẓ here refers to is probably not the ruler of Bengal but Sulṭān Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad, the eldest son of Sultan 'Imād al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Amīr Mubāriz al-Dīn Muḥammad, who, as Qāsim Ghanī observes, is frequently mentioned in the histories of the Muẓaffarid kings of Persia during Ḥāfiẓ's day. None of the Iranian court historians who wrote about the various dynasties of Ḥāfiẓ's day associated the poet with this ruler of faraway Bengal, nor did any of the Indian historians who wrote about the fourteenth century mention it, as J.N. Sarkar points out: "Hafiz Shirazi and Some Contemporary Rulers," *Indo-Iranica*, XL/1-4 (1987), 59

<sup>131</sup> M. Kalim, "Hafiz Shirazi and Bengal," *Indo-Iranica*, XXXVIII/1-2 (1985), 42-51.

<sup>132</sup> J.N. Sarkar, "Hafiz Shirazi and Some Contemporary Rulers," 56-62.

<sup>133</sup> *Dīvān-i Ḥāfiẓ*, ed. Khānlarī, II, 1193-95.



The controversy was recently revived by Peter Avery and Charles Henri de Fouchécour in their translations (into English and French respectively) of the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfiz, who share the view that the addressee of the poet's ghazal was in fact a king in Bengal who flourished in Ḥāfiz's day.<sup>134</sup>

Now, whatever the historical veracity of the story or the real identity of Sulṭān Ghiyāth al-Dīn in the poem may have been, with Tagore's visit to Iran and pilgrimage to Ḥāfiz's tomb there, the legend of Ḥāfiz having addressed a famous ghazal to a Muslim Sultan in Bengal assumed an independent literary life of its own. Crouching beside Ḥāfiz's gravestone amid a gaggle of Iranian dignitaries, Tagore brought up the legend again, commenting that if once the ruler of Bengal failed to bring the poet to his land, well, today a poet of Bengal has come to offer his good wishes and has felt fulfilled. "The Iranians felt that Ḥāfiz's body awoke from the eternal sleep of centuries and lifting the lid of the dumb coffin came up to the sky with a smile. On that sunny spring morning Tagore felt the Poet's beaming eyes on a smiling face."<sup>135</sup> Enchanted by his communion with the poet's spirit, Tagore announced, 'I am like one of those preceding Sufi saints, poets, and artists; only I have come with the language of today'.<sup>136</sup>

Commenting on his encounter with Persian poetry and visitation to Ḥāfiz's tomb, Sugata Bose notes: "Word had also spread that Tagore had certain affinities with romantic and devotional Persian poets and it was the brotherhood of Sufi poets, which eventually turned out to be the more emotionally charged aspect of the relationship. European race theory took second place to Indo-Persian poetry as the ground for commonality. Shades of Aryanism were drowned in the depths of Sufism."<sup>137</sup>

But as Tagore brooded beside Ḥāfiz's tombstone, he sunk into a reverie, depressed about "unfortunate India, benumbed from head to foot in the coils of intricate religion,—our country, crippled underneath the might of blind usage, our society, divided in a hundred ways by meaningless interdictions." When will "the liberation of India from the deadly stranglehold of blindness that goes by the name of religion occur?" he mused.<sup>138</sup> At that moment Tagore was handed a large tome – Ḥāfiz's *Divan* – by the steward in charge of the poet's tomb-complex, who suggested the Bengali sage take an augury from

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<sup>134</sup> Peter Avery, trans. *The Collected Lyrics of Ḥāfiz of Shīrāz* (London: Archetype 2007), 283, no. 2; *Hafiz de Chiraz: Le Divān: Œuvre lyrique d'un spirituel en Perse au XIVE siècle*, introduction, commentary and translation by Charles-Henri de Fouchécour (Paris: Verdier 2006), 597.

<sup>135</sup> Sarkar, "Hafiz Shirazi and Some Contemporary Rulers," 61.

<sup>136</sup> Tagore's words as cited by Sarkar, "Tagore and Iran," 81.

<sup>137</sup> Bose, *art cit.*, 8-19; on Tagore and Aryanism, cf. Marashi, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>138</sup> Tagore's words cited by Sarkar, "Tagore and Iran," 83.

Hāfiz's poems. When he opened the *Divan*, the immortal Hāfiz, who has for centuries been known to Persian speakers as the 'Tongue of the Invisible', responded to the Bengali poet's rumination over the evils of religious puritanism in India and Iran with these verses:

Will it ever come to pass again  
that they will fling open the tavern doors?  
Shall they ever loosen  
the knot of our entangled affairs?

Although they bolt up the doors for sake  
of the bigot's egomaniacal heart  
Take faith, don't lose heart, since for  
God's sake those doors shall part.<sup>139</sup>

## V. Conclusion: Tagore and Hāfizocentricism

Rabindranath Tagore is one of the truly seminal figures of the twentieth-century literature, art, and spirituality. He is very much a universal figure, a colossus who bestrides the divide of religious sectarianism and ethnocentricity, a great genius beyond any classification of ethos, nationality or religion, virtually Shakespearean in his reach across the bounds of culture and the confines of literary genre.

As this essay has shown, from childhood Tagore had been steeped in the literature, traditions, customs and manners of Persianate culture and immersed in the Sufi poetry of Iranian Islam. He had been raised in an intellectual milieu in which Bengali philosophical, theological and literary writings were permeated with Islamo-Iranian theological and religious concepts, and an assimilation between Sanskrit Hindu and Perso-Arabic Islamic ideas of the divine had occurred. The ecumenical teachings of the Persian Sufi tradition and the rich heritage of Persian poetry in general – 'Attār, Rūmī, Sa'dī, Shabistarī, Hāfiz, Jāmī and others – were well known in the Tagore family. These Persian spiritual masters had been cherished by his father and grandfather, figuring as staples in their devotional diet, regularly used as educational texts in the Brāhmo Samāj

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<sup>139</sup> *Buvad āyā kih dar-i maykadahhā bugshāyand? / Girah az kār-i furū-basta-yi mā bugshāyand? / Agar az bahr-i dil-i zāhid-i kh<sup>w</sup>udbīn bastand / Dil qawwī dār kih az bahr-i khudā bugshāyand. Dīwān-i Khwāja Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Hāfiz Shīrāzī*, ed. Muḥammad Qazvīnī and Qasīm Ghanī (Tehran: Kitābkhāna Zawwār 1320 A.Hsh./1941), *ghazal* 202, p. 137. This ghazal is absent from Khānlari's edition of the *Dīwān*.

movement to which they belonged.

During his voyage through Persia in 1932, Tagore had constantly bemoaned “the asphyxiating domination of the mullahs”<sup>140</sup> within all walks of work and life. In those oracular verses of Ḥāfiz—certainly the most formidable anti-clerical spiritual poet in world literature<sup>141</sup>—which so unerringly foresaw the political tragedy of contemporary Iran, Tagore evidently received precisely the answer he needed from “the tongue of the moment” (*lisān al-waqt*), as Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī (d. 908/1502), the eminent philosopher and scholar of Shiraz, called the poet.<sup>142</sup> The poet of Shiraz had confirmed to him that the ultimate answer to the problem of religious formalism and fundamentalism, whether of Indian Hinduism or Iranian Islam, lay in the ecstatic element of mystical religion, which was also the central theme in Tagore’s own poetry, in *Gitanjali* in particular.

In his native Bengal, Tagore had discovered in the antinomian poetry and devotional mysticism of the Bāuls that same ecstatic element. In their eclectic faith and practice he found “the common heritage of both the Hindus and the Muslims who came close without hurting each other,” seeing, he wrote, in their “innermost inspiration” the existence of “the basic ground for a common anchorage for both Hindus and Muslims.” As we have already seen (Part II), the Bāul mystics shared several mystical doctrines with the Persian Sufis—music and poetry used for devotional purposes, the concept of the interior spiritual guide, an erotic spirituality which advocated sublimation of sensual experience into divine realization, and religious syncretism itself. And it was this same Bāulian wine of ecstasy that Tagore now imbibed in Iran. That is why no doubt he felt on that evening in Shiraz that his life’s cup had been “filled to the brim” – why he so readily identified himself with “those preceding Sufi saints and poets.”

There is a final minor, but by no means marginal, point to stress when one reflects on Tagore’s own syncretistic assimilation of Persian Sufi teachings. We have already observed the international appeal of the literature and culture of Persianate civilization in Bengal over the centuries before his day and age. However, what is less known is that all the Persianate civilizations of Islamdom (Ottoman Turkey, Safavid and Qajar Persia, lands of Central Asia and most of Mughal India...) had been for the previous five

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<sup>140</sup> Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq: 1932*, 64.

<sup>141</sup> See my “The Religion of Love and the Puritans of Islam: Sufi Sources of Ḥāfiz’s Anti-clericalism” in L. Lewisohn (ed.), *Ḥāfiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry* (London: I.B. Tauris 2010), 159-96

<sup>142</sup> Cited by Carl Ernst, “Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī’s Interpretation of Ḥāfiz,” in *ibid.*, p. 199.

centuries “Ḥāfīzocentric”<sup>143</sup> as well. In Tagore’s Bengal during the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, this was also the case, as we have seen in the writings of Debendranāth Tagore and his teacher Rammohun Roy, both of whom were infatuated with the poetry of Ḥāfīz in their conversation, devotional meditations and compositions. The visit of an internationally famous *homme de lettres* and intellectual polymath such as Tagore to Iran and his pilgrimage to the tomb of Ḥāfīz in Shiraz in 1932 simply serves to further confirm the abiding relevance of the statement by Muḥammad Gulandām, the first compiler of his *Dīwān*, in his foreword to the collection that the poems were already internationally celebrated during his lifetime.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, Tagore’s ecstasy beside the tomb of Ḥāfīz bears testimony not only to the ecumenical reach of the Persian Sufi tradition that he venerated, but to the cosmopolitan sway enjoyed by Ḥāfīz’s verse.

Those Samarqandi Turks  
and black-eyed girls of Kashmir  
All dance and flaunt their charms  
to Ḥāfīz of Shiraz’s verse.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> For an analysis of this literary and historical phenomenon see my “The Ḥāfīzocentricism of Persianate Civilization and the Qur’ān,” in Lewisohn (ed.), *Hafiz and the Religion of Love*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>144</sup> “It took but a very short time for the literary empire over which his ghazals reigned to stretch from the outermost borders of Khurāsān up into Turkistān and down into India.” Cited by Muḥammad Mu‘īn, *Ḥāfīz-i shīrīn-sukhan* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mu‘īn 1370 A.Hsh./1991), II, p. 684.

<sup>145</sup> Khānlarī, ed. *Dīwān-i ... Ḥāfīz*, ghazal 431: 9; Browne, *Literary History*, III, p. 283.

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