

BUDDHADEVA

RABINDRANATH TAGORE*

On this full-moon day of Vaisakh I have come to join in the birthday celebrations of the Lord Buddha and to bow my head in reverence to him who I regard in my inmost being as the greatest man ever born on this earth. This is no formal demonstration of adoration on my part, befitting the occasion. I offer him here, today, the homage I have offered him again and again in the deep privacy of my soul.

I had once gone on a visit to Buddha-Gaya, and it had thrilled me to think that he who had hallowed the earth by the touch of his feet had once come to that very place in the flesh. Why, I had thought with a pang, had I not been born in his day, that I might have received his holy influence directly with all my mind and all my body !

At the same time, it had occurred to me that the immediate present is extremely limited in its compass, and hazy with the dust raised by the whirlwind of contemporary events. History has proved again and again that nearness in time clouds our vision, so that we fail to realize fully the greatness of the supremely great among us. How often in his lifetime Buddhadeva was hurt and wronged by the spite and antagonism of petty minds; how often they spread false calumny about him to belittle his transcendent greatness! Hundreds of men who were near to him in the physical sense could never feel the immense distance that separated him from them in spirit; in the common haunts of men his uncommon sublimity went unrecognized. It was just as well, therefore, that it had not been given to me to see him amid the dust and haze of current events.

The greatest among men take their place in eternity the moment they are born; from the present moment they

reach far back into the past and forward into the distant future. This I realized that day in that temple to which I have which I have referred. I saw a poor fisherman there who had come across the seas from far Japan to expiate for some misdeed. Evening passed slowly into the solitude and silence of midnight, and still he sat with folded hands repeating with intense concentration, *Buddham saranam gacchami*: In the Buddha do I seek my refuge. So many



centuries had passed since the Sakya prince had left his palace home and gone out into the night to strive that men may be freed from sorrow ; and there, that night, before me was this pilgrim from Japan praying to him for refuge in his deep distress. To that humble penitent he

* Founder of Visva-Bharati and the First Nobel Prize Winner in Literature in the year 1913 from Asia.

was closer and more real than all else on the earth perceptible to the senses; his deathless presence had touched the life of the poor sinner seeking deliverance. By the light of his spirit's flaming aspiration he could see him who was the Man Supreme. If Buddhadeva had appeared before his contemporaries as a powerful king or a victorious general, he could have easily impressed his age and won honour for himself; but that honour, abundant as it might have been in his day, would have passed into oblivion with the passage of time. His subjects might have been awe-struck by his regal splendour, the indigent might have admired his riches, or the weak his power, but it is the man striving for perfection of the human spirit who alone can acknowledge and acclaim the Supreme Man against the background of all time. That is why we see Buddhadeva the *Mahayogi* seated, today, on this throne of men's hearts, the glory of his manifestation in the distant past crossing the bounds of his time and continuing beyond the present. It is to him that men still come, tormented by their passions and painfully conscious of their own shortcomings, and say; I seek refuge in the Buddha. It is in this intimate realization by the spirit of man of his presence through the ages, that we find his truest manifestation.

Ordinary persons like us express ourselves in our relations with one another we are known by the class or race or community to which we belong. Very few have been born on earth who were self-luminous, whose light was not a borrowed light, who stood fully revealed in their own radiance of truth. We see partial expressions of Man in many persons renowned for their wisdom, learning, heroism or statesmanship. who have dominated others by their own will and moulded history in the pattern of their own desires. But the complete expression of Man is seen in him alone who represents in himself all men in all ages and lands, and whose consciousness has not been broken up by the customary walls of age or race or nation.

Man reveals himself in truth, the truth of which the *Upanishad* speaks: He alone knows the truth who knows all living creatures as himself. He is the complete man who has known the truth thus, and he shines in the glory of his own humanity. As the *Upanishad* says: He who sees himself in all and all in himself can never remain concealed.

He stands revealed for all time. But this manifestation is obscured in the majority of men today. We can catch glimpses of the truth in them. but much remains hidden from sight. When the earth was first created, the entire globe was wrapped in a thick vapour; only the highest

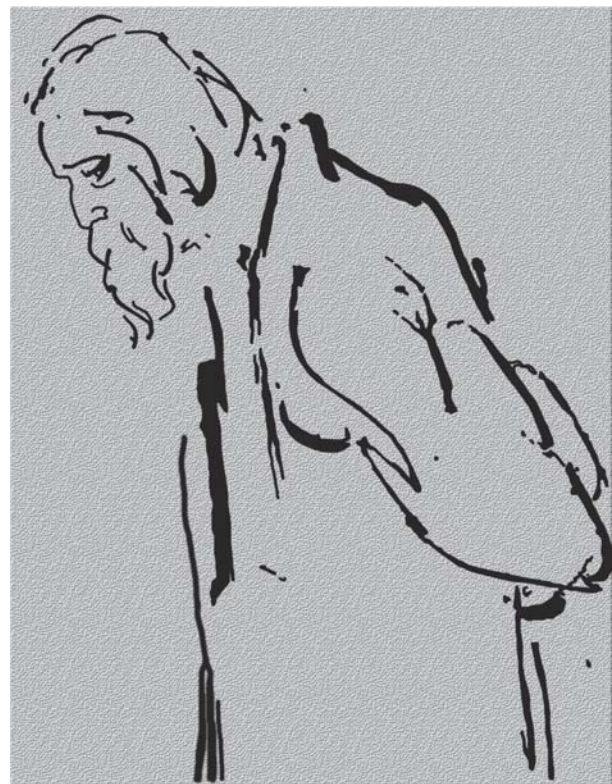


Fig.1 Sketch of Rabindranath Tagore by Satyajit Ray

mountaintops could be seen here and there rising above the mantle of vapour into the clear light. Similarly, most men today are wrapped in their self-interest and pride, with their consciousness obscured. The truth where the spirit has free play remains undeveloped in them.

The creations of men are still imperfect. How could we have recognized the truth in man behind this thick veil of imperfection if it had not suddenly revealed itself in some self-luminous and transcendent person? To man's great good fortune his true self has flamed up in Buddhadeva, who showed himself as one who had accepted all humanity within his heart. What then can hide him from view - what narrow walls of time or place or hankering for the fulfillment of petty immediate ends?

At the end of his austerities Buddhadeva rose up and manifested himself to the world. In the glory of that manifestation, the true India was revealed. The light spread far beyond the geographical boundaries of India to eternize his advent in the history of mankind. India became a land of pilgrimage that is to say; people of other lands were drawn to her by bonds of kinship; for, through the words of the Buddha, India had accepted all men as kins. India ignored none and, therefore, remained unacknowledged by none. The barriers of race and country, were swept away by the flood of truth, and India's message reached men of all races in every land. To that invitation came response

from China and Burma and Japan, Tibet and Mongolia; the obstruction of seas and mountains gave way before that irresistible call. In far distant lands men proclaimed the epiphany; they announced that they had seen the Supreme Man shining like the sun that had rent the veil of darkness. They gave lasting shape to this proclamation in a thousand images of stone in plain and desert. With infinite labour they gave expression to their adoration in image and picture and stupa. They seemed to say that their adoration of one who was so far above the common run of men must be shown by achieving what appeared impossible. They were moved by a marvelous inspiration; in deep darkness they painted pictures on the walls of caves, they carried enormous blocks of stone up to the tops of mountains to build temples there. Their skill crossed the seas and gave birth' to exquisite works of art in the lands; the artists chose to remain unknown, only

transmitting to posterity the *mantra* that had inspired them: In the Buddha do I seek my refuge. In Borobudur in Java I saw the stories of Buddha's nativity, carved in hundreds of images round the stupa, each a perfect specimen of the sculptor's art, chiseled with loving care and infinite pains. This is at once an example of the cultivation of art and the practice of austerity - the *tapasya* that eschews all desire for the fruits of work and for name and renown, and aims only at the dedication of all that is best in oneself to glorify him who is worthy of being adored and remembered for all time. Men have gone through great suffering and hardship to fulfill what their devotion to him demanded, saying that only by the supreme creations of that munificent genius which speaks in the language of universal humanity, could they truly proclaim that he had come for all men in all ages. That was what he had asked of men - that their self-expression should be through work

that was arduous and enduring, work that would signify the victory and liberation of the spirit. So we find in those far-off days of the past, his worship established in all its vigour all over his great Eastern continent – even in remote and inaccessible corners of it – and his glory proclaimed in desert plains, in solitary caves and on mountain-tops. A still more precious offering was laid at his feet when the Emperor Asoka publicly confessed his own misdeeds in letters carved on stone, proclaimed the glory of the religion of love and non-violence, and left, in his stone pillars an abiding emblem of his reverential homage to the Master. Was there ever a king like him on earth?

The Master to whose inspiration he owed his greatness needs to be invoked today even more fervently than in his day. The cruel stupidity of

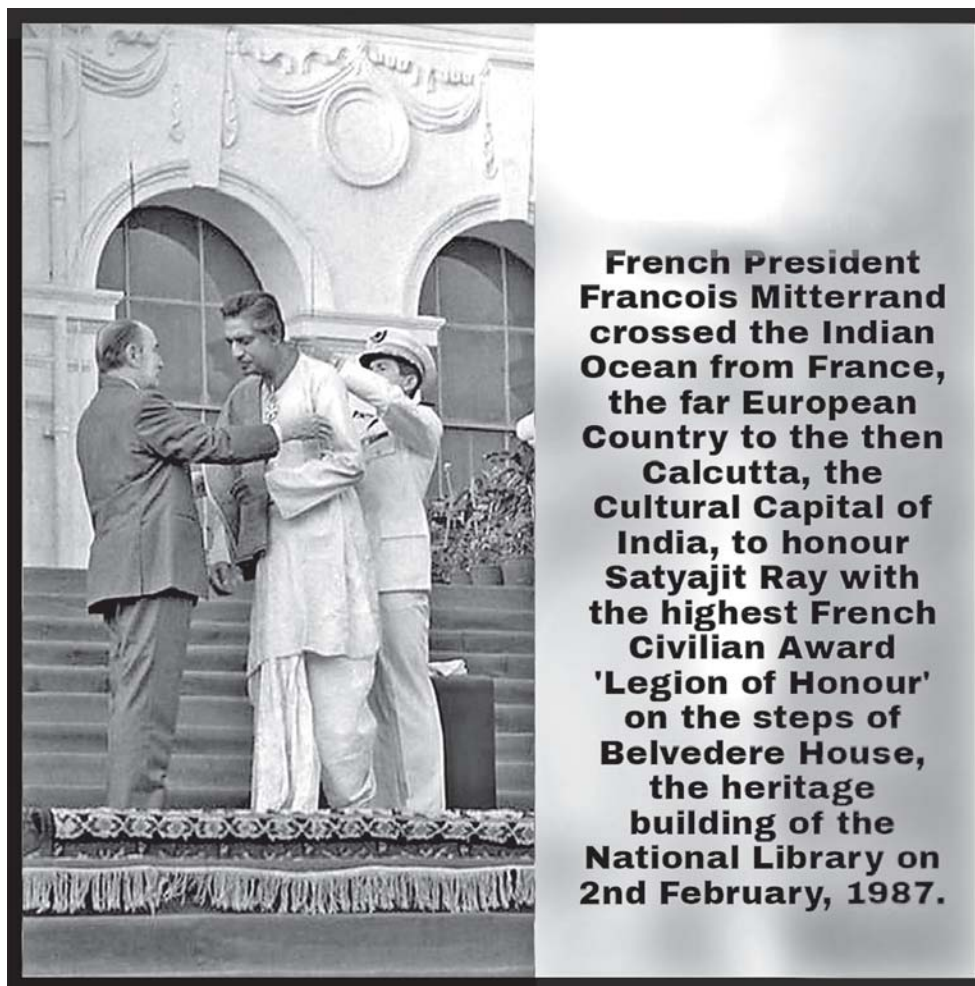


Fig.2 : Photo showing the Honour of Satyajit Ray.

The Editor-in-Chief, Science and Culture: Professor Dr. Sudhendu Mandal served National Library (Govt. of India) as its Director in this heritage building of the Belvedere Houses, Kolkata. ISNA family pays tribute to both the great personalities of India on their birth anniversary celebrated in May in every year.

wicked racial discriminations and caste and colour bars, parading as religion, has stained the earth with blood; mutual hatred, more deadly than mutual violence, outrages humanity at every step. Today, in this hapless land poisoned by fratricidal malice, we yearn for a word from him who had proclaimed love and compassion for all creatures as the path to salvation. May that best of men appear again to save what is best in man from destruction. He never cheated man of the greatest gift that one can give to another - the gift of respect. The charity which he called a virtue does not consist in the giving of alms from a safe distance, avoiding all contact with the receiver. The true giving is a giving of oneself. It has been said that whatever is given should be given with *sraddha* : respect. A gift may become a wicked insult if it is tainted by a sense of sanctimonious superiority or pride of riches. That is why the *Upanishad* says, *Bhiya deyam*: Give with awe. That religion is to be feared by the practice of which we may lose out respect for other. In India, of late the practice of religion has proceeded along channels that spread disrespect for men in all directions. The danger of this is not spiritual; it is a fact of direct experience that this is the greatest obstacle in the way of political independence. Can politics ever solve this problem by extraneous means? Buddhadeva forsook princely rank and riches to strive for the deliverance of men from sorrow and suffering. He did not discriminate among them on the basis of fitness; not one did he scorn as a barbarian or a non-Aryan. He gave up his all for even the humblest and most ignorant of men; his *tapasya* was inspired by love for all men in all lands without distinction. Shall the glory of that *tapasya* fade from India today?

What evil have we succeeded in keeping out by raising barriers between man and man? We had a full treasury, but what is left of it now? Have not attacks from outside broken open its doors and razed its walls to the ground? And yet, today, we are putting up wall after wall to keep the desire for kinship with all men, immured: we have placed guards at gates of temples to restrict meanly even the people's right of worship. We could not save the wealth that is diminished by giving and spending; we have only locked up in a sectarian strong box the wealth of love that grows more the more it is given away. Our store of righteousness has become indistinguishable from that of worldliness. The India that had once held before the world a shining example of humanity by her respect for all men has now narrowed down that ideal; by her disrespect of men she has herself become unworthy of their respect. Man has become man's worst enemy, because he is

divorced from truth and his manhood is obscured. That is why we see in men all over the world mutual suspicion, fear and animosity; and that is why the time has come to invoke the Supreme Man in these words: manifest thyself in order that Man may be manifested.

Buddhadeva had said: Conquer anger by compassion. The world saw the end of a terrible war only the other day. The victory that crowned one group of belligerents was a victory of armed might; but because brute force is not man's supreme source of strength, that victory has proved unfruitful and is only sowing the seeds of fresh dissension. Man's strength lies in mercy and compassion. The brute in man that has not yet perished does not allow him to realize this truth to which the Master paid homage when he said that all anger, whether one's own or of others, must be conquered by non-anger. Unless man follows this injunction his life is bound to be a failure. The victory of anger and revenge by means of brute force does not bring peace, which mercy alone can confer. So long-as man does not acknowledge this in his political and social life, the wicked will never cease from troubling, the fire of conflict between States will never be extinguished. the monstrous cruelty of prisons and the threatening frowns of army barracks will make life increasingly intolerable – there will be no end to all this misery and suffering.

It is time, therefore, to remember him who sought to dissuade men from the folly of hoping to achieve success by violence, and asked them to conquer anger by kindness. In these days of the world-wide indignity of man it is meet that we should say : *Buddham saranam gacchami*. He will be our refuge who manifested the ideal of Man in himself, who spoke of the liberation which is not a negation but a positive reality – the liberation that comes not by abjuring work, but by the practice of self-giving through right action, and which consists not merely in the rejection of anger and malice but in the cultivation of immeasurable love and good-will towards all creatures. In these days, blinded as we are by motives of self-interest and by cruel, insatiate greed, we seek refuge in him who came into the world to reveal in his own person the real self of the Universal Man.*

* Translated by Somnath Maitra from the original Bengali address delivered by Rabindranath Tagore on 18th May 1935 at a function organised by the Mahabodhi Society at Sri Dharmarajika Caityavihara in Calcutta to observe the birthday of the Lord Buddha. This address forms part of an anthology of Rabindranath's writings on the Buddha and Buddhism, brought out by the Visva-Bharati to mark the 2500th Parinirvana Jayanti.