

Remarks by Ambassador Asoke Kumar Mukerji, Permanent Representative of India to UN at Commemoration Event of Centenary Year of Nobel Prize Award for Literature to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore at New York on May 30, 2013

We are privileged to gather here in the United Nations today to commemorate the centenary of the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

I would like to especially thank my old friend and colleague Ramu Damodaran of the Department for Public Information of the United Nations for making this event happen.

In the United Nations, we have always benefited from the personal interaction that takes place in various parts of this multilateral institution. Such interaction between representatives of different cultures is central to our common pursuit of peace and security, of socio-economic development, and of the common threads that bind us and our cultures together.

Today, it would be appropriate to recall one such dynamic interaction between cultures, which catalyzed the publication of the *Gitanjali* in 1912, and led to the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

Sir William Rothenstein, (1872-1945), was a prominent British artist and professor and Principal of the Royal College of Art in London. He founded the India Society on 13 January, 1910 in order to encourage an appreciation of Indian fine art. Rothenstein travelled to India that year, visiting various cities before reaching Calcutta. At Calcutta, he was met by an artist of the Bengal School, Abanindranath Tagore, along with his brother Goganendranath. The two brothers took Rothenstein to their family home, Jorasanko.

It was at Jorasanko, in February 1911, that Rothenstein first met Abanindranath's uncle, Rabindranath Tagore. Rothenstein was deeply impressed by Rabindranath, whom he described as "one of the most remarkable men of this time".

The meeting between the Indian poet and the British artist was to prove significant in propagating the appeal and creativity of Indian nationalist thought in the West. Rabindranath visited England between 1912 and 1913. On board the ship, he took up the poems of his *Gitanjali*, filling up a notebook with translations of the collection from the original Bengali into English. Soon after his arrival on June 16, 1912 Tagore sought out Rothenstein, who took the notebook of English-language translations of poems from Tagore and had copies typed.

On July 7, 1912 Rothenstein arranged for the poems to be read at his rented house in Hampstead by the poet W.B. Yeats. On November 1, 1912 the India Society published a limited edition of *Gitanjali: Song Offerings*. Of the 750 copies, 500 were for its members and 250 for general sale. The volume contained English translations of 103 poems, with an introduction by Yeats and a pencil-sketch of Tagore by Rothenstein.

Tagore dedicated the publication to Rothenstein. *Gitanjali* won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

Looking at Rabindranath Tagore's many achievements, we marvel at his flair for expressing a strong sense of national pride, tinged with deep spiritualism. His poems *Jana Gana Mana* and *Amar Sonar Bangla* are fittingly the National Anthems of India and Bangladesh. Rabindranath, however, did not confine himself within "narrow domestic walls". He prayed that his "heaven of freedom" would be found in a "world that has not been broken up into fragments", in one of his most well-known poems.

Tagore was a quintessential "Renaissance Man". He was a painter, dramatist, musician, novelist, essayist as well as India's national poet. He had a profound awareness of mankind's common destiny, which he experienced during his travels to more than 30 countries on five continents between 1912 and 1933.

By hosting this function today, the United Nations underscores the continuing relevance of Tagore's humanistic and holistic vision for all of us even a hundred years after he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Thank you.

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