

Bashabi Fraser is a writer and academic who traverses her two worlds of the sub-continent and Britain. Her publications, which include academic writing, poetry collections, children's literature and edited anthologies, see these worlds converging in books like this one, which she has edited and introduced. Bashabi has a Ph.D. in English and is an Honorary Fellow at the Centre for South Asian Studies at Edinburgh University and an Associate Lecturer in English Literature at The Open University in Scotland and the West Midlands. She lives in Edinburgh with her husband and daughter.

Also by Bashabi Fraser:

Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter (Anthem Press, London, 2005)

Tartan & Turban (Luath Press, Edinburgh, 2004)

Topsy Turvy (Dasgupta and Co., Kolkata, 2004)

JUST One Diwali Night (Dasgupta and Co., Kolkata, 2004)

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Life (Diehard Publishers, Edinburgh, 1997)

Peoples of Edinburgh: Our Multi-cultural City, edited with Helen Clark and Lorraine Dick (The City of Edinburgh Council, 1996)

To my father Bimalendu Bhattacharya and my former teacher, Professor
Kitty Dutta, and, in memory of my mother Anima Bhattacharya.

A MEETING OF TWO MINDS
G e d d e s T a g o r e
L E T T E R S

Edited and introduced by Bashabi Fraser

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COVER SKETCH OF TAGORE BY ROTHENSTEIN courtesy of Marion Geddes

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My parents first led me to the Patrick Geddes legend, as they knew Arthur Geddes personally. They also gave me the privilege of growing up in a culture enriched by Tagore's presence, which is so alive in the Bengal they brought me back to after their research at the LSE, for which I am eternally grateful. They have read, advised on and clarified many of the details in the Introduction of this book. This work would not have happened without my sense of a new identity, that of being an Indo-Scot, which I owe to my husband, Neil. It has thus become a mission for me to link my two countries, something Tagore and Geddes tried to do, as is evidenced in this correspondence. Without Neil's unstinting help, suggestions and infinite patience, this book would not have been possible. And last, but not the least, this book has as its impetus, my daughter Rupsha's inter-cultural present and future, for whom I want to leave this small legacy, not of Empire and all the misunderstanding such memories entail on both sides, but of understanding and effort, that is possible when like minds meet.

Bashabi Fraser
Edinburgh, July 2005.

Foreword

Murdo Macdonald

It is an honour to write a foreword to this collection of letters exchanged between Patrick Geddes and Rabindranath Tagore. Bashabi Fraser's research gives us significant insight into the relationship between these two contemporaries whose careers bridged the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fraser's work is the more important because the link with Geddes has been a neglected aspect of Tagore's life, perhaps because Geddes is most remembered today as a pioneering ecologist and town planner, rather than as a cultural activist. Geddes' cultural activism was, of course, inherent to his ecological and planning activities. Tagore understood this very well when he wrote, in the foreword to Geddes' first biography 'he has the precision of the scientist and the vision of a prophet; and at the same time the power of an artist to make his ideas visible through the language of symbols.' Yet the most profound link between Tagore and Geddes was their shared sense of the interdependence of the local, the national and the international. When Lewis Mumford wrote of Patrick Geddes that 'his Scotland embraced Europe and his Europe embraced the world' could he not have written with equal validity of Tagore that his Bengal embraced India and his India embraced the world? For both Geddes and Tagore are characterised by their internationalism, yet for both men this internationalism is based firmly on an understanding of, and utter commitment to, locality.

University of Dundee

November 2001.

Introduction

*Leaves are masses of silence
round flowers which are their words*

— Rabindranath Tagore

By leaves we live

— Patrick Geddes

*... there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from
the ends of the earth!*

— Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West' (1889)

INITIAL STEPS

The exchange of ideas and thoughts in the form of letters, which bear testimony to an important friendship between two great men, negates the oft-quoted idea that East and West cannot meet. Resurrecting them has been a daunting task. Nevertheless, compiling and editing the correspondence between Patrick Geddes and Rabindranath Tagore, has proved worthwhile.

After my return from Britain to India, in the early sixties, I grew up in a culture steeped in Tagore, in the language we spoke, catching ourselves quoting Tagore consciously or unconsciously, in our daily speech in the Bengali we spoke (like Shakespeare in English), finding expression for every mood, occasion and festival in his numerous songs (over 2,200), dancing his dance dramas and being confronted by him in the daily rhythm of life in India.

When I came to Britain in the 1980's, I was a witness to Geddes' reconstruction work in Edinburgh, 'There stand the houses he has built – visible, tangible, delectable; concrete proof that he is no visionary'.¹ I was also amazed to see how few knew about Tagore or even remembered him, though he visited the world on invitations and gathered huge audiences when he spoke, in Europe, America and Canada (he also visited the Far East and South East Asia, South America, Iran and Egypt on similar trips). I spoke of him as a poet, a song composer, a novelist, a short story writer, a playwright, an essayist, a painter, a social and rural reformer, a political thinker and philosopher, an environmentalist, an educationist. When the response has been lukewarm, I have found myself being defensive, saying to, sometimes, an almost unbelieving audience, that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his English translation of *Gitanjali* in 1913. It was on this trip, that quite by chance I met Jeannie Geddes, the widow of Arthur Geddes. Mrs. Geddes was a friend of Carmen Dakin, a family friend, with whom I was staying at that time. Jeannie Geddes gave me a set of the songs of Tagore that Arthur Geddes had compiled and edited, with musical notations and English prose translations. It was a strange coincidence, for my parents had known Arthur Geddes back in England, as fellow geographers. In fact, my father recalls that Arthur Geddes had spoken to them in fluent Bengali!

After my return from Edinburgh to India, I was struck by the temporary oblivion Patrick Geddes had suffered even amongst the intelligentsia. *Who was Patrick Geddes?* And again I fumbled – town planner? biologist? architect? sociologist? physicist? generalist?? environmentalist? educationist? It is in this last capacity that I wish to

¹ Philip Boardman, *Patrick Geddes: Maker of the Future*, Introduction by Lewis Mumford (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. 154

² Murdo Macdonald refers to the 'untimely generalism' in 'Patrick Geddes – educator, ecologist, visual thinker' in *Edinburgh Review*, Issue 88, Summer, 1992.

introduce both Geddes and Tagore, *i.e.*, by discussing their ideas on Education. For Geddes was, perhaps, one of the most well-known Scots in his time in the world as Tagore was one of the most known Indians outside India (apart from Gandhi or even Nehru and we are not looking at political figures here) – both in the East and the West, known internationally as intellectuals, and seen as representative of their respective countries, Scotland and India.

When I returned to Scotland, it was Professor Murdo Macdonald, then at the Centre for Continuing Education at Edinburgh University,³ who put me onto this Geddes-Tagore relationship, asking me if I could do something about it. But I hadn't a clue as to what I could or should do. My friend, Rachel Blow, who has a long familial link with Bengal, gave me the next prod I needed. She came back from a trip to Shantiniketan and told me of her dismay when she did not find a single reference to Patrick Geddes at the Rabindra-Bhavana, the archival centre of Tagore's University, Visva-Bharati, to which Geddes had lent a hand in planning. I wanted to know *why*. Why was there this near obliteration from memory of Geddes in India and Tagore in Britain?

Perhaps, one reason behind their present neglect is that the trust and enthusiasm they aroused and nurtured in their lifetime has lost the inspiring spark of their presence. Even while they were alive, we know that their institutions foundered in their absence.⁴

But even while they were alive, there were many times when they were misunderstood and were often lonely souls. 'Much of what I must say about Geddes applies equally, I find, to not a few other men of genius I have known... for in one way or another one must pay for their extraordinary gifts: the very self-absorption that sustains their work, along with

³ The whole concept of continuing education, which is now promulgated by the 'School of Life Long Learning at the Centre for Continuing Education', is so much in line with what Geddes had taken as the initiative to push for from 1887 onwards, in the University Extension Movement in Scotland. Incidentally, Professor Macdonald now holds the chair for Scottish Art History at Dundee University, where Geddes was a Professor (albeit of Botany), when it was part of the University of St. Andrews.

⁴ '... projects tended to founder when Geddes himself was not longer totally involved, vitalizing them with his energy...' Paddy Kitchen, *A Most Unsettling Person*, (London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1975), p. 17. And similarly, 'In Tagore's absence his institutions tended to go to pieces...' Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore, The Myriad-Minded Man*, (Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 275.

a godlike self-confidence, breaks down normal social attachments.⁵ Lewis Mumford, who says this, had not personally known Tagore, but those who did know him, could well apply this passage to Tagore. Tagore was a lonely man in many ways and as Kripalani⁶ describes his stand, beliefs and work, his was 'A Lone Voice',⁷ that of, as Gandhi shrewdly put it, 'The Great Sentinel', and as Kripalani adds, 'of the rights of man.'⁸ The belief that such men are not capable of 'normal social attachments' is a harsh judgement, based on Mumford's initial meeting with Geddes which flawed his later relationship.⁹ But this kind of response perhaps explains the ambivalence evident in some of their social and personal relationships and commitments.

Mumford goes on to remark, 'Genius, just because of its originality, tends to be self-isolating; and the less its departures are understood and accepted, the more self-protectively inviolable becomes the resulting solitude, and the more difficult it is to overcome the solecisms that result from this isolation.'¹⁰

In the course of this book, 'Geddes' will be a reference to Patrick Geddes and 'Tagore' to Rabindranath Tagore. Other Geddeses and Tagores will be specified by use of their full names as in Anna Geddes or Debendranath Tagore. The place, Shantiniketan where Visva-Bharati is, is referred to with an 'Sh'. In the Geddes-Tagore correspondence, we have retained 'Santiniketan', unless otherwise spelt by the writer, *e.g.*, in the letter of 26 February 1926 by Geddes to Mahalanobis and by Arthur Geddes in his later letters. In our references to the place, we will use the 'sh' to denote the labial sound, to differentiate it from the dental 's', to reflect the Bengali phoneme and spelling.

⁵ *Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes: The Correspondence*, ed. and introduction by Frank G. Novak Jr. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 346.

⁶ Kripalani was the husband of Nandita, the adopted daughter of Rathindranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore's son.

⁷ Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1962), pp. 356-90

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁹ 'Somehow, our companionship got off on the wrong foot; and we never managed to fall in step afterward...' *Ibid.*, p. 345.

¹⁰ Novak, 1995, *ibid.*

PEOPLE AND PLACES

Some explanations are necessary at this stage to describe the people and places who/which are important to this correspondence.

Shantiniketan means the abode of peace. It was where Tagore's father, Maharshi¹¹ Debendranath Tagore meditated one evening under two *chhatim* trees, and taken by the sheer bareness of the place, decided to buy it.¹² This is where Tagore founded his school in 1921. The school became the nucleus from which the poet started on his next ideal, the International University, Visva-Bharati. It was inaugurated in December 1922.¹³ Tagore was keen on the idea of a synthesis of the East and West.¹⁴ In 1919, with leading intellectuals in Europe, he had signed 'La déclaration pour l'indépendance de l'esprit', an initiative of Romain Rolland. So later that year, Tagore wrote to Rolland of his deep hurt in seeing how Asia had no real love for Europe as there was contempt on the one side and hatred on the other.¹⁵ It was to make possible and to perpetuate this 'synthesis ... the meeting of East and the West'¹⁶ that he established Visva-Bharati, his International University.

In a letter dated 11 October, Rabindranath Tagore wrote to his son, Rathindranath from USA: 'I have in mind to make Santiniketan the connecting thread between India and the world. I have to found a world centre for the study of humanity there. The days of petty nationalism are numbered – let the first step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make this place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography.'¹⁷ This is something which Geddes too attempted in graphically taking the viewer beyond the Edinburgh skyline to all the

¹¹ Maharshi or the Maha Rishi means the Great Sage, so-called because of his ascetic ideals and the way of life he adopted for himself and for his children.

¹² Dutta and Robinson, p. 53.

¹³ Kripalani gives the date as the 23 December (Kripalani, 1962, p. 299), while Dutta and Robinson give it as 22 December, (p. 220), though its foundation stone was laid three years earlier on 22 December, 1918 (ibid).

¹⁴ Dutta and Robinson, 1995, p. 222.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. In 'A Poet's School' Tagore says '...I refuse to think that the twin spirits of East and West, the Mary and the Martha, can never meet to make perfect the realization of truth. And in spite of our material poverty and the antagonism of time I wait patiently for this meeting.' In Humayun Kabir, *Towards Universal Man: Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 295.

¹⁷ Dutta and Robinson, 1995, p. 20.