

Rabindranath's Role in Women's Emancipation

Rabindranath's role in the liberation of Bengali women was a seminal one. Initially, he exposed the plight of women and argued for their autonomy through his letters, short stories, and essays. Through his novels, he was able to construct new and vital female role models to inspire a new generation of Bengali women. Later, by his act of admitting females in to his Santiniketan school, he became an innovative pioneering coeducation.

The Jorasanko Tagore family played a seminal role in almost all the innovative socio-cultural changes that occurred in 19th century Bengal, and female emancipation was no exception. Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), the grandfather of Rabindranath, was advocating women's education and social reform regarding women as early as 1842, following his trip to Europe. Rabindranath's father, Debendranath (1817-1905), though conservative by nature, supported the Bethune school for women's education, and permitted the participation of his daughters and other female members of the family in various forms of education and social work.

Most notable was the liberating role of Rabindranath's brother, Satyendranath (1842-1923), whose wife Gnanadanandini (1851-1941) became a role model for modern female behavior. Not only did Gnanadanandini redesign Bengali female dress to make it more appropriate for travelling beyond the *antahpur* (inner courtyard) she contributed articles on female educational and social reform to several journals and travelled to England with her three children without the accompaniment of her husband. Rabindranath thus grew up in a household where the norms concerning women were changing rather rapidly.

Rabindranath made his first trip to England in 1878, at the age of 17, and some of his earliest statements regarding the need for Bengali women's independence come in a series of letters written to his family. After attending a party where British men and women mixed freely, Tagore wrote a letter contrasting the free mixing that occurred between men and women in England and the isolation of Bengali women, who were confined to *purdah* and separated from the outside world. Wrote Rabindranath:

It is only natural that men and women should seek amusement together. Women are a part of the human race and God has created them as part of society. To consider the enjoyment of free mixing between people to be a cardinal sin, to be unsociable and to turn it into a sensational matter is not only abnormal, it is unsocial, and therefore in a sense uncivilized. Men are engrossed in all manner of amusement in the outside world, while women are like their privately owned tamed animals, chained docilely to the walls of the innermost chambers of the houses. (Rabindranath Tagore, Letters from a Sojourner in Europe, ed. Supriya Roy, Visva-Bharati, 2008: 88).

In response to criticism of this letter, which had been published in *Bharati*, then edited by his older brother Dwijendranath (1840-1926), he wrote:

The Editor has said that keeping women in purdah is not an outcome of the selfishness of men, it is but a natural outcome of the demands that the duties of house holding place on one. This is a very old excuse provided by those against liberation of women; but I feel that it need not be pointed out that to consider the practice normal to enter into purdah, surrounded by walls for the rest of one's lifetime, severing all contacts with the rest of the world, is in itself very abnormal (ibid, p.100).

Following his return to India, Tagore was put in charge of the family estates in East Bengal. There, for the first time, Rabindranath had an extended exposure to rural society and to the sufferings of rural people in general and rural women in particular. This was the period when many of his short stories were written and we find him portraying the plight of orphans and widows such as Ratan in the *'Postmaster'* and Kusum in *'Ghater Katha'* ('The Tale of the Ghat') or the abuses of the dowry system and child-wives as illustrated by the abuse of Nirupama in *'Dena Paona'* ('Profit and Loss'), as well as the repression of female learning portrayed through the character of Uma in *Khata* ('Exercise Book'). Rabindranath's most radical short story *'Striripatra'* ('A Wife's Letter') came later. Here the transformation of its main female character Mrinal – an upper caste woman – is portrayed, from submissive wife to autonomous individual. Mrinal chooses to live apart from the joint family as a result of the oppressiveness to a female relative that she witnessed within the family. It should be noted that Rabindranath also encouraged female writers, and as a result of his encouragement, the feminist writings of Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani (1861-1920) were published in such journals as *Sadhana* and *Bharati*.

When Rabindranath started his school in Santiniketan in 1901, he had wanted to include girls as well, but it did not prove practical until 1909, when a further blow to the traditional image of the Brahmacharyashram occurred with the admission of women. The first six girls – who had close associations with the ashram – were boarded in one of the cottages, where they were looked after by Ajit Chakravarti's mother and Mohit

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Cultural Calendar for July 2010

July 9

Film: Sampurn Ramayan (In Hindi)
Episodes: 145 to 152
Venue & Time: ICC 5.30 p.m. Duration: 3 hrs

July 14

Film: Watering the Grassroots
Can you hear me? (Documentaries with English subtitles)
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m. Duration: 50 mins

July 16

Bharatha Natyam & Kuchupuddi Recital
by Mr. Thavarajah Mohanapriyan, Graduate of Kalai Kaveri College of Fine Arts
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

July 21

Film: Indian Elections – A mammoth democratic exercise
Bamboo Flute (Documentaries with English subtitles)
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m. Duration: 50 mins

July 23

Hindustani Vocal Music Recital
by Shasthrapathi Ms. Sangeetha Michael
(Dalugama), Graduate of Vishva Bharathi University, Shanthiniketan
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

July 27

Film: Beyond Tradition
(Documentary in English)
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m. Duration: 1 hr

July 30

Tabla Recital
by the students of Visharad S. W. Randoowa
Venue & Time: ICC 6.00 p.m.

(Admission to all programmes is free and on first come first served basis)

Chandra Sen's wife Susheela. What made the experiment so radical was that the girls were not put in separate classes but rather joined the boys in classes, sports and *mandir* services. Further impetus for the women's program came when Rathindranath was married to the talented Pratima Devi (1863-1969) in 1910, and she began taking a prominent role in the ashram activities, particularly in drama and the arts. Rabindranath continued his exploration of the female psyche in his writings. The publication of his novel *Gora* was significant for its delineation of young female characters and the manner in which they interacted with the society around them. Such characters as Lolita, Sucharita and Anandamayee are shown in the process of shaping new identities and personal autonomy as they developed alternate ways of interaction with men and society. The development of such vital characters signalled the potential for a new identity that Rabindranath upheld for the female students at Santiniketan. The novel's characters transcended the stereotypes of their sex, caste and race to participate in a broader social vision, becoming role models for a new generation of Bengali women.

In his educational essays also, Rabindranath began addressing the issue of women's education. His essay *Strishiksha* ('Female Education'), which was initially published in the journal *Sabuj Patra* and later translated as 'The Education of Women' in August 1915, states in no uncertain terms that there should be equality in education:

Whatever is worth knowing, is knowledge. It should be known equally by men and women – not for the sake of practical utility, but for the sake of knowing...the desire to know is the law of human nature. (Shiksha, 1351, B.S. ed, vol I, 181).

This was not to say, however, that there should be no distinction in education:

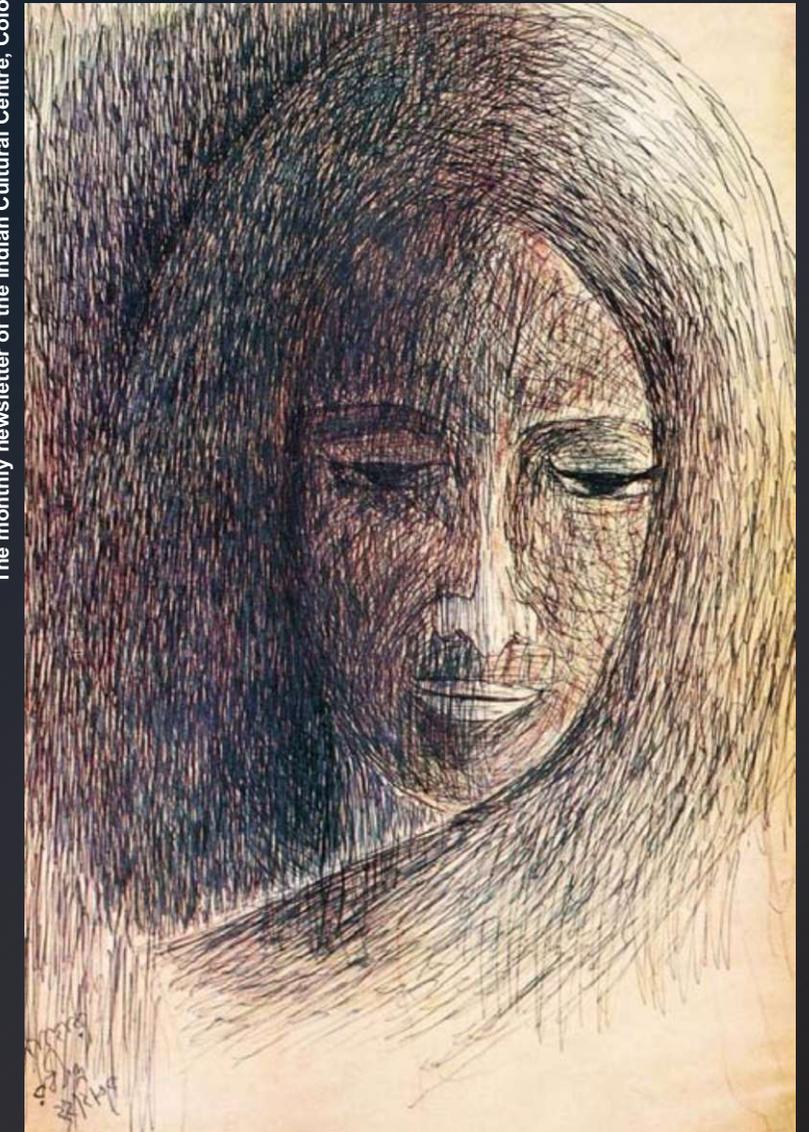
Knowledge has two departments: one, pure knowledge; the other, utilitarian knowledge. In the field of pure knowledge, there is no distinction between men and women; distinction exists in the sphere of practical utility. Women should acquire pure knowledge for becoming a mature being, and utilitarian knowledge for becoming true women (ibid, p.183).

As Santiniketan expanded to include women as students and village welfare as an objective curriculum

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SANDESH

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courtesy: India Perspectives

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Past Events

5th May

Abhijñāna Śākuntalam of Kālidāsa - A musical dance drama



Abhijñāna Śākuntalam of Kālidāsa was presented as a musical dance drama by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations on 5th May 2010 at the Veerasingham hall, Jaffna. The dance drama was produced by Aru Sri Art Theare under the direction of Kalasuri Arunthathy Sri Ranganathan.

Abhijñāna Śākuntalam is a tale of love, cruel humiliation and suspicion, courage and sweet reunion. In the dance drama the episodes of the Abhijñāna Śākuntalam were chosen so that the entire story could be portrayed as a dance drama comprising ten scenes in about two hours. Hon. Governor of Northern Province, Major General G.A. Chandrasiri graced the occasion as Chief Guest. Over 2000 guests attended the performance. High Commissioner of India Shri Ashok K Kantha was also present.



An idea of the overwhelming response the performance received in Jaffna can be had from the photographs above.



14th May

Kathak dance recital by Ms.Rangana V.Navagamuwa, Ms.Anjali Yashodhara & Mr. Sadara Supathum Peiris

Ms.Rangana V.Navagamuwa, Ms.Anjali Yashodhara & Mr. Sadara Supathum Peiris presented a brilliant Kathak dance performance at the Centre. They presented ten items which lasted an hour. The recital included Guru Vandana, Ullas Tarana, Chathurang, Shiva Tandava and many more. The evening was very well enjoyed by the audience gathered at the Centre. Around 75 – 100 guests participated.



18th May

Programme to mark the 149th Birth Anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore

The Indian Cultural Centre commemorated the 149th birth anniversary of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore on the evening of 18th May with a programme that brought together several Tagore lovers and Shantiniketan graduates. The programme included a talk by Prof. Chandrasiri Palliyaguru entitled "Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore - a universal citizen" in Sinhala followed by an instrumental recital by renowned violinist Mr. Somasiri Illesinghe.



21st May

One character dance drama "Kutrala Kuravanchi" written by "Thirikuda Rasapa Kavirayar"

Renowned Bharatanatyam dancer Ms. Subashini Pathmanathan presented a one character dance drama "Kutrala Kuravanchi" written by "Thirikuda Rasapa Kavirayar" Altogether 119 songs are in this dance drama, out of those she presented a selection of story oriented songs for the dance drama for approximately an hour. The evening was very well enjoyed by the audience gathered at the Centre. Around 70–80 guests attended.

Past Events

24 – 26th May

Exhibition

- Kalpana – Masterpieces of Figurative Indian Contemporary Paintings. An exhibition of reprints curated by Anjolie Ela Menon
- Religions of India – Photographic exhibition by eminent photographer Amit Mehra.



An exhibition of painting entitled "Kalpana" and a photographic exhibition entitled "Religions of India" was held at the Lionel Wendt Gallery from 24th to 26th May. Around 29 paintings and 30 photographs were on

display. The exhibition was inaugurated on 24th May by Mr. Chandragupta Thenuwara, a renowned Sri Lankan artist and Director of Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts. Around 150–250 guests visited to view the exhibition.

Rabindranath's Role in Women's Emancipation.. Contd.

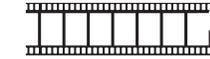
innovations were required. These often took place through extra-curricular activities such as the 1910 drama *Lakshmi Puja*, which was staged and performed by female students. Tagore brought in dance teachers from Benares to train the girls and when they left, he personally taught them.

With the foundation of Visva-Bharati, a residence known as 'Nari-Bhavan' began attracting female students from India and abroad. The girls participated in all the academic departments with virtually the same courses as the male students. In addition, they also received special classes in cooking and kitchen work from an American nurse, Gretchen Green, who was attached to Sriniketan. Along with the general social and cultural activities of the institution, the girls organized their own clubs, societies and organizations. Rabindranath believed in a holistic education, and the girls were encouraged to participate in physical education as well. They engaged in games, sports, hikes and excursion, and even the athletics of self-defense such as lathi play and ju-jitsu. In Sriniketan, Dhirananda Roy (1902-1971), a former student, organized the Brati-Balakas/Brati-Balikas (literally boys and girls who have taken a vow), a group patterned after the boy scouts/girl guides and the American 4-H movement. Their co-educational work helped the village children develop various practical skills and overcome caste prejudices through group participation.

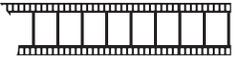
We can, therefore, conclude that Rabindranath's role in the liberation of Bengali women was a seminal one. Initially, he exposed the plight of women and argued for their autonomy through his letters, short stories, and essays. Through his novels, he was able to construct new and vital female role models to inspire a new generation of Bengali women. Later, by his act of admitting females into his Santiniketan school, he became an innovative pioneer in coeducation. Not satisfied with imitating existing educational models, Tagore set out to create an alternative model of learning that was based on the education of the whole personality, whether male or female. It is hard to overestimate the social change that resulted through Rabindranath's writings and his encouragement of women's participation in academic events, sports, dance and creative expression.

The author conducts courses on South Asia at New College, University of Toronto, Canada. Her research interests include Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray; and Bengali cultural and literary

Source: India Perspectives, Kathleen M O'Connell



Films in July



Sampoorn Ramayan (Episodes: 145 to 152)

Sampoorn Ramayan was the first mythological serial shown on the Indian television, created by Dr. Ramanand Sagar. The serial portrays the story of Lord Ram in a most aesthetic manner and portrays the culture and traditions of India.

Watering the Grassroots (with English subtitles)

The documentary Watering the Grassroots is a journey of a group of women, separated by geography and culture. But their stories converge. Startlingly similar in their individual journeys for the hardships and pain they have gone through they come across friends and mentors who show the way to a promising life.

The film is about the evolution and changing face of microfinance in India. It is about women whose lives have been transformed, about their needs for self confidence and expression, about their need to lead and to give a better life. Through the documentary we are introduced to the concept of women coming together, sharing their problems and finding solutions. The filmmaker Vibhu Kashyap of R.S. Creation has directed number of television commercials, music videos and documentaries.

Can you hear me? (with English subtitles)

On 16th November 2006, the Government of India notified a new Community Radio Policy which permitted Non-Governmental organisations and other civil society organisations to run and operate community radio stations. In less than three years, more than 440 community radio initiatives have taken off in the country. Community radio, based on the concept of radio-of, by and for the people, provides a medium that is robust, resonant with local voices, and truly representative of local issues and initiatives.

"Can You Hear Me?" is a film that covers three community radio stations, operating in India's hinterland. It captures how villagers, especially women are using community radio, not only as a medium of entertainment, but also to enhance awareness and bring about social change. The filmmaker, Artists@core, a television production company, has made films on subjects ranging from climate change, rural health, women and agriculture, to name a few.

Indian Elections – A mammoth democratic exercise (with English subtitles)

Is a documentary film depicting the journey of how the world's largest democracy conducts, manages and oversees the elections. It shows how India, irrespective of the changing times, has successfully mounted general elections and has achieved the hallmarks of an energetic, pulsating, vibrant, electoral democracy. The filmmaker: Laxmana Dalima has directed documentaries for Doorsharshan, International and national networks for more than 30 years.

Bamboo Flute (with English subtitles)

India has as many varieties of the flute as it has languages. In it one finds the purest tone. The metonymies of Indian cultural practice and poetry are full of the flute's enchantment and go beyond the mythology of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The film Bamboo Flute works through the creative mode of musical and specifically cinematographic elaboration, suggested by the actual playing of flute. Through parallel and other configurations, different melodic lines may position themselves in space and time to suggest the creative act as also the compassion generated by the metaphysics of the flute. The form of the film evolves from the musicality and the specificity of its visual correspondences in architecture, dance, poetry and the intersecting axes of color and narrative. The filmmaker, Kumar Shahani, is one of India's most distinguished film makers. In his career of over 20 years he has pioneered an art-poetic movement in cinema and is acknowledged as a "visionary who puts everything into question"

Beyond Tradition (with English subtitles)

India has immensely rich heritage of classical dance. Timeless in its beauty and appeal, Indian classical dance has already won global acclaim. The biggest challenge for many Indian dancers today is how to delve deeper into that reservoir of tradition for inspiration, yet to transcend and go beyond it to create a new dance aesthetic which is more reflective of the concerns and sensibilities of contemporary India. Beyond Tradition explores the exciting and inspirational journey. The filmmaker: Rajesh S. Jala, an award winning film maker has been making documentary films for last 12 years.

