

May 11, 1932

Rabindranath Tagore, 'Interview with Jenabe Dashty, Member of Parliament, Persia, 11 May 1932'

Citation:

"Rabindranath Tagore, 'Interview with Jenabe Dashty, Member of Parliament, Persia, 11 May 1932'", May 11, 1932, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Rabindranath Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq: 1932*, transl. from Bengali by Surendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sukhendu Ray (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2003), 154-159. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh.

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Summary:

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the 1913 literature Nobel Prize laureate, was a leading Bengali-language Indian writer and a truly influential intellectual in the subcontinent, across Asia, and indeed the world. He travelled to more than 30 countries in the America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. He often and perhaps most importantly in Asia talked about Asian civilization: a bloc shared by entities like Japan, India, or Iran that—here followed Orientalist tropes—was more spiritual than the West. A 1926 visit of his to Egypt impressed Iranian educational officials and diplomats, including the consul-general in Bombay, Jalal al-Din Keyhan, who maintained close relations with that city's Zoroastrian community. As a result, Tagore was invited to Iran, whereto he flew in 1932 for a month-long country-wide tour. Analyzed in Afshin Marashi's *Exile and the Nation: The Parsi Community of India and the Making of Modern Iran* (2020), his tour inter alia included a visit to the tomb, in Shiraz, of one of Iran's most famous poets, Hafez, and dozens of meetings with regular citizens, intellectuals, and politicians, including an audience in Iran's capital of Tehran with the country's ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944; r. 1925-1941).

This and one other text contained in the collection are (perhaps revised) transcripts of two conversations Tagore had in Tehran. One was with educators, likely in the garden palace in which Tagore was put up; the other took place during a party at the residence of the known politician, journalist, and secularist thinker Ali Dashti (1897-1982). Certainly the former but perhaps also the latter conversation was facilitated by an English-Persian translator, likely the poet Gholamreza Rashed Yasemi, or Dinshah Irani, a leading Indian Zoroastrian invited with Tagore to Iran, or Jalal al-Din Keyhan, who accompanied Tagore, too. At the time, Iran was in the midst of a sociocultural transformation. While led by the increasingly autocratic Reza Shah Pahlavi, it was initiated and carried by an expanding modern middle class, as Cyrus Schayegh has shown in *Who Is Knowledgeable, Is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society* (2009). This process went hand in hand with a nationalism that was

importantly, though not exclusively, focused on Iran's pre-Islamic past. At that time, the nationalist narrative went, Iran was interwoven with the Indian subcontinent, whose inhabitants are, like Iranians, Aryans—a European term warmly welcomed by many Iranians and Indians. In this simultaneously nationalist and supra-nationalist narrative, that common Indo-Iranian realm was broken only when Semitic Arabs, whom Iranian nationalists often malign, invaded Iran in the seventh century.

We thank Afshin Marashi for information provided about the translation practices during Tagore's journey.

Original Language:

Bengali

Contents:

Translation - English

Interview with Jenabe Dashty, Member of Parliament, Persia

11 May 1932

Poet: My time in Persia is coming to an end. I have not been here for long, yet I do not feel like a stranger. It is surprising that though I do not know your language somehow I have come very close to you and can easily communicate with you and feel the warmth of your friendship. There is not much difference between your people and ours, the general outlook on life and temperament seems to be very much akin.

Dashty: Languages are after all secondary; of primary importance is our psychological make-up which manifests itself directly through the medium of gestures and expressions. You told me in Bushire that you have come to Persia to discover the old India. Quite true, our real spirit is old Indian; it comes from a past when we shared a common culture. Even now an inner affinity persists, and it is this that makes you feel at home with us.

Poet: Yes, the path was open for me before I was born. As a matter of fact, in our home in Bengal the spirit of Iran was living influence when I was a child. My revered father and my elder brothers were deeply attached to Persian mystical literature and art.

Going further back one discovers that at one time the Bengali language feely borrowed words from your vocabulary which we use now without knowing their origin. When you find this, you must know that something of your culture flows through our daily life; for words are merely symbols of thoughts and attitudes which they represent. Even before the Mohamedan rule in India there was active cultural interchange between India and Iran; in our classical art and literature direct traces of this are to be discovered.

I do not indeed find your life and habits at all unfamiliar, it is very easy for me to adjust myself to your ways and to realize your spirit.

Dashty: I hope we have not tired you too much. We all wanted to see you and get the inspiration of your personality. It has not been possible to spare you as much as we should have done.

Poet: You know, that is what I wanted. I had been longing to meet different groups of your people, to know individuals irrespective of their vocation, their station in life. I confess that sometimes the strain of engagements has told on my health but I have never minded this. It has been a great inspiration for me to meet your people to converse with them on present-day affairs in Persia which are of vital interest to us.

A gentleman: Have you already started a centre of Persian culture in your university in Bengal?

Poet: Yes, because I always felt that it is necessary for us both to know each other, not only because of our common ancestry but because there is something in your literature and art which deeply appeals to us. The Persian temperament is poetic, you love music and merry conversation, you share our love for nature's beauty.

If you were rigidly pious 'Mullahs' corresponding to our Hindu priests, we could not have dared to invite you. Unfortunately two of our biggest communities in India have yet too many representatives of this type of bigotry and that is why we cannot come together. I claim the collaboration of your scholars and artists whose influence will unite us culturally and modify our differences which are not really fundamental.

Dashty: How do you like Persian music?

Poet: Very much indeed. Some of your recent innovations I do not fully understand. It seems to me that they have not yet been fully assimilated by the native genius of your music. They are too reminiscent of Europe; in any case, they do not move me so much as your classical music.

Dashty: We are of the same opinion. We feel that the introduction of harmony is too recent to have successfully enriched our music; but may be gradually we shall evolve a music which will be all the more beautiful because of these innovations.

Poet: It must be so. You have all along had a wonderful gift of assimilating influences from outside and coming out more fully with the expression of your own unique culture. In music too you are sure to gain by European influence. I have always felt sad that European music had not had any direct influence on our own, that great European composers such as Beethoven have, unlike great European poets or

philosophers, wielded little or no influence on Eastern cultural movements. For European music is unquestionably great and without doubt our own music would be all the richer if it can absorb, into its living texture, creative influences from European music.

Dashty: I am one of those who believe that Persia should assimilate 100 percent of American culture. I am not afraid of foreign influence; indeed, I believe, that nothing can radically change our temperament, so that we may safely go in for Americanization. We shall then be American in our methods but Persian in our culture. I believe you try to follow the same principle in Santiniketan [the seat of Tagore's Visva-Bharati Academy].

Poet: The time has come when we must think deeply about human civilization. You must have read Spengler's book on European civilization. It raises searching questions about the destiny of the modern Western civilization and gives us dangerous parallelism from history.

When you speak of hundred percent Americanization you must remember that America herself is faced today with an imminent crisis and has yet to achieve a stability which will prove the soundness of her social and political machinery.

I was talking today to a German scientist - Dr Stratil-Sauer of Leipzig - who has come here all the way from Berlin by motor car for geological exploration, and he was willing to tell me the same thing about Europe. The whole Western civilization is undergoing a severe trial. The reckless mechanization of life which has gone on in the West is already having a drastic reaction.

We in the East must ponder seriously before we go in for hasty imitation of Western life in its totality. There is a profound maladjustment somewhere at the very basis of European life. Everywhere there is a material well-being but happiness has vanished. And how could it be otherwise? Pierce through the veneer of modernity and you find almost primitive barbarism staring at you. What is high-pressure modern life for the multitude but a ceaseless preoccupation with physical needs—a hot pursuit of dress, expensive cars, elaborate food and housing, that is to say, of materials which satisfy the elementary needs of our animal existence?

Dashty: Our soul accepts what it may; we cannot determine consciously how much to receive or to reject exactly. The whole process of assimilation is a subconscious one so that there is perhaps no fear of only outside influence totally submerging or exterminating the basic character of our civilization. If we try to profit by American modes of life and hold them before our people we shall probably adopt only a few of them and that will be all to our benefit. Greek ideals, for example, have left their legacy in the great architecture and sculpture of India; but at the beginning of Greek influence we would probably have feared that India was doing harm to its traditions by accepting Greek motives and technique to experiment upon. In Persia similarly, we have had periods of extraneous influence but this has only vitalized our Persian genius. We have quickly shaken off the imitative phase and retained something from it which have helped us.

Poet: Why then do you emphasize American modes of life and how can you isolate and specify a particular country when you want the healthy contact of science, which is neither American nor Western but universal in its truth. I am not condemning America in particular but only pointing out that when you say you want to imitate a particular country or people you can only copy things and external facts, you cannot assimilate truths which lie at the foundation of our human character. If any nation or people have been successful in giving shape to ideals which are of perennial value, what we have to learn from them is their capacity to absorb and establish these ideals; we must not merely copy the results that others have produced. I am not against absorbing truths which are of universal value; as a matter of fact, it is our human birthright to claim such truths as our own. But I am against borrowing ready-made models or emphasizing upon the need of imitating isolated external facts which are particular to a particular race or a nation. Let our emphasis be on Truth, not on particular facts which have had their special evolution under inevitable local circumstances.

Dashty: I quite agree. I mentioned America as an example.

Poet: The German scientist told me that Europe is sick of her mechanized high-speed

life which adds materials but fails to satisfy the soul. As a result of this, there are many of them who seek out remote spots where they can forget the rush and fever of a purposeless existence; they go to the South Sea Islands, Madagascar, Middle Africa and so on where they can wash themselves clean of Western ways of living. He told me of a great Leipzig professor who gave up his scientific work and all that he held dear in his life to search for inner peace which he found in a Tibetan monastery. It may be a reaction but it indicates very grave problems which the modern age can no longer ignore. In Darmstadt, after the war, German students with pale emaciated faces used to flock round me and ask: 'Sir, we have lost faith in our teachers, they have misled us. What shall we do with our lives?' They expected an Eastern poet to give them something which would satisfy their spiritual hunger, some philosophy of life which the Western world needed for its salvation.

Dashty: Yes, we must work to bring the Western spirit of Science and the Eastern Philosophy of Life together. Materially we must be secure, spiritually we must develop our human wealth of character.

Poet: That is what I say. We must get out of the tangle of doctrines and the infatuation of material results in order to achieve a balanced harmony of life which, as you indicate, take cognizance of our complete human personality comprehending the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of our nature. This harmony, however, can never be established unless we have sufficient detachment of mind to judge for ourselves, to minister to the essential and reject all that is ephemeral and delusive in building the foundation of our national life. It would be fatal if we surrender our critical faculty to a mood of indiscriminate emulation. We in the East, however poor we may now be materially, must reserve the right of judging what we consider to be beneficial or not for humanity, of selecting for ourselves a path which suits the evolution of our civilization. By exercising this right of judgment we shall not only be serving our own country but do our inescapable duty to the whole world of humanity of which we form a part.

Dashty: We thank you, Sir, for your words of wisdom which, we assure you, we shall treasure in the depths of our life.