Why Tagore, Why Now?
The Relevance of Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century

The Institute for South Asia Studies is thrilled to announce the launch of The Tagore Program on Literature, Culture and Philosophy at UC Berkeley. This program honors Rabindranath Tagore, India’s iconic literary and spiritual polymath, with the goal of fostering greater appreciation of his life and legacy. Among his many honors, Rabindranath Tagore (1861 - 1941) was the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize (in 1913), in this case in Literature. As well as a widely lauded novelist, poet, short story writer and playwright, this remarkable man also was a deeply respected political and social reformer, musician, composer, painter, scientist, environmentalist, and educator. It is his work aimed at promoting long-term multicultural, spiritual and social understanding, however, that remains among his greatest legacies.

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Rabindranath Tagore’s life and work is as relevant today as when he was alive. He is the greatest poet, writer, and music composer in Bangla (a language spoken by roughly 200 million people). His influence among Bengalis is often characterized as a combination of Shakespeare and Goethe for Europeans. In a world increasingly ravaged by narrow-minded ethnic nationalisms and attacks on democratic institutions, Tagore’s writings offer a clear and eloquent voice of reason and humanitarianism. Concerned about individuals and societies losing their moral compass, Tagore consistently spoke out against all forms of xenophobia, assertions of ethnic superiority, or chest thumping nationalism. In a 1908 response to a question whether he was a patriotic Indian, Tagore noted: “Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.” A similar clarity coursed through Tagore’s writings about religion. Although deeply spiritual, he consistently denounced all forms of religious intolerance and exclusivity.

Tagore’s biography encompasses other noteworthy aspects as well. In the field of education, he led the drive to create a school that ultimately evolved into the world-renowned Visva Bharati University. Its famous alumni include, among others, the Nobel Prize economist Amartya Sen, India’s Prime Minister Indra Gandhi, Oscar-winning film-maker Satyajit Ray, and prominent contemporary artists such as K. G. Subramanyan and Mithu Sen. At this school, Tagore advocated against rote learning and for the importance of a vocational education – principles that modern educationalists agree are central to effective learning. Tagore’s deep attachment to nature, the environment, and the welfare of people who worked the land, also led him to advocate for modern agricultural and dairy methods, the formation of co-operative banks to give loans to farmers and artisans, and health care centers in villages. Tagore’s complex approach to the world is further exemplified in his simultaneous embrace of modern science for its humanitarian and spiritual values.
(expressed in many of his poems, essays and songs) and in his recognition that science and technology were being misused to create a materialistic and dehumanized world (so poignantly portrayed in his dramas Muktadhara and Raktakarabi). As with so many topics that Tagore turned his attention to, these insights are arguably more relevant today than they have ever been. Likewise, Tagore’s paintings, which were celebrated internationally for their extraordinary artistic innovations are now on the Indian Government’s National Art Treasures list. Tagore is among the nine modern Indian artists on the Indian Government’s National Art Treasures list.

UC Berkeley is uniquely positioned to host the Tagore Program on Literature, Philosophy and Culture. In 1929, Tagore came to UC Berkeley. Besides meeting with Berkeley’s faculty he also made it a point to reach out to and meet Indian students on campus. The Tagore program at UC Berkeley will be honored to carry that century old legacy of Tagore’s visit. UC Berkeley offers both language-focused and content-based courses in Bangla. Students who learn Bangla invariably encounter Rabindranath Tagore’s writings. The Tagore Program will offer them additional opportunities to learn about and appreciate his work.

The proposed Tagore Program will also augment other allied programs under the Institute for South Asia Studies such as the Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies and the South Asia Art Initiative; it will also provide opportunities for collaboration with educational and cultural institutions in West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh where Tagore spent most of creative years.

The Tagore program at UC Berkeley – as envisaged by the Institute of South Asia is an ambitious and robust one. The Institute for South Asia Studies aims to raise a minimum of a $1 million dollar endowment in support of several goals. The first is a visiting professorship in Tagore-related studies at UC Berkeley. The Institute will invite a professor to Berkeley for up to a semester to teach a course on some aspect of Tagore. In addition to teaching a class, the visiting faculty person will also organize a symposium or workshop focused on their area of research and interest. In Fall 2019, UC Berkeley sponsored a six-part course focused on different aspects of Tagore’s oeuvre, including his literature, cinema, music, and philosophy.

The second set of goals of the Tagore Program is to encourage the study of Tagore through: funding student travel and study at Santiniketan or at a university or library that houses the work of Tagore; hosting a bi-annual distinguished lecture and/or performance series featuring prominent Tagore scholars, artists and performers; offering a triennial prize for the best book on Tagore or his legacy; promoting translations of his works; and creating a regular speaker series on Tagore’s literary oeuvre. The Institute is proud to announce the annual Bhushan and Santosh Khashu Research Award. Established with a generous contribution from Drs. Bhushan and Santosh Khashu. The award will support graduate students pursuing research projects on the life and legacy of Rabindranath Tagore and provides for one award of up to $5000 for research travel to South Asia.

But we need your active participation and financial help to make this program a success. Financial support can be given in the following ways:
• Outright cash contribution, tax-deductible
• Checks made out to the UC Berkeley Foundation (On the memo line, please write “Tagore Endow #W8654”)
• A pledge to be paid over several years
• Gifts of securities
• Matching gifts by employers (many companies match gifts from retirees and board members as well as employees)
• Bequests

All donations are tax deductible. All individual donations of $500 will be acknowledged on the Institute for South Asia Studies’ webpage. All individuals donating above $1000 will also receive a personalized certificate of appreciation from the Institute.

For more information on giving opportunities, please contact:
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