

## **Khashu Award for Tagore Studies – Summary Report**

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I was awarded the Khashu Award for Tagore Studies in 2020 for my doctoral research that focuses on Rabindranath Tagore's writings on political theology, asceticism, spirituality, and world religions. First of all, I am very grateful to Dr. Bhushan Khashu and the UC Berkeley's Institute for South Asia Studies for accommodating all the pandemic-induced delays in my research travel. The Khashu Award allowed me to travel to India during the summer of 2023. I visited the Tagore archives at Rabindra Bhavana, Shantiniketan, India, from the third week of May to the end of June, and then again for a couple of weeks in early August. Throughout the time, I meticulously went through hundreds of Tagore's unpublished correspondences and manuscripts, and with the permission of the Director of Rabindra Bhavana, collected several digital copies of Tagore's original writings for my research. It is also necessary to mention here that in addition to all my research at the archives, the opportunity to visit Shantiniketan has been immensely rewarding. Shantiniketan reveals Tagore's works and thought in a unique and very special manner.

My doctoral research focuses on the areas of global twentieth-century modernist literature, religion and political theology, and postcolonial theory and ethics. The title of my doctoral dissertation, which I am going to defend on September 25, 2023, is "Straying Afield of [Oneself]: The Politics and Poetics of Asceticism in Cross-Cultural Modernisms," and it focuses on the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Hilda Doolittle, and Aurobindo Ghose. In my chapter on Tagore, which opens my dissertation, I closely examine the place and role of the ascetical figure in Tagore's works. My argument primarily centers on studying how ascetical ideals or figures assume crucial political-theological significance in addition to their aesthetic and philosophical role in global modernist literatures. Therefore, while the ascetical figure in

a global modernist writer like Tagore's works carries significant aesthetic and ethical force, it also functions as an expansive and generative space for experimental negotiations with emergent ideas of sovereignty, masculinity, subjectivity, and so on. In my chapter on Tagore, I primarily close read the following of his works – *Gora*, *The Ascetic*, *Rajarshi*, *Visarjan*, *Chandalika*, *Achalayatan*, and “The Ghat’s Story.” At Rabindra Bhavana, I closely studied the manuscripts of all these works, and collected notes about the original copies, annotations, marginal comments, and so on.

The main attraction of the Tagore archives at Shantiniketan is the huge collection of Tagore's unpublished correspondences. Since my work on asceticism and sovereignty (particularly in Tagore's novel *Rajarshi*) involves looking at Tagore's relationship with the Tripura kings, I studied Tagore's unpublished letters to them – Birchandra Manikya, Radha Kishore Manikya, and Birendra Kishore Manikya. My doctoral work also indirectly focuses on a few figures whose correspondences with Tagore were of particular interest to me in the archives – James Cousins, Patrick Geddes, and Sister Nivedita. Apart from this, it was especially rewarding for me to be able to go through Tagore's intriguing correspondences with Victoria Ocampo, Kakuzo Okakura, Harriet Monroe, Aldous Huxley, and Subhash Chandra Bose. Tagore's correspondences with his fellow artists – specifically Gaganendranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and Jamini Roy – revealed to me new ways of understanding Tagore's treatment not only of the ascetical figure but also of what I might henceforth call “the aesthetic of the spiritual.” These references and collected materials will help me supplement my preliminary findings about Tagore's use of the ascetical figure.

Since I am close to completing my doctoral research, I am currently working on ways to revise my dissertation into a book. In revising my chapter on Tagore, all that I have learned, noted, and gathered from the Tagore archives will be invaluable. In the research that will follow my doctoral work, I will focus on the possible interrelations between the concepts

and legacies of “world religions” and “world literature.” For this, my notes from the correspondence folder titled “USA and RNT” (5 large sub-folders) at the archives will be a crucial – and arguably yet-unexplored – starting point. For example, there has been very little, if any at all, written about the fact that Tagore was repeatedly invited to speak at the World Parliament of Religions. Moreover, a main topic of interest for me has been Tagore’s thoughts on the US and his travels to the US/Canada, on which I got the opportunity to take extensive notes. I am particularly interested in writing on the religious aspects of Tagore’s relationship with the US, and I have acquired invaluable materials from the archives in this area.

In connection to this, I collected a substantial part of the Tagore-May Sinclair correspondence. May Sinclair, along with Dorothy Richardson and H. D., is one of the western modernist women writers on whose works (particularly, their interest in spirituality, occult, and eastern mysticism) I have begun writing and researching. I have already been in touch with the editors of the May Sinclair Critical Editions Project, currently underway for release, regarding my contribution to the project based on my findings at the Tagore archives. Finally, I have collected a few fascinating letters Tagore received from Canada around the time of his visit, which speak of and urge not only transcultural relations but also decolonial solidarity between Indigeneity and anticolonialism. On this, I am currently drafting a public-facing piece for the *Literary Review of Canada* titled “Canada’s Letters to Tagore.” This piece will heavily draw upon the correspondences and other details I collected from the Tagore archives during my research there.

Lastly, I cannot but add a brief caveat here for future researchers regarding the archive administration. Although I received consistent and considerate help from Prof. Amal Pal, the Director of Rabindra Bhavana, and from Mr. Nilanjan Banerjee and other staff at Rabindra Bhavana, email correspondence with the archive office in particular was quite difficult an

experience. Emails are almost never answered, which makes it extremely inconvenient for far-off visiting researchers like the Khashu awardees; especially also because the archive website has no contact details of any staff. Additionally, it pains me to say that I faced lack of transparency and in the end outright hostile behavior from the staff member who was in charge of providing me access to the digitized archive. For example, I was told that I could request a certain number of files for collection in exchange of a fee per page, which I paid, but after I left the archive I was not sent all the files I had requested, I was not given any information about how I could alternatively access those files or how I could request a fee refund, and all my emails requesting information went unanswered. When I went back to the archives in August to complete my research, I encountered shockingly rude behavior from the staff member in charge. As someone who went solely to access the archives, with no prior connections at Visva-Bharati University, these experiences were quite difficult and unprecedented for me.