

Three National Anthems: Bengal's pride

Nilanjan Sengupta

Prof & Head, Dept of Endocrinology

NRS Medical College, Kolkata

Joint Organising Secretary, ITSCON 2015

Both before and after independence Bengal has dominated the sphere of Indian literature and culture through innumerable priceless works and the influence of Bengali literature, cinema, music and art on the life and psyche of communities of the Indian subcontinent is undeniable. It is probably a unique co-incidence that a prominent Bengali has been associated with the national anthems of three sovereign countries of South Asia.

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate and one of the most prolific writers of pre-independence India has been, till today, an undeniable influence in the life of almost every Bengali even after more than half a century of his demise.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, a nationalist per excellence and a great inspiration to the then fighters of Indian freedom struggle, Gandhiji included, has left behind his all pervasive impression through national anthems of three sovereign countries that gained independence from their erstwhile colonial rulers. While the national anthems of India and Bangladesh are his direct compositions, the national anthem of Sri Lanka indirectly bore his influence.

National anthem of Sri Lanka

Edophage George Wilfred Alvin Samarakoon or more popularly **Ananda Samarakoon** (Jan 13, 1911-April 5, 1962), the father of modern Sinhala music and founder of modern

Sri Lankan *Geeta Sahitya* (song literature) is credited with composing the Sri Lankan national anthem.

A Christian by birth, subsequently converted to Buddhism, Ananda Samarakoon studied art and music for a brief period at Vishwa Bharati, Santiniketan, India.

In 1938 Rabindranath Tagore composed the lyrics in Bengali and melody for his student Ananda Samarakoon. On returning to Ceylon, in 1940 Ananda Samarakoon translated the song into Sinhala...*Apa Sri Lanka Namō Namō Namō Matha*.

It was Junius Richard Jayewardane, the then Finance Minister of Sri Lanka (who later went on to become the Sri Lankan President) first proposed in 1950 that this song be adopted as the Sri Lankan national anthem. After much deliberation and with minor modifications, the song was endorsed by the government in 1951. The 1952 Independence Day was the first independence day that the then newly adopted song was sung. The song was translated into Tamil by N.Nallathambi.

Subsequently, the words *Nama* were considered inauspicious so much so that in 1961, the government changed the opening line to *Sri Lanka Matha, Apa Sri Lanka...* Deeply hurt at this change and unable to bear this mutilation, Ananda Samarakoon committed suicide.

In recent times Sri Lankan government has attempted to scrap the Tamil version of the song as an official one citing the argument that national anthem of a nation should be in one language only. Amidst this debate of whether to retain the bilingual versions of the song as official versions, the Indian national anthem was unwittingly drawn into controversy in a government minister mentioning that in India, Tagore's original Bengali version of *Jana Gana Mana*

was subsequently translated into Hindi and was adopted as the national anthem, he being oblivious of the fact that *Jana Gana Mana* was originally composed by Tagore in sankritized Bengali that did not necessitate any translation which was not the case with the Sri Lankan national anthem.

The Sri Lankan national anthem has courted one controversy after another from time to time that refuse to die down even today; it has undergone many modifications from the original version; still if one listens to the soulful lyrics and the soothing melody of the song, one can appreciate the unmistakable *Rabindrik* (Tagorean) imprint on the song.

National anthem of Bangladesh

The first few lines of the song *Amar sonar bangla ami tomay bhalobashi* (my golden Bengal I love you) constitute the national anthem of Peoples Republic of Bangladesh. The song was adopted as the national anthem during the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war.

Rabindranath wrote this song during the time of Partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India. The lyrics appeared in 1905 simultaneously in *Bongodorshon* and *Baul*. The music of this song was set in the *baul* (traditional Bengali folk) tune.

Indian national anthem

Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka Jaya Hey had been adopted by the Constituent Assembly on Jan 24, 1950 as the national anthem of India.

The Indian national anthem is the first stanza of the 5 stanza *Brahmo* hymn composed by Tagore. The song was first sung on 27 Dec 1911 in Calcutta during the annual session of the

Indian National Congress. Tagore wrote the song on Dec 11, 1911. The song was first published in Jan 1912 under the title *Bharat Vidhata* in *Tattva Bodhini Patrika*, the journal of the contemporary *Brahmo Samaj*.

The text of the poem, though Bengali, is highly sanskritized and therefore can be sung in many Indian languages without the necessity of any translation or distortion, yet being equally meaningful to many.

Tagore himself translated the song into English in 1919 with the title *Morning Song of India* which was set to tune and sung first at Besant Theosophical College, Madanapalle, now in Andhra Pradesh.

Margaret Cousins offered to transcribe the melody onto paper in Western music notation. Although the melody that Margaret Cousins captured in the spring of 1919 at Madanapalle is more or less followed to this day, her notation is slow and reflective, the way Tagore sang it. Today, when the anthem is played, typically the pace is speedy and the music bouncy. The faster arrangement is the handiwork of Herbert Murill, Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy of Music, London. The original sedate hymnal music was changed to a martial march by Murill at the request of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. That this song can be performed within a minute and can be played in a band was an important consideration among others that helped it get preferred over *Bande Mataram* as the national anthem.

Such was the impact of the song *Jana Gana Mana* that INA under Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose adopted the Hindustani equivalent of the song as their national anthem. *Subh Sukh Chain* was the short-lived national anthem of the Provisional Government of Free India (Arzi Hukumat-e-Azad Hind). It would be wrong to call this song a Hindi-Urdu translation of

Jana Gana Mana but this song was written by Capt Abid Ali of the INA, being inspired by Tagore's original Bengali song. The score was composed by Ram Singh Thakur of INA.

A controversy that never should have been: From time to time, since Tagore wrote the poem *Bharat Vidhata*, it was construed by many that he had dedicated the song to King George V. The great nationalist that Tagore was it is unimaginable that he could ever write such a servile eulogy keeping in mind the imperialist British monarch at a time when he visited India.

As mentioned earlier, *Jana Gana Mana* was first sung on 27 Dec 1911 in a chorus led by Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Tagore's niece at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress in presence of stalwarts like President Bishan Narayan Dhar, Ambika Charan Mazumder and Bhupendra Nath Bose. Coincidentally, the same Congress session chose to felicitate George V for abrogation of Partition of Bengal.

The day after the session the vernacular press appropriately reported the patriotic nature of the song. It was the pro-British Anglo-Indian press that reported that the song was sung to commemorate the visit of George V to India. The reports were based on understandable ignorance since the Anglo-Indian press had neither the linguistic abilities, nor the interest to be accurate.

To understand the real meaning of the song one has to have an insight of Tagorean literature and his interpretation of divinity. In umpteen number of his *puja* or devotional songs there existed a divine entity to whom Tagore addressed many of his heartfelt yearnings for communion and eternal play; the supreme power thus alluded to in his songs was a monarch infinitely superior to any mortal king or emperor one could ever aspire to be. *Bharat Vidhata* is no exception.

Going through records it is learnt that INC did request Tagore to write a felicitation to the emperor as an appeasement gesture to the British crown, -- as a thanksgiving for annulment of the Partition. Tagore was reportedly downright offended at this request and it is believed that ***Jana Gana Mana* was composed more out of protest and rebellion than adoration** towards the monarchy, a fact that ironically got distorted because of certain co-incidental events and because of a probable deliberate bias of the ill-informed Anglo-Indian press.

On this controversy Tagore later wrote, " a certain high official in His Majesty's service, who was also my friend, had requested me that I write a song of felicitation towards the Emperor. The request simply amazed me. It caused a great stir in my heart. In response to that great mental turmoil, I pronounced the victory in *Jana Gana Mana* of that *Bhagya Vidhata* of India who has, from age after age, held steadfast the reins of India's chariot through rise and fall, through the straight path and the curved. That Lord of Destiny, that Reader of the Collective Mind of India, that Perennial Guide, could never be George V, George VI, or any other George. Even my official friend understood this about the song. Even if his admiration for the crown was excessive, he was not lacking in simple, common sense."

Tagore added on to comment that he felt too pained by the unjustness of the charge to come out with a public refutation; may be at the initial stages he did not deem it necessary either. Probably he could not have envisioned that the issue could resurface even in independent India of future and linger indefinitely. A formal public refutation by the author himself that appeared redundant at the second decade of this century could have killed the controversy once and for all.

Conclusion

Tagore never had the slightest idea or desire of making any of these songs national anthems of any nation at the time he composed them. The sweet soulful songs reflected his spontaneous emotions for his motherland in the backdrop of prevailing socio-political scenario. It is the freedom fighters and statesmen of the concerned nations that selected them, in due course, as their respective national anthems. Tagore, the Bengali polymath of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, who has reshaped Bengali literature and music, thus continues to live in the lips and hearts of millions of South Asians through these melodious national anthems.