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The India Habitat Centre



**CROSS-CULTURE:
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
RABINDRANATH TAGORE**



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Contents

Director's Note: <i>Raj Liberhan</i>	4
Curatorial Note: <i>Dr. Alka Pande</i>	5
Editorial Note: <i>Dr. Amitava Chakraborty</i>	7
Essays	
The Cross Cultural Dialogue: <i>Dr. Tripti Pande Desai</i>	12
Rabindranath Tagore and Postmodern Perspective: <i>Dr. Amitava Chakraborty</i>	18
Tokai Bole Ami/You are said to be Me: <i>Samit Das</i>	25
Re-writing Tagore - Translation as Performance: <i>Dr. Radha Chakravarty</i>	34
Rabindranath Tagore's staging of The Post Office in the Polish Culture: <i>Dr. Elzbieta Walter</i>	42
Revisiting Tagore and Celebration of Freedom: Kanhailal's Dakghar - A Multilingual Representation: <i>Dr. Dipendu Das</i>	53
Making a Door: <i>Anne Vilsboell</i>	65
Visual Interpretation of Tagore Literature Past and Present: <i>Mrinal Ghosh</i>	74
Tagoreana: <i>Dr. Sonal Mansingh</i>	84
Not Only Did The Old Era of Lithography Come Back: <i>Dr. Ayantika Ghosh</i>	90
Rabindranath, each moment: <i>Debabrata Ghosh</i>	93
The Seasons in Gokarna: The Photo Essay on Cross-Culture <i>Niranjan Ganpati Hosmane</i>	96
Events of the Gallery	
Visual Arts Gallery	105
Open Palm Court	133
Experimental Art Gallery	155
Amphitheatre and Lobbies	162
Special Events	174
Fellowship for Photography	
Chandan Gomes	183
Niha Masih	186
Calendar for 2013	187

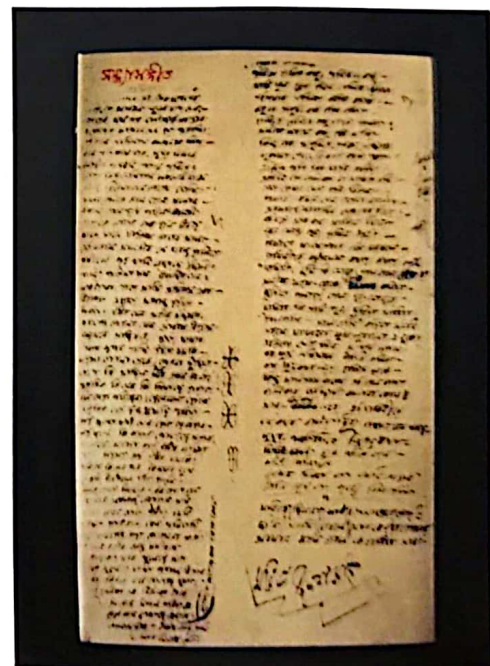
Not Only Did The Old Era of Lithography Come Back

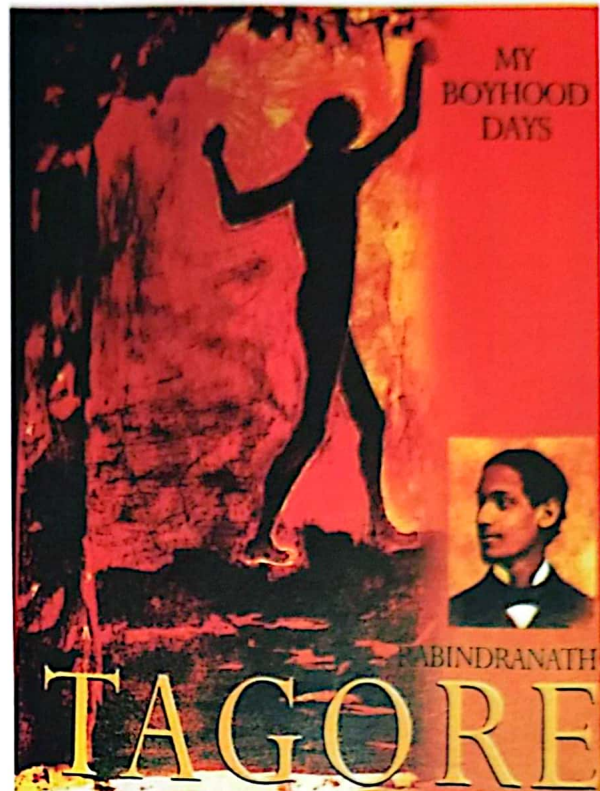
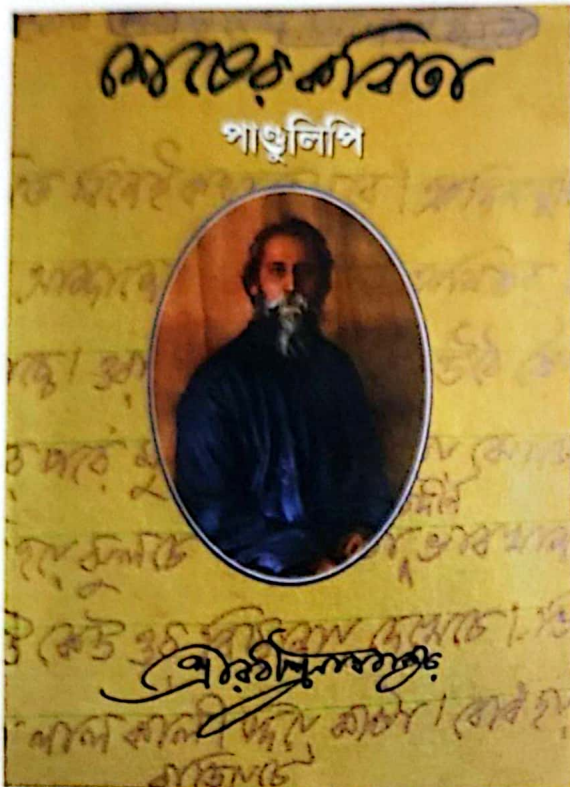
Dr. Ayantika Ghosh

Covers of Rabindranath's books take us to a unique world of art. Covers of books necessarily mean artistic organisation of images including words. Even though books published by Rabindranath or his manuscripts do not carry picture-based organisation of cover, yet they are an invaluable and inexhaustible source of artistic beauty. Since the mid- nineteenth century, as a result of the influence of the European art that came along with the British Raj, concepts around Indian art and aesthetics underwent a sea-change. Rajendralal Mitter, Jatindramohan Tagore and Justice Pratt established the Industrial Art Society in Calcutta in 1854, which was later renamed as the Government School of Art. Gunendranath Tagore and Jyotirindranath Tagore, Rabindranath's cousin and elder brother respectively, took admission to this school in 1864. Around this time, modern art started to gain attention under the patronage of the aristocrats. However, at the same time, popular native art movements were running parallel to the modern techniques in Calcutta. Its centres were located at the several parts of the older city (north Calcutta) -Battala, Chitpore, Bowbazar and Kalighat - the influence of which was visible in some of the nineteenth century texts like *Sadhabar Ekadashi* or *Hutom Pyanchar Noksha*. So, it was

amidst such milieu - a mixture of aristocrat-sponsored European art and native art - that Rabindranath grew up. But as a seventeen-year-old young man in 1878, Rabindranath wrote in *Yurop Prabasir Patro* (Letters from Europe) that his unawareness of the wonderful treasures of European Art has caused him immense sufferings. In the present paper, we are neither concerned with Expressionist techniques or the flurry of Surrealism in his paintings nor about the primacy of red and green colours in the wonderful and simultaneous contrasts of his zoomorphic pictures. But we are interested in the covers or the lack of the covers on his books and manuscripts, and plethora of lines, drawings, colours or the lack of them in the surprising richness of his creation.

The books of Rabindranath available to us may be divided into three sections: (i) those preserved as manuscripts, (ii) those published by the Visva-Bharati and (iii) those published by private publishers after the lapse of the Visva-Bharati copyright in 2001. There are almost no covers for his manuscripts. He wrote in diaries or note-books, most of which were received as gifts, in which he wrote almost from the first pages - having short titles or none at all.

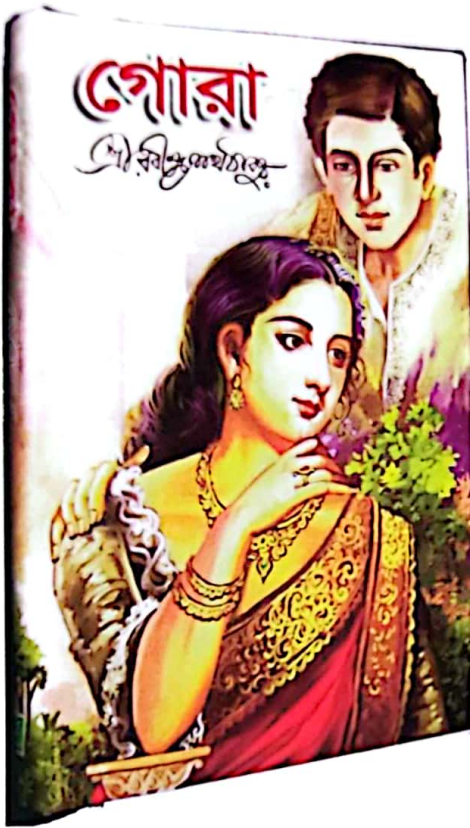




During the initial years of the second phase, i.e. along with the publications by the Visva-Bharati different publishers of Calcutta also carried out publications of Rabindranath's books. Although he was not much bothered about the covers of books, other publishers did not follow any specific pattern for the covers of his books. Visva-Bharati started publishing his books with covers of readymade papers in yellow shades, on which titles were printed in red letters. No picture or drawing was added to the title because of three probable reasons - (1) financial hardship (2) novelty and (3) Rabindranath's belief - that full reproduction of the picture could not be possible in half-tone blocks. However, his nephew Gaganendranath Tagore, who drew quite a number of Rabindranath's portraits and cartoons, added illustrations to the covers of Rabindranath's books. He drew illustrations in *Natir Puja* and added a picture on the cover of *Raktakarabi*. In this context, it may be recalled that Gaganendranath's friend Rothensteine, a British painter, read and translated Rabindranath's poetry, but never

drew any cover for him. This appears a little surprising. Did Rabindranath not allow him to do so? Was it the same reason that he did not encourage Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Jamini Ray or Binodbihari Basu to draw his covers? Even though the reasons remain evasive, interestingly Visva-Bharati adopted the same pattern for the cover of books by other authors as well.

The third phase saw the liberation from the chains of rules following the lapse of the Visva-Bharati copyright. With this, there was a plethora of publications belonging to the unregulated market, which engaged themselves in a killing competition and devised cover designs which were often devoid of aesthetic merit and aimed to make quick money by selling Rabindranath literary and visual oeuvre. For cheap publicity, bright colours were incorporated. Not only did the old era of lithography come back, but the covers were also designed in the style of popular film posters. In a number of cases, the subject-matter of the book did not match



the cover of the book. In some other cases, Rabindranath's own sketches were used without acknowledgement. The style of the Visva-Bharati was also adopted perhaps in search of authenticity. In short, the entire effort adversely affected the public aesthetic taste. Questions were raised as to whether the publishers had the right to disparage Rabindranath in such a way. By utilising the resources of the computer, internet and several software programmes, some publishers merrily went on reducing Rabindranath to easy money making machine.

(I am grateful to the director of the Rabindrabhavan, Santiniketan and to the Director of the Visva-Bharati Publication Department, Kolkata for giving me permission to use their archives and library to have some valuable documents and photographs for this article.)

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