

ON THE  
EDGES  
OF TIME

MEMOIR  
&  
MORROW

Let your life lightly dance on the edges  
of Time like dew on the tip of a leaf.

The Gardener, xlv

RATHINDRANATH TAGORE

ON THE  
EDGES  
OF TIME

M&M

**M&M**

ON THE EDGES OF TIME by Rathindranath Tagore  
[An Autobiography of RATHINDRANATH TAGORE]

Edition Copyright © Memoir & Morrow 2026

First Published: Visva-Bharati, Kolkata in June 1958

First M&M Edition: February 2026 by Memoir & Morrow

ISBN: 978-984-66153-4-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, of by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the author and publisher, except where permitted by law.

To the memory of  
**YUSUF MEHERALLY**

but for whose encouragement and  
insistence this book would never  
have been completed or published.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

The twelve illustrations which appear at the head of chapter pages 11, 31, 51, 57, 61, 79, 88, 100, 122, 127, 182, 185 were drawn by Prasanta Roy. The photograph of Rathindranath published in this book (page: 10, 42, 43, 44, 45, 109, 110, 111, 112, 173, 174) is in the collection of Rabindra-Bhavan, Santiniketan.

# CONTENTS

PREFACE	9
A Boy is Born	11
The Tagores	12
Prince Dwarkanath	14
Our House at Jorasanko	15
My Uncles	16
A Dinner Party	18
Disconnected Memories	20
Anniversary of Brahma Samaj	24
Kham-Kheyali Sabha	25
Bengal Provincial Conference	28
Congress Session 1896	29
At Shelidah	31
Visitors at Shelidah	35
Father's Literary Output	40
His Managerial Work	41
A Business Venture	47
A Dramatic Episode	48
The Boat Padma	51
A Trip to the Himalayas	57
Early Days at Santiniketan	61
A Summer Vacation at Santiniketan	68
A Midsummer Night's Dream	73
The Shadow of Death	74
The Swadeshi Movement	79

Outward Bound	88
My First Glimpse of the U.S.A.	90
Cosmopolitan Club	92
Homeward Bound	95
Shelidah Again	98
Vichitra and the Art Movement in Bengal	100
Dramas and Play-acting	107
Pareshnath	122
Giridih	124
With Father in London	127
In the U.S.A.	139
Father's Foreign Tours	141
A Travel Diary	144
A Still-born Trip to Norway	153
Paris Diary	155
With Father on the Continent	160
Visit to Italy	171
Frontiers in Europe	178
A Swiss Peasant	180
Potisar	182
Father as I Knew Him	185
THE TAGORE FAMILY TREES	201
INDEX	202

## PREFACE

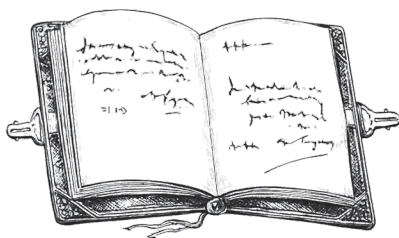
I am told these reminiscences may be of some help to those who are interested in the life and works of my father. My memory chooses to highlight certain events without going into actual details or following a chronological sequence, but it is possible that from the somewhat disconnected anecdotes penned during leisure hours at different times and put together in these pages, the reader may obtain glimpses of some aspects of my father's personality not dealt with by his biographers.

I shall remain ever grateful to Krishna Kripalani, Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Nirmal Chandra Chatterji, Amal Home and especially to Kshitis Roy for their ungrudging help in various ways in the preparation of this book. Thanks are also due to the Visva-Bharati for permission to use certain portions that have appeared in the pages of the Visva-Bharati Quarterly.

Rathindranath Tagore  
[1958]



Father with  
Bela and Author  
in 1889



## A BOY IS BORN

In my uncle Satyendranath's house, where the grown-up members of the family gathered almost every evening, there used to lie a bound volume of blank pages in which were jotted down conundrums, witty remarks, nonsense rhymes, as also words of wisdom that occurred to the minds of those who happened to be present. The book was called the *Paribarik Khata*—the Family Notebook. While looking through its pages I came across pencilled notes which could not fail to interest me. Even at the risk of breaking the solemn rule that the contents of the book were not to be published I am quoting the words. May my ancestors forgive me!

Uncle Rabi's Baby—A forecast.

Uncle's baby will be a fortunate boy, not a girl. He will not be as laughter-loving as uncle, but comparatively serious. He will not go about doing social work but will prefer to live apart in solitude and devote himself to religious prayer.

Park Street House  
November 1888

Hitendranath Tagore

Hit-da, the subject of your prophecy has now become visible. One must admit that he is serious by nature. But I don't

think the baby will become a forest sage instead of a social creature. And because he is serious it does not follow that he won't laugh. Uncle Rabi's nature is also fundamentally serious if you come to think of it. There is a difference between seriousness and moroseness.

March 1890

Balendranath Tagore

How far the above prophecies made by my cousins have come true is not for me to say, but I must disclaim the credit of having spent my days in prayer and meditation.

To be born in a family where more than a hundred members lived under one roof is a matter of no great significance in our country. Moreover, I happened to be the son of the youngest of the brothers, my father being the last surviving son of my grandfather. Our Jorasanko house had seen so many grandsons born before my appearance on the scene that I suppose the event was not considered worth celebrating. Nevertheless my mother must have felt some pride and satisfaction in having given birth to her first male child, although he did not promise to be as fair and good-looking as her first-born. My sister was indeed a very pretty child and therefore much petted by the whole family. My life thus started with a handicap which gave me a complex that has been difficult to overcome even at a mature age. Moreover, I remained the youngest of the cousins. Even as a child I felt my inferior position and this made me more and more of a retiring and unsociable disposition as I grew up. In a joint family the children have many advantages, but there is also the danger of competition beginning at too early an age and this is to the disadvantage of those who are weak and suffer under some handicap.

## THE TAGORES

The Tagores belong to the Bandyopadhyaya group of Bengali Brahmins. The genealogy can be traced back to Daksha, one of the five Brahmins who were imported sometime in the 8th

century from Kanauj to help in reviving orthodox Hinduism in Buddhist-ridden Bengal. The descendants of this Brahmin moved from one place to another until one Panchanan in 1690 settled down at Govindapur near Calcutta. The opportunities of making money in this flourishing mercantile town, the stronghold of the East India Company, finally attracted the family to Calcutta in the latter part of the eighteenth century and they built their homes at Pathuriaghata and Jorasanko.

There is a story that, while the family was living at a place near Khulna and serving the Moslem governor there, two of the brothers lost their caste in a peculiar manner. It happened this way. The brother Kamadev one day during the fast of Roza noticed that a courtier of the Governor was smelling a lemon. Jestingly Kamadev told him that he had broken his fast because, according to the *Sastras*, smelling is half-eating. The courtier did not argue with him but repeated the words to the Governor. A few days later the members of the Thakur family (the name of Tagore had not come into use at that time) along with other Hindus were invited by the Governor to attend a musical entertainment. In the adjoining room a feast consisting of meat dishes was being prepared. The savoury smell penetrated to the entertainment hall. Holding their noses, the Hindus wanted to leave. The Governor told them that since by smelling they have partially eaten the dishes they might as well stay and do full justice to them. Kamadev and his followers thus lost their caste and were looked down upon by orthodox Hindus as Pirali (Pir-Ali) Brahmins.

Not only were the ancestors of the Tagores wanderers in the province of Bengal moving from one place to another and never settling down, but latterly they were looked upon as outcasts. They had to depend upon their own resources and struggle to win any sort of position in society. They soon found that this could be done only by accumulation of wealth. These two factors probably helped to develop the pioneering spirit and the

freedom of mind that could rise above all social and religious conventions which are the basic characteristics of the Tagore family. Once they had accumulated wealth and gained the assurance of comfortable living their spirit went adventuring in other realms and their talents effloresced in many a direction.

## PRINCE DWARKANATH

My great-grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore, was a romantic figure. Contemporary of Rammohan Roy, the Father of the Renaissance Movement of Bengal, he was closely associated with him in all his activities and rendered financial help whenever required. The East India Company were by this time firmly established in Bengal and were rapidly building up their trade. Dwarkanath's knowledge of English helped him to take advantage of the conditions prevailing under the Company's rule and he was able at quite an early age not only to amass a fortune but also to gain high offices under the British. With Rammohan Roy he took a leading part in all the movements for the promotion of higher education and social welfare. There was hardly any institution founded during his life-time that did not owe its existence to the generous charity of Dwarkanath. He came to be known as Prince Dwarkanath in recognition of his benefactions. His business enterprises extended to fields unexplored by Indians in those days. He had a fleet of cargo boats for trading between India and England. To improve his business connections and gain further concessions from the Company, he himself went to England accompanied by his youngest son, Nagendranath. I have had occasion to read the diary kept by this grand-uncle of mine. It describes vividly and in very chaste English the social life of the aristocracy of England in the early Victorian age as seen through the eyes of an Indian. There is also an interesting description of his adventurous journey across the country from Bombay to Calcutta at a time when India was in a very disturbed condition on the eve of the Sepoy Mutiny. Soon after landing in London Dwarkanath became a favourite of

Queen Victoria and of the court circle. There are many amusing stories told about his exploits in England and France, some of which I came to know from the letters written by his valet. While staying in London he was once invited to a hunting party. The arrangement was that the party would call at his hotel to pick him up and ride out to the country where the hunt would take place. When his friends came he begged to be excused complaining of a rheumatic pain in the leg which rendered him unfit for riding. After much persuasion he was prevailed upon to accompany them, not riding on a horse but comfortably seated in a carriage. Thus the Londoners were treated to the amusing spectacle that morning of an Indian gentleman driving in state escorted by a bodyguard of aristocratic ladies and gentlemen.

In Paris he was once invited by a Countess to her salon, where he noticed a Kashmir shawl used as a hanging on the wall. The Countess proudly drew the attention of the Prince to this decoration. A return invitation followed in due course. As the Countess and her friends took leave the Prince presented each of them with an expensive Kashmir shawl.

It is believed that the important business which took the Prince to England was to try to negotiate with the British government for an *izara* (permanent lease) of the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in supersession of the East India Company. He was well received by Queen Victoria. But this ambitious project of his came to nothing on account of his sudden death under somewhat mysterious circumstances.

## OUR HOUSE AT JORASANKO

Our house has had an interesting history. As I have already said, my forefathers migrated to Calcutta in the early days of the East India Company, and, having helped in the erection of Fort William, made enough money to construct a palatial building of their own at Jorasanko in the northern quarter of the town. Other gentry were attracted to this quarter which gradually became

the most fashionable part of the city, with elegant houses vying with each other. It is a pity that most of these houses are being crowded out or demolished to make room for hideous modern mansions. The architecture of that period with high columned facades and a series of interior courtyards was not only dignified but most suited to the tropical climate.

After the death of the Prince, my grandfather, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, became the head of the family. Although for many years he lived away from the family residence in a separate house in Park Street, his commanding personality knit the numerous members of the family into a homogeneous body. They were also deeply influenced by his spiritual life. My second uncle Satyendranath, as an I.C.S. officer in the Bombay Presidency, had necessarily to live away from the family and on retirement chose to settle down at Ballygunge.

At Jorasanko lived the direct descendants of the Maharshi at No. 6, Dwarkanath Tagore Lane. It was a huge rambling house spread over an acre of ground with wide verandahs and large halls around the outer courtyard and a series of dark and dingy corridors and staircases and rooms, where no sunlight ever penetrated, which gave us the creeps whenever as children we had to pass through them. At No. 5, the handsome residence opposite to ours, lived my three artist cousins Gaganendra, Samarendra and Abanindra.

## MY UNCLAS

Our boyhood days were divided between these different surroundings. Each had its own characteristic contribution to make on our impressionable minds. At the Park Street house leaders of the Brahmo Samaj and ardent devotees of other religious movements from every province of India were constantly to be found come to pay their respects to the Maharshi or to hold discourses on problems of philosophy and religion with him. With what awe we went into the room to take the dust of