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A Hundred Years of Tagore in Finland

SUMMARY: The reception of Rabindranath Tagore in Finland, starting from newspaper articles in 1913. Finnish translations of his works (19 volumes in 1913–2013, some in several editions) listed and commented upon. Tagore's plays in theatre, radio and TV, music composed on Tagore's poems. Tagore's poem (*Apaghat* 1929) commenting upon the Finnish Winter War.

KEYWORDS: Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali Literature, Indian English Literature, Finnish Literature.

In Finland as well as elsewhere in the West, the knowledge of Indian literature was restricted to a few Sanskrit classics until the second decade of the 20th century. The Nobel Prize in Literature given to Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) in 1913 changed this at once. To some extent, the importance of Tagore had been noted even before—the Swedish Nobel Committee did not get his name out of nowhere.¹

Tagore belonged to a renowned Bengali family and some echoes of this family had even been heard in Finland. As early as the 1840s,

¹ The first version of this paper was read at the International Tagore Conference in Halle (Saale), Germany, August 2–3, 2012. My sincere thanks are due to Hannele Pohjanmies, the translator of Tagore's poetry, who has also traced many details about the history of the poet in Finland. With her kind permission, I have used this material, supplementing it from newspaper archives and from my own knowledge. Margot Whiting has kindly checked my English.

the Swedish-language press of Finland wrote about Dwarka Nath Tagore's (Rabindranath's grandfather's) visit to England and in the 1880s, we find a number of articles about the musician Sourindro Mohan Tagore (distant cousin). In 1909 the Finnish translation of an English account of the wedding of Rabindranath's niece, Indira Tagore, to Pramatha Chaudhuri was published in several local newspapers. In 1910 several appreciative articles, again based on English sources, noted the art of Abanindranath Tagore (another cousin).²

Hannele Pohjanmies has found what seems to be the first mention of Rabindranath in the Finnish press. It was published in *Helsingin Sanomat*, one of the leading newspapers in Finland, in the summer of 1913, a few months before the Nobel prize (November 1913). The occasion of the news was the concert tour of *Suomen laulu* ('Finland's Song'), a Finnish mixed chorus, to London. One of their concerts was attended by 'Tagore, the most famous poet of India and a fine connoisseur of music'. Soon after this, came the news from Stockholm which aroused great curiosity about Tagore. The press answered with articles and secondary translations of some poems, taken from the Swedish and German press. But the public wanted more and soon got it in the form of the first Finnish translation:

— *Puutarhuri*. Suorasanaisia runoelmia. Finnish transl. by Eino Leino. Helsinki: Kirja 1913. 120 p., 2. ed. 1924, new ed. together with *Sādhanā*. Otava, Seitsentähdet 1967; < *The Gardener*. 1913.

Four years later it was followed by another small volume:

— *Uhrilauluja*. Finnish transl. by Eino Leino. Helsinki: Kirja 1917. 118 p., new ed. *Lauluja*. WSOY 1989, facsimile reprint of the original edition 2005; < *Gitanjali*. *Song Offerings*. 1912 (< Be. *Gītāñjali*. 1910).

² This kind of information is now easily found through the portals *Historiallinen sanomalehtikirjasto 1771–1910* (Historical Newspaper Library—<http://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/sanomalehti/secure/main.html>) and a parallel system for journals and magazines, created and maintained by the National Library of Finland.

The translator of these two volumes was Eino Leino (1878–1926). He was and still is one of the most popular Finnish poets. He was also active and much appreciated as a translator—his bibliography includes works by Goethe, Schiller, Corneille and Racine and the whole *Divina Commedia* of Dante, still a very readable version. But he had difficulties with Tagore. The problem was simply his poor command of English (and perhaps also his poet's drinking habits). Fortunately, he had formed a close relation with the talented poetess, L. Onerva (*nom-de-plume* of Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882–1972). She knew English and could help Leino with his work. Later on, she also wrote his biography (1932). To Leino's credit, it must be said that in the preface to *Puutarhuri* he openly spoke of his difficulties and of his need for help. In one respect, however, time was different. In 1914 Onerva published a very positive critic of Leino's *Gardener*.

The Finnish *Gardener* appeared in December 1913, just a month after the news of the Nobel prize (14.11.1913). It seems thus very likely that the decision to publish Tagore in Finnish had been made before the news. Nevertheless, traces of hurry and linguistic difficulties can be seen in the translations. Fortunately for the Finnish public, this was not the end of our acquaintance with the Bengali laureate. In the 1920s, a large publishing house in Helsinki decided to publish a whole series of Tagore's works, translated from English into Finnish by one of the best translators of the time:

- *Haaksirikko*. Helsinki: Otava 1922. 477 p.; < *The Wreck*. 1921 (< *Naukā-dubī*. 1905).
- *Koti ja maailma*. Helsinki: Otava 1922, 2. ed. 1937; < *The Home and The World*. 1916 (< *Ghare bāhire*. 1916).
- *Ahnaat paadet ynnä muita kertomuksia*. Helsinki: Otava 1923. 235 p. < *The Hungry Stones and Other Stories*. 1916.
- *Elämäni muistoja*. Helsinki: Otava 1923. 296 p. < *My Reminiscences*. 1917 (< *Jīban smṛti*. 1912).

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- *Pimeän kammion kuningas ja muita draamoja*. Helsinki: Otava 1924. 432 p. < *The King of the Dark Chamber and Other Plays*. 1914 (< *Rājā*. 1910).
- *Gora*. 1–2. Helsinki: Otava. 323+308 p. 1925 < *Gora*. 1910 (< *Gorā*. 1907–09).
- *Sādhanā. Elämän oleellistaminen*. Helsinki: Otava 1926. 155 p., new ed. together with *Puutarhuri*. Otava, Seitsentähdet 1967, < *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*. 1913.
- *Persoonallisuus*. Helsinki: Otava 1928. 158 p. < *Personality*. 1917 (lectures in U.S.A.).³

The translator of these seven volumes was Juho August Hollo (1885–1967). Later on, he was professor and scholar of paedagogics, but in his earlier years, he was also a critic and very productive translator. The list of his translations is very long, including, for instance, names such as Cervantes, Anatole France, Flaubert, Stendhal, Voltaire, Dickens, Swift, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Hamsun, and Nietzsche. As always, Hollo took his work with Tagore very seriously. He tried to learn about the features of Indian society less familiar to his readership and to explain them in footnotes.

The press reviews of these translations was usually very positive and the publisher did not hesitate to print a rather large number of copies, in different bindings. Thus it was not difficult for me as a student in the 1970s—when Tagore was no longer considered fashionable—to collect them all at a reasonable price from antiquarian bookshops.

The small collection of Finnish newspaper articles from the 1920s and 1930s made by Hannele Pohjanmies shows that Tagore was continuously considered important. His travels, state of health, birthdays and finally his death were duly noted in the Finnish press. A perusal of magazines and journals will contribute more material.

³ All Finnish titles are direct translations of the English ones except *Elämäni muistoja* (Reminiscences of my life), which comes closer to the Bengali original.

After 1928, there was a long pause in Tagore translations, although some of the earlier ones appeared in new editions as indicated above, testifying to a continuous interest in Tagore, but only the new millennium has witnessed a real renaissance of Tagore in Finland. Before that, there was one little-known translation (I heard of it myself only many years later) made by a reliable professional translator of non-fiction:

— *Ihmiskunnan uskonto*. Finnish transl. by Heikki Eskelinen. Helsinki: Biokustannus 1990. 121 p.; < *The Religion of Man*. 1931.

The next step was a collection of Tagore's aphorisms:

— *Villilintuja: elämänviisautta*. Finnish transl. by Pertti Seppälä. Helsinki: Memphis Books 2002. 103 p.; < *Stray Birds*. 1916.

The translator is a Sinologist who has translated a number of Chinese classics, but also studied some Bengali.

During the last thirteen years, Hannele Pohjanmies has been active in translating Tagore's poetry from English. She has already published seven volumes.

— *Rakkauden laulu*. Helsinki: Kirjapaja 2002. 63 p.; selected from *Fruit-Gathering, Lover's Gift and Fireflies*.

— *Rakkauden lahja*. Helsinki: Memphis Books 2006. 63 p.; selected from *Lover's Gift and Crossing*. 1918, and other collections.

— *Hedelmätarha*. Helsinki: Memphis Books 2007. 151 p.; selected from *Fruit-Gathering*. 1916, and other collections.

— *Tähtitaivaan runot*. Helsinki: Memphis Books 2008. 202 p.; < *Poems*. 1942.

— *Toiselle rannalle*. Helsinki: Kirjapaja 2009. 64 p.; < *Crossing*. 1918.

— *Kuukeinu*. Helsinki: Therapie-säätiö 2010. 60 p.; < *The Crescent Moon*. 1913.

— *Gitanjali*. Helsinki: Basam Books 2013. 182 p.

However, the picture of Tagore in Finland is not complete with translations published in print. Tagore was also a dramatist.

According to Pohjanmies, the Finnish public first became acquainted with Tagore as a dramatist through the Finnish Broadcasting Company. “Kuningas ja kuningatar”,⁴ acted by the staff of Finnish National Theatre, aired on radio in 1932. Six years later, it was the turn of “Post Office”,⁵ the text translated by Huugo Jalkanen (1880–1960, a less known poet) and directed by Markus Rautio (1891–1973), whom all older Finnish people remember as “Uncle Markus” from his popular children’s radio programs produced from 1926–56. In 1939, the Finnish Broadcasting Company aired the same piece in Swedish, and the Finnish recording was aired again in 1952. From Hollo’s translation, “Malini” was produced as a radio drama in 1961. In October 1961, to celebrate Tagore’s centenary, a group of young students performed the “Valmiki Pratibha” (1881) in Helsinki, and two years later it was also seen on Finnish TV. Pohjanmies has also found details of a number of recitals of Tagore’s poems. Two more recent theatre performances must still be mentioned. In 1990–91, Voionmaan Opisto near Tampere presented “Uhri”,⁶ directed by Jorma Markkula, and in 2001, the TAVI-theatre in Helsinki produced “Tsitra” (Chitra 1914), directed by Timo Päivänsalo.

In addition to theatre performances and poetry recitals, Tagore’s centenary was also noted in other ways—here I again refer to H. Pohjanmies’ studies. One of the leading Finnish newspapers published a long and well-informed article on Tagore by Eino Krohn (1902–1987), the professor of comparative literature, and another on his art by the art historian Sakari Saarikivi (1911–1985).

The melodious poetry of Tagore has inspired many Western composers. To take an example, no less than ten Italian composers have set Tagore poems to music: Franco Alfano, Alfredo Casella, Vincenzo Davico, Guido Laccetti, Renzo Massarani, Leopoldo Mugnone, Giacomo Orefice, Salvatore Messina, Ottorino Respighi, and,

⁴ “King and Queen”.

⁵ *Postitoimisto* < *The Post-Office*. 1914 < *Dāk ghar*. 1912.

⁶ *The Sacrifice*. 1917 < *Bisarjjan*. 1890.

Guglielmo Zuelli.⁷ In Finland, Erkki Melartin (1875–1937) composed music for four poems of Tagore in 1914–18 (three with Swedish, one with Finnish text). Pohjanmies lists a number of more recent compositions by Finnish composers on Tagore’s texts: Eeli Kivinen (1977), Hannu Virtanen (1993), Merja Ikkela (2006), Minna Leinonen (2009) and Arto Koskinen (2010).

In many Western countries, Tagore’s name is also connected with the academic tradition of Indology. Think, for instance, of F. Belloni-Filippi and Vincenz Lesný. In Finland, the Indological tradition was rather thin. The only Professor of Sanskrit, Julio Natanael Reuter (1863–1967) sent a congratulation in Sanskrit on the occasion of Tagore’s 70th birthday celebration. His student Eino Wälikangas (1889–1960) wrote a brief, but informative article on Tagore in the first Finnish encyclopedia in 1917.⁸ Another of Reuter’s students, Hugo Valvanne (1894–1961) published a long essay on Tagore in 1918 in one of the leading Finnish cultural journals.⁹

I would like to conclude my brief survey by pointing out that Tagore himself did not forget Finland. On one of the darkest moments in my country’s history, he wrote the poem entitled *Apaghat* (1939, published 1940):¹⁰

*All around the maze
of winding paths in the wood, bhāti-flowers
Have come to bloom
Their scent dispensing the balm
of Chaitra. From a nearby jarul tree
A koel-bird strains its voice in dull, demented melody.
A telegram comes then:
“Finland pounded by Soviet bombs.”*

⁷ Cimino & Scialpi 1974: 180–182.

⁸ Wälikangas 1917: 1061–63, republished in the revised edition: *Tietosanakirja* 13, 1937: 439f.

⁹ Valvanne 1918: 230–244.

¹⁰ Translated by W. Radice (Tagore 1985: 118f).

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