

# Tagore and Korea

By Kim Yang-shik(Poetess)

Ancient sources reveal interesting stories about Korea and India. During first Century A. D. a King named Kim-Suro of Kaya Kingdom married a Princess of Ayodhya, India. If this is to be believed, then India and Korea enjoys a prehistoric relationship. In addition to this, the religion, Buddhism has played an influential role in bringing the two countries closer. Old record suggests there had been a few exchanges in relation to propagating Buddhist religion.

Coming to a more recent phase of history i.e. the early part of 20th century, Korea seemed to have greatly influenced by indian literature and culture, mainly through the writings of Rabindranath Tagore.

Many Koreans are aware till date that Rabindranath Tagore was the epitome of Indian spirituality, thought, literature and art. His Sense of humanity and justice had won the hearts of many in the world and left an indelible impression in the minds of the people. His writings were so powerful that it could move any one or any country at the very first reading. Rabindranath could never tolerate the oppression against human beings manifested through colonialism. He inspired the humankind to resist the forces of colonialism through his powerful verse.

Korean, then under colonialism looked forward to such inspirations and had invited Pandit Rabindranath to visit their country. He could not visit Korea then but was moved by the invitation extended to him through Korean patriotic feelings. His expression towards Korea finds its essence in these lines.

**"In the golden age of Asia  
Korea was one of its lamp-bearers  
and that lamp is waiting to be  
lighted once again for the  
illumination of the East."**

Rabindranath Tagore's love and support for Korean independence was never

in doubt. He had supported Korea against Japan in front of a crowd on his second visit to Japan in 1924.

He had sympathized with the revolt as a human being. What had been expressed on the surface might have seemed weak, but deep in his heart there lay a fierce anger.

Through this difference in the interpretation of Tagore we can observe the made of modernization in Japan and China, and also Korea. These were his exhortations against the Japanese people for their wrong policies but they were received coldly as the song of a poet from a defeated country which shows that Japan had little or no influence from Tagore. In China Tagore's influence had worked on certain writers, but not in Japan. In Korea, a great many writers, especially those who had nationalistic fervor, had responded emotionally to his works, but it is only in Han Yong-un that Tagore's literature and philosophy have been truly absorbed and consummated into sublimation.

The year 1929 marked the tenth anniversary of one of the most memorable patriotic movements in Korean history, the March First Movement against Japan. Tagore's poem is only four lines but the strong suggestion in his poem is enough to leave a deep emotion and a remarkable encouragement to Korean people at that time. Thus, Tagore's poem sums up his strong optimism about the revival of Korean glory which the pervading gloom of Japanese colonialism had unfortunately enveloped. The poem infuses confidence and hope even today in the minds of Korean people to march ahead towards a better future and one can easily imagine how much inspiration it would have given to them more than half a century ago when Korea was chained by foreign rule as India was.

Though the poem accompanied an unprecedented rise in the esteem and popularity of Tagore in Korea, it won't be an exaggeration to say that his name had become a household word in Korea more than a decade ago and almost every Korean was aware of his contribution in the literary and philosophical fields.

Tagore was introduced to Korea in 1913 just after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. His works were introduced in translation from 1916 and subsequent years saw a rapid rise in the pace of translation that admirers of Tagore had undertaken. In 1916, many pages of Tagore's work were translated and published in the literary magazine, *Ch'ongch'un* Youth. "Gitanjali" was translated into Korean in 1920, "The Crescent Moon" and "Gardener" in 1924 and his famous play "Post Office" and many other essays in 1926, Tagore's

works were published in six volumes through translation from English to Korean. And translation is still going on today.

Tagore himself had shown a great interest in the Korean people. Unlike other writers from the western world, he was received and translated not only as a writer but also as a philosopher. No other writer's works were translated more than Tagore's. From which it is possible to infer a particular trait in Korean literature. Here the attitude of Koreans to his works may be observed. As long as it was written by Tagore, for Korean people the nature of the work did not matter. There is the geographical fact that Tagore himself is an Oriental man and the poet himself has shown deep sympathy to ward the Korean people. That he was an Oriental poet, and his native homeland also was colonized by the British, could have been an encouraging factor considering the political situation in Korea, where as part of the enlightenment movement nationalism had become the belief of many intellectuals and youth alike.

The intellectual world of Korea in the 1920s produced a number of reviews of Tagore's works, including one written by a leading luminary of the literary as well as the political arena and whose memory is still cherished Han Yong-un (well known by his Buddhist name Manhae, 1879~1944). He was one of Korean great sage poets and a leader of Korean independence movement, who was deeply touched by Tagore's mysticism, naturalism and humanism.

When Manhae was eighteen he was already taking part in a powerful revolutionary movement of a populist and nativist character. Eventually, he became a Buddhist monk. This was partly a result of his accidental encounter with Buddhism in his pilgrimage among temples as a political fugitive. But you can also see some kind of logic in his conversion to Buddhism. He published a monthly magazine and opened the small school for children under the difficult situation of Japanese occupation. In the first edition of his magazine, he introduced Tagore to readers. It shows us how much he was interested in Tagore at that time.

Tagore's strong denunciation of the rising militarism and materialism of Japan in Asia contributed towards freedom and he was hailed as a spokesman of the suffering masses. Tagore's words touched the emotional chord of Koreans and hence it would be inappropriate to suggest that Tagore was received in Korea as a literary giant. His personality was perceived by the peace loving people of "The Hermit Kingdom" or "The Land of the Morning Calm" (the two epithets Korea was crowned with) as one who strove towards

building a bridge of understanding in a world torn characterized by alien domination, distrust and discord.

This emotional reception had its roots in nationalistic feelings and might be proclaimed to be of a higher level than a purely literary view point. But on the other hand, from the literary viewpoint, the limit in his influence is clearly seen. Tagore's influence may seem to be great on oriental culture, but from the Korean viewpoint there lies a deep ravine between Korea and the western world. In other words, there does not lie a praising glorification of a god as in the Upanishad. Tagore may be more comfortably received by the western literary world.

Tagore's influence on the Oriental world is restricted mainly to China, Japan and Korea, and the common factor in all the three countries were nationalistic. Of the three countries, the most influenced and the most accomplished work was produced by the sage Manhae.

After liberation of Korea, the Ministry of Education included an article on Tagore's poem "A Lamp of the East" in the text books for highschool students so as to perpetuate the memory of the great poet. Besides a number of Korean poets, writers and scholars carried out academic research on various aspects of Tagore's works.

In April, 1981, The Tagore Society of Korea was founded and it aims at promoting the ideals and ideas which Tagore stood for. It is in fact the culmination of a long-cherished dream of ardent admirers of the Indian poet in Korea. The Society comprises poets, writers, artists and scholars; it is a unique civilian group devoted to the promotion of exchange of study, culture and arts between Korea and India, and endeavors to lead Korean youth along a very rich avenue of oriental culture and to foster in them international understanding.

The Society has since published annual volumes of Korean-Indian Literature and the volumes of Korea-Indian Culture. It consists of articles by both Korean and Indian scholars which testify to the reciprocal interest among youth in strengthening the ties and understanding between the two different cultural identities.