

May 3, 1932

Rabindranath Tagore, 'Discussion with Educationists in Tehran, 3 May 1932'

Citation:

"Rabindranath Tagore, 'Discussion with Educationists in Tehran, 3 May 1932'", May 3, 1932, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Rabindranath Tagore, *Journey to Persia and Iraq: 1932*, transl. from Bengali by Surendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sukhendu Ray (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2003), 150-154. Annotated by Cyrus Schayegh. <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/291021>

Summary:

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the 1913 literature Nobel Prize laureate, was a leading Bengali-language Indian writer and a truly influential intellectual in the subcontinent, across Asia, and indeed the world. He travelled to more than 30 countries in the America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. He often and perhaps most importantly in Asia talked about Asian civilization: a bloc shared by entities like Japan, India, or Iran that—here followed Orientalist tropes—was more spiritual than the West. A 1926 visit of his to Egypt impressed Iranian educational officials and diplomats, including the consul-general in Bombay, Jalal al-Din Keyhan, who maintained close relations with that city's Zoroastrian community. As a result, Tagore was invited to Iran, whereto he flew in 1932 for a month-long country-wide tour. Analyzed in Afshin Marashi's *Exile and the Nation: The Parsi Community of India and the Making of Modern Iran* (2020), his tour inter alia included a visit to the tomb, in Shiraz, of one of Iran's most famous poets, Hafez, and dozens of meetings with regular citizens, intellectuals, and politicians, including an audience in Iran's capital of Tehran with the country's ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944; r. 1925-1941).

This and one other text contained in the collection are (perhaps revised) transcripts of two conversations Tagore had in Tehran. One was with educators, likely in the garden palace in which Tagore was put up; the other took place during a party at the residence of the known politician, journalist, and secularist thinker Ali Dashti (1897-1982). Certainly the former but perhaps also the latter conversation was facilitated by an English-Persian translator, likely the poet Gholamreza Rashed Yasemi, or Dinshah Irani, a leading Indian Zoroastrian invited with Tagore to Iran, or Jalal al-Din Keyhan, who accompanied Tagore, too. At the time, Iran was in the midst of a sociocultural transformation. While led by the increasingly autocratic Reza Shah Pahlavi, it was initiated and carried by an expanding modern middle class, as Cyrus Schayegh has shown in *Who Is Knowledgeable, Is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society* (2009). This process went hand in hand with a nationalism that was importantly, though not exclusively, focused on Iran's pre-Islamic past. At that time, the

nationalist narrative went, Iran was interwoven with the Indian subcontinent, whose inhabitants are, like Iranians, Aryans—a European term warmly welcomed by many Iranians and Indians. In this simultaneously nationalist and supra-nationalist narrative, that common Indo-Iranian realm was broken only when Semitic Arabs, whom Iranian nationalists often malign, invaded Iran in the seventh century.

We thank Afshin Marashi for information provided about the translation practices during Tagore's journey.

Original Language:

Bengali

Contents:

Translation - English

Discussion with educationists in Tehran

3 May 1932

Poet: I am glad to meet you here today and have this opportunity of discussing with you about some fundamental principles of education which we owe it to the modern generation to establish in our educational institutions. To me the most important issue seems to be the task of widening the mental horizon of the students, of imparting to their studies the background of internationalism which will enable them to realize the true character of our interlinked humanity and the deeper unities of our civilizations in the West and the East.

Educator I: I express on behalf of my colleagues and myself our profound thankfulness to you for reviving in your educational colony the spirit of internationalism which is the spirit of Asia.

This spirit as you know, sir, is not foreign to our Persian civilization. In the olden days, Shapur's University was a refuge for students of Rome who met with no racial bias from our people when they flocked round our teachers for knowledge. After the invasion of the Arabs, in the Nizami schools we had Jewish, Arab and Assyrian students. Our educational traditions have consistently maintained this supernational attitude in all matters relating to the quest for truth. It is because of this tradition which we yet carry in our blood that we can accept your great message with an open heart.

Poet: I rejoice to hear that you share with me a deep faith in cultural federation between different peoples and races. In India we have offered hospitality to various indigenous and foreign cultures and attempted to evolve our own civilization by assimilating influences from far and wide. It is only now that in our artificial universities we have gone in wholly for parrot-like repetition, in imitation that is uncritical, in memorizing lessons without using our own initiative of mind and courage of judgment. It produces eternal schoolboys who gather information that never ripen into true knowledge and wisdom.

My dream is to offer our students a continent background of mind, a background in which have been coordinated the experiences of ages, the intellectual and spiritual experiments made in Asia for long generations.

Europe has evolved a continental culture which is like a common coffer to which the different peoples of Europe contribute their best gifts. Owing to this collaboration Europe has become great. She has successfully exploited the rich potentialities of her peoples and come to the forefront of [sic] in the march of life. Asia too must reorganize her continental life and vitalize her scattered cultures by recognizing their affinities and expressing them in literature, arts, science and civic life. Barriers of national segregation must be broken through, superstitions of religions and social incompatibility must be relentlessly fought against. In a daring quest of all that lies deepest in our common humanity Asia must unite and hold out her hands to the West in friendly cooperation.

Educator II: Sir, we are sure that your hopes will be justified because a whole civilization expresses its deepest needs, its greatest fulfillment through its men of genius. A prophet is the product of circumstance, appearing at a critical period of a country's history. Now all the great nations of Asia are thinking of their past glories, they are waking up to their responsibility, to their national inheritance. They are seeking a great message which will ignite their dormant consciousness and bring about an illumination of their fullest personality. You appear, sir, as a prophet and spokesman of Asia's great dreams, through you we are beginning to realize the nature of the work which we educators have before us. Though we get your message through the unsatisfying medium of translation, your noble physiognomy and the music of your speech bring it very near to our soul.

Poet: We must no longer be satisfied with isolated domestic lamps, we must have a festival of lights which will express the effulgence of our humanity in Asia and justify us before the modern age. Otherwise we can never hope to be recognized by the world at large, we shall remain obscure, and the bondage of obscurity is the worst form of slavery that can shackle a nation. We must gain freedom. Freedom which is a gift of self-expression, not an opportunity for self-indulgence in material comforts. During our great past our free peoples sent their torch-bearers to different countries

to carry the radiant message of love, of great thoughts and deeds, to acquaint their neighboring peoples with the highest realizations of their seers and sages. Asia in those days had the freedom of soul to bestow and to accept all that she considered great and enduring; it is that highest form of freedom which we must today win for our coming generations by opening up through an education of complete life the richest potentialities of their character. This education of a complete life involves training to recognize the kinship of our common humanity through a correct reading of history, of science, of the arts, in the light of man's spiritual truth.

Utilitarian education has its value, but it is deprived of all significance if in its fragmentary pursuit of narrow immediate ends it fails to arouse in the mind of students the impulse of larger purposes, of aspirations which comprehend the fullness of our personality. In the East we must never forget to link up our educational institutions with the fundamental values of our undivided spiritual life, because that has been the greatest mission of our ancient universities, which, as you have said, in spite of political vicissitudes, never allowed their vision of humanity to be darkened by racial considerations. Asia owes it to humanity to restore her spirit of generous cooperation in culture and heal the suffering peoples of modern age now divided by cruel politics and materialistic greed which vitiate even the citadels of education.

In order to have this intermingling of minds in Asia we must rid our minds that are dark and against reason, of all the aberrations of local history that repel others and with a spirit of intellectual detachment seek out the treasures that have universal value.

Educator I: Material progress is essential but it must know its limits. You have made wonderfully clear to us today our task as educators to inspire our students with a correct sense of values which may be described as the one great purpose of education. Every student of history knows how nations have perished either from dire paucity of material needs or from a surfeit of them. The East and the West, roughly speaking, present before us today a spectacle of these two extreme conditions. Europe by concentrating on material achievement has exploited nature and man at the expense of her soul. She has evolved a unity of civilization because of the urge of a common purpose which has permeated her continental life. But that is not enough - the results are too evident to need explanation. Asia still retains the vision of a synthetic cultural life where good is the good of our whole nature, of all the peoples; - but as you have made evident to us now, failing to establish her ideals on the basis of a united, a continental civilization, she has become ineffective.

Sir, you have raised the banner of Asia's self-expression, your ideas of education are a new revelation to the modern age. We are proud that through you our continent offers to all humanity the promise of a new path which will lead us out of the debris of the present, out of all the delusions and oppressions which insult our human nature and bring us into mutual conflict. You can be assured that we shall never forget your message, that our renascent nation will strive its utmost to put your ideas into effective operation.

Poet: I thank you for your sympathy and your faith which strengthen my hopes for the future. Our institution in Bengal depends on your cooperation for its success. We must keep in touch with each other and be guided by the experiences we both gain in our efforts to train the minds of the young towards a fellowship of culture which will bring humanity together in love and understanding.