

# Tagore, Kabir and Underhill

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TWO outcomes of Tagore's visit to London in 1912-13 were *Gitanjali*, a collection of English translations of his own Bengali verses for which he won the Nobel prize for literature, and *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, a translation of verses by the medieval Indian saint Kabir. Despite the accolades once garlanded on *Gitanjali*, it is now little read outside of India, whilst his *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* has been continuously in print since it was first published and had a significant impact on popular images of Kabir in the West.

In this essay I investigate the translation processes which took place during Tagore's visit to London in 1912-13 that influenced his collaboration with Evelyn Underhill on Kabir. My conclusion is that Tagore and Underhill's translations of Kabir produced a conflation of Tagore's and Kabir's ideas and Underhill's Christian mysticism which has had a remark-

able and long lasting impact on perceptions of Kabir.

From as early as 1910, when writing in English, Tagore had used Kabir as an example of how in India spirituality had transcended the separation between communities, and saints such as Kabir, Nanak and Chaitanya had been spiritual masters who taught similar messages about the relationship between their communities and the divine.<sup>1</sup>

Tagore also often invoked Kabir when speaking of the relationship between the individual and the divine. In his work *Personality*, a book based on lectures he gave in the USA in 1917, he referred to how, 'Man has also known direct communication of the person with the Person, not through the world of forms and changes, the world of extension in time and space,

1. R. Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 76.

but in the innermost solitude of consciousness, in the region of the profound and the intense.<sup>2</sup> He then quoted from a version of his own translation of verse 76 in his Kabir anthology to support this view.

Tagore also often mentioned Kabir in relation to the Indian nation. For instance in his book *Nationalism* (1916), he discussed how racial harmony had been achieved in India, and again quoted Nanak, Kabir and Chaitanya to support this view.<sup>3</sup>

Tagore's interest in Kabir was also influenced by his colleague Kshitimohan Sen (1880-1960). In his work *Indian Mysticism*, he described how he had been working on Kabir verses when he arrived in Shantiniketan in 1908, and when Tagore came to know of this, encouraged him to publish his work.<sup>4</sup> In 1910 and 1911, he published four pamphlets which took the form of a brief introduction, and then the verses in Hindi, in Bengali script, and paraphrases of the verses in Bengali.

In view of Tagore's interest in Kabir as an example of Indian religious unity, and in Sen's works on Kabir, it is not surprising that translations of Kabir's verses should have been one of the projects which he took up during this period. Furthermore, the pamphlet format of Sen's works would have made them convenient for Tagore to take with him on his visit to London in 1912.

The role of Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) is often neglected in Tagore's translation of *Kabir* where she played a significant role, in a way analogous to that which Yeats did for Gitanjali. Furthermore, in order to understand Underhill's influences on the transla-

tion it is necessary to consider her own work in more detail. Underhill was both a prolific author and an enthusiastic Christian mystic and shortly before working with Tagore had published in 1911 a popular work called *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*<sup>5</sup> in which she explored the history of Christian mysticism in depth. This remains a popular work on mysticism in India, where I saw new paperback copies on sale as recently as 2009.

However, there are hardly half a dozen brief references to Indian mysticism in this work of over three hundred pages. When she does talk of Indian mysticism, her viewpoint is that: 'Indian mysticism founds its external system almost wholly on (a) asceticism, the domination of the senses, and (b) the deliberate practice of self-hypnotization, either by fixing the eyes on a near object, or by the rhythmic repetition of the mantra or sacred word.'<sup>6</sup>

She also holds that the aim of 'Oriental Mysticism' is 'the total annihilation or reabsorption of the individual soul in the Infinite.'<sup>7</sup> However, she asserted that European mystics rejected this idea and criticised Indian mystics for the 'tendency of Indian mysticism to regard the Unitive Life wholly in its passive aspect, as a total self-annihilation' and she says of the mystic that 'he does not come back and bring to his fellow-men the life-giving news that he has transcended mortality in the interests of the race.'<sup>8</sup>

4. K. Sen, *Medieval Mysticism*, Luzac & Co., London, 1929. p. x.

5. E. Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Methuen, London, 1930.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-8.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 434.

This rather critical view of Indian mysticism as a passive seeking for annihilation seems to have been challenged by her encounter with Gitanjali, and then with Kabir, who she evidently saw as a mystic who brings back a message to the world 'in the interests of the race', as she put it.

Underhill had been first introduced to Tagore by her friend May Sinclair.<sup>9</sup> She then wrote a glowing review of Gitanjali which seen in the light of her comments criticising Indian mysticism from 1911 above, shows how Tagore's Gitanjali transformed her views of Indian mysticism as it was: not the 'Via Negativa' of the Neoplatonists, but a positive mysticism, which presses forward to a 'more abundant life.'<sup>10</sup>

This review pleased Tagore greatly and he wrote a letter to Rothenstein asking him to thank her for it and this in turn then led to them working together during the summer of 1913 in London on the Kabir translations.

The materials on which the translations are based were, just as with Gitanjali, written notes that Tagore had brought with him. These included two types of sources, first, Tagore's translations, made from Bengali paraphrases made by his colleague Kshitimohan Sen of his own edited versions of earlier Hindi verses, and second, a manuscript of translations of verses from Sen's collection made by another of Tagore's colleagues, Ajit Kumar Chakravarty. In her introduction, Underhill noted that although the translations are 'chiefly the work of Mr Rabindranath Tagore' they also

9. D. Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of Infinite Life*, Crossroad, New York, 1990, p. 57.

10. *The Nation*, 16 November 1912, p. 321, quoted in C.J.R. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975, p. 140.

2. R. Tagore, *Personality*, Macmillan, New York, 1917b, p. 92.

3. R. Tagore, *Nationalism*, The Book Club of California, San Francisco, 1917a, p. 119.

had before them an English translation of 116 of the songs in Sen's collection made by Ajit Kumar Chakravarty. It is unclear whether Chakravarty's translations still exist and it is not possible to know to what extent they influenced Tagore and Underhill's translations beyond what Underhill says in her introduction which is that they had adopted 'a considerable number of readings' from Chakravarty's translation and that she had made use of some of the ideas from his essay in her own introduction.<sup>11</sup>

The process of translation undertaken by Tagore and Underhill was one in which neither had direct access to the originals. This meant that at times they included lines which are not to be found in Sen's text at all. The most striking addition is three lines in verse 61 not found in Sen's Hindi text.<sup>12</sup> I am also unable to locate what verse the extra lines might be based on and this clearly shows the way that the process of translating the verses through intermediary paraphrases and translations opened up the possibility for considerable changes in the verses.

However, just as Mary Lago noted that Tagore seemed unconcerned by making major changes in between the original Bengali versions of his poems and his renderings of them in English, this also appears to have been something which he was quite content with in his renderings of Kabir's verses.

The main sources from which we can glean any information about Tagore's views on translation are

11. R. Tagore and E. Underhill, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Translated by Rabindranath Tagore Assisted by Evelyn Underhill, Royal India and Pakistan Society, London, 1914, pp. xliii-xliv.

12. K. Sen, *Kabir*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2001, p. 44.

occasional comments in his correspondence. From this, two views emerge, which seem somewhat contradictory, a desire to not add anything to the translation, and an opposition to literal translation. The first is found in a letter to Kshitimohan Sen from 1911. 'I do not want to go beyond the original text to the smallest extent, even if, as a result, the spirit of the original is not fully explicated. That spirit may remain hidden a little – explaining too much may be limiting on that spirit – poetry and theoretical explication are different things altogether.'<sup>13</sup>

The second view is found in a letter from 1920 to J.G. Drummond, who was translating Tagore's novel *Naukadubi* into English. 'I do not believe in a literal translation, specially when the languages of the original and that of the translation are essentially different. The words of the one language may have their synonyms in the other carrying the same meanings, but their associations are in most cases different. And the suggestions and flavour contained in these associations are more important in literature than mere meanings.'<sup>14</sup>

How these views relate to his translations of Kabir is hard to say, but the second seems to relate better to his Kabir translations. They are far from literal translations, and appear to include both cuts, and additions, to the text.

There were a number of significant ways in which Tagore and Underhill made choices in their translations which determined how the verses would be understood by their potential English audience. In particular,

13. S. Bhattacharya, 'Introduction', in *Rabindranath Tagore. One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, Chronicle Books, New Delhi, 2003, p. 16.

14. R. Tagore, op cit., 1997, p. 229.

three issues are evident in relation to how they pitched their translation of the verses.

First, they shifted the verses from addressing audiences of groups of people to being verses addressed to individuals by conflating the wide range of types of people addressed in the Hindi text into a small number of English categories and by changing most instances of addresses to groups of people to appeals to individuals. For instance, the *bhanitâ* in verse one is addressed to 'fellow *sâdhs*', so, the verse is clearly addressed to a community of people, but this becomes 'O Sadhu!'.  
 In fact, in almost every instance when a verse was addressed to *sâdhs*, in the plural, they either changed this to a singular *sâdhu*, or to a singular 'brother' as in verse 22 or just left out the address as in verse 7, which starts in Hindi 'O *sâdhs*' but has no such beginning in Tagore and Underhill. Where the *tek* is addressed to *sants* this became 'lover' (17.7), 'ascetic' (57), and 'saint' (61) while *avadhût* became 'brother' (5), 'worshipper' (17), 'the wanderer' (40) and 'sadhu' (94). Tagore and Underhill were clearly making strategic decisions and dropping that which they thought would not be accessible to their new intended audience, individual English readers who would not know enough about India to be able to distinguish the different groups addressed in the verses.

Tagore and Underhill also conflate gender issues. For instance, one verse (11) in the *tek* is addressed to 'girlfriends' *sakhiyan* and the *bhanitâ* says 'listen my girlfriend', *suno sakhi mori* but these become 'comrade' and 'friend'. Likewise Verse 59 is addressed to *bâvarî* and begins 'Crazy woman, can't you see your lover?' but it becomes 'O man, if thou

dost not know thine own Lord.’ Perhaps, these changes made the verses accessible to an audience unfamiliar with the idea of a verse form in which the characters take on female persona, but they also obscured the meanings of the verse.

Tagore and Underhill translated the verses using an archaic style of English, using pronouns such as ‘thee’ and ‘thou’, in order to give a ‘spiritual’ feel to the verses. The Biblical style in these translations may have been influenced by Evelyn Underhill’s views, in particular the nineteenth century notion that translations of historical texts should be done in a pseudo-archaic diction.<sup>15</sup> Her own poetry published around this time also uses a similar kind of diction, as in her poem ‘Nature’ from 1916. ‘Thou art a priest, O Nature, And from Thee All who believe Assuredly receive Enshrined in many a change-ful accident The substance of the only sacrament.’<sup>16</sup>

Underhill was the final editor of the work after Tagore returned to India when it was going to press, and she wrote on 16 November 1913 of ‘the various changes I made in the translation’ in regard to the final version of the text for publication.<sup>17</sup> The translations were eventually published in 1914 as *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* by the India Society in London and subsequently reissued by Macmillan and Company in 1915 in London as *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* and in New York as *Songs of Kabir*.<sup>18</sup>

15. R. Apter, *Digging for the Treasure: Translation After Pound*, Paragon House Publishers, New York, 1987.

16. D. Greene, op cit., 1990, p. 59.

17. C.J.R. Armstrong, op cit., 1975, p. 143.

18. E. Underhill, *Modern Guide the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998, p. 227.

In both Underhill’s introduction to Tagore and Underhill’s translation of Kabir verses, Kabir emerges as a figure who dreamed of ‘reconciling [...] Mohammedan mysticism with the traditional theology of Brahmanism,’<sup>19</sup> and she comments that, despite founding a movement with around a million followers, it is ‘supremely as a mystical poet that Kabir lives for us.’<sup>20</sup> This last comment is very telling I feel, as it shows her complete lack of interest in how the verses of Kabir related to the living tradition of Kabir’s followers in India and points to her crucial role in how Kabir’s verses in this translation got separated from the living tradition of Kabir in India.

Her enthusiasm for Tagore at this time also led her to enthuse about Tagore’s play *The Post Office*, which was performed in London at this time, and also helping to edit an English translation of a biography of Tagore’s father and write an introduction to the volume.<sup>21</sup>

After Tagore and Underhill’s collaboration on translating Kabir during the summer of 1913, she wrote to him on the 29 November 1913 saying that: ‘I want so much to tell you – but it is not possible – what your kindness and friendship has meant to me this summer, and will always mean to me now. This is the first time I have had the privilege of being with one who is a Master in the things I care so much about.’<sup>22</sup>

Her contribution to the Kabir translation was, I argue, very influential as she conflated a vision of Tagore as a mystic teacher with Kabir himself and with her own understandings of

19. R. Tagore and E. Underhill, op cit., 1914, p. vii.

20. Ibid., p. viii.

21. C.J.R. Armstrong, op cit., 1975, p. 142.

22. Ibid., p. 141.

Christian mysticism, in terms of language, ideas and interpretation.

A clear instance of this is her understanding of the term which she understood to be the “‘Unstruck Music of the Infinite” – that celestial melody with the angel played to St. Francis, that ghostly symphony which filled the soul of Rolle with ecstatic joy.’<sup>23</sup> This undoubtedly in Kabir’s own verses had almost nothing to do with what she understood, but was rather a yogic term for a particular kind of experience in practice relating to the *ita*, *pingala*, and the *susmanâ nâvî* and the raising of consciousness to the *trikuti sangam* and the experience of hearing the ‘unstruck sound’, the *anahad sabda*. However, by conflating a concept unknown in the West from Kabir’s verses with a well-known Judeo-Christian concept, Underhill and Tagore created a lens through which Kabir’s verses could be understood by western audiences.

The degree to which she also saw Kabir through the lens of Christianity can be seen to an even greater degree in an essay she wrote on Kabir for the journal *Contemporary Review* of February 1914 called ‘Kabir the Weaver Mystic’. This was a development of the material in the introduction to Kabir which also introduced the theme of possible Christian influence in Kabir. As she said, ‘The devotional monotheism of the poems, together with their sense of Divine Fatherhood and “perpetual insistence on the virtues of meekness and love” showed the influence of Christianity.’<sup>24</sup>

Underhill’s Christian presuppositions led her to see things in Kabir, which are plainly not in Kabir at all, and this I suggest led her to introduce into

23. R. Tagore and E. Underhill, op cit., 1914, p. 14.

24. C.J.R. Armstrong, op cit., 1975, p. 145.

the Kabir tradition ideas which were not at all present in it at all before that.

Underhill also quoted from Kabir in some other of her works, but apparently in some cases from translations which were not part of the work she had made with Tagore, and which sound remarkably akin to Christian teachings. For instance, in her work *Practical Mysticism*, in a discussion of sin she says: 'When the I, the Me, and the Mine are dead, the work of the Lord is done, says Kabir.'<sup>25</sup>

The English reading audience for Indian religious verses at the start of the twentieth century was far from being a *tabula rasa*, coming to Kabir without any expectations. Readers were familiar with translations of the *Dhammapada*<sup>26</sup> and the *Bhagavadgita* in translations like that of Edwin Arnold's.<sup>27</sup> The success of Tagore and Underhill's collaboration was ironically due to Underhill seeing Kabir through a lens of Judeo-Christian and Islamic mystical traditions as part of a syncretic view of mysticism as transcending the distinctive characteristics of individual traditions. This syncretic view not only curtailed her understanding of Kabir as it led to editing out anything inconsistent with it, but also broadened the appeal of Kabir's verses by refashioning them into a form which brought them to the attention of new English reading audiences in the West.

In conclusion, Tagore's collaboration with Underhill produced a work which despite, or perhaps paradoxically because of, conflating Tagore, Kabir and Christian mysticism, has remained popular from its publication to the present day.

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25. E. Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, J.M. Dent, London, 1914.

26. P. Friedlander, 'Dhammapada Traditions and Translations', *Journal of Religious History* 33(2), June 2009, pp. 218-37.

27. E. Arnold, *The Song Celestial or Bhagavad-Gita*, Trubner & Co., London, 1885.