A Portrait of Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya: The Quintessential Indian Comparatist before Tagore

Jey Sushil
Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, USA
Corresponding author email: jeysushil@wustl.edu

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Abstract: Over the past two decades, the origin stories of world literature have been increasingly challenged. Rabindranath Tagore's 1907 lecture on world literature became an important text. The history of comparative literature in India can, however, be traced back to the 1890s by examining the figure of Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya, who was a member of the editorial board of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*. One of the earliest Indians to pursue a PhD abroad, Chattopadhyaya wrote on religion through a comparative lens. This essay highlights his contribution to comparative literature and extends the origin story of comparative literature back to the late nineteenth century.

Keywords: comparative literature, comparative religion, drama, Hinduism, Buddhism.

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Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya is a largely forgotten name in the annals of comparative literature, although he was the first Bengali to obtain a PhD from a European university. Despite the fact that the majority of his academic output was comparative, and he was on the editorial board of the first journal of comparative literature, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, his contribution to the field of comparative literature remains unacknowledged. A scholar from a British colony who traveled to Europe for higher education, he studied in Edinburg, Leipzig and Zürich, and devoted his life to comparative religion. A portrait of Chattopadhyaya as a comparatist has the potential to shift the origin story of comparative literature in India by at least twenty years.[1]

In the last few decades, established origin stories of comparative literature have been challenged. As far as India is concerned, the main origin story was tied to Rabindranath Tagore, who gave a lecture on World Literature, in Bangla, in 1907.[2] Translated into English in 2001, the lecture found its place in *World Literature in Theory* (2014), edited by David Damrosch. Rosinka Chaudhuri and Damrosch have argued differently about Tagore's concept of world literature *vis-á-vis* Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur*. While Tagore was aware of Goethe's work, he envisioned a different path for world literature, based on his understanding of the Upanishads and the Indian cultural sphere. Tagore, mainly a poet, imagined a world literature beyond the confines of a particular time and space. He claimed that "we have to regard world literature as a temple being built by the master mason, universal man; writers from various countries and periods are working under him as labourers. None of us has the *plan* of the entire building." In this view, each writer is making and remaking this temple through their talent, according to an "invisible" plan.[3] Tagore's lecture ponders the idea of self, extending it to the notion of universal man. The image of the temple is significant; religion was part of the upbringing of Bengali upper middle class in the late nineteenth century. Families like those of Tagore and Chattopadhyaya were influential and active in the religious reform of Hinduism. In these circles, comparing religions and pursuing philosophical inquiries on religion were ongoing intellectual

1. In his published dissertation, Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya's name is written as Nisikânta, whereas another published work has the name as Nishikânta.

2. Rosinka Chaudhuri argues that Tagore's idea of world literature contrasts with Goethe's. For Goethe, world literature was about universality whereas the idea of "the world" that Tagore develops is related to an understanding of the "self" and the "other," predicated upon his inheritance of, and interest in, both Upanishadic high theory and popular folk culture. Rosinka Chaudhuri, "The Rustle of Language," in *Tagore: The World as His Nest*, ed. Sangeeta Datta and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2016), 263. On the other hand, Damrosch argues that Tagore follows Goethe's notion of world literature and "turns it to new purposes in colonial India, opposing both a narrow-minded nationalism and British policy" of divide and rule. Rabindranath Tagore, "World Literature," in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. David Damrosch (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 47.

3. Tagore, "World Literature," 55.

activities.

Chattopadhyaya had a wide interest in comparative religion and was well known in the Tagore family. According to one of Tagore's biographers, when Chattopadhyaya needed funds during his European sojourn, Devendranath Tagore came to his assistance.[4] Furthermore, in the 1870s, Rabindranath Tagore, a teenager at the time, was writing poems under the pseudonym Bhanusingha. These poems were published serially in the journal *Bharati* as "Bhanusingher Kabita" (Bhanusingha's poem). Sixteen-year-old Tagore claimed that Bhanusingha was a medieval poet, and that he had found a tattered manuscript somewhere in a library. He added that, "Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay, an academic, was said to have written a dissertation on these poems while in Germany, comparing them to European lyric poetry, thereby obtaining his doctorate on the subject."[5] The information is inaccurate, as Chaudhuri points out, but it is clear that Tagore was using Chattopadhyaya's name to bolster his claim that Bhanusingha (his pseudonym) has been studied by an Indian scholar in Europe. As part of the first generation of scholars who travelled outside India for higher education, Chattopadhyaya's name must have been well known in Indian academic circles. His PhD dissertation, titled *The Yātrās; or, The Popular Dramas of Bengal*, a study of travelling dramas in Bengal, was published soon after its defense in 1882. He was a polyglot who could speak and write fluently in English, German, Sanskrit, Bangla, and Hindi—as well as, most likely, other Indian languages. He taught in Hyderabad (where Telugu and Hindi are spoken), Muzaffarpur (Hindi, Bhojpuri, Maithili) and Mysore (Kannada-speaking region); it would have been difficult to get by in these regions with only English and Bangla.

But who was, in fact, Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya? The 1976 reprint of Chattopadhyaya's 1882 dissertation includes an introduction written by Ramakanta Chakrabarty, which offers a hagiographic biographical account.[6] Born in 1852 into the family of a rich upper caste Brahmin lawyer in erstwhile Dhaka, Chattopadhyaya was the youngest of three brothers.[7] He went to Calcutta as a young man for college and left for Europe in 1873. After spending a year in Edinburgh as a medical student, Chattopadhyaya moved to Leipzig University in Germany, where he enrolled as a student of comparative religion. Religion played a significant part in Chattopadhyaya's life, as his father and eldest brother were members of Brahmo Samaj.[8] He would later recall that, as a young man, he came in contact with Brahmo Samaj and Christianity but could not reconcile with Christian orthodoxy.[9] He also recalled that, during his year in Edinburgh, "I fell in with the writings of Thomas Carlyle, who inspired me not only with a genuine love for German literature but also with a real admiration for Luther, Goethe and Schiller."[10] He thus decided to study German in Leipzig, where "Leibnitz, Lessing and Goethe had finished their studies a century ago."[11] Goethe, in particular, long considered to have coined the term *Weltliteratur* (though now we know that the term was in use much before Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*) inspired Chattopadhyaya.

As a comparatist, Chattopadhyaya gave lectures on Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Theosophy and Christianity. He eventually converted to Islam and wrote an essay explaining this decision. One of his lectures, titled *Buddhism and Christianity*, was not liked by local Christian groups and he was asked to leave Leipzig.[12] The lecture was later published in 1882 and Chattopadhyaya explained that, "The orthodox party naturally viewed both lecture and lecturer with the reverse of approbation and hurled their anathemas upon his devoted head. Some went so far as to denounce him from the pulpit."[13] The controversial lecture offered a comparative study of Buddhism and Christianity. He claimed that Christianity borrowed many elements from Buddhism, especially as they pertained to the purification of the soul, moral values, etc. After providing many parallel quotes from Buddhist texts and the Bible, the author observed: "But enough of this before an assembly consisting, or which is supposed to consist,

4. Prabhakar Mukhopadhyaya, Rabindra-Jivani, Calcutta, B.E. 1353, vol. 1, pp. 63-64, apud Nisikanta Chattopadhyaya, *The Yātrās; or, The Popular Dramas of Bengal* (Calcutta: Susanta Majumdar, 1976), 2.

5. Rosinka Chaudhuri, "The Rustle of Language," in *Tagore: The World as His Nest*, ed. Sangeeta Datta and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2016). https://www.india-seminar.com/2011/623/623_-rosinka_chaudhuri.htm. Accessed on March 24, 2025.

6. Chattopadhyaya, *The Yātrās*.

7. Dhaka was part of India in 1852. In 1947, it became part of Pakistan. After the war in 1971, it became the capital of the newly founded country of Bangladesh.

8. Brahmo Samaj was a reformist movement and is considered part of the Bengal Renaissance. It was initiated by Ram Mohan Roy and attracted influential people, such as Tagore's grandfather.

9. He read the works of American religious-spritual figure Theodore Parker and considered Parker "a prophet and an apostle of God" and believed his works were equal to the Bible or the Koran.

10. Chattopadhyaya, *Why Have I Accepted Islam?* (lecture, The Quran-o-Seerat Society, Hyderabad, August 26, 1904), 3.

11. Chattopadhyaya, *Why Have I Accepted Islam?*.

12. Ramakanta Chakrabarty mentions that his lecture about the Buddhist influence on Christianity landed him in trouble. Chattopadhyaya later published this work in English translation under the title *Buddhism and Christianity with an Appendix on Nirvana* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1882).

13. Chattopadhyaya, *Buddhism*, 1.

of Christians. You see, therefore, that in this respect Jesus has much resemblance to Gautama."[14] He argued that, "the doctrine of transmigration was principally borrowed from the Hindu religion, and Gautama accepted it, as Jesus accepted the idea of a final judgment."[15] He later published the lecture with more clarifications and provided an appendix on Nirvana.

After a stay in St Petersburg, Chattopadhyaya went to Switzerland, to the University of Zurich, where he completed his dissertation titled *The Yātrās; or, The Popular Dramas of Bengal* under the guidance of Dr. H. Schweizer-Sidler and Dr. Breitinger, in two years. The Yatras, or travelling drama, was part of the ancient Indian literary tradition.[16] One of the most significant Indian texts of literary criticism dealing with this archive was *Natya Shastra* (Treaties on Dramaturgy and Theatre), written by the sage Bharat, around 200 BC. Most of the Yātrās analyzed by Chattopadhyaya were Krishna-yatras (dramas devoted to God Krishna), composed by Krishnakamal Gosvami.[17] While undertaking close reading on some of Gosvami's works, Chattopadhyaya compares Yatras with European drama when it comes to their structure and form. He writes that the *Prastavana* of Sanskrit dramas have similarities with the prologue in European dramas. He mentions that Goethe had probably written the prologue of *Faust* inspired by the Sanskrit text *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. He further writes that, "After the *Prastavana*, the real dramatic story, Vastu (res), opens, and is carried on, not as in the modern European or the antique Sanskrit dramas, divided into *acts* and *scenes*, but as in the mediaeval Christian Mysteries, *passio, sepultura* and *resurrecttio*, or, as in the ancient Greek dramas, into *prologue, episode* and *exode*. All Yātrāsbelong to this class."[18] Like many other contemporary intellectuals of Bengal, Chattopadhyaya believed that Indians and Europeans belong to the same race. He therefore tried to find similarities between Yātrās and Greek dramas and considered Bengali drama an essential part of Indo-Aryan cultural heritage.[19]

It remains unclear when Chattopadhyaya returned to India from Zurich. In an essay remembering his German university life, he mentions that, after the submission of his thesis, he was supposed to become an "interpreter of German thought to my countrymen, and of Indian thought to the Germans and Europeans."[20] Therefore, he might have returned to India a few years after completing his PhD in 1882. He subsequently worked as a teacher and principal in different Indian colleges, where he probably taught comparative religion and ancient Indian dramas. Most of his writings are on religion, ranging from Christianity and Buddhism to Theosophy, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. In between these writings on religion, he wrote a lengthy essay on the first Indian Sanskrit drama: *The Mricchakatikam or, The Toy-Cart* (1892), delivered as a two-part lecture and later published in 1895. Here, Chattopadhyaya situates the plot of the drama in the second century after Christ, supporting his claim by the fact that, after the expedition of Alexander the Great, interactions between Greeks and Indians intensified and Greek plays influenced Indian drama. He states that "The *Mricchakatikam* is a sort of looking-glass for the age and society it depicts in the same sense as some of the romances of Dickens and of Balzac are of the peculiar social manners and customs, virtues and vices of the English and French during certain periods of their growth and development."[21] He presents himself as a comparative scholar, who had studied world literature, someone at ease with the works of Dickens, Balzac, and ancient Greek texts, and who sees himself as a world scholar.

As recounted in his memoir, *Reminiscences of the German University Life*, Chattopadhyaya's scholarship seemed shaped by a strong penchant for comparison. He praises discussion groups and mentions that students in German universities met over drinks to discuss lectures and new ideas every week. Chattopadhyaya considered this part of the "college life" to be lacking in India. He argues, referring to college life, that: "Until something is done to remedy this defect, our Indian Universities, I am afraid, must continue to be only teaching and examining bodies as they now are..."[22] He lamented the fledgling Indian university system, which called for reform, among other things by adding German-inspired physical training. These ideas had little resonance in India undert Britisth

14. Chattopadhyaya, *Buddhism*, 7.

15. Chattopadhyaya, *Buddhism*, 10.

16. Pronounced as Jatra in Bangla, Yatras were travelling dramas popular in the Bengal region, where theatre companies performed different stories in the evening and overnight during festivals.

17. Goswami is considered a religious storyteller or *Kathaka*. His father was a Sanskrit scholar and singer of Vaishnava devotional songs. Goswami later learned Sanskrit as well and wrote songs and dramas praising lord Krishna. His major works are *Svapnavilasa*, *Divyonmada/rai Unmadini*, *Kaliya-damana*, *Nimai-sannyasa*, *Barata-milana and Gandharva-milana*. Most of these works were performed by the travelling companies and they were not necessarily published as books. Goswami died in 1888, but it seems that his works were popular and had an aesthetic value that was of interest to Chattopadhayaya.

18. Chattopadhyaya, *The Yātrās*, 10.

19. Chattopadhyaya, *The Yātrās*, 5.

20. Chattopadhyaya, *Three Lectures. The Reminiscences of the German University Life; The True Theosophist; and The Mricchakatikam, or The Toy Cart* (Bombay: Education Society Steam Press, 1895), 11.

21. Chattopadhyaya, *Three Lectures*, 49.

22. Chattopadhyaya, *Three Lectures*, 5.

control.

Chattopadhyaya considered his time in Leipzig and Zürich highly productive. He likely came in touch with Hugo Meltzl, either directly or through one of his professors, during his stay in Europe. Meltzl himself studied in Leipzig from 1868 to 1872. Chattopadhyaya seems to have arrived a year later than Meltzl, but they probably had the same teachers. When Meltzl searched for an expert on India as a contributor to *Acta Comparationis*, he was likely recommended Chattopadhyaya. One of Meltzl's professor—from whom he acquired his love of Goethe—was Johannes Minckwitz. Chattopadhyaya was also fond of Goethe, whom he mentioned in at least three of his works. As Mihnea Bâlici's article in this special issue argues, Meltzl's network of collaborators was anchored in his educational mobility, especially his stay in Leipzig. It is on this educational infrastructure that Meltzl encountered Chattopadhyaya.[23] Moreover, Meltzl and Chattopadhyaya shared similar noble, elite backgrounds, albeit from different parts of the world. They both travelled far and wide for education, and were more interested in international cultural frameworks than national narratives. Chattopadhyaya's fluency in German and his expertise in comparative religion might have influenced Meltzl's sense that comparative religion constituted an inherent part of the study of comparative literature. One of the issues of *Acta Comparationis* was devoted to comparative religion and included Meltzl's hand drawn images of the Indian goddess *Kali* and other symbols and mantras, such as *Om Mani Padme Hum* from Buddhism.[24]

The origin stories of comparative literature have largely been Europe-centric. Alternative genealogies, like the one centering Rabindranath Tagore's work, have called us to rethink our conceptions of world literature. In turn, Chattopadhyaya's educational travels, polyglotism, and work in comparative religion shift the origin story of Indian comparative literature from 1907, the year Tagore gave his lecture on world literature, back to at least 1882, when Chattopadhyaya lectured in Leipzig on Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism in German. Although Chattopadhyaya's work remains Occidentalist in nature, the comparative nature of his work on relgion, and its echoes in *Acta Comparationis*, asks us to reconsider the Indian origins of comparative literature.[25]

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23. Mihnea Bâlici, "For a Post-Imperial Discipline: On Dora d'Istria and Hugo Meltzl's Travels," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2025): 55–67.

24. Fig 31 and 36, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, no. 11–14 (1886): 111.

25. The idea of Aryan brotherhood was fashionable in the second half of the nineteenth century in India, when intellectuals tried to establish cultural similiarities between Europe and India. It was called Aryanism or Aryami in Bangla. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of Aryanism was criticized by intellectuals and it slowly faded.