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Christotsava Today: Form, Meaning, Relevance

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Abstract

The essay discusses the cultural significance of *Christotsava* in Santiniketan, a unique tradition of commemorating the birth of Christ in the form of prayers, chants, hymnal songs, and readings from the Bible. Even as the inception of this annual bilingual ceremony at the Upasana Griha on Christmas evening cannot be definitively ascribed to a particular historical date, the essay argues that this special event has over the past century acquired a special place not only in Santiniketan's alternative calendar of faith-inclusive, season-centric, communitarian cycle of festivities but also in the Bengali cultural calendar as a whole. To substantiate the reasons for this phenomenon, the author draws upon Tagore's own writings to analyse closely what status Christ had come to command in Tagore's humanist ethos and why he considered it crucial to keep Christ's contribution to the ethical evolution of mankind in focus. In the third and final part of the article, the analysis moves to the form, sequence, setting and symbolism surrounding the actual conduct of the devotional congregation and what broader cultural ramifications these take on in the diverse social scape of Bengal and India.

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In our ashram, we will not engage in a conflict with Truth simply because we are angry with a particular community. We shall try to grasp the essential message of the faith of Christ – not because it is something Christian, but because it is something human. (Tagore, “The Religion of Christ”, *Khristo*, 12-13)

It is quite remarkable that Tagore’s Santiniketan, later Visva-Bharati, should have gifted us a cultural calendar that has remained alternative in spirit while seamlessly assimilating itself into the already full, markedly supple and refreshingly inclusive Bengali year of festivities. Santiniketan was not always a mere two-hour journey from the nearest metropolis where festivals over the past two centuries have attained a uniquely cosmopolitan flavour and given the place its distinctive cultural character. So, there is nothing foregone in this success story of the provincial slowly but emphatically finding its way into the wider cultural consciousness among actual or honorary Bengalis across the country and the world. Bengalis flock to Santiniketan for *Pous Mela*, *Nandan Mela*, *Anandabazar* and *Vasantotsava* (not *Doljatra* or *Holi*) without in any way seeing it as a stretch from their festive revelries around *Durga Pujo*, *Saraswati Pujo*, *Nababarsho*, *Eid* or New Year.

It is no mean feat for a semi-rural place where festivities commemorate an alternative, strictly secular, largely seasonal and therefore eco- and community-centric cycle of special days to have retained its hold over the Bengali consciousness in the face of accelerated urbanisation, rampant consumerism, polarisation along lines of faith and language, the digital craze and the ensuing estrangement from the natural rhythms of a simple life. Most of all, it is no ordinary matter that a certain visionary poet and educationist’s determination to resist the sweep of modern machine-driven civilisation should continue to engineer a tug in the hearts of common man and woman towards what could have well been mistaken for just another small town on the fringes of a rural hinterland. Are we to assume that only the metropolitan elite feels that pull? Hardly. Santiniketan’s gritty refusal to differentiate between the privileged elite and the humble proletarian is its greatest contribution to social cohesion through festivals. Hence the continued currency of that apt leveller in the Bangla lexicon – *mela*. *Mela* is neither fair, nor market. Santiniketan’s festivals are both *utsava* and *mela*.



Even for this strikingly non-conformist calendar of communitarian celebrations, *Christotsava*, commemorated on Christmas evening at the *Upasana Griha*, might appear to be a wild card entry of sorts. Instituted, as scholars corroborate, as early as 1909/10¹, it might seem out of place in what was then an *ashrama* and school founded around the secular principle of non-preference to any faith, creed or belief system. It is crucial to note that the definition of secularity enshrined in this institution's practice pre-dates the insertion of the term "secular" in the Preamble by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1976. This is precisely where Tagore's Santiniketan asserts its continued relevance not just as a Bangla-phone cultural space, but as a site of living history relentlessly negotiating its place in relation to the larger Indian polity. As the rest of this essay will argue, *Christotsava* does not contradict that secular ideal. *Christotsava* is reinvented in consonance with secularity. It is not a departure but a reconstitution of a faith-specific occasion into a faith-inclusive celebration; and the conceptual register for this practice may be found across Rabindranath's rich body of writings on Christ both in prose and poetry. The respective dates accompanying many of these compositions compiled in *Khristo: An Annotated Anthology* suggest that the latter were written for Christmas and might have also been delivered at *Christotsava*. Dated between 1909 and 1940, these occasional reflections testify to a disciplined, consistent engagement with Christ as an idea of humanity across decades. The specific reason for instituting *Christotsava* in Santiniketan is not known to this author. However, it would perhaps not be amiss to infer from these writings that political schism and an air of imminent hostilities in Europe may have taken Rabindranath's mind back to the profound anomaly between Christ's teaching and the state of Christian civilisation in contemporary Europe. He declaims as much on 25 December 1932:

In our life his birthday comes once in a while but his death by crucifixion happens almost every day. We know that on this special day, people are singing praise in church after church, in country after country for Him who brought the Holy Father's message to humankind – and outside the church the earth is bathed in the blood of fratricide. Those who announce his name in their chanting in holy shrines reject him with the roar of cannons. (*Khristo* 26)



In Tagore's "religion of man" –the foundation for his transcontinental collaborations with Romain Rolland and others – both Buddhadeva and Christ embody the highest qualities of humanity. Both are exemplars of "the greater man", *Mahamanava*, or to quote from "Buddhadeva", "Supreme Man" (Tagore, qtd. in Chaudhuri, 37). They ennobled and uplifted humanity across time and beyond the narrow boundaries of race, class, region and gender. Their greatness ultimately reflects "man's greatness", a truth that ordinary humans like us, mired in quotidian preoccupations, remain unmindful of (Tagore, *Khristo*, 5). On 25 December 1936, Tagore offers a comparison of the two personages, Buddhadeva and Christ:

The way is easier for us if we are able to love all those who have loved mankind. When Buddha delivered immeasurable amity to mankind, he did not only preach the scripts, he kindled devotion in the minds of men. Within that devotion dwells true liberation. All who have been able to love Christ in a tangible manner, have not just sat in one place and suppressed their vices. They accomplished an arduous task. Travelling far and wide, crossing mountains and oceans, they proclaimed the message of love and humanity. This is the way great men light the lamps of their own lives; they do not merely argue or preach. They present us with their legacy as mortals. (Tagore, *Khristo*, 24)

Buddhadeva for Tagore marks the *summum* of compassion and spiritual awakening. Without necessarily excluding these traits, Jesus is the liberator and emancipator against oppression. In "Religion of Christ", Rabindranath notes, "this manifestation of greater humanity in mankind, the one who has suffered all attacks at the hands of human beings and whose pain can be felt in the core of man's iniquity, is a revelation that is not specific to any corner of history" (Tagore, *Khristo*, 13). It would not be entirely amiss to find intersections between Tagore's reception of Christ as revolutionary Man and the spirit of enlightened resistance he instils in the protagonists of his allegorical plays. For Tagore, the appeal of Christ lies in his messianic, meliorative contribution to the cause of human freedom, and freedom is indispensable to evolution. In the address "Celebrating Christ" delivered on 25 December 2023, Rabindranath clarifies that Christ saw himself in fraternity with "the poorest of the



poor” (*Khristo*, 19).

The wording of his address on 25 December 1926 can serve as our point of reference here: “The illimitable reverence for man that Christianity has awakened, may we embrace it with hearts bereft of self-pride and, the greater man who had propagated this truth, we bow to him” (Tagore, *Khristo*, 19). In “The Life of Jesus”, one finds him making a case for segregating Christ from the institution of Christianity. He attributes the practice of collating Christ with Christianity to Christian missionaries (Tagore, *Khristo*, 1).

It is a key aspect of Tagore’s cosmopolitanism that he never allowed his sense of the injustice of colonial subjection to prejudice his or his compatriots’ right to participate in the world’s cultural, intellectual and spiritual riches. It was always his effort to reclaim, wrest without requiring permission or asserting ownership, every element of every culture he encountered through art, literature, travel and conversation. Christ, in his perception, did not belong exclusively to Christians, and his contribution to civilisation is not restricted to the Christian community. Given the Buddha’s subcontinental origin, Tagore would have had less to explain when it came to his assimilation of Buddhist thought and praxis into Santiniketan’s ethos. However, for a nascent *ashrama* school and community in rural Bengal under British rule to celebrate Christ as a Universal Man was *not* a way of ingratiating itself with the foreign coloniser but a political act of sustained boldness against religious and cultural hegemony. It was the way of saying that the ownership of the world rests with all humanity across the world. The legacy of that internationalism in Santiniketan’s way of life has been significant and enduring.

Rabindranath’s vision of Christ is thus refreshingly un-affected by the complexities and entanglements of Christian theological discourse. In this he invites comparison with Milton’s representation of Christ in *Paradise Regained* (1671), a protagonist at once human and supra-human, an incarnation of the human as divine and of the divine reborn as human. Milton’s equivocation is no doubt coloured, at least in part, by the constraints of theology. Tagore disentangles himself from that theological bind and hails Christ as one of those few chosen humans who both demonstrate and teach of man’s final transcendence into oneness with the Divine. On 12 Chaitra, 1315 (26 March 1909), he will write of Christ, “by



establishing the ideal totality of the *manabatma* or the human soul within the *paramatma*, the Absolute; he has made us aspire for it” (Tagore, *Khristo*, 25). Tagore’s transculturation of Christ is an important academic lesson not just in the philosophical framework of syncretism but also for the subject-discipline of comparative religion.

Two essays, “Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi” and “Buddhadeva”, that all undergraduates have long been taught here at Visva-Bharati as part of the Compulsory Valued Added Course on Tagore Studies, are illustrative of this point. The humanist criterion informing the *secular* canonisation of the Buddha is also the premise for acclaiming Gandhi as a leader of the people of India (Chaudhuri, 36-45). The Buddha is the supreme incarnation of the same transcendental qualities that a contemporary leader also manifests. Moreover, the timelessness of the Buddha’s message for humankind does not preclude the fact that He belonged in life to a particular historical moment. Likewise with Christ, and Tagore makes this evident in the prose-piece “Life of Jesus”: “When Jesus was born, the glory of the Roman Empire had reached its zenith” (Tagore, *Khristo*, 5). Rabindranath pointedly calls Christ “son of man” (*Khristo* 10), not Son of God. Thus, Tagore’s principle as well as parameters for evaluating leaders past and present, leaders of people or faith, are grounded in a secular, modern, transnational purview of human history.

This Tagorean method and ethos is fundamental to our understanding as to why *Christotsava* has come to occupy a character and a resonance of its own rather than as an extension of *Pous Utsava* and *Pous Mela*. Scholarly opinion within the university is not entirely certain that *Christotsava* was originally organised as a vesper, i.e. evening prayer. Historical sources about the evolution of *Christotsava* remain a relatively less explored archive. However, this author’s personal recollections across the past twenty-three years suggest that the public recall of this event has certainly risen and expanded in successive decades. This rise in esteem may owe something to the inspired decision, at a later stage of the institution’s history, to hold the prayer service in honour of Christ on Christmas evening. The reasons are conjectured below.

Christotsava may have some ritual intersections with the design of a cathedral mass. Choral songs are interspersed with readings and a sermon is addressed to the congregation to



mark the occasion. Yet such intersections are not restricted to the annual commemoration of *Christotsava*. Readers who have attended or witnessed prayer services at British universities with an in-house choir, and also Unitarianism-inspired prayer meetings at *Brahmo Samaj* venues in Kolkata, will instantly recognise the influence. The difference, as always with anything Tagorean, is in conscious “provincialisation” and, simultaneously, cosmopolitanisation of what is at first glance a borrowed module.

Services at the *Upasana Griha*, be it the weekly prayers on Wednesday mornings or special prayer meetings, follow a uniform framework, without being exactly repetitive. Refreshing variations in the schedule are effected through change of song numbers, choice of text and, most importantly, the democratic practice of letting the *Acharya* for the day present an address (not sermon) of their own on a pertinent subject. Quintessentially, then, Tagore’s Santiniketan accommodates in quiet ways what TS Eliot called “tradition and the individual talent”, i.e. a layered ongoing dialogue between an established schema and considered, appropriate departures from it.

The shared spirit of these prayer meetings has always been one of sweet solemnity. The classical gravitas of the *mantras* and the spoken word is carefully blended – *not broken* – with Rabindrasangeet numbers, some sung singly, some in chorus, to ensure that the flavour of human expressiveness that lyric music grasps so fully is given due regard. Tagore will profess to Einstein, “our own music touches me more deeply by its fundamental lyrical appeal. European music is epic in character...” (Tagore, *Sangit-Chinta*, 346). Once again, in *Christotsava* we note an *adaptive* rather than derivative approach. At all other services, possibly, the chief if not sole medium of communication – words and songs – remains Bangla. *Christotsava*, on the other hand, intersperses Upanishadic chants, commemorative songs from Tagore’s own oeuvre and a special address, all three in Bangla, with Christmas carols and a reading from the Nativity chapters of the New Testament in English.

Let us now consider the visual aspects representative of the rites of prayer at the *Upasana Griha*, so that we can then grasp the slightly variant ritualisation of *Christotsava*. The coloured glass and wrought iron structure of the *mandir* evoke the ambience of a chapel rather than the grandeur of a cathedral with an apse, the altar as its centrepiece of the apse,



and the spectacular arched, stained glass windows behind it. Diversity rather than the domination of any one faith is the felt sensibility of the *mandir* as a space. The seating is on the floor, for the congregation, performers and presiding dignitaries alike. The spatial relationship between the speaker, the performer and the listener is thus de-hierarchised in favour of humility in unison before the Divine. The relationship aspired to is *organic* and fraternal under the invoked benevolence of the universal Father rather than *organised* and mediated by the minister or priest. The formal simplicity marking the commemoration of *Christotsava* then is perfectly attuned to Tagore's perception of Christ's appeal as a *mahatma* whose "simple" message is that we embrace simplicity (Tagore, *Khristo*, 4).

The reason why *Christotsava*, for all its distinctiveness, never appears to be a synthetic appropriation of the foreign into the local is that *all* celebrations in Tagore's Santiniketan embrace and embody the same ideal of simplicity. A point Rabindranath makes about Christ in 1316 (1909/10) is pertinent here:

...the greatest among human being stand equal with everyone in such a way that their soul is connected to the All-pervading. When human beings want to become superior by pushing aside everyone else, then they become separated from Him. (Tagore, *Khristo*, 28)

We may also recall "The Message of India's History" from *Introduction to Tagore*, the textbook mentioned earlier. There Rabindranath makes a categorical distinction between the political, combative nature of European power alliances and the social, assimilative nature of India's sense of civilisational oneness (Chaudhuri, 14).

Returning to our outline of the sensory scape of *Christotsava*, adornments are few – the singing voices, the musical accompaniment, chiefly *esraj* (two, sometimes three), the speaking voice, radiant yellow light and the fragrance of flowers. Let us also not forget the silent attention of the listeners, who have either taken off their shoes and seated themselves on simple jute floormats around the four sides of the porch, or braved the wintry chill to stand or sit on the surrounding grounds, listening without watching. Visuality is not privileged here. Experience, indeed performance and reception are not predicated upon seeing. To experience



the Divine through music, one need not watch the performer. By contrast, the pulpit in the Western Church is a visual aid. The preacher there must be seen to be heard while his congregation must listen to him under his watchful eye.

To match the dignified synergy within the *Griha*, candles are lit all around the surrounding precincts. The atmosphere thus exudes unobtrusive grace and elegance rather than loud revelry. A shared solitude is created in the process, perfectly attuned to Rabindranath's conceptualisation of an Indian way with music. One may refer to Tagore's essay, "Sangit" (Agrahayan 1319, i.e. October/November 1912) to understand his sense that Indian philosophy of music has its fount in the deeper, secret, interstitial melody where the cosmic and the human meet halfway (Tagore, *Sangit-Chinta*, 33).

The praxis of faith, meditation and prayer in Tagore's Santiniketan is thus a curated confluence of the European and the Asian modalities of collective faith. It is in relation to these subtle but significant signs and signifiers that the distinctiveness of *Christotsava* dawns upon the cultural observer. Kolkata has always had a healthy, generous open-heartedness in respect of faith-specific festivities and has been remarkably creative in transforming them into occasions for celebrating inter-faith, intercultural harmony. Only lately, in view of a global regression into purist dogma around race and religion, has Kolkata deservedly come into limelight for its exceptional cultural inclusivity. This is reflected in Christmas, indeed in *all* festivals, not just in the intangible cultural heritage of Durga Puja recently recognised by UNESCO. The bold timbre of Kolkata's way with Christmas naturally overshadows the more anchored, self-effacing message of Santiniketan's *Christotsava*. Yet Kolkatans too, indeed people from across the world, often return to the serene resplendence of Santiniketan's candlelit Christmas. The bilingual conjunction of the Greek *Christ* (*Khrishto* in Bangla), literally "the anointed One" and the Sanskritic *Utsava*, is an apt conveyor of this legacy. Tagore's favourite poet, Matthew Arnold, would have found in *Christotsava*, both as construct *and* name, a welcome convergence of "sweetness and "light" (33).

In the end, one hopes that the rise in the popularity of *Christotsava* is not a passing phenomenon produced by and therefore contingent upon social media and its insatiable appetite for novelty. One hopes that those who come to experience *Christotsava* here in



Santiniketan return from it with a deeper, quieter understanding of its fundamental message. That message, as Rabindranath clarifies in an address, is at once joyous and sombre. It is a celebration of the humanity that endures among us even as we mourn its daily depletion from our hearts, minds and souls:

Shall we announce that it is his birthday today after consulting the almanac? It is only when we are ready to renounce everything for Truth, when we can spontaneously accept other men as our brothers that the Son of the Father is born among us. (*Khristo 25*)



End Note:

¹ I am indebted to Professor Manabendra Mukhopadhyay for referring me to a letter by Rabindranath addressed to Acharya Kshitimohan Sen dated 11th Kartik 1316 where he mentions the commencement of *Christotsava*. I am also grateful to Dr. Shinjini Basu for motivating me to write this essay.



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