

National Anthem and Rabindranath Tagore

When the Constituent Assembly of India met on Tuesday 24 January 1949 in the Constitution Hall to sign the Constitution its President, Dr Rajendra Prasad, began the proceedings with a statement on the question of a National Anthem of India:

The composition consisting of the words and music known as *Janaganamana* is the National Anthem of India subject to such alteration in the words as Government may authorize as occasion arises; and the song *Vandemataram* which has played a historic part in the struggle for Indian freedom shall be honoured equally with *Janaganamana* and shall have equal status with it.

After the Members of the Assembly had signed the Constitution Shri Ananthasayanam Ayyangar asked the President if he would permit all Members of the House to sing *Janaganamana* and the President giving his assent Smt. Purnima Banerji with other members sang it for the first time after its formal adoption as our National Anthem. This was however, not the first time that *Janaganamana* was sung in the Constituent Assembly. The proceedings of the historic session of the body at the midnight of 14 August 1947 ended with the song although it was then sung only as a national song following *Sare Jahan se Achcha Hindustan hamara*. The first item on the agenda for the session was the singing of *Vandemataram*. In fact, soon after independence it was provisionally recognized as India's National Anthem till a choice was formally made by the Constituent Assembly in 1949. Jawaharlal Nehru himself preferred *Janaganamana* and he gave his reason in a statement made in Parliament on 25th August 1948 and 10 days before on 15th August that year the Sikh Regiment Central struck the tune of the song at the hoisting of the National Flag at the first anniversary of Independence at the Red Fort in Delhi.

Janaganamana was composed by Rabindranath Tagore some-time towards the end of 1911 and was first sung on 29th December that year at the second day's sitting of the twenty-sixth session of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta under the President ship of Bishan Naraya Dhar. The choir included Shri Amal Home and Smt. Chitralakkha Devi, wife of a former Vice-chancellor of the Calcutta University.

Reporting the proceedings of this session *Amrit Bazar Patrika* in the 28 December 1911 issue called *Janaganamana* a 'song of benediction' and *The Bengali*, a paper edited by Surendranath Banerjee who was one of the principal organizers of this session of the Congress, also in its issue of 28th December 1911 called it a 'patriotic song' and published an English version of it in its report.

The official report of the Indian National Congress covering this session says that 'the proceedings commenced with a patriotic song composed by Rabindranath Tagore' and that after that a 'song of welcome to their Imperial Majesties composed for the occasion was sung by the choir.' This song of welcome was in Hindi and was composed by Rambhuj Dutt Choudhuri, husband of Sarala Devi, a niece of the poet.

The Congress included it in the programme because it desired to be polite to King George V then visiting India after he had announced the annulment of the partition of Bengal against which it had agitated about six years.

Two Anglo-Indian newspapers of Calcutta, *The Englishmen* and *The Statesman* in their issues of the same date and Reuter on 29 December 1911 deliberately or ignorantly reported that the song by Tagore was a song of welcome to the king.

The Englishman said: The proceedings open with a song of welcome to the King Emperor, specially composed for the occasion by the Babu Rabindranath Tagore..... This was followed by a song of Hindi welcoming their Imperial Majesties.

The Statesman did not mention either the content or the author of the Bengali song but called the second song a hymn of welcome to the King specially composed for the occasion by Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet. Reuter reported that 'when the Indian National Congress resumed its session on Wednesday Dec 27, a Bengali song, specially composed in honour of the Royal visit was sung. It may be noted that the three erroneous reports are inconsistent with each other.

How careless or irresponsible some reporters can be when the identity of Indian languages is involved is evident from a report published on 15th May 1949 in the *Sunday Times*, London in which *Vandemataram* is mentioned as a song written by Tagore and *Janaganamana* as song composed in modern Hindi. It is also surprising and puzzling that the same *Statesman* reporting on the thirty-second session of the Congress held in Calcutta in 1917 went against its previous reporting and said in its edition of 30th December 1917 that the Congress commenced with *Janaganamana* 'a national song composed by Rabindranath Tagore.

Such obvious errors in reporting would not deserve mention were it not for the fact that those who did not favour the adoption of *Janaganamana* as our National Anthem used them as an argument against the song. When in 1937 the Working Committee of the Congress appointed a sub-committee to consider the whole question of a national anthem for India with Abul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose and Narendra Dev as its members there arose a controversy as to the relative claims of *Vandemataram* and *Janaganamana* on the distinction and the exponents of the first song sought to strengthen their case by fabricating a scandal about the second.

They knew that the scandal was utterly baseless but could not but take advantage of what they considered to be its tactical value in the controversy.

Presumably some of them thought it was effective reply to the poet's remark that parts of *Vandemataram* could offend Muslim sensibility. The poet had an occasion to say this when Jawaharlal Nehru asked him for his opinion on *Vandemataram* in 1937. That the poet unhesitatingly approved of the adoption of the first two stanzas of *Vandemataram* as our national anthem was not enough for the exponents of Bankimchandra's song.

When Tagore was told about what was being said about the origin of *Janaganamana* he said in a letter to Pulinbihari Sen dated 20 November 1937, published in *Vichitra*, in the month of Paush, 1344 Bengali year i.e. January 1937:

"A friend influential in the Government circles had importuned me to compose a song in praise of the King. His request had amazed me and the amazement was mingled with anger. It was under the stress of this violent reaction that I proclaimed in the *Janaganamana adhinayaka* song the victory of that Dispenser of India's destiny who

chariots eternally the travellers through the ages along the path rugged with the rise and fall of nations,— of Him who dwells within the heart of man and leads the multitudes. That great Charioteer of man's destiny in age after age could not by any means be George V or George VI or any George. Even my 'loyal' friend realized this; because, however powerful his loyalty to the King, he was not wanting in intelligence”.

In yet another letter written to Smt. Sudharani Devi dated 23 March 1939 Tagore said: “I should only insult myself if I cared to answer those who consider me capable of such unbounded stupidity as to sing in praise of George IV or George V as the Eternal Charioteer leading the pilgrims on their journey through the countless ages of the timeless history of mankind.”

This silenced the detractors of *Janaganamana* for a time and when the song was finally adopted as our national anthem nobody repeated the fantastic view that it was an ode to an earthly king. But because of misinformation, lack of proper historical investigation by those who think that the song was an address to King George V and on top of it because of utter absence of poetic sensibility and understanding there are many who would repeat the old allegation against Tagore by quoting the same two Anglo- Indian newspapers and a foreign news agency that the song was, infact written in praise of the King of England. Here two points are worth mentioning;

- (i) There is no mention of a song of welcome to the King composed by Tagore in the elaborate report of the royal visit to India known as *The Historical Record of the Imperial Visit to India* , published by John Murrey in 1914. There is no mention either in John Fortesque, *Narrative of the Visit to India of Their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary, London 1912.*
- (ii) *Janaganamana* was published under the title ‘*Bharat-Vidhata*’ and sub-title *Brahmasangit*, in the *Tattvabodhini patrika*, the official organ of Adi Brahma Samaj founded by the poet's father , and then edited by the poet himself. A song of welcome to an earthly king would never be included in the hymn-book of Brahma Samaj.

Even those who are not acquainted with Tagore's political ideas atleast would have the common sense to realize that after the movement of 1921, 1930 and 1942 the political leadership of the country would never have accepted a song as national anthem when it was known to have been

composed as an ode to a British sovereign. In 1946 Mahatma Gandhi had said as quoted in the 19th May 1946 issue of *Harijan*, that the song has found a place in our national life. It is not only a song but it is like a devotional hymn. In 1961 Jawaharlal Nehru had said:” It was a great happiness to me when after the coming of Independence, we adopted *Janaganamana* as our national anthem.”

There are many who suspect that the word *singhasan* meaning throne brings the idea too close to a king may remember that the throne of the Lord is a popular image for the power of the Deity in religious literature. In song 49 of *Gitanjali* The king comes down from his throne and stands at the cottage door of the poet is the Deity who in the 3rd stanza of the song *Janaganamana* is addressed as *chirasarathi*, the eternal charioteer, who takes mankind along the right path in the midst of the terrific revolutions his voice reaching the human ear like the sound of a conch shell

almost like the verse 1.14 of the *Bhagavadgita* where Lord Krishna brings Arjuna to the battlefield of Kurukshetra in his chariot and blows his conch shell *panchajanya*.

The fourth stanza of the song is a praise for the Lord, who is addressed as the father in the beginning is now called mother— *sneha mai tumi mata*. This kind of an imagery will be unthinkable in the western perception for a British king but so common a feature of the Indian religious sensibility. In the *Bhagavadgita* in the verse ix.17 Lord Krishna says:

Pitamaham assya jagato mata dhata

“I am the Father Mother Sustainer of this world”

What is striking about this religious imagery in *Janaganamana* is that unlike Bankimchandra’s *Vandemataram* and Tagore’s own *Ayi bhuvanamanamohini* it does not hypostatize the country into a Divine Mother but presents it as a living human society moving towards the realization of its destiny under some Divine dispensation. It is a hymn celebrating the regeneration of the *janaganamana* collective mind of a people in a cosmic process which the poet views as the working of a Divine purpose of history.