

Letter correspondences of Rabindranath Tagore: A Study

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Published letters written by Rabindranath Tagore counts to four thousand ninety eight. Besides family members and Santiniketan associates, Tagore wrote to different personalities like litterateurs, poets, artists, editors, thinkers, scientists, politicians, statesmen and government officials. These letters form a substantial part of intellectual output of 'Tagoreana' (all the intellectual output of Rabindranath). The present paper attempts to study the growth pattern of letters written by Rabindranath and to find out whether it follows Bradford's Law. It is observed from the study that Rabindranath wrote letters throughout his literary career to three hundred fifteen persons covering all aspects such as literary, social, educational, philosophical as well as personal matters and it does not strictly satisfy Bradford's bibliometric law.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, letter correspondences, bibliometrics, Bradfords Law

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore is essentially known to the world as a poet. But he was a great short-story writer, dramatist and novelist, a powerful author of essays and lectures, philosopher, composer and singer, innovator in education and rural development, actor, director, painter and cultural ambassador. Rabindranath wrote as many as 4098¹ letters from October 1978 to July 1941 which forms a substantial part of Tagoreana (all the intellectual output of Rabindranath). Besides family members, estate workers and Santiniketan associates, Rabindranath wrote to literary personalities, poets like W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, artists, editors, thinkers like Romain Rolland, Bertrand Russell, scientists, educationists, scholars of Indian religion and philosophy, religious leaders, agricultural economist (Leonard Elmhurst), politicians and statesmen like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose.

Rabindranath wrote huge number of letters during his lifetime not only to communicate messages to persons for specific purpose but also to express his ideas on nationalism, civilization, nature, society, education, Swadeshi movement and so on. So, the letters of Rabindranath helps to understand Tagore as

a family man and also as a universal man with his many faceted vision and activities. Tagore's letters written to his niece Indira Devi Chaudhurani published in *Chhinapatravali*¹ written during 1885-1895 are not just letters but finer prose from where the true picture of poet Rabindranath as well as imaginative Rabindranath can be drawn. Rabindranath wrote to W.B. Yeats "...I feel sure these letters, when published, will present to you pictures and ideas concerning me and my surroundings more vividly and truly than anything I have yet written"². Most of the letters were first published in different journals and were in the personal collection of different people to whom the poet wrote. Only after the establishment of Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati took initiatives to collect them and later on publish them in the book entitled *Chithipatra*³. It is a rare example in Indian literature, particularly in Bengali literature where manuscript of such a good number of letters are preserved and published. Letters written to Mahatma Gandhi⁴, letters of English poets to Rabindranath⁵, selected letters of Rabindranath⁶ etc. have been published separately.

Objectives of the study

- To study the growth pattern of Rabindra Patrabali;
- To find out the persons to whom Rabindranath had written to;
- To identify major themes of the letters;

¹Number of published letters. There may be unpublished letters in the personal custody, scattered all over the world. Majority of the published letters are kept at Tagore's museum Rabindra Bhavana.

- To find out whether Rabindranath's letters follow any bibliometric law (Bradford's law).

Methodology

Bibliometric techniques are used "to analyse quantitatively the properties and behaviour of recorded knowledge"⁷. In this study statistical bibliometric technique is followed as it helps to "... shed light on the process of written communication and of the nature and course of development of discipline by means of counting and analyzing the various facets of written communication"⁸.

Chithipatra, the book containing of Rabindranath's 4098 letters of Rabindranath was consulted. Original letters whenever necessary were consulted from Tagorean research centre and Rabindra Bhavana museum to record the name of addresses, date of writing etc. Besides, primary and secondary sources in the form of original works or first editions of Tagore's work kept in Rabindra Bhavana were consulted. A wide range of secondary sources in the form of books and articles both in Bengali and English were consulted to corroborate and critically evaluate for the purpose of interpretation.

Analysis

Growth of Rabindra Patrabali

Rabindranath composed his first poem at the age of eight and by the end of his life, he had written twenty-five volumes of poetry, fifteen plays, ninety-five short stories, eleven novels, thirteen volumes of essays; initiated and edited various journals; prepared Bengali textbooks, penned thousands of letters; and by the age of seventy created more than two thousand paintings. All these writings and paintings come under preview of Tagoreana.

Record of growth pattern of letters of Rabindranath may help to identify place of letters in Tagoreana. It may also help to know Tagore's imaginative thinking to construct his biography, to establish his relationship with different people, period of letter correspondence, mode of relationship, etc. Many letters may still be in the custody of individual correspondents. There are 4098 Rabindra Patrabali (letters) published in *Chithipatra*. The growth pattern of letters being substantial part of Tagoreana can be found in Table 1.

Table 1—Growth of Rabindra Patrabali

Year	Jan	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total
1878										5			5
1879													7(7)
1880	1												1
1881													1(1)
1882							1						1
1883	3		6									3	12
1884	1	1											12(10)
1885							1		1	3		2	11(4)
1886	2			1	2		2						35(28)
1887		1		1			1		2	2			7
1888				2		1							4(1)
1889				1		1						1	4(1)
1890	3				2	2		1	2	2		1	13
1891	9	8	1			10	2	4	3	5	1	1	45(1)
1892	3	1	1	2	11	12	7	2	1		1	10	55(4)
1893		9	5	4	6	3	9	4	2	1			43
1894		2	6	1		6	10	16	11	16	5	5	78
1895	1	9	11	7	1	5	6	6	5	8	5	9	73
1896			1							1			2
1897								1					2(1)
1898						2	2				1		4
1899				1	1	6	5	5	7	2	3	3	36(3)
1900		1	1	1	2	4	8	16	7	4	3	9	56
1901	4	3	17	10	10	6	7	7	4	2	3		74(1)
1902	1	6	2	14	8	1	3	2	2	3	4	4	50
1903	6	4	11	6	7	5	6	15	1	10	3	5	84(5)
1904	3	2	5	5	7	6	5	7	4	6	7		58(1)
1905			2	3	4	2	4	3		4	1	2	26(1)

(Contd)

Table 1—Growth of Rabindra Patrabali—Contd

Year	Jan	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total
1906	1	2	3	5	4	6	3			6	3	1	34
1907		1	1	5	8	2	4	4	6	10	5	15	63(2)
1908	14	17	10	8	6	3	9	3	6	3	7	4	90
1909	2		4	10	3		6	2	4	8	5	6	52(2)
1910	3	2	2	10	8	3	10	6	10	9	7	4	77(3)
1911	7	3	4	10	17	13	6	7	12	17	23	3	125(3)
1912	8	12	18	7	11	11	1	9	11	14	13	15	130
1913	21	16	10	11	20	5	4	2	2	5	12	5	115(2)
1914	4	6	9	9	7	5	8	2	5	4	1	4	70(6)
1915	4	10	10	4		4	6	5	4	4	5	5	66(5)
1916	9	13	4	13	8	3	4	6	7	7			74
1917			4	10	5	6	2	9	5	11	13	2	70(3)
1918	5	11	3	8	7	1	9	7	9	10	8	11	89
1919	3	3	2	12	12	4	6	5	2	8	10	5	74(2)
1920	6	5	2	1	2	2	3	7	4	2	2	4	40
1921	1	1	4	4	6	1	2	2	13	7	6	3	54(4)
1922	5	5	11	7	10	5	3	2	7	3	4		64(2)
1923	1	2	5	3	2	2	2	2	8	6	5	2	41(1)
1924	2	3	3	4	2			2	7	2	1	7	34(1)
1925	2		3	9	8	4	3	1	5	9	4	8	57(1)
1926	5		1	7	8	3	4		1	5	1	14	52(3)
1927	16	5	14	9	10	6	14	14	13	9	19	12	144(3)
1928	7	18	4	6	8	5	13	17	20	23	12	5	138
1929	5	4	14	1		1	15	12	15	15	19	8	109
1930	7	13	2	5	9	5	7	7	7	20	5	1	88
1931	1	8	10	21	25	26	22	19	14	23	12	14	197(2)
1932	13	10	8	2		12	9	11	7	19	14	8	114(1)
1933	3	3	4	8	5	10	11	7	10	11	13	2	87
1934	10	1	11	22	7	5	12	15	6	18	6	6	119
1935	19	2	18	16	17	21	11	12	14	23	8	7	168
1936	10	6	4	14	5	9	12	6	15	28	5	9	123
1937	9	4	13	9	17	5	12	12	4	20	12	5	124(2)
1938	13	12	12	11	33	14	10	12	19	21	12	11	180
1939	9	8	14	9	11	9	9	5	12	19	7	3	117(2)
1940	11	8	9	7	16	7	6	6	5	3	2	4	84
1941	3	2	3	8	10	9	1						36

* Number within bracket in the total column indicates letters written in the corresponding year without any reference to the month or date.

Rabindranath wrote all first five letters in October 1878 to Kadambari Devi (wife of elder brother Jyotirindranath Tggore) from United Kingdom and the last letter to Pratima Devi (wife of poet's son Rathindranath Tagore) on 30th July, 1941 from Calcutta. The first verse narrative *Kavi-Kahini* published in 1878 and the final year (1941) of poet's departure from this 'earthly heaven' is marked with five publications, namely: *Arogya* (verse), *Janmadine* (verse), *Galpasalpa* (stories and poems), *Sabhyatar Samkat* (address) and *Asramer Rup o Vikas* (essays). Rabindranath wrote the highest number of letters (N=197) in the year 1932 along with four Bengali books entitled *Parishes* (verse), *Kaler Yatra* (drama), *Punascha* (prose-poem) and *Visvavidyalayer Rup* (essays) and two English titles, *The Golden Boat*

(poems) and *Mahatmaji and the Depressed Humanity* (address).

A listing of top recipients of the letters of Rabindranath with the dates of the first and the last letters is given in Table 2.

An in-depth study of all the letters written to top recipients may cast new light in respect of Tagore's personal relationship with them, many facets of communicating and/or exchanging ideas etc. The top themes on which Tagore corresponded is given in Table 3.

It may be concluded from above table that Tagore's concern about Santiniketan Ashram got top priority in his letters. Tagore's religious thinking and idea about the supreme can also be traced out from his letters.

Table 2—Top ten recipients

Sl. no.	Name	Relationship with Rabindranath Tagore and/or his associates	Date of writing first - last letter	No. of letters
1	Nirmal Kumari Mahalanobis	Wife of Rabindra-associate Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis	22 April 1925 – 8 June 1941	506
2	Indira Devi Chaudhurani	Musician, translator and close companion of Rabindranath	16 September 1887 – 13 May 1941	339
3	Hemantabala Devi	A great admirer of Rabindranath	8 February 1931 – 10 May 1940	265
4	Priyanath Sen	Close friend of Rabindranath	1881 - 1915	199
5	Pramathanath Choudhuri	Friend and admirer of Rabindranath	21 May 1890 – 22 July 1940	137
6	Ramananda Chattopadhyay	Editor	25 June 1910 - 14 June 1941	120
7	Rathindranath Tagore	Son	14 May 1903 – 24 April 1940	111
8	Manoranjan Bandyopadhyay	Teacher of Santiniketan	25 May 1902 – 14 June 1940	103
9	Kadambari Devi	Wife of Jyotrindranath Tagore	01 October 1903 – 10 May 1931	95
10	Mira Devi	Third daughter of Rabindranath	05 February 1907 – 14 April 1938	83

Table 3—Top ten themes

Sl. no.	Theme	Date of writing of first - last letter on the theme	No. of letters
1	Santiniketan ashram	21 May 1890 – 11 June 1940	792
2	Personal and family affairs	January 1883 – 30 July 1941	784
3	God and religion	July 1886 – 18 December 1940	296
4	Rathindranath (Son)	12 June 1889 - August 1940	234
5	Silaidaha (Family estate)	1886 – 7 June 1939	160
6	England (Travel)	October 1878 – 6 May 1941	122
7	Pratima Devi (Daughter-in-law)	27 January 1910 – 20 September 1940	112
8	Reunite (Political issues)	October 1878 – 16 May 1940	111
9	Sangit (Music)	18 January 1891 – 21 March 1941	100
10	Meera Devi (Daughter)	27 June 1898 – 26 July 1935	87

Tagores letters and Bradford's Law of Scattering

“Bradford's law of scattering”⁹ states that journals in a single field can be divided into three categories, each containing same number of articles: 1) a core journals on the subject few in number, produces approximately one-third of the articles, 2) in second zone, containing the same number of articles as the first, but a greater number of journals, and 3) third zone, containing the same number of articles as the second, but still greater number of journals. This mathematical relationship of the number of journals in the core to the first zone is a constant n and in the second zone the relationship is n^2 . Bradford expressed this relationship as $1:n:n^2$.

This law can be applied in case of Tagore's letter to identify core persons with whom Tagore had more correspondence (Table 4). Tagore wrote 4098 letters to 315 persons. His letters can be divided into the following three zones, each zone comprising more or less equal number of letters, i.e. one-third of the total

number of letters. Tagore wrote 1309 letters (1/3 of 4098 letters=1366 letters) to 4 persons namely: Nirmal Kumari Mahalanobis, Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Hemantabala Devi and Priyanath Sen forming the first zone. In the second zone Tagore had corresponded ($N= 1377$) with nineteen persons and the remaining 1412 letters to 292 persons. Besides the six names mentioned in Table 2 (Sl No. 5-10), the remaining nine correspondents in second zone are: Amiya Chakravarty (81 letters), Bhupendranath Sanyal (81), Pratima Devi (73), Dilipkumar Ray (64), Ranu Mookerjee (63), Mohitchandra Sen (53), Ajit Kumar Chakraborty (50), Amal Home (50), Dineshchandra Sen (46), Srischandra Mazumder (44), Jagadananda Roy(43), Monilal Gangyopadhyaya(40), Nagendranath Gangulee (40). According to the law the number of recipients in the third zone should have been 64 (4:16:64), Here it is 292. Hence it cannot be said the number of letters strictly follow Bradford's law.

Table 4—Cumulative total of the letters

Recipients according to rank	No. of letters	Cumulative total
1	506	506
2	339	845
3	265	1110
4	199	1309
5	137	1446
6	120	1566
7	111	1677
8	103	1780
9	95	1875
10	83	1958
11-12	81 (written to 2 persons)	2120
13	73	2193
14	64	2257
15	63	2320
16	53	2373
17-18	50 (written to 2 persons)	2473
19	46	2519
20	44	2563
21	43	2606
22-23	40 (written to 2 persons)	2686
24	38	2724
25	37	2761
26	36	2797
27	35	2832
28	32	2864
29-31	30 (written to 3 persons)	2954
32	29	2983
33	27	3010
34	26	3036
35-36	25 (written to 2 persons)	3086
37	24	3110
38	21	3131
39-41	20 (written to 3 persons)	3191
42-43	18 (written to 2 persons)	3227

(Contd)

Table 4—Cumulative total of the letters—Contd

Recipients according to rank	No. of letters	Cumulative total
44-46	17 (written to 3 persons)	3278
47-48	16 (written to 2 persons)	3310
49	15	3325
50-53	14 (written to 4 persons)	3389
54-55	13 (written to 2 persons)	3415
56-57	12 (written to 2 persons)	3439
58-62	11 (written to 5 persons)	3494
63-66	10 (written to 4 persons)	3534
67-70	9 (written to 5 persons)	3570
71-73	8 (written to 3 persons)	3594
74-85	7 (written to 12 persons)	3678
86-92	6 (written to 7 persons)	3720
93-98	5 (written to 6 persons)	3750
99-109	4 (written to 11 persons)	3875
110-136	3 (written to 27 persons)	3963
137-180	2 (written to 44 persons)	3972
181-315	1 (written to 137 persons)	4098

Table 5 – Distribution of letters according to the zones.

Zone	No. of letters	Recipients
First	1309	4
Second	1377	19
Third	1412	292

Discussions

Tagore's long literary career has been classified by different scholars from different viewpoints. Chunkapura classified it as youth and early adulthood writings (1878-1900), *Gitanjali* period (1900-1912), the years of matured reflections (1912-1927) and the final years (1927-1941)¹⁰. Thompson classified development of Tagoreana as early life and poetry (1861-1886), The *Shileida* and *Sadhana* period (1887-1897), unrest and change (1898-1905), *Gitanjali* period (1905-1919) and finally internationalism (1919-1941)¹¹. Majumdar leaving aside the period of radiant dawn 1875-1880, before the rise of the effulgent sun, divided the literary life of the poet into four epochs. The first period covers seventeen years from 1881-1897, from the date of writing of *Bau Thakuranir Hat* to that of composing the *Lakshmir Pariksha*. The second period is that of full maturity extending from 1898 to 1913. The next thirteen years or third period from 1914 to 1926 may be called the age of rejuvenation of the poet and his revolt against the conventional society. The last period covering fifteen years, 1927 to 1941 is the age of glorious and picturesque sunset¹². Tagore's biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya though not categorically distinguished writings of Tagore like others but pointed out different phases of life such as 'littérateur in the making', 'the flower blossoms', 'the humanitarian takes his stand'; 'the nationalist takes shape', 'the brotherhood of man', 'the diffusion of culture'¹³. Kripalani pointed out different phases as adolescence, youth, maturity, a man among men, a world citizen, world in one nest, old world and new, between two worlds¹⁴. It is evident from the growth of letters that Tagore wrote letters throughout his literary career. Highest productivity (N=1818) can be observed in the final or glorious and picturesque sunset years (1927-1941). It is obvious that the growth of Tagoreana with the passage of time reflected faithfully the diverse tendencies of his age. But at the same time these help to usher in a new epoch in Indian history.

Conclusions

It is clear from the study that Rabindra patrabali (Letter correspondences of Rabindranath Tagore) as a literary form constitutes a substantial part of Tagoreana. Tagore used his mighty pen to write large

number of letters not only as a medium of personal communication but to express his ideas on different aspects of life/society or even travel account. His concerns about Santiniketan ('abode of peace') amply are reflected in his letters. An in-depth study of letters reveals that many times Tagore used letters to draft his ideas of short stories or even poems. For example, characters of his short stories like Giribala of '*Megh o Raudra*', '*Postmaster*', Mrinmayi of '*Samapti*' or Phatik of '*Chhuti*' make their first appearance in letters¹⁵.

Rabindra patrabali does not strictly follow Bradford's law. But it helps to identify core personalities to whom Rabindranath made maximum letters correspondence, particularly in respect of first and second zone. Content analysis of these letters may open new vistas of Tagorean research.

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