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Salute to a Great Lady:
Victoria Ocampo

by
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Salute to a Great Lady: Victoria Ocampo*

*How I wish
I could once again
find my way
to that foreign land
where waits for me
the message of love!*

Written weeks before his death, these lines were among the last of the Gurudev, Rabindranath Tagore ('The Empty Chair', 6 April 1941). The poem was about the brilliant and beautiful Victoria Ocampo, who was the inspiration for some of his most memorable works in the last 17 years of his life. Victoria, in turn, felt a deep affection, and indeed reverence, for him. The 'chair' was given to him by Victoria for his sea voyage back home from Buenos Aires in January 1925, and it remained with him ever after.

Victoria Ocampo was a well-known literary figure, in her own country and in the West. She was the first woman ever in Latin America to be named to her country's Academy of Letters. In India, this remarkable lady is known solely through the prism of Rabindranath Tagore. The year 2015 marked her 125th birth anniversary.

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During the last four years of the life of Victoria Ocampo, I lived in her native city, Buenos Aires, one of the most beautiful in the world. I met her for the first time on a sunny morning in 1975 at 'Villa Ocampo', her magnificent home in the fashionable suburb of San Isidro. At 85, she exuded the dignity and bearing

*Lecture delivered on November 20 at IIC by Moni (S.M.S.) Chadha.



The author at Villa Ocampo

of a highly accomplished and cultured lady. She was elegantly turned out in a coat and a scarf. A beautiful woman in her youth, she continued to be so in her twilight years. The turn-of-the-century furniture in her tastefully decorated living room was in sync with the traditional architecture of her home.

As we conversed, it was impossible not to think of the many conversations that she must have had with Tagore, 50 years earlier, in the Argentine spring of 1924; of his leisurely walks with her; of his tender feelings for his gracious hostess which were to find such eloquent expression in his poems and letters to her until his death in 1941. She walked

with me around her immense garden, the first of many times that I would do so over the years.

The next morning, a white carton arrived at my residence, hand-tied with a red ribbon and delivered by her attendant. Inside was a large, single white orchid, along with a thank-you note in her hand. As I came to know her well, I found that she liked sending hand-written notes, rather than use the phone, no matter that they took an hour to deliver by car. (Years later, I saw a few among my papers; the one reproduced here is a later one, after she came to my home the first time for a quiet dinner.)

I had just arrived in Buenos Aires as Ambassador of India. Victoria, born in 1890, was about the same age as each of my two grandmothers. Bharati and I, still in our thirties, were five decades younger. With her innate warmth and cultured background, she sometimes spoke with a touch of the parental, that nudged protocol but did not quite breach it. Thus began a warm relationship. We always conversed in Spanish. She was fluent in French and Spanish, but less so in English.

In time, I made many an interesting acquaintance at her informal gatherings of creative persons. Conversation flowed effortlessly around her huge 19th-century dining table, catalysed by home-made cakes and beverages, served graciously and with old-world charm by her family retainers. Sadly, my own interests were

hardly literary. And these remained no more than occasional breaks in the mainstream of diplomatic life, with its ubiquitous cocktails in the metropolis where the latest trivia was exchanged over whiskey. With hindsight, the wonderful possibilities they offered to broaden one's horizons were lost on me.

Courteous, considerate, kind, courageous, honest, original and profound—these are among the many adjectives appropriate to Victoria's remarkable personality.

Rebellious as a young woman in the early 1900s, she defied the skewed norms of the *macho* Argentine society of her time. In 1908, while still in her teens, she records: 'Man is a beast who abuses his freedom and the legal power that social prejudices give him. Prejudices of which the woman is the victim'. And on religion: '....the fact is that the pompous profanations imposed on me in the name of religion only drive me away from Catholicism.... Catholicism, as I see it practiced seems to me narrow, limited, irritating, empty, hypocritical. I cannot respect it'.

In her 20s, she published articles in *La Nacion*, the prestigious Argentine daily. She wrote in French, the language that she knew best. Her early subjects included Mahatma Gandhi ('the Indian I worship—for whom I find no adequate qualification'). She adored him as one who would not compromise on the truth. In time, her own vision of women was fashioned after that of Gandhi (the equal of man) rather than that of Tagore (inspirer, helper).

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She was soon among the 'movers' in the literary world. Victoria's early writings included *De Francesca à Beatrice*, a commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, later published in Spain through her friend and writer Ortega y Gasset. An important work was *Testimonios*, her ten volumes of essays on a range of subjects. Among them: on *The Grapes of Wrath*, Gandhi, Dante, Virginia Woolf, Emily Bronte, etc. In 1931, she launched her international literary magazine *Revista Sur*, which became famous for works by international writers. Eminent names figured there. Patricia Owen Steiner, her last biographer, describes Victoria as 'an exponent of cultural bridges between intellectuals in the Americas and Europe', and 'a major figure in twentieth century Latin American Letters'.

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In 1967, Victoria was conferred an honorary degree by Harvard University, only the 10th woman to be so honoured in 330 years. She had lived up to her own aphorism: *'The only thing that counts is what each of us has done with our life after the accident of our birth... whether we have taken advantage of our opportunities or not, how we have struggled to overcome the obstacles that beset us.'*

Victoria travelled extensively. Among many others, she corresponded and met with Virginia Woolf in England, a year before the latter's suicide in 1941. Virginia strongly urged her to write her autobiography, which was finally published after her death in 1979.

It was only at the age of 86 that Victoria was finally named to the Argentine Academy of Letters, the first woman to breach that exclusive male preserve. A celebrity in her own country and well beyond its frontiers, she did not need that honour. But it was a vindication, a formidable 'first', a milestone not just for Argentina but for the entire Latin American continent. Professor Maria Renee Cura, her long-time associate, came by to my home to give me the news. I went over that evening to Villa Ocampo to felicitate her.

In India, this formidable lady is known solely through the prism of her interaction with Rabindranath Tagore.

As a young woman, Victoria contracted a bad marriage, but in Catholic Argentina divorce was not permitted under the law. It was with this backdrop that she first read Tagore in 1914, when she was 24, through Andre Gide's French rendering of Tagore's *Gitanjali*. It was, she said, her single greatest 'spiritual experience'. In her own words:

When *Gitanjali* first came into my hands...I was going through one of those crises which youth believes to be without issue. I felt the need to confide in someone and this someone could only be God. However, I did not believe in God, not in the revengeful, demanding, petty, implacable and limited God I had in vain been taught to worship... .It was in this state of mind that I opened the *Gitanjali*:

'They come with their laws and their codes to bind me fast; but I evade them ever, I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands.'

The love to which Tagore referred in these poems was not the love that was tormenting me; but Tagore's God was someone to whom it was possible

to talk even of that profane (and to me sacred) love...I wept from joy and thankfulness reading these poems....God of Tagore, said I to myself... Merciful God who knows that the only path to him is the path of freedom!

Ten more years were to pass before Victoria first met Tagore. By then she was a writer, with stirrings of international acclaim.

In September 1924, when Tagore was expected in Buenos Aires, the young Victoria could not contain her joy. She was later to write about that time:

That spring was, in San Isidro, limpid and warm, with an extraordinary abundance of roses. I used to spend the mornings in my room, with all the windows open, smelling them, reading Tagore, thinking of Tagore, writing to Tagore, waiting for Tagore.... In those days of great expectation it never occurred to me that the Poet would be my guest on the cliffs of San Isidro...

Tagore, accompanied by his British secretary, Leonard Elmhirst, arrived in Buenos Aires, on the way overland to Lima for Peru's independence centenary. Tagore fell ill, and doctors advised him prolonged rest. Joining other visitors, Victoria went for a *darshan* of the Gurudev at his suite at the Plaza Hotel. She timidly suggested that he spend time in more relaxed surroundings as her guest. (She belonged to a rich and well-known family in Argentina.) To her delight, he accepted.

That chance meeting conspired to create one of those rare and momentous turning points that happen but once or twice in a person's lifetime. The friendship that blossomed became a major influence in Tagore's life. From his writings during his stay, mostly poems that were later to figure in his collection *Purabi* the following year, it was Victoria who discovered the visual artist in him. During erasures, and his 'doodling' on paper, she noticed that he created interesting figures. Some years later, she used her contacts to arrange the first ever exhibition of Tagore's paintings and drawings in Paris, and led the world to discover yet another facet of the Gurudev's genius. Of that exhibition, she recalled in her autobiography, 'Tagore was as happy as an adolescent who receives an unexpected prize.'

In Buenos Aires, Tagore and Elmhirst were lodged by Victoria in 'Miralrio', a house that belonged to a cousin, and was not far from her own, 'Villa Ocampo', in the elegant suburb of San Isidro. She went to Miralrio each day to ensure

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that Tagore was well looked after. But she was considerate to a fault; overly conscious of not intruding on his privacy, she tended to deprive herself of his nearness and presence, something she cherished the most. She was later to recall in her autobiography that she was



Tagore loved this bench

split between shyness and avidity, scruples and eagerness not to lose a single crumb of this (Tagore's) presence.... In the afternoon at tea time, having decided to be once and for all very bold, I used to timidly knock at his door.... 'Is that you, Vijaya? You've had a busy day!' he would say. Indeed very busy, thought I despising myself for my speechlessness. Waiting for the right time to see you... Little by little he partially tamed the young animal, by turns wild and docile, who did not sleep, dog-like, on the floor outside his door, simply because it was not done.

For the Gurudev, Victoria instantly became 'Vijaya', his Bengali rendering of her name, and it was to Vijaya that he was later to dedicate *Purabi*, the anthology of his poems written during his Argentine sojourn.

Two days after his arrival in Miralrio, Tagore sent a note to Victoria, his first ever:

Last night when I offered you my thanks for what is ordinarily termed as hospitality I had hoped that you could feel that what I said was much less than what I had meant.

It will be difficult for you fully to realise what an immense burden of loneliness I carry about me, the burden that has specially been imposed upon me by my sudden and extraordinary fame. I am like an unfortunate country on an inauspicious day where a coal mine has been discovered with the result that its flowers are neglected, its fruits cut down and it is laid bare to the pitiless gaze of a host of treasure-seekers. My market price has risen high and my personal value has been obscured. This value I seek to realise with an aching desire which constantly pursues me. *This can be*

had only from a woman's love and I have been hoping for a long time that I do deserve it.

I feel today that this precious gift has come to me from you and that you are able to prize me for what I am and not for what I contain....
(emphasis mine.)

This was the first of the many exquisite letters that Tagore would write to Victoria while in Buenos Aires, a correspondence that he was to continue till his death in 1941.

Among his many musings in the ensuing days in San Isidro:

Woman, thou hast made my days of exile tender with beauty, and hast accepted me to thy nearness with a simple grace that is like the smile with which the unknown star welcomes me when I stood alone at the balcony and gazed upon the southern sky.

There came the voice from above: 'We know you, for you come as our guest from the dark of the infinite, the guest of light.'

Even in the same great voice thou hast cried to me: 'I know you.'

And though thou speakest not my tongue, Woman, thou knowest from thy heart,

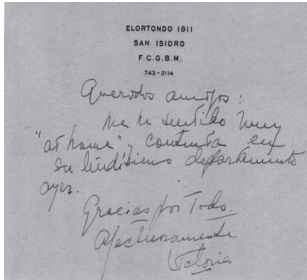
That the poet in me has ever been thine own guest on this earth, the guest of love.

The poems that Tagore wrote in the heady Argentine spring in late 1924 were numerous; he translated many of them into English for Victoria. These were later included in *Purabi*. The collection appeared later in its Spanish version under the enchanting title: *Canto del Sol Poniente (Song of the Setting Sun)*. Among them is 'Foreign Flower', Victoria's favourite of all of Tagore's Argentine poems.

On 2 August 1925, Tagore wrote to Victoria Ocampo from Visva-Bharati, recalling his days with her in San Isidro:

The poems that Tagore wrote in the heady Argentine spring in late 1924 were numerous; he translated many of them into English for Victoria. These were later included in *Purabi*. The collection appeared later in its Spanish version under the enchanting title: *Canto del Sol Poniente (Song of the Setting Sun)*. Among them is 'Foreign Flower', Victoria's favourite of all of Tagore's Argentine poems.

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Unfailingly courteous:
Following a visit to our home

...my basket, while I was there, was being daily filled with shy flowers of poems that thrive under the shade of lazy hours. I can assure you, most of them will remain fresh long after the time when the laboriously built towers of my beneficent deeds will crumble into oblivion. Very few people will know that they ought also to thank you for this gift of lyrics which I am about to offer to them...

And, on 29 October 1925, in a reference to his anthology, *Purabi*:

...I am sending to you a Bengali book of poems which I wish I could place in your hands personally. I have dedicated it to you though you will never be able to know what it contains. A large number of poems in this book were written while I was in San Isidro. My readers who will understand these poems will never know who my Vijaya is with whom they are associated. I hope this book will have the chance of a longer time with you than its author had.

Towards the end of his life, on 26 January 1939, with handwriting that was clearly less steady, he penned these lines to her:

...I am still made to carry on my work though I know it is the best part of the wisdom of living to be able to switch off in time life's daylight and gently to glide into the silence of its stars.

What a blessing that today's telephone technology did not exist in the world of that era; these beautiful letters may never have been written!

I was delighted to learn that Tagore's letters to Victoria, as also the original manuscripts of his poetry (and of his 'doodling'), were preserved with her. I then spent time with her at Villa Ocampo, over two separate visits, to go through this veritable treasure trove of memorabilia: letters, poems, drafts of poems with erasures—all in Tagore's hand.

Victoria readily agreed to my request for photocopies. Maria Renee personally brought the originals over. I had a set of copies mailed to Santiniketan, first

through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in Delhi, and later directly. I received no reply, no acknowledgement.

Years later, at the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi in the early 1980s, I was informed by Santiniketan that a researcher had been appointed to study them. I learnt later of a book that emerged. It was in need of a significant correction of fact, and others of inference. The house that Victoria gifted to UNESCO after her death was her own (Villa Ocampo), not the one in which she lodged Rabindranath Tagore (Miralrio). Earlier, Krishna Kripalani made the same error.

Victoria died in January 1979, a few weeks after I left Buenos Aires.

In keeping with her wishes, Victoria's autobiography was published only after her death. It is a remarkable testimony to her character. In a long and eventful life there were bound to have been differences and disagreements, but she does not speak ill of anyone, not even of those connected with her disastrous marriage. The marriage effectively ended in months, but the charade continued in tradition-bound Argentina,



1986: Seven years after Victoria: at 'Villa Ocampo' (UNESCO's) with Maria Renee Cura

where divorce was illegal. Much of it (five volumes, in Spanish only) is not of interest to the casual Indian reader. It brings out interesting facets of her personality, among them her views on Catholicism, the religion she was born into, her longing for motherhood and her vision of love. Of special interest is the fourth volume, over half of which deals with Rabindranath Tagore.

A childhood recollection in the first volume brings out her lighter side. Here is the translation (mine) from the Spanish:

We walk along the avenue de las Casuarinas, in Palermo, my sister and I, with Pepito and Eduardo. I adore Pepito. He is two years older than I. One day we will marry. He brings me sugar in his pockets. I walk along with him, ahead. The nannies and the other two are behind us. 'Look', says

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Pepito to me. Continuing to walk, he opens his short pants. He shows me a little piece of rosy flesh. I look, much too surprised to ask questions. Pepito seems proud of what he is showing me. I am troubled by this ridiculous detail. Because I find it ridiculous. It's only because of Pepito that I don't tell him that I don't like it. Pepito begins to button up his pants. We don't speak any more about the matter. I think that the little piece of rosy flesh makes him look ugly. But so what! His face is so beautiful that I could bring myself to forgive him this imperfection.

A later passage expresses her longing for motherhood, which she never achieved because of the circumstances of her life:

...To have a baby in the hands is an unforgettable experience. Watch it bathe, hold it in one's arms, sit with it in a hammock, smell it like a flower with talcum and milk, gently unfold its hands, kiss its feet, give it a mother's love. What a privilege!

And here is how Victoria defines her vision of 'love' in her autobiography: '...love is a passion that occupies the entire space of a lifetime for those that are born to feel it. Because it would be absurd to confuse love with sexual activity.'

In 1990, I was with the United Nations in New York. A decade had gone by since I left Argentina. Maria Renee Cura (by then awarded a Padma Shri by Mrs. Gandhi) phoned from Buenos Aires to remind me that this was Victoria's centenary year, and could I please write about her in the Indian press for the occasion. She mailed me more material, including Victoria's five-volume autobiography in Spanish.

I wrote a two-page piece for Victoria's centenary in the *Hindustan Times* in Delhi. Later that year, at Maria Renee's request, I published one in *La Nacion* in Buenos Aires, the paper to which Victoria had contributed so much in her own lifetime. (In time, my friend Karim, former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh who resided in New York after retirement, asked me to write one for Bangladesh, which I did.)

In Delhi in late 1991, Professor Susnigdha De, Rector of JNU, organised a seminar to mark Victoria Ocampo's birth centenary. I was asked to co-chair it along with Ambassador Elsa Kelly, who came from Argentina for the occasion. Maria Renee Cura, who also flew in from Argentina, was a key discussant.

Following the seminar, Maria Renee and I met with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, who was deeply interested, at his residence at Race Course Road. The compilation from the seminar is available with the Argentine Embassy, at the library at the India International Centre, and likely with other libraries.

One comment on my *HT* piece of 1990, by the irrepressible Khushwant Singh, was scribbled on a post card, as was his style. It was in a lighter vein, yet symptomatic of a widespread Indian view. His facetious but expressive take:

... I met her in Paris. I asked her if she had slept with Tagore. She did not reply.

'Greatness' in human beings, in societies like those in India, often pre-supposes exacting 'moral' standards; romantic thoughts among those that we hold in high esteem often cause embarrassment. There is self-censorship about such things. The fact that Tagore died three quarters of a century ago, and so little has been written in India on *the truth about his relationship with Victoria*, is a good example; that his romantic feelings for Victoria, unwavering over the years till his death in 1941, were reciprocated *with reverence, not romance*.

Eminent among those who wrote about Tagore was Krishna Kripalani. He was closely associated with Santiniketan, and married to Tagore's grand-daughter, Nandita. Kripalani is widely admired, including by this writer. But when it came to the relationship, his was a traditional, macho reaction. Picking up on the thought that Victoria expressed—about wanting to sleep '...dog-like, on the floor outside his (Tagore's) door...'—he commented ('A Cultural Bridge between Three Continents', published 1982):

Even God is moved by such devotion—so the saints assure us. Tagore was only human. He was deeply touched and grateful.

Really? The inference is appalling, a 'defence' of Tagore *who had no wish to be defended*. It was a reflection of Kripalani's subjective imagination of how Tagore *ought to have been*, rather than how he *was*. Worse still, torn out of context, even by some with scholarly pretensions, the lines above—Victoria's and Kripalani's—are taken as proof positive that Victoria had placed herself at the Gurudev's carnal convenience.

Kripalani's statement is misleading. The unsaid judgement is that He finally relented *only because of her dedicated and prolonged devotion*—as in many

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a traditional Indian romantic love story. (And, after that macho Judgement, All Real Indian Men May Now Rest Content that it was *she*, not He, who succumbed.)

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen thoughtlessly echoed this sentiment of Kripalani a quarter of a century later in his book, *The Argumentative Indian* (2005). True, Kripalani is well known and widely respected, and Amartya Sen did not have the kind of time needed for original research. Sadly, however, Indian scholars may now quote not just Kripalani, but also Amartya Sen, to buttress the macho view—with no need to examine it further (because, after all, 'not just Kripalani, but even Nobel laureate Amartya Sen said so'). A graphic example of how the truth gets a huge setback.

Tucked away later in Kripalani's piece is the thought that Victoria will be cherished in Bengali literature as 'a semi-mythical figure who was Tagore's last *platonic* love' (emphasis mine). But the impact of his original statement—about what 'the saints assure us'—is overpowering in its subjective judgement of Victoria.

As for Tagore, we do not need to be assured *by the saints* (to use Kripalani's phrase) that he was human like the rest of us. He was extraordinarily gifted, but his philosophical search for the divine *by no means precluded romance on earth*. The reality stares us in the face. The Gurudev never made any effort to keep his romantic feelings about Victoria away from the public gaze. And he was fully aware of how he was viewed by the public when he wrote to Victoria in early 1925 (from the ship that he boarded for home from Buenos Aires):

...You will excuse me when you know that *a man who is not a prophet and yet who is treated as a prophet* must give vent to his fit of laughter even at the *risk of misunderstanding* (emphasis mine.)

The truth is that Tagore *did* blink—in his very first letter to Victoria, quoted earlier. His words—emanating from the house he shared with Elmhirst, not Victoria—are worth a second look:

.....This value I seek to realise with an aching desire which constantly pursues me. This can be had only from a woman's love and I have been hoping for a long time that I do deserve it.

I feel today that this precious gift has come to me from you and that you are able to prize me for what I am and not for what I contain...

That the Gurudev made the first move leaves diehard male chauvinists red in the face. But there was nothing wrong with it. Tagore had been a lonely widower for years. He had a deeply tormented life; his wife died in her 20s, and only two of his five children survived to be mature adults. I believe that he lived a life that was profoundly ethical.

And how did Victoria feel about him? She says in her autobiography that for a long time she kept on a table near her bed, a phrase she copied from Ruskin: 'Hold so tightly all that you love, that it would break if it were hollow.' For Victoria, Tagore was very special, and it was in this manner that she regarded him. Significantly, she adds in the fourth volume of her autobiography (the translation from the Spanish and the emphasis are mine): In effect, I felt for him (Tagore) a great 'amour de tendresse'. A love entirely spiritual.

Victoria further goes on to describe how her 'idolatry' for Tagore made her and Tagore's secretary, Leonard Elmhirst, mutually 'jealous' of each other. That couldn't be because of her 'romantic' feelings for Tagore—unless Elmhirst was also inclined to be romantic about Tagore, which of course he was not.

And, most importantly, it wasn't Tagore; it was another man that Victoria was in love with in Buenos Aires, long before, during, and somewhat after Tagore's visit in 1924. She avows in her autobiography that she would have married Julian Martinez (to whom she refers only by the letter 'J' in her autobiography) if the laws in Argentina had permitted it. If it were not for 'J', she adds, she would have 'followed Tagore to Shantiniketan'.

Doris Meyer, Victoria's best biographer (*Against the Wind and the Tide*, 1979) is unequivocal and emphatic on the nature of the relationship between Tagore and Victoria. She first travelled to Buenos Aires in 1962 on a Harvard–Radcliffe fellowship to meet Victoria to research her life and work. They became close. This was 'in the autumn of her years, and the springtime of mine', she recalls. She met Victoria again in 1975, 76 and 77 for her biography, spending many weeks with her in Buenos Aires and at her other home in the sea-side resort of Mar del Plata. I did not meet Meyer; she makes a warm mention of Maria Renee Cura, who 'read portions of the manuscripts...'. Meyer's unambiguous verdict on Tagore's romantic relationship with Victoria: 'Unilateral'.

In India, a course correction in favour of integrity is long overdue.

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Tagore sailed from Buenos Aires in early January 1925. The correspondence between Victoria and Tagore seems to take a pause during the period 1926–29. Were some letters lost? Not likely. Since Victoria personally introduced me to the correspondence, she would surely have mentioned this if it were so. She did not.

In 1930, Victoria met the Gurudev in Europe, and helped launch his first ever exhibition of paintings and drawings at the Galerie Pigalle in Paris. She went there with her personal staff, as she always did. Her maid, Fani, who brought up Victoria as a child, attended fondly to Tagore.

Victoria saw Tagore for the last time at the Gare du Nord in Paris that year, when she bade him farewell. They continued to correspond until his death 11 years later in 1941.

The sketches and paintings that Tagore continued to create emerged from the tormented soul of a many-sided genius, whose quest for the truth found such a deep reflection in his own life. His work as a visual artist is replete with dark colours and grim figures. The chair that Victoria gave him in 1925 inspired not only poetry but also his painting. It was always to serve as a reminder of Victoria.

Victoria continued to have contact with India long after the Gurudev passed away. In 1953, when she was imprisoned by General Peron for her liberal views, Jawaharlal Nehru discreetly intervened. She was released in 26 days. There followed a brief exchange of letters with Nehru. Much later, Indira Gandhi spent time with her in Villa Ocampo when she visited Argentina as the Prime Minister of India. A periodic correspondence continued between them.

On 17 October 1941, Rathindranath Tagore, the son of the Gurudev who was then General Secretary of Visva-Bharati, wrote to Victoria following his father's death. (Quaintly, Rathindranath's phone number is mentioned at the top of his letter as 'Santiniketan 22'.):

... With regard to you, his affection had never been dimmed for a moment. It may console you to know that the chair you had provided him with for the boat for the return journey from S. America (in 1925) had remained his most favourite piece of furniture and been used by him daily until the very last days

when he could no longer sit up. About a month before his death one morning when he was in a cheerful mood he wrote a poem on this chair...

(This poem was 'The Empty Chair', written on 6 April 1941, and quoted at the beginning of this piece.)

Victoria continued to have contact with India long after the Gurudev passed away. In 1953, when she was imprisoned by General Peron for her liberal views, Jawaharlal Nehru discreetly intervened. She was released in 26 days. There followed a brief exchange of letters with Nehru. Much later, Indira Gandhi spent time with her in Villa Ocampo when she visited Argentina as the Prime Minister of India. A periodic correspondence continued between them.

Victoria was at ease with everyone, the famous and the unknown, the rich and the poor. Her own 'aristocratic' upbringing, her wealth, her unusual intellect, her independent and original outlook, her wide exposure, made her completely at ease in any company. In her long life, celebrities from many countries and from every walk of life (including the likes of Mussolini) lavished attention on her, and mere titles and fame did not impress her. Her modesty and humility, her genuine friendship and loyalty for the people she liked, her steadfast devotion to her principles, all these were in consonance with the one enduring love in her life: the God of Tagore that she discovered from the *Gitanjali* at the age of 24.

Yet, Victoria was no ascetic. She was very much a person of this world who loved life and all that it had to offer. She was not unconscious of her own physical beauty. I recall an occasion when a photographer readied his camera. '*Saque de este lado*' ('take it from this side') she told him, as she gently patted her left cheek and turned it towards him.

I met Victoria for the last time at Villa Ocampo at the end of October 1978, five days before I left Argentina after my four-year stay. She was terminally ill, with cancer in the right side of the mouth. I knew from Maria Renee that it was a closely guarded secret; that she was not receiving visitors. Victoria did not, perhaps could not, come down the steps to the living area. Bharati and I went upstairs to her bedroom. Victoria was propped up in bed. We sat beside her. There was a poignant touch; all three of us were aware that this was our last meeting, and not just because I was leaving Argentina.

Victoria wore a scarf to cover the right side of her mouth. She betrayed no signs of discomfort, even though she had refused painkillers. We sat for a long time, and chatted about nothing in particular. She spoke about my imminent departure, and my future. When the time came to say farewell, she got up (she

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insisted) and walked with us until the landing. There was a lull in the conversation. She hugged each of us. I took her hands in mine and kissed them. I thought her eyes were moist; and so too, as I turned away, were mine.

Victoria died three months later, on 27 January 1979. Maria Renee was with her, and wrote to inform me how brave and considerate she was till the end. She adamantly refused to take painkillers, because she wanted to *bear* the pain, which she regarded as her 'karma'. Besides, she did not want to lose her clarity of mind. She did not. On 25 January, representatives of UNESCO arrived from Paris (she had gifted her house to UNESCO). Her cancer no longer allowed her to speak, but she asked Maria Renee in writing whether they would stay. The next day, 26 January 1979, she scribbled to Maria Renee, by her side: 'Did they have a good lunch?'

At 9.00 the following morning her life had ebbed away.

In 1976, during my conversations with Victoria, the thought emerged of installing a bust of Tagore with an inscription in Villa Ocampo in memory of the Gurudev's visit to Argentina. I agreed to make suggestions from his poems from *Canto del Sol Poniente* (the Spanish version of *Purabi*). She selected the one at the end of this article, from his poem 'Foreign Flower'.

Three years after her death, Tagore's likeness in bronze was placed in Villa Ocampo, courtesy the Tagore Society in India, but without an inscription. An appropriate one would serve as a reminder of one of the most unusual 'love stories' of our times.

As for Victoria, would that really matter today? Do our actions for those who are no longer alive have any relevance? Our earthly logic tells us that they no longer perceive, that the symbols that humans create are only for the 'living'. Victoria and Tagore were united in their profound awareness that the only enduring realities are those that are intangible. As Victoria, too, '*switched off... life's daylight and glided gently into the silence of its stars*', her life is now as intangible as the thought that inspired her so much:

*Your home is there
In the loving heart of him
Who knows you,
And nowhere else.*

Moni (S.M.S.) Chadha joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1960, with an Honours degree in Physics and an MA in History from St.Stephen's College, Delhi. From 1962 to1966, he qualified in Russian, German, French, Polish and Spanish, all five by the 'Advanced Standard' of the Ministry of External Affairs. Much of his career was devoted to multi-lateral diplomacy, in New York and in New Delhi. He was Ambassador to Argentina from 1974 to1978. For the academic years 1977–1978, he formally taught (in the Spanish language) Modern Indian History at the Universidad Catolica del Salvador as Visiting Professor. He retired in 1995 as Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs. His last assignment abroad, for six years from 1985 to1991, was with the United Nations, New York, as Director for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries.

On retirement, he continued as Advisor/Consultant at the UN. In the year 2000, he was a Delegate at the United Nations Millennium Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in New York. He can be reached at smschadha@gmail.com
