

Yone Noguchi and India: Towards a Reappraisal of the International Conflict between R. Tagore and Y. Noguchi

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It might well be said that the name Yone Noguchi (1874–1947), as a Japanese poet is much better known among Indian people than among Japanese, due to his relationship with Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Yone was firstly friends with Tagore and he then touched off an international argument in 1938. The reference to this international conflict between the two poets centers on the contrast between the ‘humanist’ of a dominated country and the ‘spokesman’ of an imperialized country. The comparison of the two poets was drawn between the one as a master poet vs. the other as a minor poet, or the one as an exquisite saint vs. the other as a vulgar, inferior writer. Generally speaking, while Tagore is a great and popular figure internationally, Yone Noguchi has been judged as a comic character who asserted the senseless politics of Imperial Japan. Within recent times, however, I think, the line of thought towards that international argument merits some reassessment from diversified viewpoints. For instance, in order to evaluate the standpoint of Tagore, Amartya Sen makes mention of this conflict, in *the Argumentative Indian: Writing on Indian History, culture and Identity* (2005). As Sen notes, ‘how to view Japan’s position in the Second World war was a divisive issue in India’ (A. Sen: 110). Indeed it is definitely true that complex and numerous problems stand in the shadow of this wartime argument between the two poets. The problem does not figure out within the relations of these two Asian countries, much less within the communication of the two poets. This problem could be made clearer by the reference to outside factors and relative verification.

This paper will demonstrate some of the results of my investigation into the relationship between India and Yone Noguchi, and then raise a question about conventional ideas towards the relationship between Tagore and Noguchi. When we examine closely the situation of Yone Noguchi, one notices the international argument between the two poets, introduced during a time of global warfare, a whirlwind of international politics, can be reconsidered in ways different than ever before.

General Opinion of Yone Noguchi

Yone Noguchi, best known for his role as a Japanese poet up until the end of WWII, has been

rather harshly judged and almost totally neglected, in the postwar era. Yone Noguchi has been almost totally sidelined, in fact, excepting insofar as he attracts some attention by way of being the father of Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), a highly-regarded multilateral sculptor. In this connection, in any case, the assessment of Yone carries both distaste and a critical flavour, because Isamu was his illegitimate child. If we have regard for the worldwide success of Isamu as an artist, however, it is apparently true that Isamu inherited from his father's estate in the terms of an international human network and also, it may be argued, his directional characteristics as an artist yet. Another reason (probably the main reason) for the harsh judgements towards Yone Noguchi in the postwar era is that Yone was stigmatized by his identification as a 'Nationalist' or 'Imperialist'. In postwar Japan, a number of Japanese were targeted with criticism as being stigmatized as nationalists, and remained under a kind of 'seal of taboo' without any further investigation. Noguchi was one of such figures in the postwar era. Especially from 1942 onwards, Noguchi wrote war-effort poetry, intended to stir up war sentiment, along with others such as Takamura Kōtarō (1883–1956). They were not alone: almost every literary contemporary did so. In radio broadcasts, Noguchi, well-known as a poet across the world, became the landmark or signature poet of Imperial Japan. However, in the postwar era of Japan, being labeled as a "writer of War Poetry" brought immediate harsh assessment, not only to all the Japanese-language poetry written by Yone during the wartime era, but also to the totality of his identity as a writer.

As for his wartime poetry, it has often been read in the light of his engagement with the media; such as his radio broadcasts, and it has been used to measure his "guilt", in terms of its devious manipulation of the public and its tendentious use as political propaganda during that imperialist era. However, that aspect is not the all of Noguchi's activity in the war-era. His standpoint was much more complicated, as a writer of 'dual nationality', whose label was recognized universally both home and abroad. Although Yone Noguchi wrote in concert with his broadcasts by radio, and was involved in contributing to National policy, he also wrote poetry showing a degree of resistance and desperation, which fell foul of the censor. Noguchi was able to give voice to criticize 'the savagery of war' in his poetry, even under the ban of censorship. That aspect of Yone Noguchi had not been critically appraised for a long time after the immediate postwar era.

It can be said that Yone Noguchi, as a Japanese writer of world-renown, was given special treatment in wartime Japan. His English writing played a crucial role as a mediator both within Japan and outside of Japan, not only in the wartime era but also from the era preceding the war. His English poetry and literary theory gained him fame overseas as a representative of Japan in the early 20th century, and then it made an impact on the contemporary Japanese literary arena. I will leave aside the issues of Noguchi's English and Japanese writings, which made this impact and contribution both internationally and domestically, and instead try to focus on his connection with India.

Towards a Biography: Noguchi's Fin de Siecle Literary Transition at the Turn of the Century

Next, let me give you a rough sketch from the beginning of his life, before entering into the issue of his relationship with India. Yone Noguchi the writer emerged in the period of the beginnings of the Symbolist literary movement. Noguchi left for the USA in 1893, and then gained the chance to study poetry under Joaquin Miller (1839–1913) in Oakland, California. During his experience of the natural life with Miller, Noguchi absorbed the works of such American poets as Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and others, who had also been attracted by Symbolist writers in the period of transition from the latter part of the 19th to the early 20th century. That is, Noguchi, who learned about naturalism, mysticism, the maverick free spirit, and localism, was aligned with the trends of the time. Noguchi started to write English poems under the influence of Poe's poetic theory and Whitman's style, with ponderings from the Japanese tradition, incorporating Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644–1694) or Haiku 俳句, and Zen Buddhism. The period prior to 1900 and just after was the heyday of literary Symbolism and also foreshadowed Modernism. It had attracted notice to the mysteries of the Orient and of such non-Christian philosophy. Noguchi's literary career began thus as a young Japanese poet providing a breath of fresh air in the literary world of the Pacific Coast of America, where the local and national literary atmosphere had developed on its own cultural terms. *Seen and Unseen; or Monologues of a Homeless Snail* (1896), which was Noguchi's first collection of verse, was well-received among American writers. After this success in the US, Noguchi went on to London, canonical in the English literary world, in which had arisen the movement seeking modernity between the traditional and that of innovation. Noguchi's publication in London entitled *From the Eastern Sea* (1903) was favorably received among the many writers in London, including, for instance, William Michel Rossetti (1829–1919), Arthur Symonds (1865–1945), and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939). From that time Noguchi began to learn about the political issue of Ireland, as well as India, especially in the arena of human relationships, in particular from the writing of Yeats, he became familiar with Ireland, and from Sarojini Naidu (1874–1949) he learned about India.

From the latter half of the 19th Century, and especially after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and both before and after the First World War (1914–1918), the Western literary world had become more sensitive to the concerns of modernity. In other words, a movement of interest in, and admiration of the Orient had developed, which found correlation with the sticking point of Western civilization. English poets, who had acted for social reform and artistic innovation, such as W. B. Yeats, Arthur Symonds and Laurence Binyon (1869–1943), were deeply interested in Indian poetry and poets. With the transition stage of the turn of the 20th Century, some Indian English-language poets appeared in London, such as Manmohan Ghose (1869–1924), Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), and also Sarojini Naidu. Moreover, from a Japanese perspective, Noguchi, too, had emerged, as a Japanese English-language poet. It can be said that receipt by Tagore of the Nobel Prize made a huge impact across the globe, and was a vivid flagship of the movement, a signal of the fluctuating nature of Western power.

Western writers, who had contributed significantly to the creation of Tagore's reputation, might have sensed an innovative feel, or a political feel, with which to break down the established cultural hierarchy as existed in the contemporary literary field. In other words, Tagore's success may have been related to some historical inevitability and to the political bias of the beginning of the 20th century. Generally speaking, this line of thought around the fact of Tagore's Nobel prize for *Gitanjali* would not be difficult, if we remind ourselves of some post-colonial literary theories; such as those developed by Terry Eagleton and Edward W. Said. A. S. Z. Haque (1981; *Folklore and Nationalism in Rabindranath Tagore*), for example, suggests that Tagore and Yeats had several points in common. Firstly, according to Haque's argument, these two were mystic poets: Tagore's Upanishadic idea; and the attraction of Yeats for supernatural phenomena. Secondly, they tried to reconstruct their national culture from folklore. Furthermore, both were strong nationalists, of India and Ireland, against British domination. In my point, all of these contexts can be amplified in the case of Yone Noguchi of Japan, though his case was much more complicated, because of his background from the nation-state of Japan.

Noguchi, who had formed friendships with English writers in London from 1903, kept his eyes on India and Ireland. The relationship between Noguchi and India developed from his personal exchanges with Indian poets, such as Sarojini Naidu and Rabindranath Tagore. As for Rabindranath Tagore, Noguchi wrote a letter to him in February, 1915, before his visit to Japan in 1916. From that time onwards Noguchi became close friends with Tagore, and welcomed Tagore to Japan in 1916, again in 1924 and in 1927.

Tagore had long invited Yone Noguchi to visit India, and Santiniketan. It was not only Tagore, but other intellectuals like Asutosh Mukerjee (1864–1924) who had also been asking Noguchi to come to India. In fact Noguchi was connected to the Indian literary arena as a contributor to some Indian magazines from the 1910s, and he had received invitations and requests to make a lecture tour in India from the 1920s. Then, in 1935, he finally decided to take such a chance and travel to India.

Noguchi and His Journey in India of 1935–1936

Now, I should mention some specifics about the significance of Noguchi's Indian Journey of the 1930s. Noguchi took ship for India on the 17th October, 1935, and arrived at Calcutta on the 10th November, having travelled via Shanghai, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Burma. From the moment of entering the port of Calcutta, he was given a warm reception, and thus began a hectic life which he had never experienced before. From then, until he sailed out of Colombo, on the 4th February, 1936, Noguchi went on to deliver lectures and to be requested to meetings from place to place all over India, a very heavy schedule. Through a careful examination of his schedule in India, it reveals the facts of what Noguchi's travel was like, how Noguchi played a crucial role as a voice between nations, and how much indeed Noguchi met with the leading figures of modern Indian history.

Noguchi's Indian Journey was undertaken with the object of promoting cultural exchange

between the 2 nations. At first, as he wrote frankly before traveling, Noguchi was rather unwilling to go India, because he understood, at the back of his mind, that his status as an international Japanese poet might be easily misinterpreted such that he could be seen as the representative figure of Imperial Japan. Noguchi wanted to be an individual poet or independent artist, free from any contexture, and had moved himself away from the role of representative of the state. However, many people persuaded him to agree to visit India, because they felt that Noguchi was the best man to go. It is true that Noguchi was required to fulfill the role appropriate for that era, that is, he was actually urged to act as a kind of channel for propaganda of the national Japanese situation. One of the main persuaders for Noguchi's Indian journey was Kalidas Nag (1892–1966). Nag, as a contact man, used his influence for Noguchi's traveling in India, for achieving mutual understanding between India and Japan.

Noguchi was hugged in welcome by R. Tagore, and his fellows of Santiniketan. For example, Nandalal Bose (1883–1966) and Kshitimohan Sen (1880–1960) were among those who had been associated with Noguchi since Tagore brought them along to Japan in 1924. Sarojini Naidu, Noguchi's old friend, and her family, also took him to their hearts. Noguchi was even allowed to see Mohandas K. Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi: 1869–1948). To see Gandhi was quite difficult for Japanese people in those days, as he was under the eye of British control. However, it can be said that due to Noguchi and his reputation as an international poet that he could be permitted authorization. Moreover, what I would emphasize in this presentation, is the fact that Noguchi requested and agreed to meet with a huge range of Indian



Fig. 1 Arrived at Calcutta, on shipboard, on 10th Nov.1935



Fig. 2 With Rabindranath Tagore, in Santiniketan



Fig. 3 With Mohandas K. Gandhi

intellectuals and other leading figures in the contemporary business field. Primarily, Noguchi accepted invitations for lectures at many universities all over India, and held face-to-face meetings with many university presidents. For example, Shyamaprasad Mukherji (1901–1953); the head of Calcutta University and the key educator of modern India, gave him a cordial reception and asked

him to make 6 lectures. M. Bhavanishankar Niyogi (1886–?) in Nagpur, and Sir Alladi Krishnaswami Iyer (1883–1953) in Madras, asked Noguchi to make some lectures, and after that, they affirmed the Asian spirit of coordination synchronously. Those people were regarded as friendly toward Japan, and had taken a different stance from that of Tagore or Gandhi. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), a philosopher of international repute, complimented Noguchi on his lecture. Secondly, Noguchi's lecture was not only given at the university, but also given at several community and other organization gatherings. For example, Noguchi attended several meetings of Hindu Maha Sabha, in Calcutta, Lucknow and Agra. Noguchi attended several welcome parties; such as Armand Bazar Patrica, Bengal-PEN-club, some women's societies, etc. When Noguchi attended the semicentennial gala ceremony of the Indian National Congress at Nagpur, V. S. Srinvasa Sastri (1869–1946) held discourse with Noguchi. Noguchi's lecture was broadcast nationwide over the radio, and expressed publically via several Indian newspapers. Thirdly, the exchange program of Noguchi's Indian journey extended to the business field. Gansham Das Birla (1894–1983), an Indian business magnate and supporter of Gandhi, requested a meeting with Noguchi and invited him several times. Noguchi contended that Birla's ideas for social reform came from a religious perspective. On the other hand, father-child Bodar (?), whose heart had been stirred when meeting Noguchi in Bombay, discussed zealously the need for social reform in the educational system. In addition, in connection with Noguchi's Indian journey, it should be mentioned that he deepened exchange with some of the other leading cultural figures of India. Noguchi visited the motion picture company in Calcutta, and met famous film directors and female actors. In Bombay, his interview with Uday Shankar (1900–1977) and his performance both, made a big impression on Noguchi. It is also important to remember that Noguchi visited the house of Saraladevi Chaudhurani (1872–1954), in whose reception room was displayed pictures by the noted Japanese artist; Taikan Yokoyama 横山大観 (Kali-goddess カーリー女神) and Shunsō Hishida 菱田春草 (Sarasvati 弁財

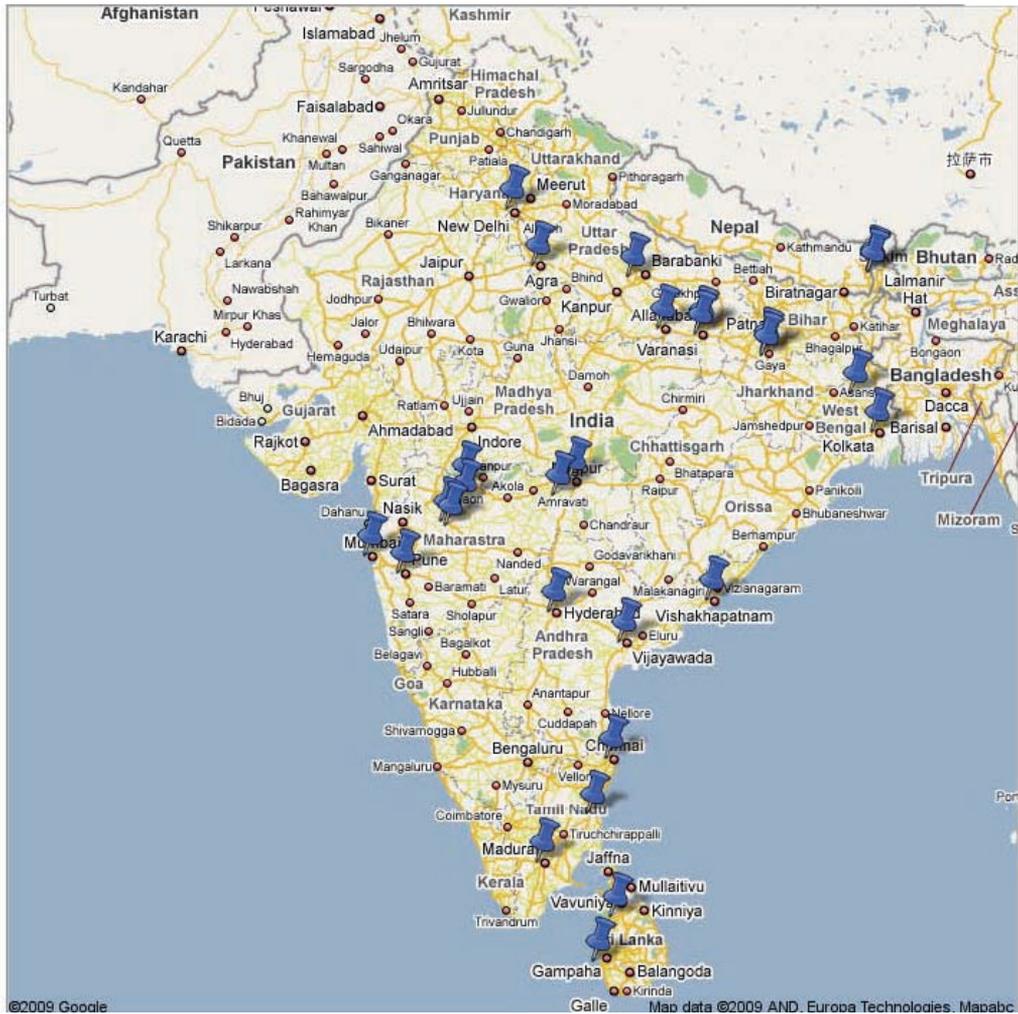


Fig. 4 Traveling from 1936 to 1937

天／ショロシヨッテイ[ベ]).

It is true that the political situation of Japan had aroused strong criticism in India during his travels, and that Noguchi was required to play a role in order to tone down their criticism toward Japan. A number of Indian people held an unfavorable opinion of Japanese policy and raised doubts as to the political significance of Noguchi’s lecture tour. For example, The Indian Express wrote a strongly negative article on Japanese militarism and the political meaning of Noguchi’s visit to Indian. There certainly existed negative movements toward Japan, although there was also positive and friendly opinion in India in those days.

The International Dispute between Tagore and Noguchi of 1938

Following is an explanation of the international conflict which took place between Tagore and

Noguchi in 1938. This conflict received wide international attention. The open letters of the two poets in English spread across the world through newspaper and magazine articles, and were even circulated, via a small pamphlet, in China. Here, I would like to suggest two points for us to take to analyze this conflict.

The first point is to examine to what extent both poets were assimilated into international politics. Noguchi's assertion was a criticism concerning Tagore's stance on Chiang Kai-Shek (Jiang Jieshi 蒋介石 1887–1975). For example, Noguchi wrote to Tagore as below:

Chiang is a living example who sold his country to the west for nothing, and smashed his skin with the crime of westernization. Dear Rabindranath, what will you say about this Chang Kai-Shek?

Noguchi's irritation came from the fact that Tagore had made a creditable comment towards Chiang Kai-Shek who had expressed his solidarity with Western Countries, and asked for their help. To Noguchi's way of thinking, Chiang was not a person of the people, not a humanitarian. Noguchi implored Tagore to believe in 'the war of "Asia for Asia"', whereas Tagore argued for a denial of 'the doctrine of "Asia for Asia"', as 'an instrument of political blackmail.'

The second point is to notice the fact that Noguchi referred to Indian gods, both male and female deities, in order to explain about destruction and regeneration. Though Noguchi was not in favour of the war and its barbarous acts, he defended the Japanese military campaign with explicit references to Kali and Siva.

Admitting, that militarism is criminal, I think that, if your humanity makes life a mutilated mud-fish, its crime would never be smaller than the other. I spent my whole life admiring beauty and truth, with one hope to lift life to a dignity, more vigorous and noble; from this reason. I knelt before the Kalighat, Calcutta, because Kali's smeared face in madness, with three wild eyes, promised me with a forthcoming peace. And also at Elephanta Island; near Bombay, I learned from the Three-headed Siva a lesson of destruction as inevitable truth of life.

It is apparent that this discourse by Noguchi awoke some Indian sympathy. After this international argument, Noguchi, in Japan, received more than 40 letters from India. As Noguchi wrote about Agarawal (? , an ophthalmologist in Delhi) and Basu (? , a writer/commentator on the Mahabharata) in *Nihon hyōron* (1939) approved Noguchi's reference to the Indian gods. Noguchi's assertion, his insistence 'for establishing a new great world in the Asiatic continent' was not defeated with total disgrace. Noguchi said, as follows:

Believe me that I am never an eulogist of Japanese militarism, because I have many differences with it. But I cannot help accepting as a Japanese what Japan is doing now under the circumstances, because I see no other way to show our minds to China. Of course when China stops fighting, and we receive her friendly hands, neither grudge nor ill feeling will remain in our minds. Perhaps with some sense of repentance, we will then proceed together on the great work of reconstructing the new world in Asia.

We don't have the time now to argue further on this interesting topic. However, I would like to say that this argument needs to be analyzed more closely. If we are to take up this argument, we must examine those Indian revolutionaries or intellectuals who split with Tagore and Gandhi: for instance, such luminaries as Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945) and Rashbehari Bose (1886–1944). Noguchi and his engagement with radio broadcasts in the early to mid-1940s was highly connected to the activity of Indian political refugees to Japan who had asserted Indian independence. In that sense, research should focus much more closely on the contemporary relationship between India and Japan, and on people exchange of that period between India and Japan.

In conclusion, the primary purpose of this essay has been to show how much Yone Noguchi connected with India and Indian people, especially the people whom Noguchi met while traveling in India from 1935–36. This included some of the most important and prominent players of the history of 20th century India. In addition, this essay describes to what extent the two poets were involved in the contemporary whirlwind of international politics. Tagore brought 'the humanity of intellectuals' in his discussions, but his standpoint was, nonetheless, in the controlling pull of the political strings of the time. It seems that Noguchi, compared to Tagore, was more consciously aware of his situation under the Japanese nation-state, because of the critical eye cast upon it by the whole world. Finally my intention was to identify the significance of joint research beyond each country or beyond each field of study. Controversial topics, such as the international and complex conflict between Tagore and Noguchi, cannot be fruitfully opened from the entrance of a one-way street. Collaborative research and interactive study with the input of several viewpoints is what is required for a full investigation.

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