



# Revealed: Tagore's muse w

## HISTORIANS TRACE TALE OF INDIAN WHO CAPTIVATED A YOUNG RABINDRANATH



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by AMIT ROY

**EDINBURGH** has many links with India, but the latest, most significant discovery is the exact location of the grave of Annapurna Turkhud, a Marathi woman who developed an affectionate relationship with the Bengali poet and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, when she was 20 and he was 17.

Some scholars believe that Annapurna's father, Atmaram Pandurang Turkhadekar, who headed a prominent family in Bombay [now Mumbai], proposed a marriage between the young couple, but this was turned down by Tagore's patrician father, Debendranath Tagore.

The actress Priyanka Chopra Jonas wants to turn their story into a full-fledged Bollywood romance, which is possibly why she has not been given clearance to make the movie by the zealous guardians of the Tagore flame at Vishva Bharati University in Santiniketan in West Bengal.

What is new is that the location of the unmarked grave in Morningside Cemetery in Edinburgh, where Annapurna (Anglicised to Anapurna or Ana) was laid to rest after she died shortly after childbirth on July 2, 1891, has been established.

What is also poignant that her infant son, Denzil Fane Sewell, who was born on June 26, 1891 and died on November 2, 1891, is buried with his mother. The baby was the result of an affair between Annapurna and a poet, Henry Fane Sewell.

Annapurna left her husband and their three children behind in Bombay and set sail for the UK with her lover, when she discovered she was pregnant. It is assumed she headed for Edinburgh because her brother, Dyneshwar, was studying medicine in the city. He was present when his sister passed away, aged 33.

On July 2, 2023, a plaque was put up on a wall adjacent to the grave on the anniversary of Annapurna's death.

"There's so much story behind it," commented Hauke Wiebe, a Scottish tour guide and honorary fellow of the University of Edinburgh's India Institute.

The plaque was unveiled by Prof Bashabi Fraser, who has been the director of Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies at Edinburgh Napier University and is the author of a number of books on Tagore.

The young Rabindranath was in 1878 sent from Calcutta to live with Annapurna's family in Bombay, so that he could learn English and the ways of the British before being sent to London to study law. Annapurna herself had returned from a trip to England and was considered a suitable tutor for Rabindranath.

There was a family friendship between



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Rabindranath's elder brother, Satyendranath, and Annapurna's father, a progressive man who denounced the caste system and child marriage, supported widow remarriage, encouraged female education and sent all his three daughters to England to learn English manners. He served as sheriff of Bombay in 1879.

Bashabi and other scholars have pieced together what might have happened between Annapurna and Tagore, who gave his young tutor the poetic name, "Nalini", meaning lotus, as she became his muse.

"Tagore writes that he half expected her to look down on him for what he called his own lack of scholarship, but she didn't," said Bashabi. "As for her nature, we can piece it from Tagore's random jottings. We get impressions of a lively young woman hovering around a young Tagore, cheering him up in moments of homesickness, playing tug-of-war, flirting. She once told him whoever stole a young woman's glove while she was asleep

earned the right to kiss her and then she fell asleep promptly, gloves by her side.

"Tagore responded awkwardly to these affectionate overtures. But he writes about how he would try to impress this accomplished young woman by sharing his poetry. Their friendship teetered on the edge of something more. But Tagore was too shy to give in to her advances."

She read a poem she had written for the occasion: "She sailed across the stage of his vision/ An embodiment of elegance, magically conversant/ In many tongues that mingled the essence/ Of the east and west in her expressive vitality./ He was overawed by her beauty and confidence,/ Her sophistication and gentle acceptance/ Of his tongue-tied presence, broken by his eloquent verse."

Shortly after their encounter, Tagore sent sail for England, but had no interest in becoming a barrister and returned home without getting a degree.

As for Annapurna, in 1880 she married Harold Littledale, a Dublin-born profes-



**LOVE STORY:** Annapurna Turkhud and; (clockwise from below) Rabindranath Tagore in Brighton in 1878; musicians perform Tagore songs during the unveiling of Annapurna's grave; Bashabi Fraser lays flowers on Annapurna's grave and Fraser with Hauke Wiebe (left) and Roger Jeffery

