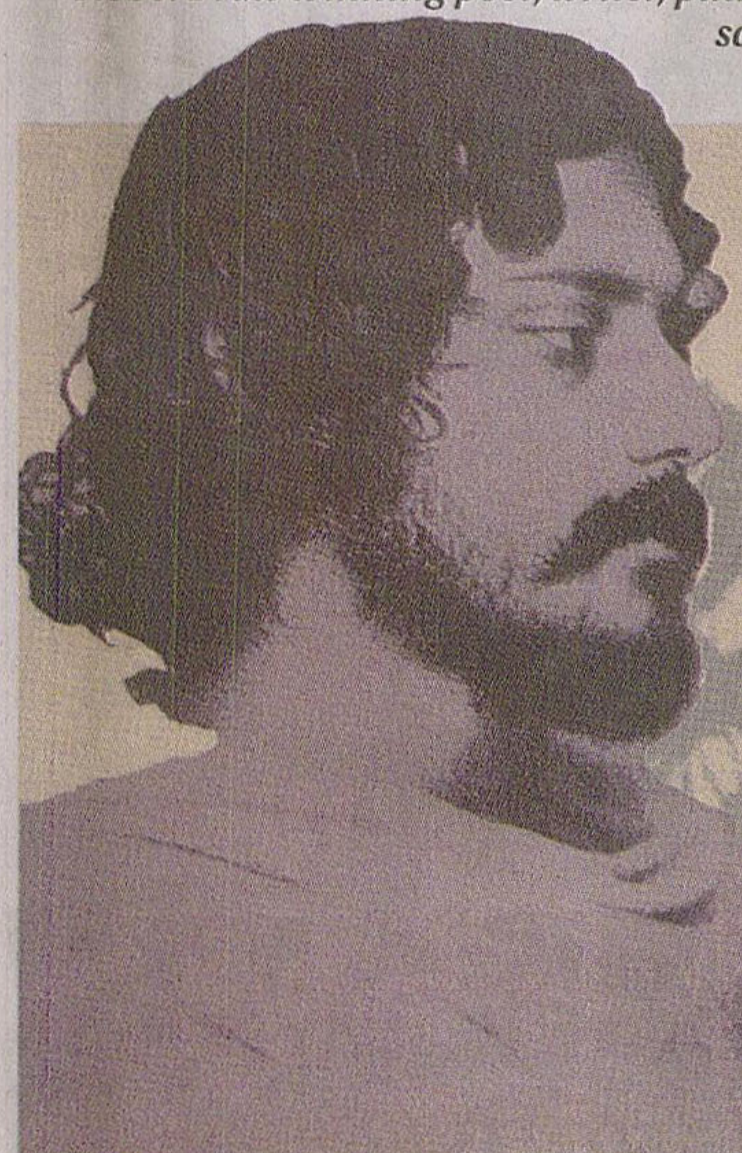


145th Birth Anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore

Nobel Prize winning poet, writer, painter, thinker, educational reformer and a song writer. Even today Rabindranath Tagore looms large over the cultural scenario in Bangladesh and India. On his birth anniversary, it is opportune to pay a tribute to this creative titan.



Tagore on faultlines between civilisations

KARUNAMAYA GOSWAMI

KNOWLEDGEABLE people throughout the world are found to take interest in Samuel P. Huntington's theorisation of clash of civilisations. There happen to be a lot of people in the North America who believe that Huntington is a great truth-teller and all the clashes in the new world which is the post cold war world are going to take place along the faultlines of civilisations. Huntington very assuredly says: "It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among human kind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in the world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between

nations and groups of different civilisations. "The clash of civilisations will dominate the global politics. The faultlines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future ... what do we mean when we talk of a civilisation? A civilisation is a cultural entity... differences among civilisations are not only real; they are basic. Civilisations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important religion." But the post cold war course of world politics does not prove the truth of Huntington's observations. Battles have already taken place and they don't prove out they are purely civilisation centric. I am not up to refuting all what Samuel P. Huntington has got to say. Some of his observations on the global human situation of our time are revealing. Clashes may take place anytime among civilisation based communities or sub-civilisation groups. That is the part of human history. But apart from pointing all the violent differences out, it is far more useful to prescribe how to mend the

faults and how to make earth livable for all the civilisations and sub-civilisation groups in an environment of understanding, respect and amity. In this context, Rabindranath Tagore's mission of life was to devise a meeting point between the East and the West, which was the major concern of those days and also to create an environment of harmony in his own country where all the major civilisations exist in thriving forms. I particularly remember Tagore's Nobel Prize Acceptance speech where he made no reference to poetry at all and only referred to bringing communities of man together through understanding and respect initiated through a system of education. He founded his university with this big dream of human unity. In his speech he said: "And I can assure you that the prize which you have awarded to me was not wasted upon myself. I have used this money which I got from you for establishing and maintaining the university which I started lately, and it seemed to me that this university should be a place where western students

might come and meet their eastern brethren, when they might work together in the pursuit of truth and try to find the treasures that have lain hidden in the East for centuries and work out the spiritual resources of the rest, which are necessary for all humanity. And I feel that what we suffer from in the present day is no other calamity but this calamity of obscurity and seclusion... Because of that reason in India we have not been given the unity of races. "Our problem is the race problem, which is the problem of all humanity. We have Dravidians, we have Hindus and all different sects and communities of men in India. Therefore no superficial bond of political unity can appeal to us, can satisfy us, can ever be real to us. We must go deeper down. We must discover the most profound unity, the spiritual unity between the different races. We must go deeper down to the spirit of man and find out the great bond of unity, which is to be found in all human races." Tagore termed as difference and seclusion what the social historian of these

days mean by faultlines of civilisations or cultural faultlines. In fact the faultlines are not so watertight as they are described to be. But mere identification of lines does not matter most. They have got to be overcome. Tagore thought of overcoming the differences between communities through initiating a rightly directed education in his own university. What else could he personally do when all the other universities of the world were not under his own grip. But the lesson he has left behind is: only education can save us from the peril of seclusion. Today everybody is talking about everything which is global. But what about global mind as Tagore anticipated? All our tribal instincts will lead nowhere unless we make ready the area of human bonding. In our own society Tagore stands as symbol of unity, which overcomes all the faultlines of culture. Had there been 10 or I don't exactly know how many persons like him throughout the world today, the whole scenario would have been different. The author is a noted music exponent

The modern primitive art of Tagore

SYED ASHRAF ALI

Nothing can be both primitive and modern. But the paintings of a maestro have very surprisingly been classified as "Modern Primitive Art." What is more, very few on earth know this towering personality as a painter. He is adored and eulogised in every nook and corner of the world not as a "man of colours" but as a "man of letters" and a "man of sound." The name of Rabindranath Tagore indeed suggests primarily no theme connected with the history of art. All over the world he is acknowledged as a great poet, a great writer and a great musician. His success in everything he touched was so complete that it is hard to even say what his forte was. Very few among us, however, know that the versatile genius was not only a poet, a writer and a musician of the first order, but he also excelled in painting. He painted fast and with a sure hand, in between the intervals of his literary activity, finishing each picture at one sitting, and left behind nearly 2,500 paintings and drawings, all done during the last 13 years of his life -- a no mean achievement, considering that during the same period he also published more than 60 volumes of new literary writings, poetry and prose. The unique and astonishing creativity of Tagore "stemmed basically from the fact that he was a mystical, philosophical being -- in everything, he was constantly searching for some bearing on life, some balance and symmetry of vision." His life is the story of a great and passionate heart, which was entirely filled with two things: love and sorrow. Love, not in the sense of likings or preferences, or sympathy or aesthetic test, but in its deepest form, charity, a deep religious relationship to men and things. His life was an uninterrupted giving of himself, and his painting was yet another brilliant way of giving himself, which he discovered after many other attempts. He himself described his paintings as 'my versification in lines' and confessed in a letter that he was 'hopelessly entangled in the spells that the lines have cast all around me.' There is no doubt that many of these drawings are marked by a strong feeling for rhythm, but apart from this affinity there is little in common between the poetry and the painting of this great maestro. It was in 1928 that the versatile genius began his experiments in an entirely new and unforeseen medium of creative expression, namely, painting. He had always been drawn to this art and had occasionally cast furtive and longing glances at it; as a young boy he had seen elder and versatile brother Jyotindranath draw. His first attempts at drawing, however, came at the early age of nine when he and his brother's

education was in the hand of private tutors. But to him drawing was then nothing thrilling, it was just included in a long list of subjects comprising geometry, arithmetic, science, history, geography, physiology, Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, anatomy and, of course, music. At 12, he had a more personal and less formal contact with drawing when he made little sketches during a tour of North India with his father. But drawing still did not quite capture his imagination in any way.

Later, when his nephews Abanindranath and Gyaganranath discovered their talents for painting he encouraged them in their pursuit and helped in finding what came to be known as the modern movement in Indian Art. He himself hardly ever took the brush in hand. But though he did not wield a brush, he doodled freely with his pen and the expression gushed forth like a flood; completely abstract forms com-

transform accumulation into adornment." And the poet really let himself go. He had no training and no reputation at stake as a painter, and so he went on without inhibition, without affectation. He drew on whatever paper was at hand and with any instruments and colours, with the unfortunate result that the preservation of these paintings, many of which are of extraordinary quality, presents today a serious problem. He drew on whatever

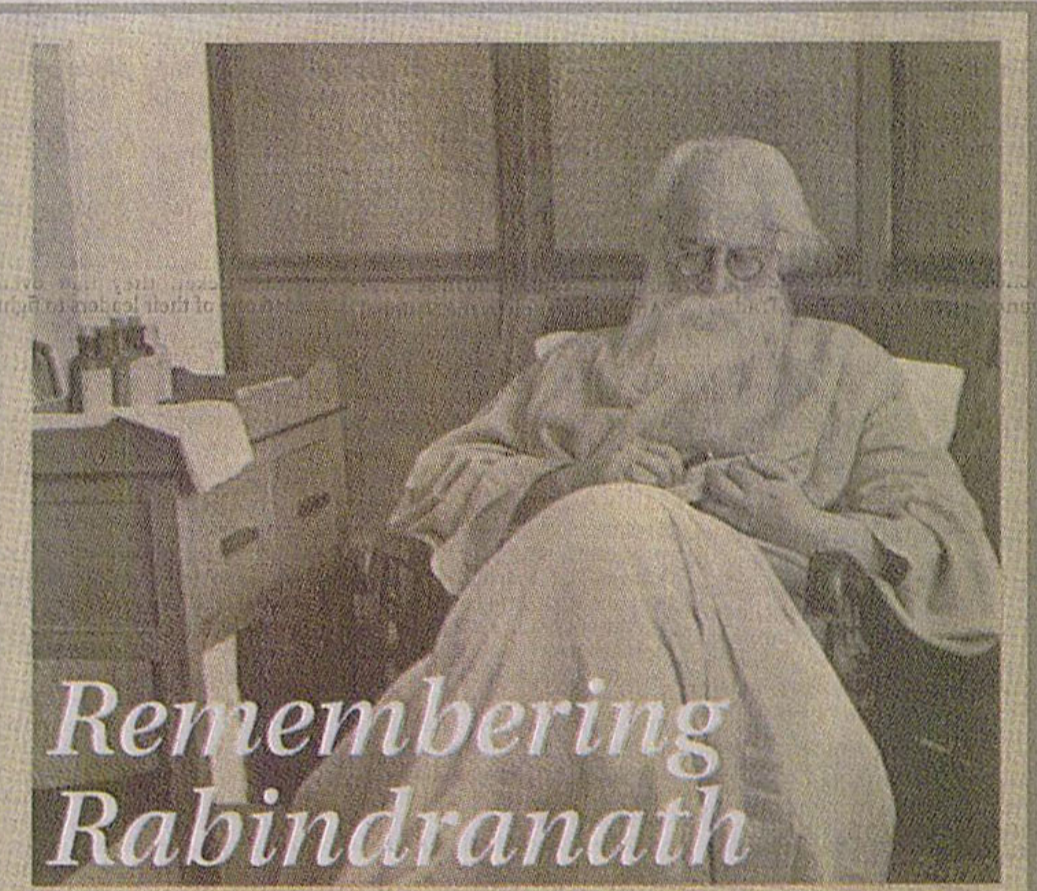


At 30, drawing again made a re-appearance in his life, when he used to spend a few private hours, now and then, practising it. The sporadic sketches and drawings show an innocent hand. But Tagore obviously did not really like what came about, and this, combined with the fact that he did not apply himself with total dedication, saw an end to that particular tryst with painting, which he regretted. Thirty long years would pass before he wooed the world of visual expres-

ceived in a search for purely visual balance poured out of his pen. They would come mainly in the shape of "doodles" upon his manuscripts when he paused for thought while he wrote. The "doodles" appeared suddenly and with abundance in his manuscripts of 1923-24 and subsequent years. "The scratches and corrections in my manuscripts cause me annoyance," he wrote. "I want to make my corrections dance, connect them in a rhythmic relationship and

ideas he believed in, both modern and traditional, and tried to achieve a vision which instead of "rejecting all the forces at work, imbibed and sifted through them, and ultimately transcended them to acquire a progressive, personal vision of his own." In 1924, on his way to Argentina, Tagore wrote the *Yatri* and the *Purabi*. In Buenos Aires, he fell ill and while staying there, he dedicated his poems to his hostess Madame Victoria Ocampo. It was

she who remarked on the striking texture of the adornment on the manuscripts and pointed out how visually appalling they were. The "doodles" radiated the feelings of a deeply sensitive artist, acutely aware of his milieu, all superbly conveyed through a technical excellence of the highest order. By 1928, Tagore abandoned the pretext of turning "accumulations on his manuscripts into adornments" and closed, self-contained monochromes in fountain pen ink began to appear on the blank spaces on his manuscripts. Soon after, he started drawing in two or three tones, and he used his figures or bits of rag to spread or blend them. But he hardly used any brush. In 1929, Tagore began to see his creations in terms of actual forms and figures, and a sudden plethora of those gushed forth, like reawakened visions from a subconscious memory, "very amialistic, hobgoblin-like faces, people and creatures" started appearing. He had already started using separate pieces of paper to paint on, using fast-sticking coloured inks, crayons, corrosive inks, vegetable colours and varnishes -- anything and everything that would quickly dry and stick, thereby preserving his original flash in spite of repeated assaults with the brush. He never bothered to care how long it would last. The paintings of the great poet are indeed extraordinary and provide us with a unique style of painting. In the words of the distinguished art-philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy, "An exhibition of drawings by Rabindranath Tagore is of particular interest because it puts before us, almost for the first time, genuine examples of Modern Primitive Art." When the pictures of Tagore were exhibited in Gallery Pigalle in Paris in 1930, it earned a worldwide reputation. The Comtesse de Noailles wrote: "The Pictures of Tagore which begin like the entry of the spirit into sleep by dreamy and vague spirals, define themselves in the course of their remarkable execution, and one is stupefied before this masterly creativeness which reveals itself, as much in the trifling as in the vast, why has Tagore, the great mystic, suddenly, without knowing, set at liberty that which in him scoffs, banters and perhaps despises." Tagore himself admitted, "My pictures represent no preconceived subject. Accidentally, some forms, of whose genealogy I am totally unaware, takes shape from the tip of my moving pen and stands out as an individual." The paintings of Tagore indeed are not only colourful and varied but those are literally "Pictures about himself -- much nearer to his music than to his poetry."



Remembering Rabindranath

DR HALIMA KHATUN

While still a tiny tot I had my first encounter with Rabindra Tagore. At that time I had a hazy idea about poetry and poets. I laboured under the misconception that there was only one poet (*kabi*) in the world. You could put it down to my world at that time -- the village or at least the lush greenery of the forest. Finally I picked up the word *kabi* from my uncle who used to recite poems, going so far as to sneak out of the house at night to attend a *kabigan* in the next village. To avoid the elders' ire, he would stealthily go out and return early in the morning. You could put down my interest in Tagore to my curiosity about the word *kabi*. As a young girl from class two I came across a picture of the great bard and one of his poems on the first page of my Bangla textbook. The poem went as follows: *Tumi dhanyo dhanyo hey, Amar pran tomar daan Nadi giri bon saras shobhan Tomar bishal bipul bhuban Korechho amar nayan lobhan Tumi dhanyo dhanyo.* Since those days the *kabi* was always with me. In my imagination I saw his profile engraved by the autumn clouds that floated above a seemingly infinite expanse of a paddy field that surrounded our tiny school. Or I spied him writing poetry seated among the cotton clouds. He seemed to be writing with a pen crafted out of a bird's feather. At a later stage I came across his patriotic poem, which began with the lines: *Banglar mati Banglar jol Banglar bayu Banglar fol Punno houk punno houk*

This heartfelt prayer resounded in my mind and helped me to build a strong, nationalistic persona. My patriotism was put to the test, first with the anti-British movement and later in the Language Movement in 1952. It was my fortune to get hold of a brand new copy of Tagore's *Chayanika*. This selection contained almost all the poems that are collected in *Sanchaita*. The precious *Chayanika* was a school prize belonging to my elder sister. She brought the book home and did not take it back when she left for school at the end of the holidays. Along with *Chayanika*, she brought *Katha O Kahini* and *Akash Pradeep*. I began reading and memorising the poems and was totally mesmerised by the lyrical beauty of the work. In the course of time I memorised most of the poems of *Chayanika*, beginning with *Marane tuhi mamo shyamo shoman to Pratham diner Surya proshno korechhilo and Rupnarayan kulay jege utkhami*. Now with the onslaught of time I cannot recite some of the lines correctly. However, these poems made a deep impact on me. Likewise, I was greatly moved by *Katha O Kahini*. The poems *Debotar grass, Pujarini, Abhisar, Bisharjan, Karna Kunti Sangbad* and other immortal works fascinate me to this day. Even now I recite these by myself or in company. The poem *Pujarini* was performed in our school when I was in class four. The actors performed the actions silently in coordination with a reciter's voice. The subject of the poem was the injustice perpetrated by Ajatasattu, the brother of Ashoka the Great, against Buddha's preaching and Buddhists. This literary work gives the reader a glimpse of the

Pallera. I can never forget the day when Tagore left this world. It was the 22nd Shrabon of 1941. It was a rainy day and the tears of his devotees shed like the rain. We got the sad news of his demise when our school was in session. The school authorities declared the school closed and mourners crowded the streets. At that time women were not to be found in street processions. However, we the grieved students of the only girls' school, joined a procession on the town streets. To this day I feel the void left by the bard's demise. Tagore's lasting appeal lies in his wealth of expression, poetic imagery and philosophical messages. The works are like a tapestry that he wove with carefully chosen words. It is almost as if he sought to evoke joy and give an everlasting insight into human character through his works. *Geetanjali*, in particular, captures the aspect of devotion and surrender to the Divine. This work earned him a Nobel Prize. I began this short tribute to the bard with my early exposure to Tagore. As I grew up I continued my literary pursuits. I leafed through his poems, short stories, novels, plays, philosophical essays, science treatises, children's literature, songs and comics. I never failed to be amazed by his versatility, creativity and depth. Besides his great works, Tagore also made a name for himself in the field of education. His two institutions, Shantiniketan and Sriniketan remain unparalleled even today. The same holds true for his short stories, poetry and other immortal literary works. The author is a former Director of the Institute of Education and Research

The author is a former DG of Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh