

Shelaidah Estate : Where a History Hums

THE name Shelaidah has been associated with numerous poems, songs, short stories and dramas of Rabindranath Tagore. The place derived its name from two words: *Shel* and *Daha*. Mr. Shel, an Englishman used to reside in the area. He was, in fact, an indigo planter whose Nilkuthi had been washed away by the erosion of the river Padma. 'Daha' means a big pool of water. The name of the village, therefore, means an abode formed on the pool. Two tombs on the grave of the two members of Mr. Shel's family which existed in the village were also washed away by the erosion of the river. There is, however, a saying that Mr. Shel was a ruthless indigo planter in the area.

This estate (the village now in Kushtia district) was located in Birahimpur Pargana (collection of villages) in Nadia district. The formation of Birahimpur Pargana was perhaps not very old as no reference of it had been made in the statistical account of Bengal by W. W. Hunter or the Nadia Kahini (Story) by Babu Kumar Nath Mullick which, perhaps, are the most authentic books on Bengal.

During Mughal period Pargana Birahimpur was a part of the vast Zamindari (estate) of the Raja Bahadur of Krishnanagar of Nadia. It may be recalled that the British Raj bestowed titles like Raja Bahadur, Maharaja, Roy Bahadur, Khan Bahadur on those who were, by and large, loyal aristocrat land lords of India. In Bengal, Zamindari belonged to mostly Hindus while there were few Muslim Zamindars, too. The Zamindari was established by Bhabananda Majumdar of Krishnanagar. Meanwhile, there was rebellion of Zamindars of North Bengal under Raja Udaynarayan, Sitaram Roy and other which occasioned the transfer of the capital of Bengal from Jahangirnagar (Dhaka) to Murshidabad. The new capital was named after its founder Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan, who was the first Nawab of Murshidabad. Although Sitaram Roy had succeeded initially, he was defeated and executed in 1719.

It may be mentioned that Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan was known as Jafar Khan, the

Subadar of Murshidabad. On successful suppression of the rebellion of the Zamindars of North Bengal, the extensive Zamindari of Rajshahi, as constituted at that time, was presented by the Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan to his favourite Raghunandan. This Raghunandan was the founder of the Natore Raj family. In fact, Pargana Birahimpur was part of the Zamindaries of Natore Raj family and remained as such for quite sometime.

Dwarakanath Tagore, grand

by Mohammad Anjad Hassain

people of Shelaidah — disappeared.

The elegant three-storied building stands in the middle of a large courtyard which includes two ponds, a mango grove and a host of other blossoming trees. The Kuthibari has 17 rooms. Rabindranath Tagore used a room in the third floor for his creative writings. From this room one could watch the Padma and the Goral by the side of which Kushtia town is situated. Shelaidah is only six miles

Tort which he wrote sitting in a boat on the mighty wide Padma at Shelaidah. During the period of Tagore's Zamindari, Shelaidah looked vibrant and young with the hubbub in the two full-flowing rivers — Padma and Goral. As a matter of fact Padma had changed its course during Tagore's time and flowed by the Shelaidah side. The erosion of the river washed away some one-fourth of the Birahimpur Pargana and flourishing and villages lying on the north of the Pargana

(uncle — husband of father's sister) Munshi Nooruddin Ahmed, who was literary minded, was one of the sponsors of this Conference. He told me that Rabindranath could not attend the conference because of ill health, but wished the people of Shelaidah all the best to make the literary conference a success. Mr. Ahmed was undisputed leader of Shelaidah as a Chairman of the Union Council for 20 years following his retirement from the services of the British Government in Burma. He was the Vice-Chairman of the organising committee of the conference proposed to make Kuthibari national asset to preserve the memory of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore. The proposal was finally unanimously adopted in the conference and an appeal was made to the authorities of Kuthibari to preserve it as a national monument.

After Pakistan came into being Mr. Nooruddin Ahmed pursued the matter as Vice-Chairman of the District Board of Kushtia. During the Chief Ministership of the late Ataur Rahman Khan, Kuthibari was declared a protected monument under ancient Monument Act of 1904.

Rabindranath Tagore was not only a great poet of international repute but also a successful businessman. He had set up a firm under the name of Tagore and Co. in Kushtia town for jute baling and food-grain storage. This company supplied sugarcane grown by the farmers of Tagore estate to M/s. Renwick and Co., the well-known British sugarcane crushers. On receiving complaint about audacity of the British sugarcane crusher, Rabindranath Tagore decided to set up a similar firm.

With the assistance of his Bazar Sarkar (market assistant) and his engineer brother, Rabindranath established an engineering firm. Later it turned out to be M/s. Jageswar Engineering Works — named after the employee who received it as a gift from the poet. Adjacent to it, one brick-built double storied self-contained building stands in the main town Kushtia. It was known as Kushtia Kuthibari in mouza Bahadurkhal Pargana under Jessore Collectorate. The area was 1.30 acres. It was requisitioned by the erstwhile Government of East Pakistan and people's expectation was that this Kuthibari should be developed into a museum or research library. As ill luck would have it, Kushtia Kuthibari now belongs to a private owner who

reportedly bought it in auction.

There is hardly two opinions about the saying that Shelaidah, Kushtia and luminaries of Kumarkhali like Lalan Shah, Gagan Harkara and Harinath Majumdar contributed to Rabindranath's literary bent of mind. Rabindranath Tagore was more a man of Bangladesh than of India because of his long association with this part of the world. Gitanjali (English version) which won Tagore the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, was translated by him at Shelaidah. Shelaidah and Padma were so close to his heart that once the poet was planning to set up Shantiniketan there, but he abandoned the idea because Shelaidah estate went to Surendranath Tagore one of the poet's brothers, as a result of apportionment of property of the Tagore family.

There is enough scope to make Shelaidah Kuthibari a place of unique historical interest to attract poets and literatures from all over the world.

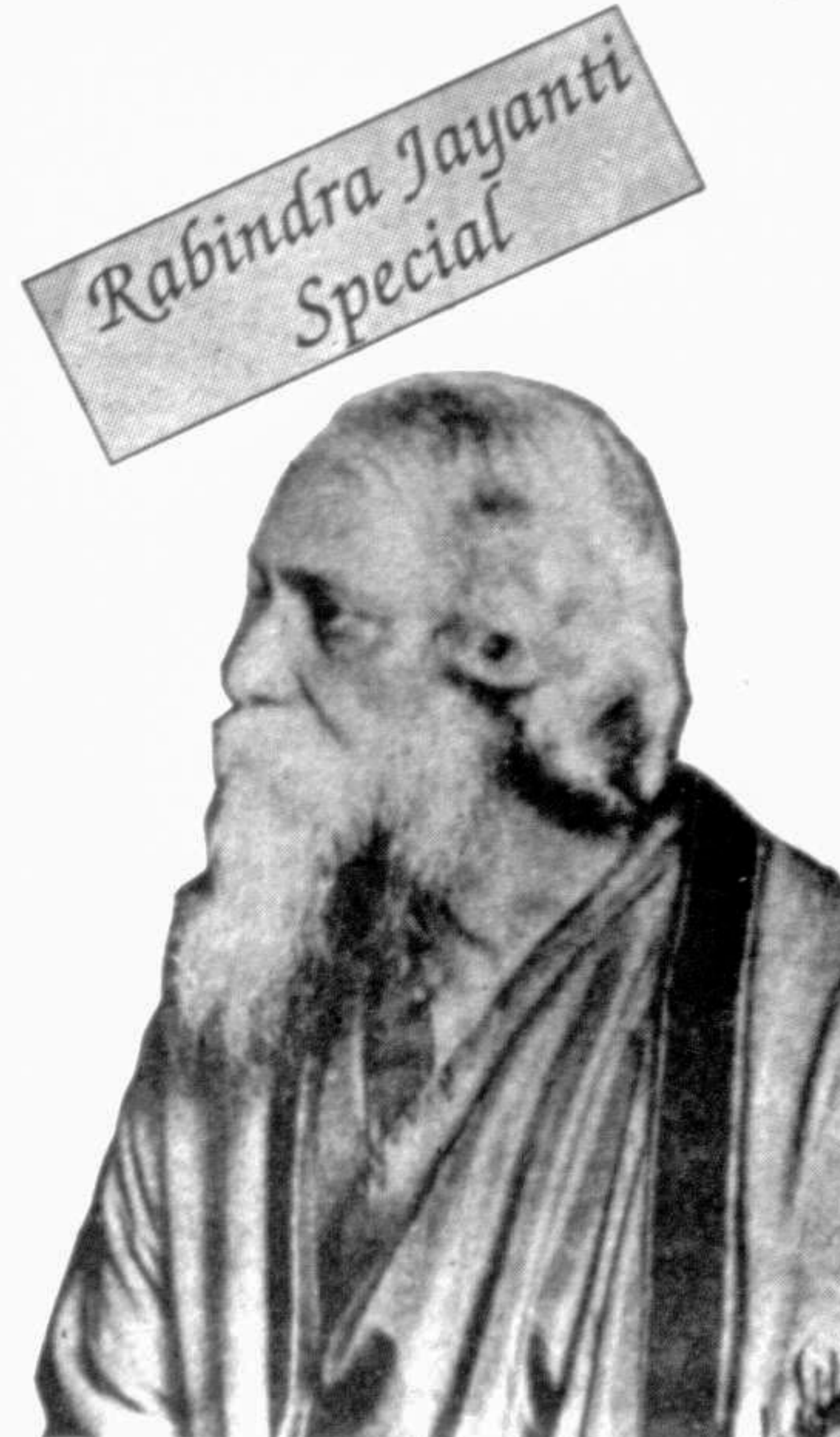


Photo : Courtesy-DESH



Tagore among the peasants at Shilaidah

father of Rabindranath Tagore purchased the Zamindari of Natore Raj in an auction in 1800. The area of this estate was spread over to Patisar of Rajshahi, Shahjapur of Pabna and Birahimpur of Nadia district. Rabindranath Tagore took over the administration of Tagore estate in 1891.

In the whole area of the estate, Kuthibari of Shelaidah was the only brick-built house. The existing Kuthibari of Shelaidah where Rabindranath Tagore had spent a good part of his life was rebuilt by Rabindranath himself after dismantling the one built by the indigo planters when it was about to be eroded by the might Padma. And with the rebuilding of Kuthibari the last vestige of the English indigo planters — whose ruthless act and oppression had left indelible mark in the minds of the

away from Kushtia town. Two boku trees were planted by Rabindranath Tagore himself on two sides of the brick built bathing place. The pair of trees still hold the fragrance the poet loved so much. But the rivers Padma and Goral which were a source of inspiration to the poet — towards his contributing to the Bengali literature — are practically dead. The whole area has become a semi-desert. Once upon a time steamers plied between Shelaidah and Pabna.

Gaganay garajay megh ghano barasha
Kulay eka bosay aachhi nahi barasha
(Roaring thunder in the sky — deep monsoon murk
Alone at the bank I am, by the river dark)

These lines are from Tagore's famous poem Sonar

were engulfed.

Shelaidah estate went to Surendra Nath Tagore in 1922 following apportionment of the asset of the Tagore family but Rabindranath Tagore still paid a few visits to Shelaidah after that. While he decided to stay in Zorashanko he felt the pang of separation from Shelaidah. Following his last visit to Shelaidah, Rabindranath reported to have written that Padma had divorced him, he did not find the Padma which was darling to him once.

Following a financial crisis, Tagore estate was sold. The estate went to Sreemati Shyamangini Roy Choudhury trust. Babu Nandalal Roy and Babu Pulin Krishna Roy of Choudhury trust purchased Tagore estate in mortgage sale in 1937. Babu Nandalal and Pulin were Zamindars and bankers of the Bhagyakul family which Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bengal, in a darbar held at Munshiganj, described as great.

Rabindranath Tagore was invited by the sponsors of All Bengal Rural Literature Conference which held in March, 1940 at Shelaidah. My 'fufu'

In Love with Kuthibari

Continued from page 9 — and sometimes deliberate — act of putting the articles of the Kuthibari and even parts of it at risk.

The picnicers come crowding in droves without paying heed to the caution. Evidently, the staircase starts shaking under the weight of four to five visitors. What if 10 to 20 people cram the staircase together! Those are the dangers the porch too is exposed to. Considering all this,

the need for regulating the visitors appears to be a prime — and immediate — task.

To do this however a few steps have to be considered. The boundary wall around the mansion itself will have to be raised further by at least another 3-4 feet. Most importantly, the introduction of an entry fee — at least a token one — is the right answer to the crowd problem. Not that the small amount at the gate will dissuade the visitors but chances are that it will help develop a mechanism by allowing a group of 10 to 20 at a time. For genuine Rabindra followers, it will be quite a nice treatment and hopefully at least bring to an end the free-for-all business. The gate-money, moreover, will at the year end become a substantial amount — enough for doing some renovation work of the mansion. The Archaeology Department may not have to spend anything from the government exchequer.

One suggestion that a police camp be set up to curb vandalism does not look practical. For, a visit to the place where Tagore lived is more a pilgrimage than just a picnicking or an ordinary excursion. The two simply do not conform to each other. What is important is to develop a culture of treating such places with reverence and love. That culture does not develop automatically. It depends on how the poet's works, ideas and philosophy are inculcated in the national life. Stratford-upon-Avon has not become, over the years, just a name but a symbol of love for the greatest English poet ever. So should the Kuthibari at Shelaidah and Sahjapur along with Shantiniketan and Jorasanko be hallowed by the love of the Bangladeshis for their greatest poet. It is the people's will rather than physical force that ought to highlight the great human bond to which Rabindranath himself devoted his entire life.

— S. M. Ali

Tagore: A Poet, a Painter

by Tarikul Alam

THE nation and the country, in fact the whole world celebrates the 131st anniversary of birth of the great poet Rabindranath Tagore today, 8th of May 1992. It is a great day for all of us.

I would not venture upon dwelling on his greatness, manifestations of which are spread over whatever he touched. I do remember, of course, of a comment made on his mastery over paintings. To that lady, whose name I have managed to forget, I owe a lot. She, of course, knew what she was writing or saying. The gist of her saying was that Tagore would have even been immortal if his genius would have centered round his paintings. I do not have the authority to comment. But I quote Tagore. He said while explaining the meaning of painting: 'The language of sound is a tiny drop in the silence of the infinite. The universe has its eternal language of gesture, it talks in the voice of pictures and dance. Every object in this world proclaims in the dumb signal of lines and colours the fact that, it is not a mere logical abstraction or a mere thing of use, but it is unique in itself, it carries the miracle of its existence.'

"But there countless things which we know but do not recognise in the fact that they exist, though we may have to acknowledge them as facts that are injurious or beneficial. It is enough for me that a flower exists as a flower, but my cigarette has no other claim upon me for its recognition, but as being useful for my smoking habit."

"But there are other things which have certain rhythm or character in their forms which make us acknowledge the fact that they are. In the book of creation they are the sentences that are underlined with coloured pencil and we cannot pass them by. They

seem to cry out, 'see, here I am' and our mind bows its head and never questions, 'Why are you.'

"In picture, the artist creates the language of undoubted reality, and we are satisfied that we see. It may not be the representation of a beautiful

main silent even as my pictures are. It is for them to express themselves and not to explain. They have nothing ulterior to their own appearance, and if that experience carries its ultimate worth then they remain, otherwise they are rejected and forgotten



Woman

woman but that of a commonplace donkey, or of something that has no credential of truth in nature, but only in its own artistic significance.

"People often ask me the meaning of my pictures. I re-

even though they may have some scientific truth or ethical justice."

Rabindra Nath Tagore
Moscow, Sept 15, 1930

(Reproduced from The Modern Review, Jan 1932.)

Nandalal Bose, doyen of art in the sub-continent paid great homage to Tagore. He said that when Gurudev's glory was ever-shining in the field of literature, religion, politics, sociology, and he was considered to be original thinker in these sectors, he started painting. He was in his seventies and three objects were dominant in his pictures. They are — the consciousness of rhythm, coordination and self-emulations. His paintings are his own, but in conformity with Indian tradition.

In fact, Tagore was a painter of such qualitative superiority and he blended so much variety in various forms and schools of thought, that it is difficult to limit him anywhere in any particular manner. Like his all other creations, he was also unique and singular in this aspect too. That is his greatness.

Long live his spirit and soul to illuminate us.



A Homage to Tagore — from Malaysia

Know not how thou singest, my master! I ever listen in silent amazement.

The light of thy music illumines the world. The life breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.

My heart longs to join in thy song, but vainly struggles for a voice. I would speak, but speech breaks not into song, and I cry out baffled. Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master!

DIFFERENT countries have found different ways of paying their homage to Rabindranath Tagore. But there is something unique about one publication on the great poet, published from Kuala Lumpur in the mid-eighties. It is the work of a noted photographer of the country, O. Don Eric Peris, titled 'Images of Gitanjali'. It is what Mr. Peris describes as a

"Malaysian photo-interpretation of some of Tagore's poems from Gitanjali."

The design of the book, well-produced on art paper, is simple but innovative. On the left side on each page is a poem of Tagore; on the right side is a photograph by Peris. It is always a landscape from Malaysia. It may be of trees which grow by the wayside, of

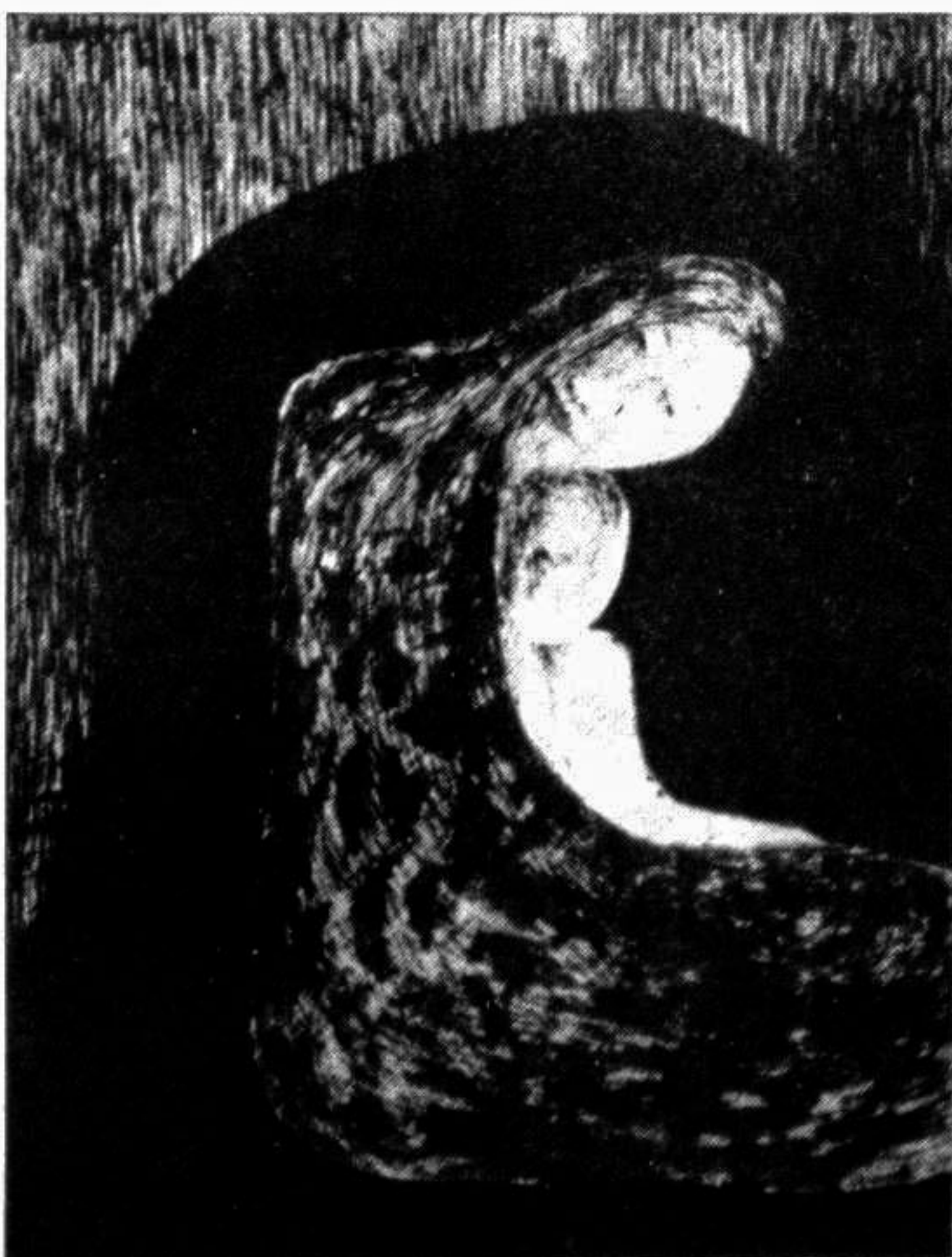
waterfall that is gushing with a beauty of its own; or of a lonely road winding to nowhere. Peris concentrates on the play of light and shadow, all the photographs being in black and white.

We reproduce one of the poems from Gitanjali with the accompanying photograph by Peris.

Needless to say, photographer Peris and the designer

and the producer of the book, Cyril D Pereira are Malaysians. When a copy of the publication was presented to me in Kuala Lumpur before I left for Dhaka, I had no idea that I would get an opportunity of making any use of this unique publication in a newspaper in Bangladesh, and that too on a birth anniversary of Tagore. Herein lies my personal satisfaction.

— S. M. Ali



Mother and Child

Photo : Courtesy-DESH