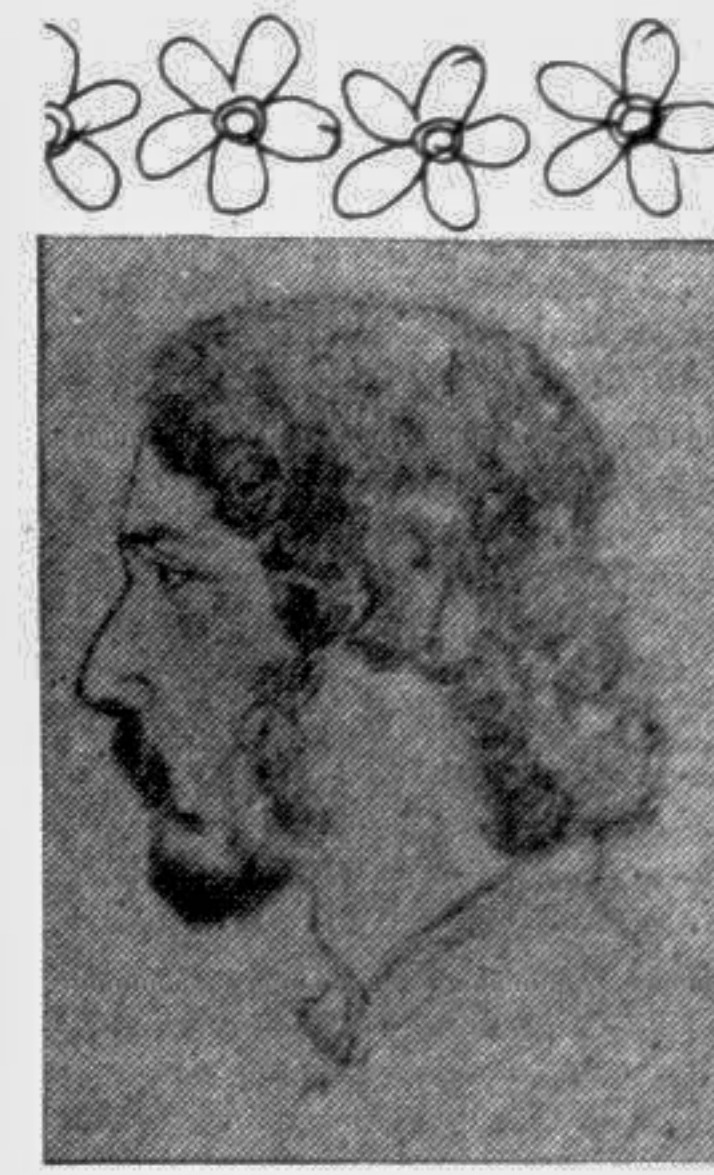
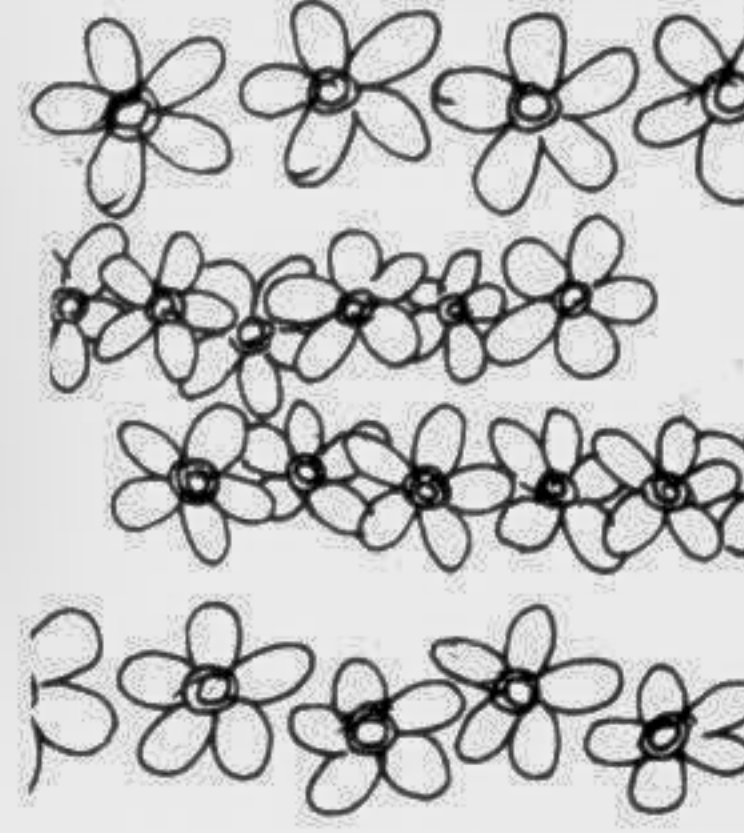
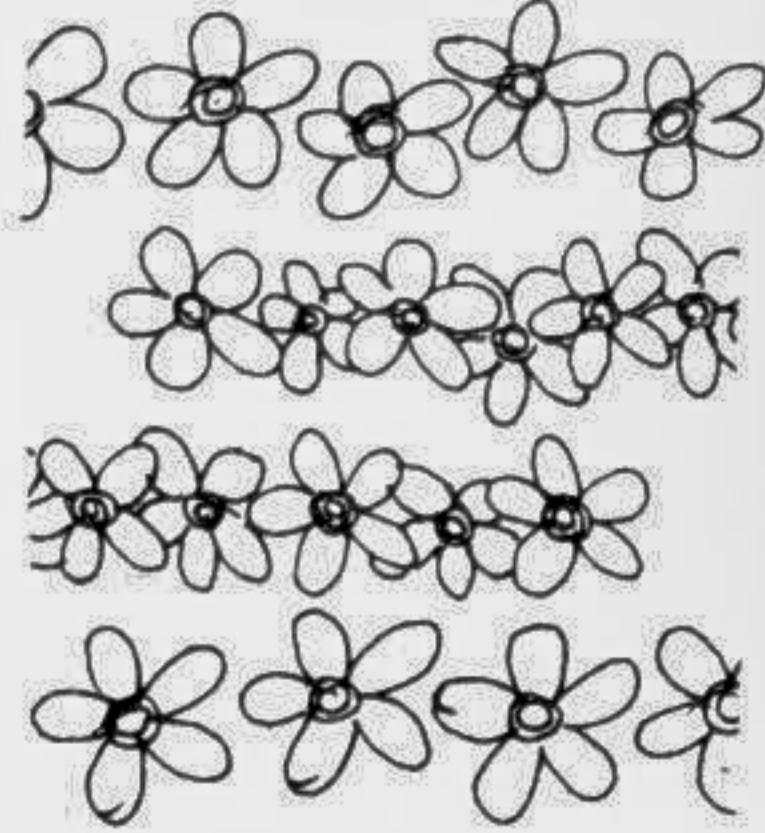
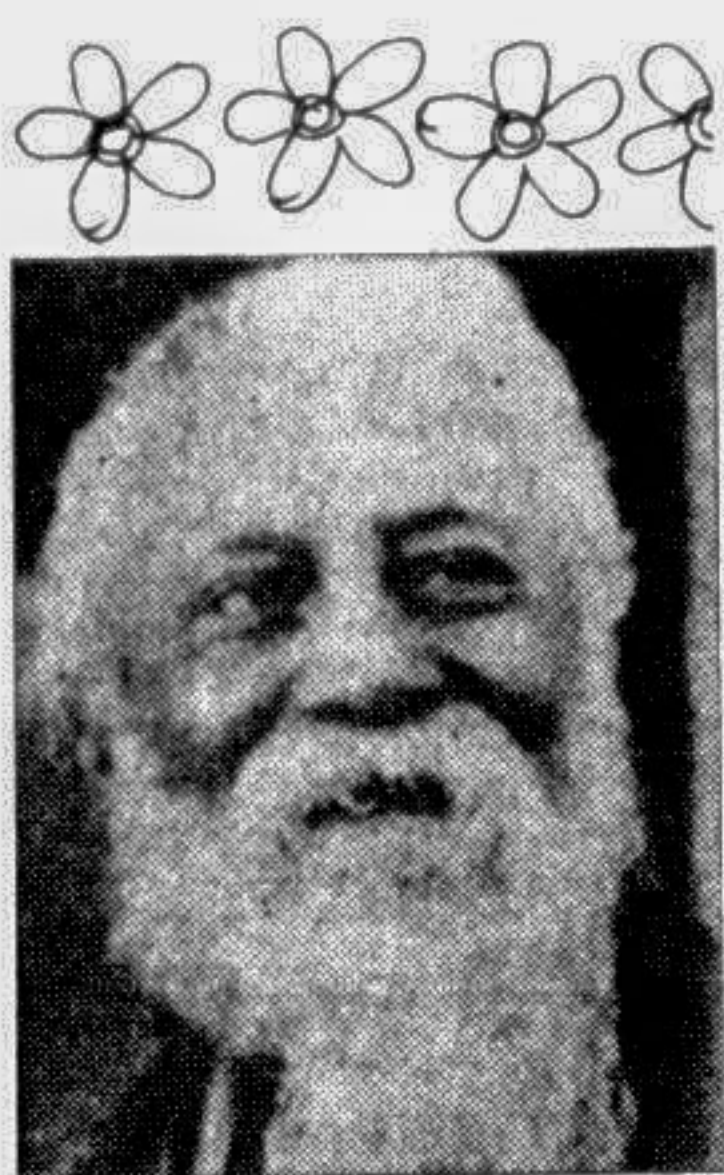


Rabindra Jayanti Special



Santiniketan as I Remember it

by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

I spent the winter of 1984-85 at Santiniketan as a visiting professor. It was not my first visit, as I and my wife had been there on a days visit — half day and a night, to be precise — a few years before. On that occasion, Professor Amlan Datta, the Vice-Chancellor, had left instruction to the effect that an informal meeting with some senior faculty members should be arranged. This took place in the lounge of the Guest House and Professor Srinarayan Ray, who was the Director of Rabindra Bhawan at that time, played the host on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor who had been away.

That was my first taste of Santiniketan hospitality. I could perceive, even during that short visit, that the kind of hospitality which was extended to me, a restrained and refined thing, had a long history behind it. Tagore himself had set the example of academic and artistic hospitality during his forty years of stewardship of Santiniketan.

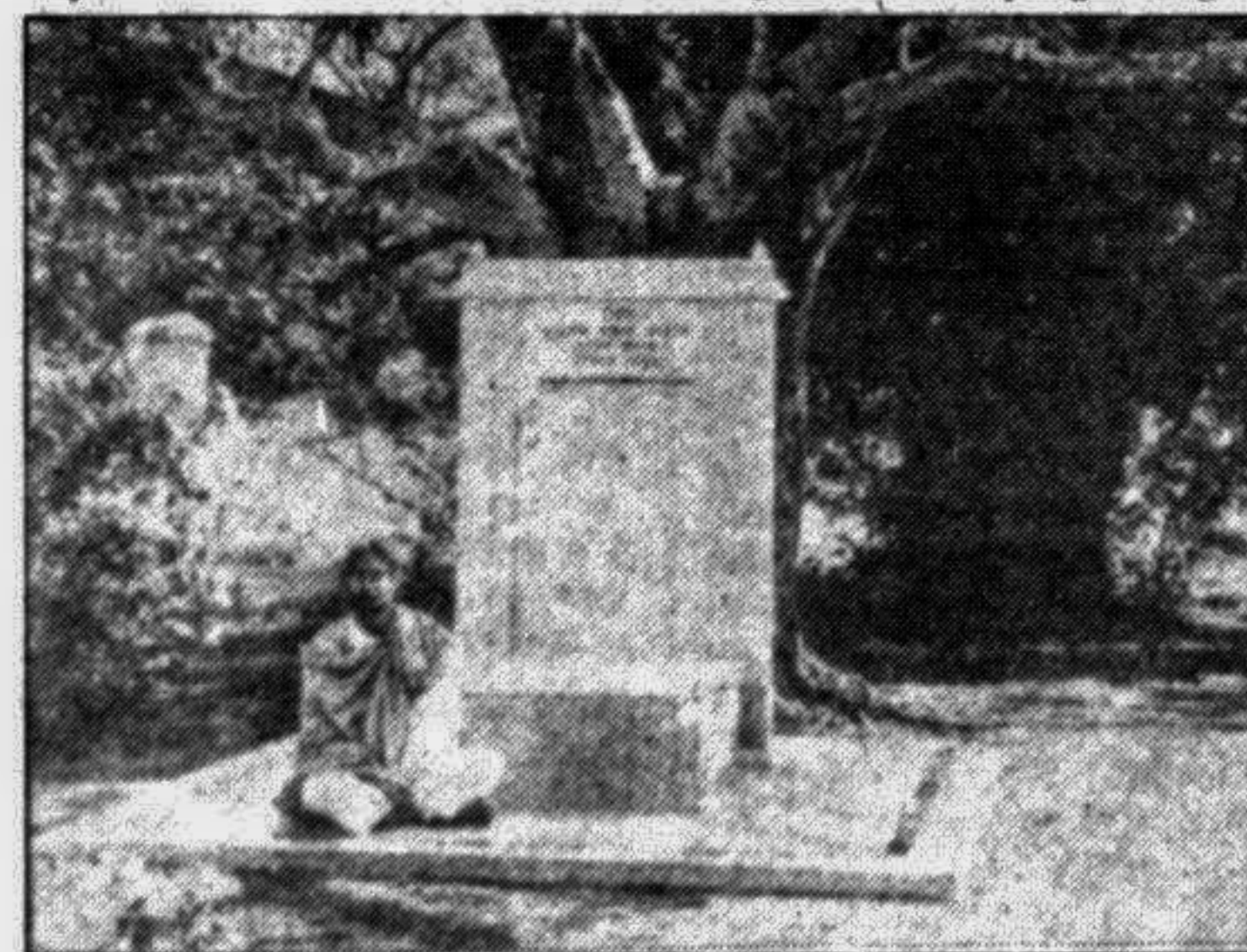
The Santiniketan that I found in that memorable winter was still a place where one could feel the spiritual presence of the poet. I was attached — visiting professors were expected to be attached to one or other of the Bhavans — to Rabindra Bhawan. Professor Srinarayan Ray had left after serving his term as Director, and Professor Naresh Guha had succeeded him. We had known each other for many years. This time, when I landed in Santiniketan, the whole place was under a sense of stupor. Prime Minister Srimati Indira Gandhi had been assassinated only three — was it four? — days ago. I was in Calcutta, on that fateful day, and I was at Annada Sankar Roy's place when she was felled in her own official residence by gunshots fired by her own guards. The taxi had just dropped me close to Bangladesh High Commission, when I first heard some hushed voice talking about it. Though she had died almost immediately, the news was held back for some hours. There was sporadic rioting in Calcutta, and in New Delhi, it had taken a vicious turn. Throughout India, all traffic came to a halt, and I had to wait for a couple of days for my onward journey to Santiniketan.

Santiniketan held Indira Gandhi in special affection and esteem as she had been a student here while Rabindranath was still alive. She too, in her turn, reciprocated this feeling. A moving memorial service was held in the mango groves, a brief and neat affair, devoid of excess.

It took a few days for me to settle down to my work. After a week's stay at the Ratanpalli Guest House, I moved into my quarters at Panchabati, a complex of five small houses. I had a Russian and an Italian neighbour, and neither had a family. When I joined them, we were all of us men without women, and social contact did not thrive.

— the use of a room of Uttaran. I had thanked him and declined the offer. I should be too much cut off from the Library. The place had a sharp smell of chemicals for the preservation of books, but was otherwise perfectly to my taste. I could browse among the books to my heart's content and whenever I wanted a change from reading, I could just walk downstairs, peep into the room of Naresh and I was sure of a ready smile of welcome.

I have never met a man more relaxed than Dr. Naresh Guha. I always wondered when he did his office work. There were always a few people in his room and he was never in a hurry to dismiss them. It looked as if a business was meant to be non-ending. Naresh, many years ago, had announced his entry as a poet with a volume of verses entitled *Duranta Dupur*, and had produced very little poetry since then. He was a close friend of Buddhadeb Basu and had helped him steadily for many years in bringing out Basu's *Kavita*, a journal devoted to poetry. Fitting his own poetry was smothered under the



Tagore at Chhatimata of Shantiniketan.
All pictures used in this page— Courtesy: DESH

weight of scholarship and academic responsibilities. After Buddhadeb, he took over the headship of the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University and had edited a scholarly journal with great credit.

We met every day and sometimes took our morning walks together. Naresh's house, in Purva Palli, close to Panchabati where I lived, stood on extensive grounds, and, in order to keep fit, he had taken to gardening with an exemplary doggedness. Naresh initiated me into going to the Mandir, where a weekly prayer meeting was held each Wednesday morning. The congregation consisted mostly of school children and women, with a few adult males whose piety, I suspect, centred on the devotional songs of Tagore sung by someone chosen for a particular Wednesday. Santiniketan had no dearth of musical talents.

Incidentally, Wednesday is the Sabbath day at Santiniketan, and has been so since the founding of the Ashram by the poet's father, the saintly Debendranath. That takes us back to the early sixties of the nineteenth century.

The English Department had, in the early weeks of my stay, invited me and had induced me to teach Chaucer for the M A class. I had accepted the invitation, and this meant I was with the teachers of that Department twice every week. It took some of my time but I valued the companionship of some very friendly people who had treated me as one of them.

Curiously enough, so did the teachers of the Bengali Department. They arranged a special session of lecture and responded warmly to my talk on Shakespeare's Sonnets. Special occasions were cre-

ated for me by others outside these two Departments to talk or to read a paper. Srinarayan Ray, who occasionally descended upon Santiniketan from Calcutta, had a special talent in organising informal meetings. In his eagerness to see that I meet his Calcutta friends, he invited me to Calcutta, and I had some formal lecturing to do. One was in the Jigyasa office, and one at *Bangiya Sahitya Parisat*. The most satisfying of these special occasions was the one sponsored by Vice-Chancellor Mimi Sadhan Bose. A one-hour session of poetry-reading from my own meagre crop of poetry was perhaps the highest tribute I have ever received as a poet. I forgot to mention that Dr. Bose had succeeded Prof Amlan Datta as Vice-Chancellor.

Bangladeshi girls studying at Sangeet Bhawan would sometimes visit me with their Indian friends. They would enliven an evening with their chatter and with their songs, and enjoying whatever snacks I could get for them. A particular girl from West Bengal, in love with a boy from Bangladesh, hoping to get

married some day, took me as a friend and when ultimately their courtship came to nothing, the girl wrote me a letter, confiding in me her pain and sorrow. But the boy who was a frequent visitor at my place, maintained a studied silence over the matter. I still remember the girl, for she made me share her pain.

Santiniketan hospitality reaches a climax with the famed Paush Mela. The whole place, it seemed to me, woke up from a slumber. There were visitors and guests in every house. Bauls appeared with their Ekara, stalls were set up over a vast area. There were fireworks, *jatras* were staged, and mairas were doing their business of a life time with Bengali Babus consuming hot jilpils with so much excitement that was to be seen to be believed. I still remember a limping Pratiba Basu, alighting from a ricksha, and joining the company of jilpi eaters in their idle talks, otherwise known as *adda*, my plans for an early return to my work was totally set at naught. Pratiba Bose is a great conversationalist, and this I would not have known but for the good offices of Naresh. I have seen a speechless Srinarayan Ray in her company, as she went of weaving her tales. Pratiba Basu's reminiscence of Dhaka of the twenties and of Nazrul Islam the enchanter of youth I still remember with gratitude, so liberal she was with her time as we visited her in her Santiniketan house, *Swagata Bidya*.

With my wife's arrival during the Paush Mela, my life-style changed considerably. Some of the neighbouring families came still closer to us, and she could see for herself that I was not doing too badly without her at Santiniketan where all the doors I had knocked had opened for me and where I had spent a season rich with the meeting of minds. Amlan had said that was exactly the idea behind the invitation.

Paying a Debt of Gratitude in Massive Celebrations

by Waheedul Haque

THE celebrations of the Bengali New Year's Day this year far outshone all such celebrations held before. Even after the misconstrued enthusiasm about the dawning of a new century that morning had been cut sizeably, that memorable turn out gave a full day of forgetting all worries and enjoying life positively if only for one day. All intelligent Bengalees knew the one and only reason behind the unprecedented festival. Tagore, way back in 1302 of the Bengali era, wrote a poem titled 1400 Sal or The Year 1400. As that year approached, the awareness of the poem grew and somehow the idea took over that in that poem perhaps the poet was musing over the fate of his works in the new century. The unforgettable celebration on the last Pahela Baishakh and in the week following were thus an indirect but very forceful compliment to the memories of the poet and his works.

It was a kind of paying a debt of gratitude — in a very grand and all-involving way. And how this nation and this state — and more so the society of world Bengalees — is indebted to Tagore! It will be very difficult to catalogue the numerous items of that debt and impossible to gauge the depth of all of those. But for Tagore it would have been impossible for the Bengali Muslims to engage the fascist-fundamentalist ideas directly spawning rabid communalism that intoxicated in sadistic perversions a whole community of people for more than half a century's time — and come out rallying round their true identity as Bengalees. The anti-Bengalee and as such anti-culture persuasions still remain very strong in the social sinews of this community proving the monumentality of Tagore's achievement against

an almost impossible adversary. The adversary is strong because in its demonic power there is all that illiteracy and backwardness, greed and a total incomprehension of consequences to one's own self and to others, social and moral, can produce over centuries. Tagore standing for light and understanding, tolerance and accommodation, compassion and an abidance by the social weal as well as the cause of the individual's liberty of life and thought, has seen us through the half century of

cataclysmic happenings starting with the '43 Bengal famine and ending in the subcontinental wave of inhuman communal carnages of the current year. The fascist phalanxes overtake the forces represented by Tagore but for spells — and the time of culture and of mending the damages and constructing the future comes back.

Tagore's bequests come down to us in three main streams: art, wisdom and life. He is incomparable in his artistic, painterly and musical — and, we must not forget,

little too unthinking. One who has even a general grasp of all his works, would find it hard to believe that any one man, even if he happens to be Tagore himself, can surpass that body in any way. Well, as a matter of plain prosaic fact, he did. His life was one gigantic canvas of art, a magnificent physical continuum studded through with deep drilling inquiry resulting in the most rewarding integration and synthesis of ideas. And yet there was much more to it. It is a story of a self realising itself through gritty honesty and unsparring application and true genius. His had been a hard life — contrary to popular notion. A full-time writer and yet not quite wholly professional, a successful benevolent zamindar who would hardly get his minimal expenses of sheer existence paid out from the paternal treasury — for the simple reason that there was none, and a long-living one who continued to lose to death nearly all his loved close ones — he took every suffering in his stride to keep himself at the ready for the service of his people and to keep his creative life ever out of the bog. He is one great teacher of man who lived all his teachings and did far more. He never outgrew the shy boy bullied by the servants and looking out to the old banyan tree, drowned in a strange loneliness that he so loved. Life, how well to bear it and how to make the best of it — that's one teaching that is in his life and not in his books. Perhaps one can find very touching references to this in his songs. His politics and his lifelong organisational exertions addressed to liberating the broad masses from the consequences of a colonial society rotting in its roots — demanded of him a lot more than there are in his books. And he was never found wanting or unresponsive. This is equally true for Tagore as a man — a friend and a father, a son and as a husband.

To paraphrase a celebrated utterance, we can say Tagore was enough reason why the Bengalee people should be free and have a state of their own. We vindicated that and carved out our own state. We have been waging our own war to keep our true identity to eliminate injustice and any cultural straitjacket and Bangladesh came as a product of that. That struggle appears to be far from a conclusive success which could allow us to engage other pressing challenges. It goes on and, as of always, we fight with the name Rabindranath writ large on our standards.

Isn't it time that we started reading him more and getting truly into his art and philosophy and life? We have only so far used him without knowing him much. He is a beacon light to us but we must have the right eyes to take direction. Except for his music, he is increasingly being pushed into becoming the academic's griot — devoid of life and society. We must embark on work that would make Tagore a living force in our social and economic endeavours and, more importantly, in our education. Why should a nation having Rabindranath as a son continue to waste into a stinking extinction?

Tagore at the break of the 14th Century of the Bengali era was a little unsure about his standing amongst us at the dawn of the next century. We have in the mean time earned much using his name. And we can assure him we are now conscious more than ever of the unaddressed task of having him as a living presence in all the aspects of our collective and individual being.

Tagore Lived a Full Life

by Parveen Anam

ON the 7th of May, 1861, on the 25th day of the month of Baishakh, which remained one of his favourite months ever afterwards, Rabindranath Tagore was born. To the fourteenth child, the event seemed to be of little importance. But for the Bengalee nation it was a momentous occasion. As was evident years later.

The Bengalee loves his poetry and his music. And Tagore fulfilled this thirst adequately. Brought up in an austere household, Tagore lived a full life. His mother died when he was but eight years old and he was more or less under the care of his elder sister. The stringent lifestyle was no surprise to the children in the rambling Jorashanko household: they were happy and content complaining only when the tailor Nyamat forgot to put a pocket into their tunic, for no boy has yet been born so poor as not to have the wherewithal to stuff his pockets in the words of the poet.

However, his yearning for 'the great beyond' which for him was actually symbolic of a child's curiosity, helped him in moulding the ideals of his education for children in later years. He wrote his first verse at the age of eight and the elders smiled indulgently and said 'The boy has no doubt a gift for writing.' It was this 'boy-with-the-gift-for-writing' who in later years was to bring the greatest laurel for the Bengalee nation in the form of the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was at his beloved

Shantiniketan, when word came on 13th Nov. 1913, of the award of the Nobel Prize for his *Gitanjali*, published the year before. And yet writing to his niece Indira from London, Tagore, who was awarded the Prize for his English rendering of the *Gitanjali*, had said, 'I cannot imagine to this day how people came to like it so

much. That I cannot write in English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it. If anybody wrote an English note asking me to tea, I did not feel equal to answering it. That I have written in English, seems to be a delusion.'

Yet it was his own people, his own nation, their sorrows

and their joys, which moved the great poet, to achieve what he did. It was his own land he loved most. He went abroad frequently, more so after the award both for sojourns and lecture tours. But somehow, he could never write when he was away from his beloved Bengal. His muse 'dried up or flowed only in dribbles'. His best works were all produced in his own land amongst his own people. His fountain of poems and songs overflowed in his native Bengal. His love of life was strong. His success as a short story writer helped him to arrive at a sound diagnosis of the social evils that plagued his beloved land. He spent much of his time in the countryside, which brought him in direct contact with the soil of the land. He grew to love his people who he had a chance to see first-hand and his love was at times possessive. He did everything within his means to help his peasants. From 1890 to the year of his death in 1941, one of his principal interests was the peasant. He helped and made it possible for them to build their own schools and hospitals, roads and water tanks. The handsome amount of money from the Nobel Prize was donated to the school at Santiniketan and invested in an agricultural co-operative bank. Now his peasants could get their loans at cheap interest rates.

Yet, the artist in him was restless. His poems and songs, loved by his people are immortal. He took part in the independence movement, in his



"When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable."

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