

exhibition

Tagore and the British Press

by Prof Abul Kalam Elias

An exhibition of news reports published in British Press from 1912-1941, presented by Bangladesh National Museum, Bangla Academy and the Tagore Centre UK, from 19th December, 1998 to 6th January, 1999 left an indelible impression upon my mind.

This splendid exhibition at the Exhibition Hall of the National Museum, produced a stir among the readers and researchers throughout the length and breadth of Bangladesh. I, for myself, as a researcher was all the more benefited by this wonderful exhibition.

This exhibition speaks volumes for the fact that multifarious aspects of Tagore's life and work elicited wide appreciation and applause from the West and England of his time.

The researchers (Kalyan Kundu, S Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sircar) who compiled the materials gave out their objectives in clear-cut terms.

"The purpose of this exhibition is to focus the attention of the specific dimension of Tagore's relationship with the world."

Tagore's great literary works were unknown to the world outside Bengal until 1912 when Tagore was 51. The poet's acquaintance with the West at that time was limited to two visits to London related to his academic career. His third visit to England in 1912, however, turned out to be a major turning point in his life. The manuscript of his own English translation of his poems Tagore had carried to England during his visit was read and admired by W B Yeats, the great Irish poet, who found these free verse compositions as exquisite in style as in thought.

The publication of his work, *Gitanjali* was immediately noticed by the Western literary world and on the merit of this single work Tagore was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1913. His name as a Seer from the East took no time to reach Europe and America. Other works followed and were received with equal enthusiasm by the British public sphere. England kept up this interest in Tagore's life and work until the poet's death in 1941, though the response varied from elated adulation to evident disenchantment.

This exhibition is a faithful reflection of these changing moods of the British public as captured by the British print media of Tagore's time. The six hundred news items from the British dailies and the weeklies from the Tagore Centre, UK, from which the present selection has been made are sure to

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interest every lover of letters. Arranged in chronological order with useful background materials, these rare exhibits recreate the image of Tagore as felt and known by the West of his time. They say as much about the poet as about the contemporary West: retrospective articulation of two cultures meeting and assessing each other.

Exhibit-1

Of 97 exhibits, in all, here is a quotation from the first of Tagore's poems published in the British Press, "The Country of Found Everything" that appeared in *The Nation*, June 15, 1912:

A hut with a hedge round it,
There creepers twine and coil,
And all day long the bees
In flowers buzz and toil.

In the morning, the passersby
Go to their work and sing,
In evening they come unpaid,
In the land of Found Everything.

Exhibit-2

Rabindranath Tagore was introduced to British poets and men of letters at a reception given to his honour at a restaurant in London on July 10, 1912. The reception was arranged by the India Society with W B Yeats presiding. The report of this reception was published in *The Times*, July 13, 1912. This was the first report on Tagore which appeared in a British newspaper.

Many adaptations and translations of Tagore's famous short stories, dramas and plays were made in the British Press of repute at various times.

Exhibit-6

"Few words of poetry published in English during recent years have made so deep an impression on the minds of thoughtful readers as this collection of translation from the Bengali made by the author." (*Hibbert Journal*). *Gitanjali* was accepted for its literary excellence by British readers. Reviews of *Gitanjali* were published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, (Nov 7, 1912), *The Daily News and Leader* (January 1, 1913) and the *New Statesman* (April 19, 1913).

Tagore has translated some of his verse and lyrics into English and two volumes have appeared — "The Gitanjali" of "offerings of song."

According to a commentator, "The *Gitanjali* shows the 'mind of a self-conscious poet artist; it is full of pictures of Bengal; it is probably the most intimate and faithful revelation of his own thoughts which is native of the Far-East has ever afforded to natives of the West.'"

The poet writes —
"Let the stains of joy mingle in my last song.....the joy that sets the twin brother — life and death, dancing over the wide world.....the joy that sits still with its tears on the open red lotus of pain."

"When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable....In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play; and here I caught sight of Him that is formless."

This is flat pantheism — no doubt. Tagore, however, is as much one as he is the other.

"This little flute of a reed," he says speaking of himself, "Thou hast carried over hills and dales, and hast breathed through it melodies eternally new."

Thus a reviewer puts it: "No envy or hatred has a place in his poetry of philosophy but beauty and love and patriotism and the honour bestowed upon him should have the effect of introducing his work to the wider public it deserves."

Exhibit-10

Between 19 May and 25 June, 1913 Tagore delivered six lectures (one in each week) under the auspices of the Quest Society (a society devoted to the study of religion and philosophy) at Caxton Hall, London. Report was published in *Westminster Gazette* (3 & 18 June, 1913) and in the *Inquirer* (14 June, 1913).

Title of each lecture in the series —
The Search for God. Realisation of Individual and the Universe (19 May), *Soul Consciousness* (26 May), *Problem of Evil* (2 June), *Problem of Self* (9 June), *Realisation of Love* (16 June) and *Realisation of Brahma* (25 June).

Let us cite a quotable piece from the *Realisation of Love*: (Truth and Paradox) :-

"We feed and we clothe ourselves from its stores (Mother Earth). We scramble for its riches and it becomes for us a field of fierce competition.....In the lands where cannibalism is prevalent, man looks upon man as his food. In such a country, civilization can never thrive, for there man loses his higher values and is made utterly cheap. Thus our lust, our greed, our love of comfort result in cheapening man to its lowest wave."

It is self-deception on a large scale. Our desires blind us to the truth that there is in man and they deaden our consciousness and are a gradual method of spiritual suicide.

It produces ugly sores in the body of civilization, gives rise to its hovels and brothels, its vindictive penal codes, its cruel prison system, its organized methods of exploiting foreign races."

Exhibition-16

On November 14, 1913 the news of award of Nobel prize for literature to Rabindranath Tagore appeared in almost all British dailies. The present reports are taken from *The Daily Chronicle*, *The Daily Express* and *The Globe*.

Here is a report from *The Daily Chronicle* — 14 November, 1913.

Stockholm Nov 13.

The Nobel prize for Literature for 1913 has been awarded to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore — Reuter.

The award of Nobel prize to Mr Rabindranath Tagore, the famous poet, writer and teacher, is a remarkable event in the history of the World's Literature. He has brought great literatures the mind of the East to us in our own tongue.

The poet was born about 52 years ago. As a boy he did not like school and early felt into the habit of educating himself. He did not go to college and while very young he wrote his first poem. In his early manhood he came to England to study Law, but finding that took him out of his elements he returned to India to

write those lyrics and verses which have made his name known and loved throughout the length and breadth of his native land.

A Bengali Renaissance. The poet has not only done splendid work in revealing the mind of the East to the West but his work may truly be said to have brought about a renaissance in Bengali literature.

Here is an extract from *The Daily Chronicle*, *The Light of India*, 19 May, 1915

By C E Lawrence

The Time Ripe:

It was indeed high time for such a seer and healer as Rabindranath Tagore to minister, into us. The European world was growing sick with insincerity. Then the war came. While in slums and other forgotten places, there was an ugly and devastating poverty that rebuked the empire. In our vulgar satisfaction we had faggotten and rot had set in. It was, then, in the midst of the glistening and vulgar rot that a gentle voice came from the East and it is a hopeful fact that the poems and personality of Rabindranath Tagore claimed our attention.

Exhibit-37

Let us have a nice quotation from a poem on Tagore in the *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury* (May 15, 1915), composed by unknown Englishman:

Rabindranath Tagore
Midst the woes of woman suffrage
In the shores of wanton war
There's a certain soothing something
In Rabindranath Tagore.

A plain cow, a pig, a glow-worm
And some humdrum daily chore
Then uphold a thrilling prose-let
By Rabindranath Tagore
When snow-capped Himalayas
Through the sun baked valleys pour
The wide waters of the Ganges
Dwells Rabindranath Tagore.

Apart from many reports, news views and printing of articles, poems

and paintings, the exhibition displayed representative samples, photographs of Tagore with family members and outstanding personalities, statesmen and scientists, at various times and places and on different occasions.

We find in this exhibition Tagore's last message to the West — *The Manchester Guardian* (April-1, 1941)

At long last — Exhibit-97. An obituary by E J Thomson published in the *Listener* (August 14, 1941)

After having a cursory glance at the Exhibition I have come to realise the veracity of the statement — "There is no history, but only biography."

To the best of our knowledge and information a western poet, dwelling upon the difference between East and West once said: The East is East, the West is West, the twain shall never meet. According to Rabindranath Tagore are not yet showing any real sign of meeting. But the reason is, because the West has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East, but only its machine. This is why our Nobel Laureate Tagore said:

"Man is man, machine is machine.
And never the twain shall wed."

Who does know that —
"King's are honoured only in their own land."

The learned receive homage wherever they go."

In a nutshell, it was clear from this Exhibition that in his life not a moment was spent by Rabindranath Tagore when he was not united with the Supreme. His first sentence was that the greatest news of this century was the meeting of the East and West. Rabindranath did not deny that Asia had many truths to learn from Europe. His idea is that there are more things that Europe can learn from Asia. Only he who brings fame to his country is really famous.

The hunger of the European intelligentsia for the nectarine spiritual knowledge of Far East made them receive Rabindranath with open arms. In their own words, "Though we suffer hell-fires, we have not given up the hope of life divine on this earth. At this juncture, Tagore came like a man of God from another planet." This is made clear by the grand homage paid to him that Rabindranath was able to point out India as the world's spiritual teacher.

The writer is Principal, South Sanduip College.

book

Need to Evolve Constitutional Conventions

by Rohit Nair

FED up with the politics being practised in the country, the founding fathers of the Indian republic feel the fault lies not with the constitution but the lack of democratic conventions in India.

Political, social, economic and cultural reform do not always require constitutional amendment, but creation of appropriate conditions in order to facilitate the translation of the intent of the constitution.

And practising and upholding the conventions of constitutional democracy is the most effective "mid-course correction" in a parliamentary democracy, say the surviving members of the constituent assembly in G R S Rao's new book 'Constitution of India — Vision, Reality and Reform'.

But this does not mean that the constitution should be replaced or drastically amended, say Rao and his respondents, suggesting a host of specific

remedies for the ills of the country.

These include a constitution review commission to periodically review the statute book in the light of the prevailing situation in the country, decentralisation of fiscal powers, giving citizens the right to recall elected representatives and making the judiciary accountable as well as independent.

As the Indian republic approaches its 50th anniversary, its founding fathers find little to cheer about on looking back at the past decades, with the spirit of the constitution they framed flouted by politicians and its provisions manipulated for narrow interests.

"When we framed the constitution of India, we made a sad mistake...We had not bargained for the kind of politicians India has been suffering from for the last 40 years. The constitution is good but we Indians have let it down."

This quote from M R Masani sums up the feelings of the surviving members of

the constituent assembly.

The fear voiced by former president Dr S Radhakrishnan, when he said at the first session of the Constituent Assembly that "when power outstrips ability, we will fall on evil days", has come true, as Rao discovers in his interviews with 41 members of the Constituent Assembly, carried out between 1993 and 1996.

Misuse and abuse of constitutional provisions for narrow political ends, disregard for the directive principles in policy-making, dilution of judicial independence and frequent amendments are some of the "distortions" in the working of the constitution pointed out by these founding fathers.

Beginning with an overview of the freedom movement, with an emphasis on the constitutional means adopted by Mahatma Gandhi, the book covers the birth of the constitution before going on

to the views of the respondents on a host of issues facing the nation and the suggested remedies.

All of Rao's respondents feel that the democratic process has been corrupted in India due to the lack of maturity and certain conventions which the framers of the constitution had hoped would develop as the country tread the path of democracy.

They are consistently critical of the manner of functioning of the political parties.

"Politically, we have failed to produce leadership with a nationalist vision and a spirit of service...we had expected political awakening in the shape of fewer political parties, with respect for each other, and a minimum national programme to which every party is wedded," the late Kamalapati Tripathy says in the book.

Service of the people has ceased to be the main objective of political parties,

which seem to exist only to come to power, they feel, and suggest comprehensive electoral reform to check the fall in the standards of political institutions and processes as exemplified by the entry of criminals into legislatures.

And the subversion of democratic institutions and processes has affected all aspects of national life, retarding the pace of social and economic development.

India has failed to meet the desired goals of social transformation, which, Rao says, was the most important of the goals of constitution, as the founding fathers saw it as the only means of fulfilling the basic needs of the common man and translating the vision of free India into a reality.

As an example, Rao's respondents cite the working of Panchayati Raj institutions, which were meant to usher in local self-government and foster decentralised development.

Summing up their views, Rao says: "While the states would like to have more autonomy from the centre, they on their part do not like to extend that autonomy to the Panchayati Raj institutions", adding that politicians had manipulated these bodies for electoral and other gains.

The policy of reservation for the backward classes has been similarly subverted, with its benefits having been cornered by a few in the targeted sections.

Giving reservations is only a matter of psychological satisfaction. "It really has not mattered with regard to the masses," says C Subramaniam.

(About the book: 'Constitution of India — Vision, Reality and Reform' by G S Rao, Centre for Public Policy and Social Development. Pages 172. Price Rs 180)

— PTI/APB

award

Rushdie and Vikram Seth Likely Rivals for Booker

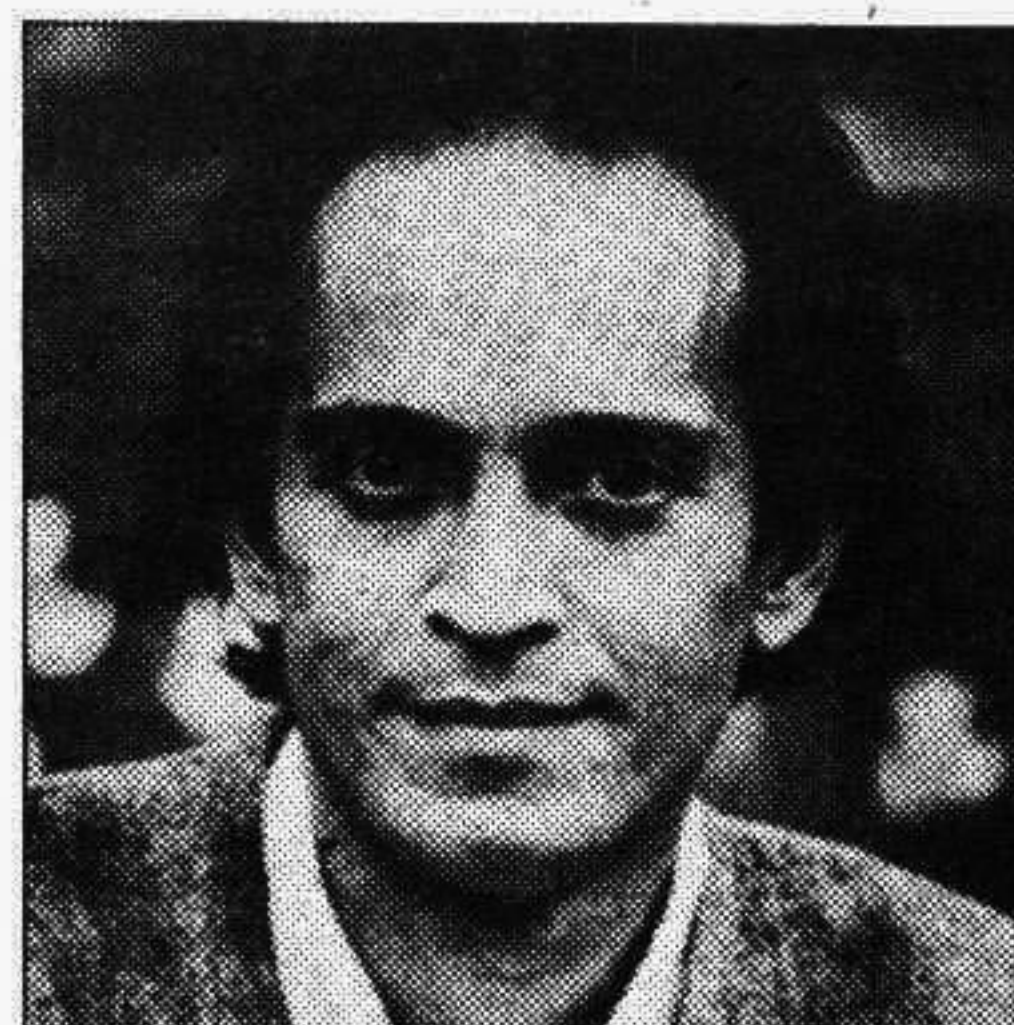
by Vijay Dutt

SALMAN Rushdie and Vikram Seth are likely to be rivals for the next Booker Prize, the most prestigious British award for a literary work. The West is very interested in Anglo-Indian novels and books of both the writers, which will hit bookstands next month, have the theme which could attract the literary world here.

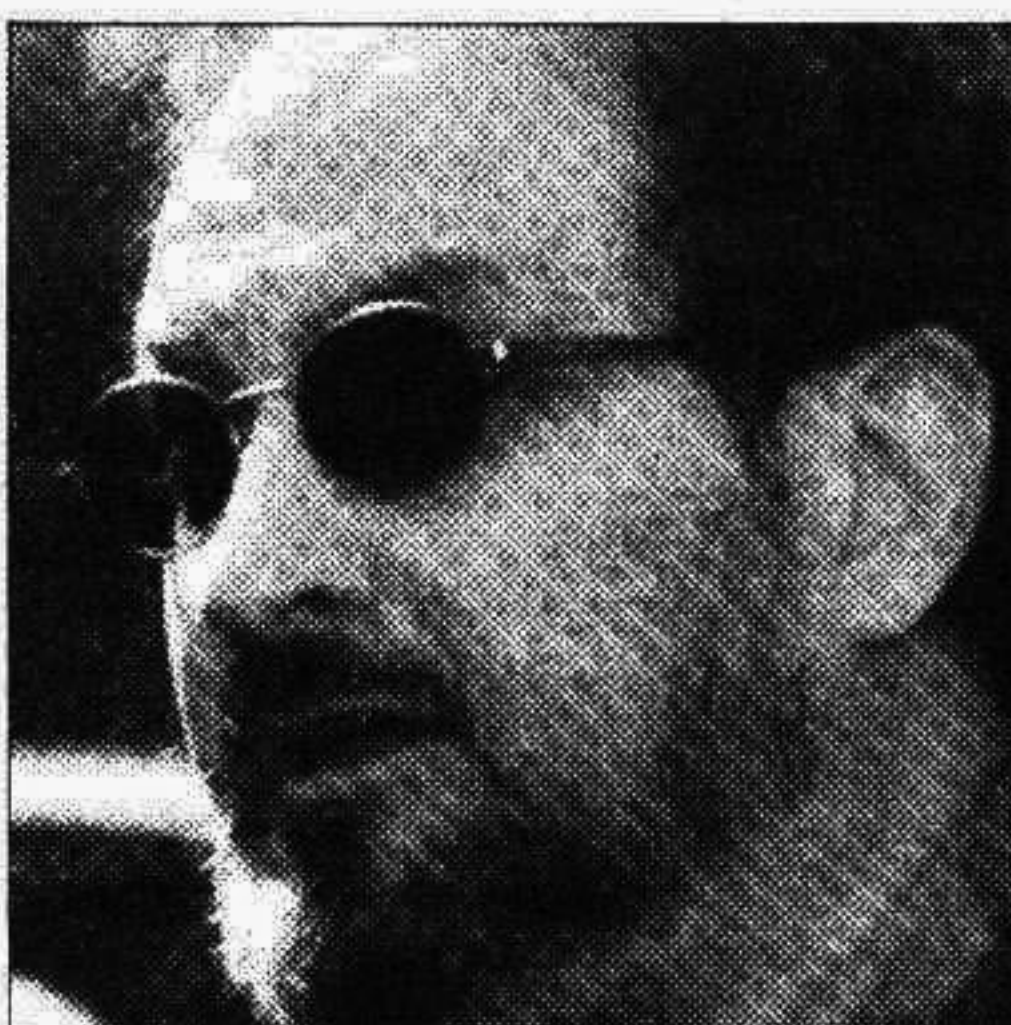
Both works, surprisingly, have stories which are similar in themes. Rushdie's book, 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet' is expected to sell at least 50,000 in the hardback edition and so is Seth's 'An Equal Music'. Thereport is that both have received pound 5,00,000 advance for their books. Seth had been busy giving final touches to his novel and had reportedly been in India re-

cently. Rushdie is likely to go to India shortly. Sources say that he will travel to India soon after the release of his book. The publishers of Seth and Rushdie, Phoenix House and Jonathan Cape, respectively, have planned an expensive and extensive international marketing strategy.

An executive of a bookshop chain said that all the stores are vying to get the two authors to make personal appearances and sign their books. Both Rushdie and Seth have received various awards and earned accolade for their earlier works. Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' was in 1993 declared the best novel to have won Booker Prize in the last 25 years. Seth's 'A Suitable Boy' kept receiving prizes and praise for a long time and is still a much-sought-after



Vikram Seth



Rushdie

because the judges felt that it was too weighty and long (80,00,000 words). But possibly the hype for it alienated them at that time. The present book will be of 320 pages and is priced at pound 16.99. The publishers say that it is an amazing book by a multi-talented writer. Rushdie's book is of 465 pages and is priced at pound 18. The publishers say that Rushdie has been at his best, "almost insolently global best". Rivalry is bound to build up between the publishers and the Seth and Rushdie supporters.

The general manager of Hatchards in Piccadilly has been quoted in the Independent as saying that he is so impressed by Seth's book that he will ensure that every customer will walk out of his store with it.

One day, he suddenly spots the lover on the top deck of a bus. Seth had failed to get the Booker Prize last time around