

essay

Tagore's Celebration of the Seasons

by Mohit Ul Alam

NATURE has been an enduring inspiration to man let alone the poets. In fact, Wordsworth has crystallised the feeling when he wrote, "My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky." Nature and man have ever lived in close diurnal relation with each other since the ancient time. The Greek drama originated from the seasonal rituals of burying the seeds in the winter and celebrating the spring with which the new crop shot up. Thus the social customs and manners have orbited around the cycles of seasons — celebratory during the harvesting time and muted at other times. When it comes to poetry nature seems to be the greatest moulding factor of the poetic imagination. Not only Wordsworth and his peers who are a recognised group of nature poets, but all major poets in every literature do evince a strong bond with nature in their work.

In Bengali literature too nature in all its variations and colours has been treated adorably whether it is in the ancient Padabali or the Mymensingh lyrical songs or in the nineteenth-century lyrics or in Tagore's poems and songs. It is a commonplace that nature both vitalises and fertilises Tagore's poems and songs, but it is interesting to note how hugely is Tagore taken up by the idea that nature can be looked up to as a force that energises, rejuvenates and refurbishes the human spirit, while he refuses to accord it any inimical attributes. Not that Tagore does not stop at nature's treachery, he does as in the poem "Prakritir Protishodh" (The Revenge of Nature) where during a storm on the sea a preacher in a boat asks a mother to sacrifice her daughter into the sea in order to pacify the angry gods. But here the thrust of the theme is more to reveal the religious bigotry of the priest than to show the cruelty of nature. In another poem, "Samanya Khati," (A small Loss) the queen of Kashi feeling cold on her way to the river for bathing orders the torching of a village so that she is warmed, and here again we notice that the winter season as such is not the premise for attack, but the insensitivity of the queen towards the plight of the common people. Many such examples can be given where Tagore seems to address the malign aspect of nature, but finally shies away from completely committing himself to it. In his poems, his attitude towards nature is informed with a complexity of vision, but in his songs what surfaces is a worshipping unconditionally recognising nature as a positive force that kindles a flame in the poet's heart, and he sings about it to generate the feeling amongst the listeners. The idea is worth probing.

In our climate we usually assign six seasons to indicate the changes in nature. Tagore, it may be seen, has written songs about all of these seasons, and in doing so he does not care about the characteristic differences between one season and another but rather consid-

ers each of them as capable of inspiring the human spirit the same way. He is different in this respect from the great English romantics, particularly Shelley. Shelley says that it winter comes then spring will surely follow, thus making a value-judgment between the two seasons — winter symbolising non-life and spring the coming of life. Shelley's idea has been shaped by both the vegetation myth of the western civilisation and the climate of England itself. The vegetation myth evolved around the rituals of the burying of the seeds during winter and the germinating of the same in spring. To celebrate the sprouting of the seeds and the harvesting of the crops all festivals were customarily held in spring. And, in the English climate winter is an inclement season covering nature under snow thus making spring take all the applauds for its capacity to reinvigorate. Tagore, as fitting with our own climate where summer, accompanied by the monsoon rains, dominates over most of the year followed by almost a fleeting winter and an all blooming spring, naturally writes more about summer, rains and spring than about winter. Tagore's seasonal songs, however, are characterised by the poet's optative faith in every season as being capable of offering hopes and courage.

Tagore's songbook *Gitanita* (published by Vishva Bharati in 1970 as a one-volume anthology) contains about 2500 songs of which 283 songs have been entered under the category called 'prakriti' (Nature), though in other categories too nature poems are not few in number. There are two other categories bigger than the 'Nature' category which are labelled as 'Puja' (Veneration), containing 617 songs, and 'Prem' (Love) with 395 songs, but the intrinsic value of these songs also derives from their through orientation by nature phenomena. In fact, it is difficult to give meaning to either Tagore's veneration songs or love songs without seeing nature in the background. Central to Tagore's songs on seasons is the feeling that nature should be welcomed as a regenerative force much in the same way as Shelley deemed it in "Ode to the West Wind" which anticipates Tagore's song, "Esho hey Baishakh" (Come you Baishakh), in spirit, both being great apostrophes to nature. In Tagore's case, however, a distinctive feature is that the month of Baishakh is also the first month of the Bengali year, and thus its arrival coincides with all our craving

for a new force to emerge, new things to start, and to have, in Auden's language, "a change of heart."

The Song, "Esho hey Baishakh" (number 14 in 'Nature' group), asks the hot summer month to sweep away the sick with its hot breath, and to clear up the year-long waste. Old memories, old forgotten songs, and old tears are all urged to be vanished by the forceful wind of the season. Humiliation and laziness and other like vices which encumber human progress have been wished to be driven away from the earth by the purifying fiery flames of baishakh. Even the poet asks the season to dry up the juicy flow of emotion that seems not in order with the demand for a wholesale change. All false illusions have been asked to be cast away again by the cyclonic herald of the season.

The poet's attitude to summer is that despite its scorching heat it contains the power of fire which is desirable to burn down the old habits. In another song of similar nature, Song II: "Daruna Agnibanerey," (Piercing fiery arrows), he reassures us that though the cauldron of summer makes us tired, takes away our sleep, and the thirsty birds chirp dolefully, but at the same time summer will bring up the storm (and rains) to soothe down everything. There are many similar songs where the poet expresses his fascination for the terrifying image of the nor'wester storm that occurs with the onset of the monsoon. It is like Blake's discovering the fearful symmetry in the ferocious tiger.

Tagore's adoration for summer extends naturally to the main thing, the source of all heat, the sun. A surprising number of songs addresses the sun in complete veneration for both its sheer appearance and light. It may be noted that the songs made in eulogy of the sun are most buoyant and uplifting in nature.

The morning sun is welcomed in Song 373 in the "Puja" group: Vengecha Duar Eshecho Jyotirmoy" (You've come and broken the door, O you bright angel), in the same spirit as employed in the poem called, "Suprabhat," that starts with "Bhairav tumi kil beshe eshecho, lalate frushiche naginee" (In what guise have you come? o morning goddess, a snake is hissing from your forehead). Both the song and the poem can be read as complementary to each other. From this rather fearful aspect of the morning sun he turns to a more soothing image in yet another more

popular song (Song 310, "Puja"): "Edin ajee kone ghrego khule dila ddar" (Which house has opened its door today? The sunrise this morning has been successful for whom?) The song is excellent in carrying the message that the night has passed and the morning has broken out to drive away darkness from everybody's life. The homage to the morning sun as symbol of both new life and new aspirations reverberate in many a song, thus establishing Tagore as a poet of the light ('Rabi' in bengali, also the first word of his name). Song number 339, "Amar mukti aloi aloi," in 'Veneration', is an open invitation to glory in nature when it is washed with sunshine that liberates our soul too: "My liberty is in the sky throbbing in sunlight, my liberty is in the dust, in every blade of grass." The sunlight is celebrated in another song, "Alo amar alo ogo alo bhuvan bhara" (serial 46 in 'Varieties' group), more emphatically than ever, the theme being that the light, filling up the world of the poet of has not only occupied his heart but also splashed his eyes. Then the image shifts, the light being considered as an element that dances that drums that flies and that smiles. Then two more images clusure: thousands of butterflies have flung sails in the current of light, and flowers like 'Mallika' and 'Malati' dance up in the waves of light. The song ends with the affirmation of the light being the source of all music. Tremendous exuberance.

Tagore is a master watcher of the beauty of nature. Having celebrated summer in absolute terms, he turns to the rainy season and it seems that in his adulation of this season his response is imaginatively more intense and richer than his treatment of summer. His summer songs strike as powerful and assertive but his rain songs have an unmistakable moaning tenor that lingers and clings in our hearts long after the songs have been rendered. The summer songs arrest our attention at once for their refugeance, but the rain songs pervade our consciousness and are retained in our memory.

In fact, the songs on the rains can be separated into two groups, those celebrating the rains as do the songs on summer, and those which try to manifest the spongy nostalgic strain that relates to a quality of feeling, heavy sighs maybe, but unnameable. In this essay, however, we are concerned with songs that celebrate the seasons, and see

that about a dozen songs are there which usher the rains to come and reinvigorate our hopes and desires, much in the same way as he expects of the sunlight in summer. In 'Nature' section, Songs 56, 58, 65, 71, 73, 79, 113, 122, 126, 131 and many more fancy the rains as a harbinger. Song 58 addresses 'Asharh', the first month of the rainy season, on its capacity for releasing lightning and thunder, and the image that Tagore invokes is that of a series of golden thunders that weaves the garland of the rain: "Bajramanik diey gantha Asharh tomar mala." Song 73 says that a deep message has come in the guise of a rain-soaked cloud, and by the touch of that message new life has started all around: "Eki gabhir bani elo ghana meghe arhal dharey." Similarly in Song 126, "Badala dinera prathama kadama ful," we hear about nature's first offer in the form of a flower, kadam, which is said to come out blooming on the first day of Asharh.

Songs 113 and 122 are splendid inasmuch as they reproduce the dancing rhythm of the rain-clouds floating by. The first one, "Hriday amar nachere ajike moyurer moto nachere" (My heart dances today like a peacock), expresses the tremendous pleasure coursing through the poet's heart as he sees the black clouds crowding over the horizon and the wind rising. What is interesting in this song is that the rain-clouds are hardly mentioned, though their impact can be felt everywhere. In the second song, "Mano more meghero sangi" (My mind is a company of the clouds), a complete identification between the poet's self and the phenomena of nature has been effected through onomatopoeic expressions. The pattering sound of the rain is mentioned: "rimizhim, rimizhim, rimizhim." The song has assurance and alliteration in equal measure and when sung sounds as one of the most sprightly of numbers.

The rainy season officially comprises the months of Asharh and Sraban. Tagore has songs dedicated to both these months. As we hinted earlier, Tagore's rain songs are of two types, and it may be worth noting that while his more jubilant songs on the rains address Asharh, his more contemplative songs centre around Sraban. This may be because though the climate in this region begins to receive thick incessant downpour even with the starting of Asharh, but it is in Sraban that the land

gets saturated with rain — every possible water duct being filled to the brim, frogs croaking, and all that. Movement becoming difficult people choose to stay inside, thus growing reflective. Songs 95 and 106 are especially mentionable in this regard.

In the first song, "Aji jharer rate tomar abhisar paran sakha bandhu hey amar" (On this rainy night takes place your journey, my dearest friend), is punctuated by the poet's deep feelings to meet and merge with the friend (may be the creator) who has eluded him all the while. The song embraces a deep sense of loss, of having missed some vital connection, and as it is evoked through the atmosphere of the heavily rain-drenched night, the total effect is one of sombreness, an absolute immersion in the deeper reaches of life. The sky is crying in frustration, the poet is sleepless and looks out the door frequently, but sees nothing outside, and wonders whither might go the path of his friend! He speculates whether his friend is passing by a distant river or through a dense forest or through a deep darkness. Sung most notably by Pankaj Mullik, his nasal voice holds out the deepest philosophy of Tagore's which is that despite our efforts we may be left a forlorn creature — abandoned by our creator or by our dearest ones. And only the uninterrupted rains of Sraban can mature this realisation. The same pathos is held out in the second song, "Ami Srabana akashe oi diechi pati mama jala chalachala anki megh megh" (I have laid my tearful eyes on the clouds of the Sraban sky), and here the separateness is more poignant as the beloved is presumably dead and the feeling is realised through more concrete expressions in the form of the beloved's hair, breath, the easterly wind and the emerald forest. Again Pankaj Mullik sings it out airing the right pathos and the rich tone in exact measure and depth. The lover has waited the whole night sleepless for one who has gone out of sight (may be dead, may be just out of sight), and in his dreams float the long strands of her hair in the easterly wind, and at the moment of farewell the path she chose through the emerald forest, the grass she treaded upon, still look smudged with pains, still stirred by her breath, and her frequent looking back is still haunting the shades. Terrific appeal.

The season of Sarat, that is, the early autumn, has appealed to Tagore both for its crystal clear sunlight and the kaleidoscopic interplay between light and shade. Songs 141, 142, 143 and 145 are particularly exuberant about the inspiring qualities of the season. Song 142 begins with the unabashed joy the poet is feeling as the heavy monsoon rains have finally let up and the sun has come out: "Megher kole rode hesheche badal gece tuti, aha ha ha ha" (The rains have stopped and the sunlight has landed smilingly on the lap of the clouds). So let there be a long holiday.

To be continued

book review

Introducing Bangladesh

by Tanweer Akram

Baxter, Craig. *Bangladesh: From a Nation to a State*. Boulder, Colorado, and Oxford, United Kingdom: Westview Press, 1997. Pp. 176. ISBN 0-8133-2854-3.

BAXTER'S book is a concise introduction to Bangladesh which provides a historical overview. It briefly discusses the country's geography, political system, economic and social development, and international relations. The book contains a short but useful and informed bibliographic note.

Baxter's central thesis — that the emergence of self-conscious Muslim identity of the majority of Bengalis in Bangladesh has been the crucial determinant of its national identity — is suspect because the national identity of the people of Bangladesh is multifaceted and complex. Bengali national identity cannot be reduced solely to the particular religious affiliation of the majority of the country's inhabitants. The book covers in several chapters the history of the Bangladesh starting from Bengal in antiquity to the second free election of 1996. The author accepts the conventional demarcation of Bengal's history into the following periods: Hindu and Buddhist eras; Muslim rule; East India Company rule; British rule; Pakistani period; and post-independence period. It does not make much sense to categorise

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the Bengal history in terms of the rulers' religion and Baxter's emphasis on the political contentions among Muslim and Hindu prior to the rise of British imperialism in South Asia is also misplaced. The religious identity of the ruling class in Bengal, prior to British rule, was a minor issue of far less import than chronic instability, palace intrigues, and the quest for legitimacy, control, and independence from paying tributes to outside rulers. Baxter offers little in the way of explaining historical change. Marx had written extensively on British rule in India analyzing in particular the result of de-industrialization and colonial exploitation in Bengal. Yet there is no reference in book to Marx's insightful writings on Bengal. The impact of the colonial Permanent Settlement on East Bengali peasants was devastating. Even an official British Commission, reviewing forty years after its implementation,

concluded: "[T]he settlement fashioned with great care and deliberation has unfortunately subjected the lower classes to most grievous oppression," which it stated, "hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce," as "the bones of contention of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India."

The war of national liberation of Bangladesh, one of the most important events in its history, merits a more detailed coverage than offered in the book. The two major famines, Great Bengal Famine of 1943 during British colonial rule and Bangladesh Famine of 1974 under post-independent government, should figure more prominently even in an outline of Bengal's history. Interested scholars should consult Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famines* (1974) for analysis of the causes and the effects of the famines. It is hard to believe the author's assertion that in Bangladesh today, "Muslims... retain a

community of interest with Pakistan." After 28 years of independence from Pakistan, trade and business ties, political, social, and cultural links between Bangladesh and Pakistan are mundanely normal, routine, and barely of any significance. If anything, a large segment of civil society in Bangladesh is calling for an official apology from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for its crimes against humanity. In the 1990s emerged a social movement determined to bring to trial war criminals and collaborators (such as Mr. Golan Azam, the head of the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islam) for their role in killing Bengali civilians and intellectuals during Bangladesh's War of National Liberation, emerged. The outpouring of public support and interest in bringing the war criminals to justice is a key event in the social history of Bangladesh during 1990s. The challenge of development in Bangladesh faces is complex. Almost

every year Bangladesh faces natural disasters, arising from regular flooding and cyclones. It needs to accelerate its economic growth and development, industrialize rapidly, invest in infrastructure (electricity generation and distribution, adequate and safe water supply, telecommunication, and transport), and increase expenditures on basic education, public health, and agriculture to alleviate poverty. Water pollution and air pollution, which pose threat to public health and safety, are very serious issues of public concern in rural and urban areas in Bangladesh.

The country needs to develop its manufacturing base and properly and prudently exploit its natural resources. Political instability, chronic nationwide strikes caused by political deadlock among the main political parties, and widespread corruption among the 'elite' retard economic growth and higher levels of investment. Since its independence, the society in

Bangladesh has changed dramatically. The rise of export-oriented garment textile sector has been a remarkable phenomenon. Besides earning the major share of foreign exchange, it has created a vast pool of non-unionized female workers in the formal labor force.

The activities of non-government organizations, particularly micro-credit programs, have been a major part of the nation's development initiatives. Although micro-credit programs have been successful in creating self-employment and income opportunities for some of the poor, it has neither had much impact on growth nor reached the most vulnerable and destitute population. Public attitudes toward birth control have changed over the years. Consequently non-coercive policies encouraging voluntary family planning and improved health care and nutrition could reduce population growth much further. The book's coverage of social and economic issue is perfunctory.

Baxter provides a succinct and valuable summary of ancient and contemporary history of Bangladesh. It is recommend for those who want to learn about the country's history. However, readers interested more in depth analysis of Bangladesh, especially its recent economic problems, will find more useful studies undertaken by Bangladeshi research institutions.