

travelogue

Esfahan Enchants

by Raana Haider

"Esfahan is half the world."
Sixteenth century Farsi saying
"A city as brilliant as the thoughts
of a wise man, in which the whole
world is reflected"
A city as beautiful as the beloved
one's face in which you may find
anything you wish."
Khaghani, tenth century Iranian
poet

"Esfahan is a city built on a plain.
It has a fine climate. They reach cold
pure water anywhere they dig for
about 30 feet. The city has strong high
walls. There are streams of water and
beautiful tall buildings in the city;
with a large and beautiful Friday
mosque... All across the land where
Persian is spoken, I have not seen a
city better than Esfahan."

Nasser Khosro, eleventh century
Iranian scholar and poet

"Nowhere else in the oriental territory
can be compared to Esfahan.
Even as to Constantinople, Esfahan is
not only a match from several re-
spects, but one can dare say that it is
even better."

Pietro della Valle, sixteenth century
Italian traveller

"Esfahan, the capital of Persia,
with its suburbs, is one of the biggest
cities of the world."

Jean Chardin, seventeenth century
French traveller

"Everywhere there were gardens
which for grandeur and fragour, are
such as no city in Asia outvie, withal
so sweet and verdant that you may
call it another Paradise." Thomas
Herbert, seventeenth century English
traveller

"Who can claim to have seen the
most beautiful city of the world with-
out having seen Esfahan?"

Andre Malraux, twentieth century
French politician and writer

In my humble opinion, there was
no bravado on the part of the sons of
the soil nor was there any exaggera-
tion on the part of foreign observers.
Esfahan was and remains enchanting
and merits the early Farsi declaration
— Esfahan nesf-e-Jahan (Esfahan is
half the world).

THERE is poetry in the name
"Esfahan." It smoothly rolls off
the tongue, evoking fabled cross-
roads of commerce and culture. Here
is a meeting-place of manuscripts,
miniatures, monuments, mosaics and
mosques — all artifacts from
centuries of civilisations. Esfahan is
the heartland and the epitome of
Persia as one imagines it to be.
However, the origin of the name is
more common. The Farsi word for
army is sepah. There was a garrison
base in this area in early times, giving
birth to the city's name.

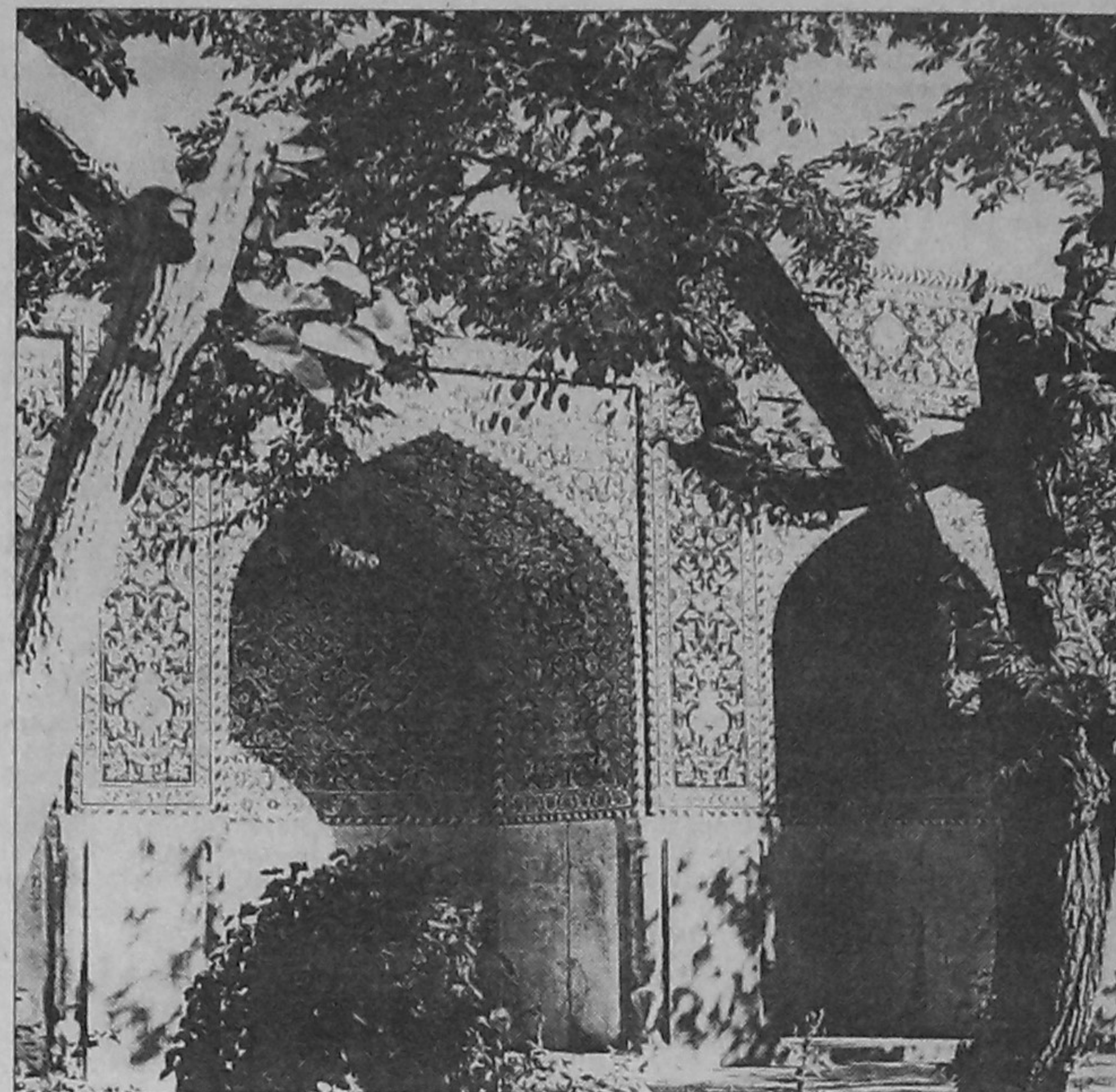
There are global art cities that
blend grace and harmony in its archi-
tecture and cityscape. Esfahan is such
a metropolis a living museum that
people just happen to inhabit. Neither
is Esfahan in a ruinous condition, nor
is it anywhere near a shadow of its
former glorious self. There is more
than enough to satisfy the most de-
manding, jaded and deja vu of trav-
ellers not to speak of enthralling the
first-time sightseer. My introduction
to Esfahan belongs to the latter cate-
gory. My repeat visit deserves to be in
the former group.

My first visit to Esfahan was in Au-
gust 1978. I flew via Kuwait Airways
from London to Tehran for a two-
week visit to my parents. My father
was the Bangladesh Ambassador to
Iran. This visit took place six months
prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution.
Twenty-one years later, I once again
flew into Esfahan in November 1999.
This time, I was accompanied by my
husband, now Bangladesh
Ambassador to Iran and our daughter.
At Esfahan airport, a board greeted us.
"The Islamic Revolution like a
volcano is everlasting. Representative
of the Public Relations of the Esfahan
Airport." Time had passed, but then
again maybe not.

Esfahan located along the Zayan-
deh Rud river in the west-central part
of Iran and 340 kilometres south of
Tehran can trace its history 2500
years back. The country Iran is de-
rived from Aryan, meaning Land of

the Aryans. However, Iran in history
has been widely known as Persia, a
name derived from Pars or Fars, one
of the southern provinces of Iran. Dur-
ing the Caliphate of Omar, it was es-
tablished under Muslim rule that

day, there is none to cry for a hundred
dead." There are areas all over the
world that have been soaked in blood
with monotonous regularity. Settle-
ments have been besieged, burned,
desecrated and rebuilt numerous



Courtyard of Imam Mosque, Esfahan.

continued for 300 years. It was a ma-
jor city of the Seljuki Turk dynasty in
the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Mongols invaded the city in the
thirteenth century. Kamaledin Es-
mael, a renowned thirteenth century
poet of Esfahan despaired about the
catastrophic impact on the city. He
wrote "There's no one to cry for his
homeland or for the souls that have
been wasted. Yesterday, there were two
hundreds crying over a dead body. To-

times over the ages. Newcomers have
then gone on to reshape the city in
their image, leaving their own stamp
of identity. Such has been the fate of
many a metropolis throughout his-
tory.

The Safavid dynasty ruled Persia
from 1502 to 1736. In 1598, the
Safavid ruler Shah Abbas the Great
transferred the capital from Qazvin to
Esfahan. Sir Roger Stevens, British
Ambassador to Iran in the 1950s and a

keen Iranologist wrote in his im-
mensely applaudable book "The Land
of the Great Sophy" "Today Kazvin is a
shrunk town with an unmistakably
old-fashioned air. I know of no better
place in which to get the feel of nine-
teenth century Persia — long-standing
neglect, dignified decay side by side
with seedy respectability, life running
on among the ruins and grinding
gradually to a stop, the sort of hope-
lessness which pervaded provincial
life after a century of indifference."

Stevens adds that although Kazvin
is no ville mommentale, it can still
boast some outstanding monuments.
Near Kazvin is the fourteenth century
mausoleum of Sultan Oljeitu built en-
tirely of brick that has "long defied ar-
chitectural analysis." The word 'mau-
soleum' derives from — a magnificent
tomb named after the Carian king
Mausolus (fourth century BC). Andre
Godard, French Iranologist and long
time Director General of Iran's Ar-
chaeological Department exalted in
the 1930s, in Arthur Upham Pope's
'Survey of Persian Art', Vol. 2 "Here is
a dome which simply stands by virtue
of a perfectly conceived and con-
structed profile. The cross-section of
its construction is as great a delight to
an architect as the vision of the splen-
did blue dome is to the traveller on the
Tabriz-Kazvin road." The vaulted ceil-
ings and walls contain such intricate
and wealth of designs that they
prompted Pope to declare them "a se-
ries of masterpieces of architectural
ornament capable of holding its own
with anything ever achieved in Per-
sia."

Arthur Upham Pope and his wife,
American Iranologists of the twenti-
eth century wrote an authoritative six
volume series, the 'Survey of Persian
Art'. They maintained a house in Shi-
raz for fifty years. It is today part of
the Narejstan museum. Some of their
slides and photographs on Iran are
kept at the museum.

In the seventeenth century under
the Safavid dynasty, Esfahan reached
the zenith of its fame. Its Golden Age
came under the reign of Shah Abbas,

born in 1571 in Herat (present-day
Afghanistan). His grandfather, Tah-
masp is alleged to have remarked
about his grandson: "He will be the
light of our dynasty." Shah Abbas as-
cended the throne in 1587 and died in
1629. According to various Iranian
historians, Shah Abbas, Cyrus and
Darius were the only rulers to be en-
dowed with the suffix The Great. The
same ruler who in 1609 issued a royal
ordinance giving women the right on
Wednesdays to move freely without
veil in certain streets of the capital —
Shah Abbas — also had his son, the
crown-prince assassinated in 1615
and another son, a second crown-
prince blinded in 1621. Upon his
death in 1629, his body was trans-
ported some five hundred kilometres
all over Iran by loyalists. In a bad
state of decomposition by now, the
body was finally buried in a simple
tomb in Kashan. However, political
intrigue in the capital city of Esfahan
and a fear that Shah Abbas's burial
place would become a centre for gath-
ering and reverence, his successor had
four identical funeral corteges sent
out! One was heading for Ardebil, the
other to Mashad, the third to Qom and
yet another to Kerbela.

The population of Esfahan then
stood around a million; making it one
of the world's largest cities of its time.
Here was a cosmopolitan city — a
melting-pot of Moslems, Armenians,
Zoroastrians, Indians, British and
Dutch East India companies, Swiss
watchmakers and Chinese potters.

The heritage of conquerors over the
ages fused with traditional skills of
artisans in decorative arts culminated
in creating a magnificent city — a
centre for the arts and architecture,
calligraphy, culture, miniature paint-
ing, philosophy, religion and science.
Jean Chardin in his travels in Persia
in the seventeenth century reported
that in 1666, Esfahan already had 162
mosques, 48 madrasahs (theological
schools), 1802 caravansaries and 273
hamams (elaborate bathhouses).

To be continued

essay

Tagore and "Us"

By Milia Ali

AS I start writing this piece I am
filled with a sense of apprehen-
sion since the very name
"Rabindranath Tagore" is sacrosanct
in most Bengali households. And
there is also a popular belief that only
"intellectuals" can touch this topic. As
much as I think that no writer should
make excuses for expressing his or her
feelings, I will deviate from my prin-
ciple and clarify at the beginning that
I am no great Tagore scholar. I am
only articulating my inner thoughts
as a Tagore lover and one who has
tried to "live" through each and every
experience of her life within the
sphere of this multi-faceted genius.
What I have to say is merely based on
my understanding of his philosophy
and not the result of some intensive
research.

Let me start my expose with a very
simple hypothesis. Tagore buffs in
Bangladesh can be broadly categorized
into three groups: (i) those who are the
experts and exponents and will not al-
low the entry of any "outsider" into
their inner circle, simply because they
have convinced themselves and others
that this is a very restricted domain of
intellectual activity, not for the
masses; (ii) those who are over-
whelmed by his genius and are con-
stantly struggling to apply his teach-
ings in their lives; and (iii) those who
love his music and read his poetry and
short stories on a rainy day or a
lonely night and derive innocent pleasure.
There is also a group outside the
Tagore arena consisting of cynics who
view all Tagore admirers as pseudo
and think it's time to move forward
rather than get entangled with Tagore
phobia. Of course, like everything else
in life, the groups are not discrete and
there is an element of overlap between
the categories. And I should perhaps
qualify that it is not fair to categorize
people because there are always ex-
ceptions to the norm! For example,
some great exponents of Bangla litera-
ture never claim that they are Tagore
experts. I remember once I asked poet
Shamsur Rahman to give me an expli-
cation of a particular song "Esho esho
phire esho" from the short story
"Megh O Rudro" and all he said was:
"If you want to understand Tagore you

Tagore buffs in Bangladesh can be broadly categorized into three groups: (i) those who are the experts and exponents and will not allow the entry of any "outsider" into their inner circle, simply because they have convinced themselves and others that this is a very restricted domain of intellectual activity, not for the masses; (ii) those who are overwhelmed by his genius and are constantly struggling to apply his teachings in their lives; and (iii) those who love his music and read his poetry and short stories on a rainy day or a lonely night and derive innocent pleasure. There is also a group outside the Tagore arena consisting of cynics who view all Tagore admirers as pseudo and think it's time to move forward rather than get entangled with Tagore phobia.

only have to ascend upward—it's a
constant process, which never reaches
an outcome." A profound statement
humbly articulated!

This article focuses on the Tagore
scholars, mostly belonging to category
(i) who are prone to giving unsol-
icited advice in the media and private
parlors. They enter into a monologue
about every piece that Rabindranath
Tagore has written, analyzing, dis-
secting and also extrapolating! As if
Tagore's writing is not self explana-
tory! You get an impression that they
would have written the piece better—
it's only that Rabindranath preceded
them and got an unfair advantage! Reminds me of Tagore's poem Joota
Abishkar (The Discovery of the Shoe).
The story of the king who ordered the
entire ground in his kingdom to be
covered to save his feet from getting
soiled. When a wise man gave a simple
solution to cover his feet with shoes
rather than the earth the king ex-
claimed "Amaro chhilo mone kemone
bata pereche sheta jante" (Actually I
had thought of it first but the rogue
read my thoughts and outwitted me!)
Let me elaborate the point further
with a personal example. Once I ren-
dered a song: "Amar Mallika bone
jokhon prothom phutechhe kol" (When
the first bud blossomed in the forest
of my mallika.) No sooner did I
step out of the stage one of our
"greatest" Tagore experts came up to
me and started giving me an analysis
of how I should have pronounced the
double "l" in the word "Mallika" with
my tongue hitting the roof of my

mouth and that would have really
made a difference! Although I had
learned the song from my guru, Kanika
Banerjee, my confidence was shat-
tered. When I next saw my guru I asked
her about the double "l" mystery. And
what she told me was again very sim-
ple: "Milia, the notations, the pronun-
ciation they are all important but they
are only the frame or the skeleton. It's
the totality of the rendition that is
important. At the end of each perfor-
mance you ask yourself: have I
touched even 10 people in the audi-
ence? If yes, then you have been true to
Gurudev and his style." What I am try-
ing to illustrate is that, there is no one
way of doing something right — even
Tagore offered freedom of expression
to all those who critiqued and per-
formed his music or plays. Then why
do our Bangladeshi Tagore gurus pre-
vent his creative compositions from
moving into parallel planes? Why im-
prison Rabindrasangeet (Tagore
songs), Rabindra Kabita (Tagore po-
ems) and Rabindra Golpo (Tagore sto-
ries) in a black hole which ordinary
people cannot access? Why intimidate
anyone who attempts to introduce in-
novations in Tagore's music or work
and yet preserve the true spirit of his
creations? Let the reader misunder-
stands me I must clarify that I do not
mean experimentation which deviates
from the essence of Tagore's true phi-
losophy. What I mean is injecting an
element of flexibility and individual-
ity within the boundary of his style in
the domain of performing arts like
music, dance and theatre. Also, using

the media more effectively and in
novel ways to expose his works to a
larger audience.

My rationale is based on the fact
that Tagore himself introduced inno-
vations to his music and art whenever
he discovered something which he
thought fitted into the basic structure
of his creations. For example, his visit
to Bali inspired him to use the Bali-
nese style of tying a scarf for his
dancers. Also, the songs which have
been derived from old North Indian
music (Hindi Bhanga Gaan) or Scot-
tish or Irish melodies (Phule phule
dhole dhole)! The genius who was al-
ways receptive to new ideas, who
wanted to reach out to people with
open arms—why punish his soul by
subjecting his work to narrow inter-
pretations? Why not let his music flow
like the torrential river and fly like
the wild bird? An associated problem
is also the exploitation of Tagore's
works in the name of art and culture.
It seems to me that some academics
and cultural figures use Rabindra
Kabita (Tagore poetry), Natok (theatre)
and Sangeet (music) as a means to get
limelight and climb to the peak of
their success. Let me illustrate my
point with a recent example. This year
the official celebration of Tagore's
birth anniversary was inaugurated by
the Prime Minister. It was inspiring to
see the head of our government sing
and recite in unison with the perform-
ers on stage. But backstage there was
total pandemonium. The artists were
all huddled in a small corridor, no
chairs, not even a glass of water to
drink for five hours. Hounded by se-

curity and worst of all subjected to
neglect by the very intellectuals who
represent Tagore culture in
Bangladesh! Apparently the organiza-
tion was handled by a Samannaye
Committee consisting of all the who's
who in the Bangladeshi cultural and
literary scene—senior academicians,
writers, poets, actors, etc. However, all
throughout the performance the or-
ganizers in the Samannaye Commit-
tee were hovering around the PM
rather than pay any attention to the
arrangements of the show. The cli-
max was reached when the Prime
Minister left as scheduled and the an-
nouncers mistakenly announced the
end of the show despite the fact that
about 15 artists had not yet per-
formed. Our Tagore scholars con-
veniently disappeared, leaving the
singers and dancers with an empty
auditorium and an empty stage.

Meanwhile Gurudev's painting hung
silently at the back of the stage won-
dering what this was all about! Rather
than the true Tagore spirit which
should have been "Amra milechhi aj
mayer daake" (We have assembled at
the beckoning of our motherland) it
seemed to me Rabindranath Tagore's
soul was crying out "Ha re rere rere
amae chhere de re de re" (Please set me
free from the shackles of this
bondage)! Part of the reason for this
confusion and chaos that usually
reigns whenever we bring Ra-
bindranath into the public domain is
due to the fact that the Tagore intel-
lectuals have their own separate groups
which are constantly vying against

each other for supremacy. What they
forget is that Tagore's own life was an
example of "unity in diversity." He
embraced people from all languages,
cultures and countries to study in his
ashram, Santiniketan, and encour-
aged them to perform and enrich his
creations by introducing their indi-
vidual styles. The China Bhavan in
Santiniketan, the Japanese students
who learnt to sing Rabindrasangeet,
people from other parts of India even
Elmhurst who came from England to
help him with his rural development
program are glowing examples of Ra-
bindranath's all embracing personal-
ity. Yet today Tagore culture in
Bangladesh is being held hostage by
the ideas of a few who have already
decided for the rest how his works
should be interpreted.

What happened to Gurudev's
proclamation:

Hetha arjya, hetha anarjya, hethae
drabr chin—

Shok-hun dol pathan-mogol ek
dehe holo leen

Poshchime aj khuliachhe dar,
shetha hote shobe ane upohar Dibe ar
nibe, milabe milibe, jabe na phire—

Ei Bharoter mohamanober
shagorotire.

Come hither! Where the Aryans,
non-Aryans, Dravidians and Chi-
nese—

Where the Shoks, Huns, Pathans,
Moghuls have all merged into one
body and spirit.

The West has opened its doors, rare
gifts travel from afar

We will give and receive, mingle
and mix, but never retreat into a shell!
Come hither! On the sea shore of
Bharat, the land which represents all
that is sublime in the human spirit.

There is still time—let us respond to
the call of this "myriad-minded ge-
nius" and open all our gates to give
and receive, to allow equal light to
enter and create equal music with
Rabindrasangeet! Note: All transla-
tions are by the author and are in-
tended to facilitate non Bengali read-
ers. The author apologizes for the fact
that the translations do not do justice
to the original writings.