

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 many 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 respects,
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 without
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 exaggeration
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 *sephah*. 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 architecture and cityscape. Esfahan is such a metropolis a living museum that people just happen to inhabit. Neither is Esfahan in a ruined condition, nor is it anywhere near a shadow of its former glorious self. There is more than enough to satisfy the most demanding, jaded and *deja vu* of travellers not to speak of enthralled the first-time sightseer. My introduction to Esfahan belongs to the latter category. My repeat visit deserves to be in the former group.

My first visit to Esfahan was in August 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 Zayandeh 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 derived 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. During the Caliphate of Omar, it was established 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. Settlements have been besieged, burned, desecrated and rebuilt numerous

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 history.

Mongols invaded the city in the thirteenth century. Kamaleddin Esmael, 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

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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 immensely applaudable book 'The Land of the Great Sophy' "Today Kazvin is a shrunken town with an unmistakably old-fashioned air. I know of no better place in which to get the feel of nineteenth century Persia — long-standing neglect, dignified decay side by side with seedy respectability, life running gradually to a stop, the sort of hopelessness which pervaded provincial life after a century of indifference."

Stevens adds that although Kazvin is no more than a moment in time, it can still boast some outstanding monuments. Near Kazvin is the fourteenth century mausoleum of Sultan Oljeitu built entirely of brick that has "long defied architectural analysis." The word 'mausoleum' derives from — a magnificent tomb named after the Carian king Mausolus (fourth century BC). Andre Godard, French Iranologist and long-time Director General of Ifan's Archaeological 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 constructed profile. The cross-section of its construction is as great a delight to an architect as the vision of the splendid blue dome is to the traveller on the Tabriz-Kazvin road." The vaulted ceilings and walls contain such intricate and wealth of designs that they prompted Pope to declare them "a series of masterpieces of architectural ornament capable of holding its own with anything ever achieved in Persia."

Arthur Upham Pope and his wife, American Iranologists of the twentieth century wrote an authoritative six volume series, the 'Survey of Persian Art'. They maintained a house in Shiraz for fifty years. It is today part of the Narejestan 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

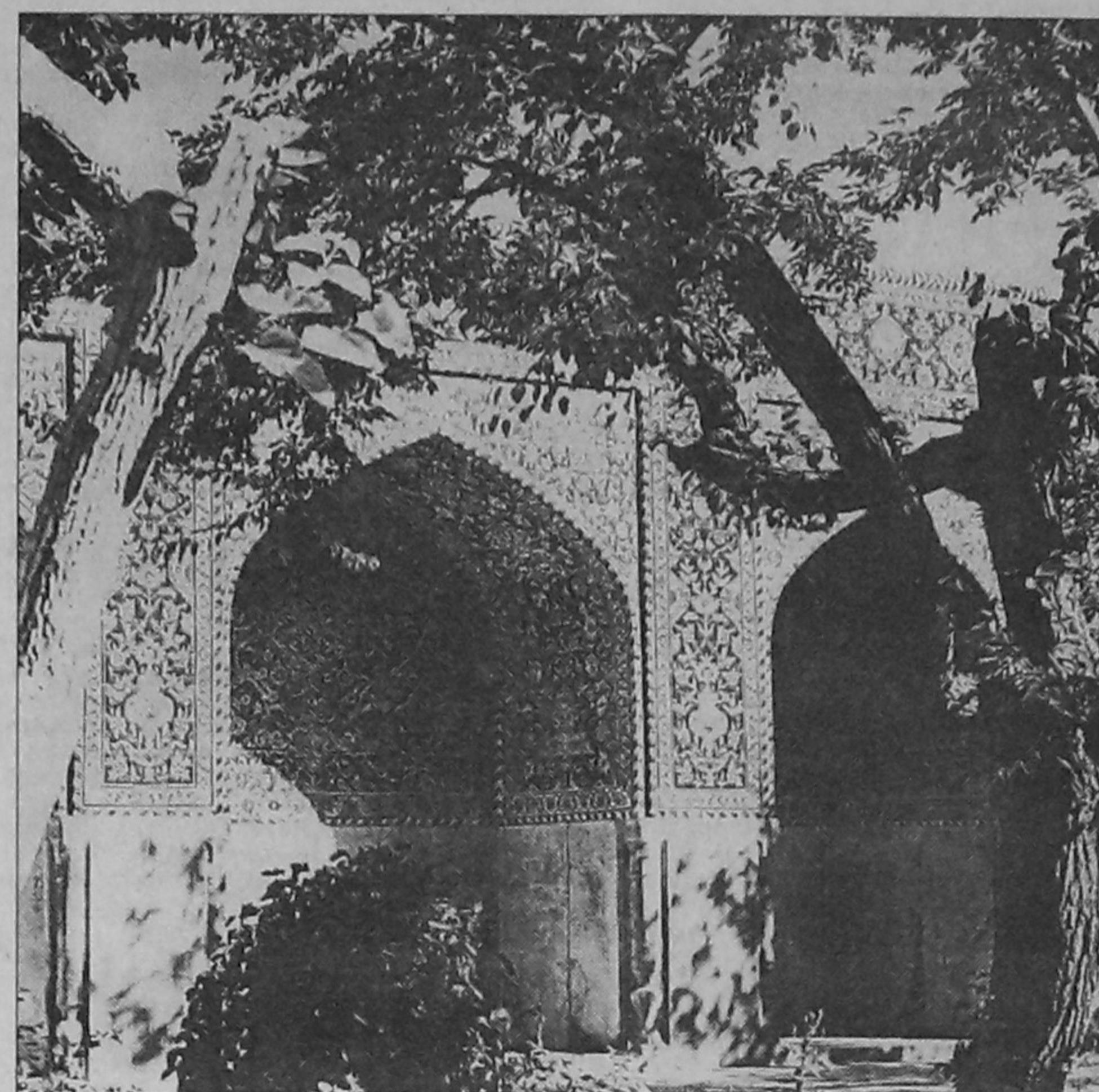
came under the reign of Shah Abbas.

born in 1571 in Herat (present-day Afghanistan). His grandfather, Tahmasp is alleged to have remarked about his grandson: "He will be the light of our dynasty." Shah Abbas ascended the throne in 1587 and died in 1629. According to various Iranian historians, Shah Abbas, Cyrus and Darius were the only rulers to be endowed 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 transported 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 gathering and reverence, his successor had four identical funeral corteges sent out! One was heading for Ardeabil, the other to Mashad, the third to Qom and yet another to Kerbala.

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 painting, 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



Courtyard of Imam Mosque, Esfahan

essay

Tagore and "Us"

By Milia Ali

AS I start writing this piece I am filled with a sense of apprehension 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 principle 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 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.

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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 unsolicited advice in the media and private parlors. They enter into a monologue about every piece that Rabindranath Tagore has written, analyzing, dissecting and also extrapolating! As if Tagore's writing is not self explanatory! 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 exclaimed "Amar 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 rendered a song: "Amar Mallika bone jokhon prothom phutechhe koli" (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 learnt the song from my guru, Kanika Banerjee, my confidence was shattered. When I next saw my guru I asked her about the double "l" mystery. And what she told me was again very simple: "Milia, the notations, the pronunciation 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 performance you ask yourself: have I touched even 10 people in the audience? If yes, then you have been true to Gurudev and his style." What I am trying 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 performed his music or plays. Then why do our Bangladeshi Tagore gurus prevent his creative compositions from moving into parallel planes? Why imprison Rabindrasangeet (Tagore songs), Rabindra Kabita (Tagore poems) and Rabindra Golpo (Tagore stories) in a black hole which ordinary people cannot access? Why intimidate anyone who attempts to introduce innovations in Tagore's music or work and yet preserve the true spirit of his creations? 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 performers 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 organization was handled by a Samannay 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 organizers in the Samannay Committee were hovering around the PM rather than pay any attention to the arrangements of the show. The climax was reached when the Prime Minister left as scheduled and the announcers mistakenly announced the end of the show despite the fact that about 15 artists had not yet performed. Our Tagore scholars conveniently 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 wondering 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 re 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 Rabindranath into the public domain is due to the fact that the Tagore intellectuals 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 encouraged them to perform and enrich his creations by introducing their individual 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 Rabindranath's all embracing personality. 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 amarjya, hetha drabir chin—

Shok-hun dol pathan-mogol ek dehe hololeen

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

Ei Bharoter mohamanober shagorotie.

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

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 genius" and open all our gates to give and receive, to allow equal light to enter and create equal music with Rabindrasangeet! Note: All translations are by the author and are intended to facilitate non-Bengali readers. The author apologizes for the fact that the translations do not do justice to the original writings.