

Death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

The legacy lives on...

Rabindranath : The poet as actor and director

SABIRA MANIR

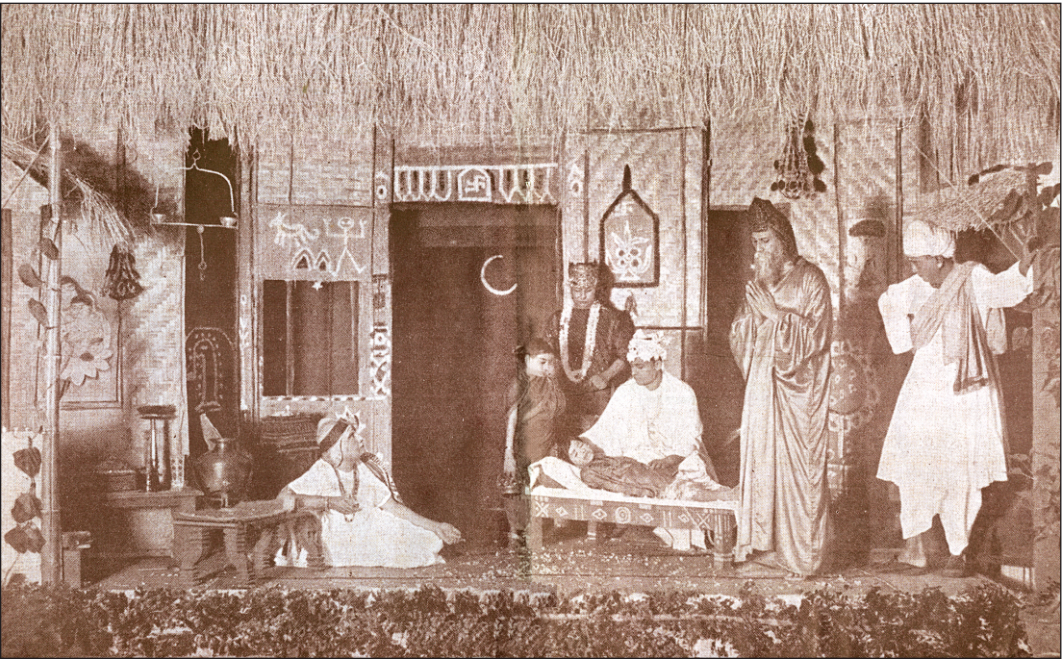
Tagore's childhood in Jorashako (a locality of Kolkata) was culturally very rich. The environment was enlivened with the performances of renowned maestros and talented *jatra* artistes. Even in his early years, Tagore developed a taste for *jatragaan* and was inclined to act in plays.

Rabindranath began writing plays at a relatively young age and also managed to enact those written by children of his family. Except for one or two performances in his early years, most of the time he used to play the role of the complex characters or of the protagonist of his own plays. Simultaneously, he would take on the mantle of play director.

Tagore's early dramas featured only the artistes from his family. He also did excellent work grooming theatre activists.

Mukto Kuntola, was among the first plays that Tagore launched in his boyhood. *Mukto Kuntola* had the touch of foreign stage play and not that of *jatra*. Even though Tagore's thoughts about theatre somewhat changed later, there was a distinct influence of the West in his productions starting from *Balmiki Pratibha* (1881) to *Kal Mrigoya*(1882),*Raja o Rani* (1889) and *Bishorjan* (1890). As the Shakespearean

Capturing the quintessential Tagore



Tagore (2nd R) in the role of Baul in *Dakghar* (1917)

style was followed in Tagore's plays, the stage decoration and the planning of scenes were also inspired by the western style.

Later, Tagore thought of dropping

redundancy from acting. It is this philosophy that was reflected in his works like *Sarodotsav* (1908) through the Nriyanattya's(Dance Drama)that were staged at the end of his life. This

can be termed as the 'Shantiniketan Phase' in the history of Rabindra Nattya. At this phase, the plays produced by Tagore had simple but indicative symbols in stage decoration. The play

Raja in 1910 was also performed in the same style.

There were several pragmatic reasons for promoting a new trend in theatre as exemplified in the 'Shantiniketan Phase'. Because of financial constraints, it was not possible to have expensive stage sets.

It is worth mentioning here that as there was no opportunity for female students at that time to pursue their study in Shantiniketan, male artistes used to play the female roles in plays like *Rajaor Prayoshchitto*.

The stage setting of *Falguni*(1916) or *Dakghar* (1917), staged in Kolkata, were a bit heavy but it helped deliver the theme of the plays symbolically.

Although *Raja o Rani* (1889)and *Bishorjan*(1890) were staged following the western style of theatre, later the adaptation of these two plays- *Tapoti* (1929) --revealed Tagore's new ideology of theatre. Symbolic features, dropping still background, continuous acting, creating characters like Vivek-- all these elements clearly bear an indication of the very new theatre ideology.

Rabindranath always believed that it was *jatra* and not theatre which was a strong weapon for mass communication.

Since 1921, in his seasonal *Geetinatya* (musical drama) and *Nriyanattya* (dance drama) -

Rabindranath began to give priority to our very own *jatra* style. This very style was pursued in staging *Shesh Barshan*, *Srabon Gatha*, *Bashanto*, *Shundor* and *Nataraj*.

Rabindranath was always fascinated by dance and has always admitted the invaluable role of this performing art in acting. Since *Kal Mrigoya* (1882), Tagore included little girls of his family even for auxiliary characters like 'Bon Devi'. Rabindranath himself was adept in dancing. He featured efficiently as a dancer as *Thakurda* in *Raja*, *Kabishekhar* and *Andho Baul* in *Falguni* and *Baul* in *Dakghar*.

A harmonious bridge between music and dance was observed in *Geetinatya* like *Bashanto*(1923), *Shesh Barshan*(1925), *Shundor* (1925) *Nataraj* (1927) and *Gitotsav*(1931). Later on the subject of plays was gradually presented in the form of dance.

Rabindranath's role was of the director-producer in the 'Nriyanattya phase'. The plays were rehearsed before him. He would often sit on the right side of the stage and at times took part in the music, reading and recitation.

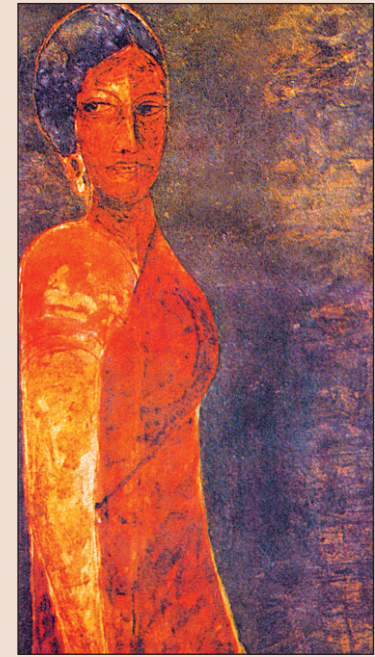
Though less known as an actor and director in stage plays, Tagore's legacy lives on in the form of simple stage sets and the inclusion of dance in theatre.

Source: Rabindra Smriti, Kaler Matra O Rabindra Natok and Natticommancho Nattiyarop.

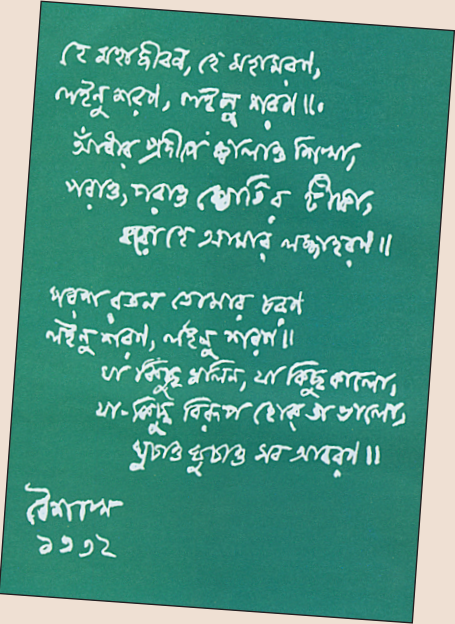


Tagore in *Balmiki Pratibha* (1881)

REMINISCENCE



A painting and an original handwritten poem by Tagore



The pristine setting of Shantiniketan

FAYZA HAO

'SHANTINIKETAN' is Tagore's *amar kirti*, something which is unparalleled. I myself feel that I'm alive through Tagore's poetry and painting. The lyrics of his songs are there to support you no matter in what mood you are. The university that he has created is *asram kendrik* and aimed at meditation. Here you can meditate at will,' says artist Rokeya Sultana. 'During Tagore's time, people in Shantiniketan lived in thatched houses and people went about barefooted. No religion was allowed to have a foothold here. In this residential university the students planted their own trees from which they harvested the fruit. There is the *pathak bhaban* (school) where classes are held under the sky.'

Rokeya says that the university is based in the tribal area of the Santals and the students learn everything from economics to literature, music, dancing, painting, and dramatics. Keeping

the university in mind, a township has come up with a single road winding through. The artificiality of urban life is, thankfully missing. Famous personalities such as Indira Gandhi and Satyajit Ray have been through the portals of Shantiniketan.

Every Tuesday there are prayers in the early morning with Tagore's *puja* songs. Students are surrounded by the sky, a close by river, fresh breeze and plants. Students like Rokeya are so influenced by Tagore's teaching of nature that even today nature prevails all over her paintings. Going from a metropolis like Dhaka to the natural surroundings of Shantiniketan had a profound effect on Rokeya.

'There was *krishnachura*, *kanchan* and *polash* all around me and I felt the change of seasons within me, being affected by my surroundings. The *kash* flower surrounded the lakes and one could even go for the juice of *taal* in the nearby villages,' says Rokeya.



Spring festival at Shantiniketan with Rokeya Sultana and her Monipuri friend Krishna

During the *bashanta utshab* (spring festival), a line of students extending to two miles sing the song *Ure griho bashi tora khol dar khol laglo je dol* with garlands of *polash* on their neck and little sticks in their hand. *Pahela*

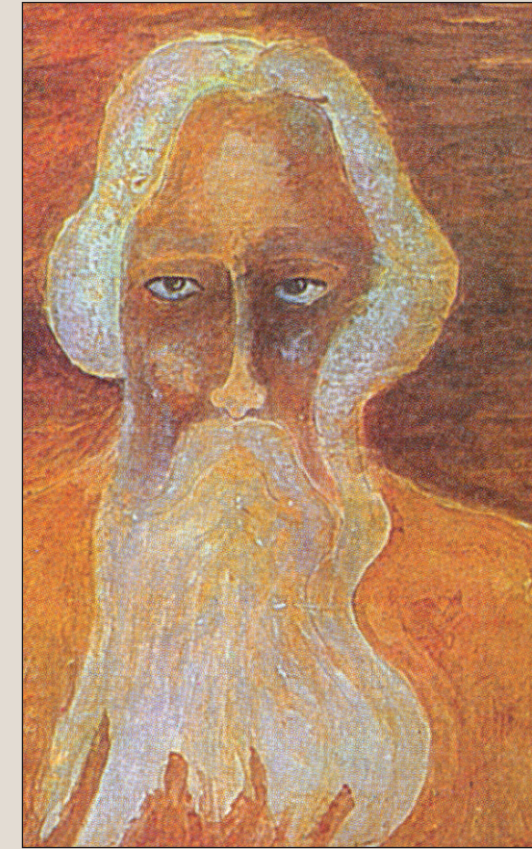
Boishak is another such seasonal festival. 'This influenced my nature-based landscapes. I found a philosophy to sustain my paintings. I could concentrate at will as this is a place to meditate in. My teachers like Samnath Hor, Lalu

Proshad Sho, Sanat Kar, Subramanyam and Jogen Chowdhury were very understanding and warm. We didn't call them 'sir' but 'dada'. They took the place of artists in Tagore's time like Ramkinkor, Abanindranath Thakur, Nanda Lal and Binod Bihari Mukherji. The atmosphere of simplicity has continued from Tagore's time. He himself lived in mud houses like Shaymoli and Uтарыon, one of which has been converted into the Tagore museum. In front of our Kolabhaban (Art's building) was a wonderful sculpture of a Santal family by Ramkinkor. In between we would have breaks of tea in the canteen and chat with our teachers.'

Shawkutazzaman, adding his own experiences at Shantiniketan said, 'My teachers in 1988 were Jogen Chowdhury, Shuhash Rai and others like Lalu Proshad. They never kept us at an arm's distance. The understanding

REFLECTIONS

Theatre activists on Tagore



Self portrait

HARUN UR RASHID & ERSHAD KAMOL

Since before the Liberation, theatre in Bangladesh has been dealing with Rabindranath Tagore's plays-- original and adapted--at a regular pace. Not many of the theatre groups, however, have taken part in this enterprise. Only Nagorik Natya Sampradaya and Theatre have so far come with several productions of Rabindranath Tagore's plays. Under the direction of Ferdousi Majumdar and Abdullah Al Mamun, Theatre has produced *Dui Bon* and *Ghorey Bairey*--adapted from novels of the same names. On the other hand, Nagorik has produced the highest number of original plays by Tagore at different times under different directors. Noted actor Aly Zaker directed *Achalayotan*, while Khaled Khan produced *Mukto dhara*. Detached from theatre activities since long, Abul Hayat directed two plays-- *Bishorjon* and *Rother Roshi*--of which the former had huge success. At present, Ataur Rahman's *Raktokarabi* is having its regular shows.

Actor-directors Ramendu Majumdar and Abul Hayat talk on their productions, while playwright Selim Al Deen comments on Tagore as a playwright.

Selim Al Deen

'As a dramatist, the way the British highlight Shakespeare, the Norwegian praise Ibsen or the Russian do to Chekhov, Rabindranath Tagore should be highlighted in a similar fashion. In case of world literature, I think, he deserves a higher position,' says renowned playwright Selim Al Deen.

On Tagore's literary talent Selim says, 'We should not judge Tagore only as a poet or as a dramatist or as a short story writer individually. Rather, we should appreciate him on the whole--as a playwright, a poet, a novelist and a painter. We will be able to judge him properly only when we will be able to realise the philosophy and thought that he had expressed on civilisation through his diversified artistic pursuits. Only three writers in the world--Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, Goethe in *Faust* and Rabindranath in *Geetanjali*--have shown the ultimate destination of human civilisation.

'If we were a rich nation, we could have spread the works of Tagore world wide.'

To comment on Rabindranath as a playwright Selim Al Deen says, 'He is a modern playwright. He first introduced the 'Non Theatre' concept--a theatre never expresses reality, rather through a theatre the audience gets the 'touch' of reality. Tagore's characters like Raja (King), Rani (queen), Thakurda (grandfather) and others have the universal appeal that is found only in a few plays in the history of world drama. Realising this fact, the Irish have staged Tagore's several plays like *Raja*, *Daakghar* and *Raktokarabi* in Dublin.'

Finally, Selim Al Deen says that to overcome the present chaotic world, we should practice the philosophy of Tagore, Tolstoy and Goethe in our daily life.



Ramendu Majumdar

The renowned theatre personality of the group Theatre explains the reasoning behind doing a Rabindranath play. 'Generally we used to do our own plays--written or adapted by ourselves. But then we wanted a little change. So, we chose Kobiguru's novel *Dui Bon* (Two Sisters)' says Majumdar.

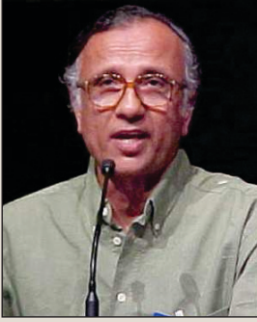
But why adapt from a novel, when there are many original plays of Rabindranath Tagore? 'Tagore's original plays are a little too grave and intellectual for the general audience,' says Ramendu. 'We wanted to present something which the audience will feel comfortable to relate with. And *Dui bon* was a huge success: we staged 110 shows of the play!'

Dui Bon was adapted by Mamtazuddin Ahmed and directed by Ferdousi Majumdar. Ferdousi Majumdar, Ramendu Majumdar, Mita Chowdhury and Afroza Banu performed different roles at different times. The first show was staged on February 8, 1978, and the hundredth show took place on August 13, 1981.

Another production by Theatre was *Ghorey Bairey*--also adapted from a novel of the same title. Renowned actor-director-playwright Abdullah Al Mamun adapted and directed the play. Ramendu used to perform the role of the master. The three main characters were performed by Abdullah Al Mamun, Ferdousi Majumdar and Tareq Anam Khan.

Ghorey Bairey altogether had 52 shows.

Ramendu thinks that the practice of Rabindranath Tagore has decreased in theatre. 'Nagorik's *Raktkarabi* is the only production in the last few years that is still running and has recently crossed 50th show.'



Abul Hayat

Unlike Ramendu, Abul Hayat is elated that his group has so far staged the highest number of plays by Rabindranath Tagore. 'And we have always performed the poet's original plays, which are often treated as complex,' he says. 'Rabindranath is the greatest playwright of all times and we take pride in having staged so many plays successfully.'

Hayat has directed two plays of Tagore: *Bishorjon* and *Rother Roshi*. The first one had about 40 shows. Asaduzzaman Noor, Jamaluddin Hossain, Lucky Inam and Abul Kashem performed in the lead roles.

Hayat's second direction was to a workshop production, *Rother Roshi*, which was conducted among all the young activists of the group Nagarik Nataya Sampradaya. 'All of today's popular performers--Bipasha, Shomi, Afsana Mimi and others--acted in that play,' says Hayat.

The production, however, did not come up as a regular show as the play was of only 40 minutes. 'The duration was not suitable for a regular show of a professional theatre group. In total, the play had about four to five shows,' says Hayat.

Regarding the present situation of Rabindranath's theatre plays, Hayat hesitates to comment since he has not been involved with the theatre for quite a long time now. Yet, he says that Rabindranath has always been a good source for plays in our theatre. He recalls the memory of staging *Raktokarabi* under the direction of eminent Mustafa Monwar in 1970. The staging was obstructed by the then ruling junta. 'Thousands of spectators came to watch the show at the Bangla Academy premises,' Hayat says. 'Although Ataur Rahman's *Raktokarabi* is the only play running at present, the practice has not died down completely,' he concludes.

