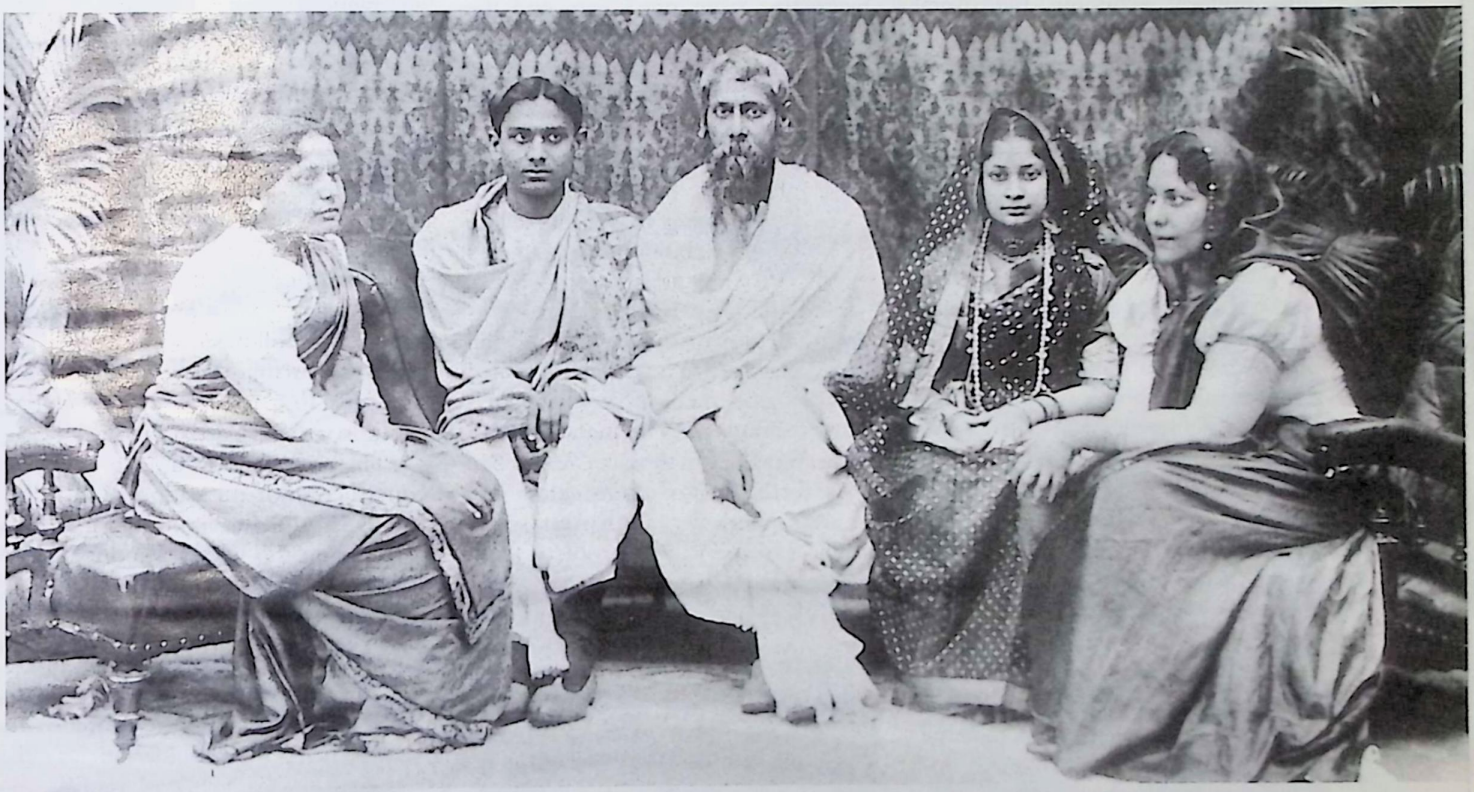
The women in his life

Rubaiyat Hossain discusses Rabindranath's willingness to subordinate to the cause of nationalism his liberal humanism when it came to the issue of women's emancipation

Madhurilata got married on the first of *Ashar*, Renuka is getting married on twenty first *Srabon*. Renuka is ten. When needed, the poet who once spoke against child marriage had forgotten all about it. Not as a poet, this time, he has been flawless and successful as a father. But the poet had to pay a price. For the next three months, not a single line of poetry came to him. Only prose!

-- *Prothom Alo,* Sunil Gangopadhay



UPENDRAKISHORE RAY

Rabindranath with his daughter Mira, son Rathindranath, daughter-in-law Pratima, daughter Bela

IN Sunil Gangopadhay's historical fiction *Prothom Alo*, poet Rabindranath Tagore's remorse after marrying Renuka off at a young age with dowry money is depicted by a sudden spell of drought in his poetic career. That was Tagore's punishment for marrying off his young daughter. If we ask for what offense Renuka was banished to the fate of a young bride, we will not be able to find an answer. Renuka died a few years after her wedding.

Madhuri, Meera and Renuka, all three of Rabindranath Tagore's daughters were married off well before reaching even fifteen years of age. Historical references testify that Tagore was not at all happy with Renu's and Meera's matches. He paid heavy dowry for marrying all three of his daughters, but the dowry demand from Meera's and Renu's husbands remained a recurring theme. Madhuri died at the age of thirty-two in 1918 and Renu died at the age of fourteen in 1904.

It is worthwhile to ask: why is it that all the women in Rabindranath Tagore's family had tragic endings?

Whereas Indira Chowdhury and Sarala Ghosal, two of Tagore's nieces, got married at the age of twenty-nine and thirty-three, respectively, which was quite the exception back in the early 20th century, why did Rabindranath Tagore refused to educate his daughters in Shankiniketan, or perhaps send them abroad to become educated and self-sufficient?

Why did he define their ultimate fates as marriage when clearly he had the understanding that these marriages were not going to work out for the girls' benefit? Why is it that Tagore never made an effort to educate his wife? Why does Mrinalini only appear as a self-sacrificing mother who sells her jewelry to save Shantiniketan from sinking?

Whereas Tagore's sisters-in-law were all educated, and even appeared in the public sphere, why is it that Tagore's wife lived a very uneventful and private life? She was married at the age of thirteen, bore five children, and