

146th birth anniversary of Tagore

From doodles to toast of Europe

Rabindranath's stride in the world of fine arts

FAYZA HAQ

"RABINDRANATH Tagore is India's first modern painter. In his songs, drama, fiction and other creative work, he has always upheld the heri-

on lines, following the oriental style. In this way alone he has kept up with traditions. His work depended on treatment of form and space." Tagore took to painting in the latter stage of his life, when he was done with expressing himself in profusion in so

supported his nephew Abanindranath's paintings of the Bengal School, says Qayyum, and he specially encouraged the paintings on Indian mythology. On visiting Japan, Tagore realised that paintings could not be established on literary values.

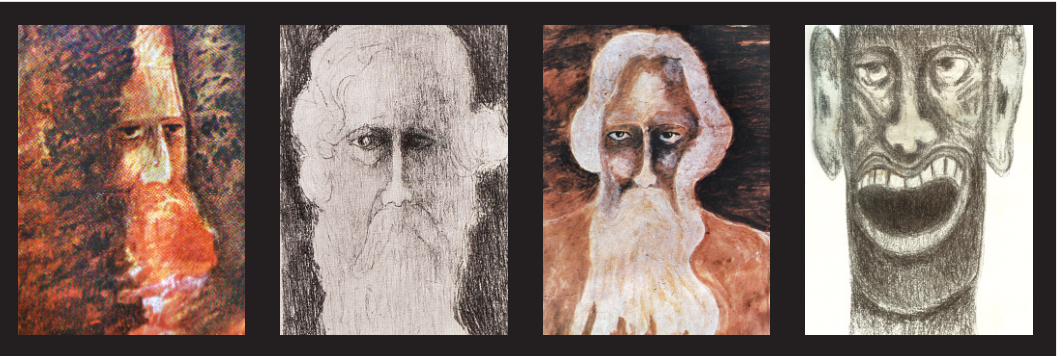
while writing. From the scratching and cutting during his writings arose an exciting form of art," Qayyum says. One finds birds, animals, tree branches in the doodles done with pen and ink.

"I had the opportunity to examine some of his paintings at Shaniketan. The colours are applied in such a manner that they are fresh and exciting even today. When he had exhibitions of his work in England, France and Germany, they were greatly appreciated. However, unfortunately, back home in India, his paintings were not much admired by critiques or artists. This was around 1910. In his paintings he has created a world of his own, with birds, animal figures and humans. They resemble Kalighat Pat paintings in some ways, specially the faces but his style was with fine lines. Yet, if we study art, it is Rabindranath Tagore who first represents modern Indian art overseas.

"As a creative artist, Tagore visualised pictures in colours and lines. In

his songs and poetry we find pictures of nature in the different seasons. These were much more exciting than his pictorial work in lines and paints. Some critiques say that he could not even draw a matchbox correctly, so limited was his knowledge of perspectives. However, when a creative man sees a matchbox, he sees it as an image of his own perception. In his doodles are birds and animals that you sometimes cannot find on the planet. They are creatures of his own imagination. His urge for painting was purely his own. He was a self-taught artist. His family engaged teachers to assist in write poetry and compose music and he was even taught wrestling," says Qayyum. "But painting was something he developed on his own although he came from a family where the men painted portraits etc."

Even in the world of paints and colours, Tagore remains unique.



tage of the subcontinent. Yet in painting he did not follow traditions. What he painted was entirely his own style and vision," says Qayyum Chowdhury. "He based his paintings

many other creative forms, says Qayyum.

"Drawing and painting were novelties for Tagore at the last stage of his life. Of course, in the meantime, he

Painting itself has a different language. He sent Japanese artist Oka Kura to India to guide the artists there. He began painting himself. This was after he had done a lot of doodling

Tagore in translation

Sabbir Chowdhury on film adaptations of the maestro's works

KARIM WAHEED

"Films have to be liberated from literature" -- Tagore in *Pashchim Jatrir Diary*

"Two-third of all feature films are based on previously published sources," says Sabbir Chowdhury. A lecturer at the Department of English, Jahangirnagar University, Sabbir has been actively involved with the film societies in Bangladesh for over 22 years. Sabbir is a member of FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics), the general secretary of Zahir Raihan Film Society and vice president of Bangladesh Federation of Film Societies. He also has a not-so modest collection of over 4,000 movies in all formats -- VHS, LD, VCD and DVD.

common trait of Sarat Chandra's works. Commercial films thrive on melodrama; the kind of subtlety prevalent in Tagore's work is not encouraged.

"Human psyche, and nature are major elements in Tagore's stories. It takes a deft filmmaker to incorporate these elements," Sabbir says.

"If we consider film adaptations of Tagore's literary works, starting from the silent film *Manthanjan* (1923) by Naresh Chandra Mitra to the very recent *Kabuliwala* (2006) by Kazi Hayat -- majority are literal adaptations. In most cases these adaptations are by mediocre filmmakers who have little or no understanding of Tagore. For instance Tapan Sinha made three films based on Tagore's works -- *Kabuliwala* (1956), *Khudhito Pashan* (1960)

background. Both Tagore and Ray belonged to pioneering *Brahmo* families. Ray's father (Sukumar Ray) and Tagore had close ties. When Ray went to Shantiniketan to study Fine Arts, Tagore was still alive. So, it's understandable that Ray would have a sound understanding of Tagore as a person and as an author.

"Ray used Tagore's stories but his films had their own language. He made modifications where necessary (for which he was often criticised), keeping the central idea intact. The best demonstration of creative adaptation of Tagore's work is perhaps *Charulata* (1964). Based on *Noshtoneer*, the film is a

Tagore plays and hurdles they face in contemporary theatre

ERSHAD KAMOL

The number of plays by Rabindranath Tagore is more than that of many world-renowned playwrights such as Shakespeare. Due to language barrier, his plays have not been staged the world over. However, the quality of these plays is unique. He has emerged as a social reformer through his works. Each of his plays delivers a strong message in an artistic way through wonderful dialogue and diction. The beauty of these plays is that they never appear message-oriented, rather, feature philosophical content analysing human psyche. Moreover, Tagore provided a modern presentation of indigenous culture and emotions of Bengalis in his plays. However, in contemporary theatre many troupes face obstacles when staging these plays.

Quite a few directors in Bangladesh have experimented with Tagore plays such as *Raktokarobi*, *Muktadhara*, *Dakghar*, *Achalayeton*, *Tasher Desh*, *Chiro Kumar Shobha* and *Bishorjan*. The number of productions staged in Bangladesh is more than that in Kolkata, India. The experimentation began in 1960s, when Drama Circle, a pioneering theatre troupe of Bangladesh, staged *Raja o Rani*, *Tasher Desh* and *Raktokarobi*. *Raja o Rani* and *Tasher Desh* were directed by Bazul Karim while *Raktokarobi* was directed by Maqsoodul Salehin.

Eminent actor Masud Ali Khan who performed in all three plays, said, "We staged the shows at the Tagore's centennial celebration in 1961. The productions were aesthetically rich. However, there is now a shortfall of quality productions of Tagore plays."

A similar observation on contemporary theatre in Bangladesh is also reflected in the words of eminent cultural personality Mustafa Manowar, whose praiseworthy productions of Tagore's plays like *Raktokarobi*, *Muktadhara*, *Dakghar*, *Tasher Desh*, *Shyama* and others are firmly etched in the mind of the audience.

Explaining the reason behind the hurdles of staging Tagore plays, Mostafa Manowar said, "Pronunciation of the artistes, habituated in performing in contemporary theatre is a major hurdle of staging Tagore plays. The master playwright's diction is nothing like that of the playwrights of these days. His diction is in prose form, but with a unique rhythm. When

the rhythm is amiss, the dialogues fail to communicate with the audience. As a result the standard of the play falls."

Contemporary theatre director Ataur Rahman, who has directed *Raktokarobi*, *Tasher Desh* and *Natyatroi* (a trilogy including *Gandharir Abedon*, *Biday Abhishap* and *Karno Kunti Shanglap*), also admits that incorporating the unique diction of Tagore is a major hurdle for artistes of this generation. To quote him, "While staging *Natyatroi* I noticed that actors were having a hard time maintaining proper diction. Many of the younger actors can handle 'movement' quite well, but only a few have control over voice modulation and pronunciation. Sense of music is yet another hurdle."

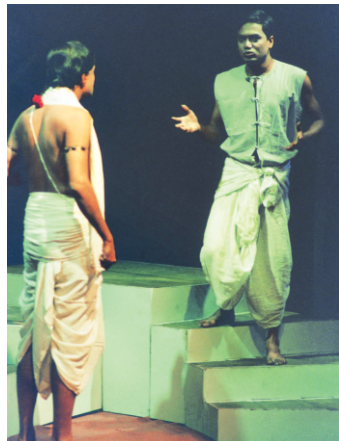
The form of theatre that Tagore evolved in his symbolic plays, which is a fusion of song-and-dance and

an intimate performing space.

Though Tagore's plays are performed at the proscenium stage in Bangladesh, Ataur Rahman claims that a good numbers of experimentations have so far been

remember the way the audience (no less than two lakhs) cheered."

But, one of the major features of these experiments is the use of dance and music. Acclaimed director Mostafa Manowar said, "Sense of proportion in art is the key factor to present Tagore plays in the dance-drama-music form. If the director expects actors to perform skilfully like the professional dancers, the production will be mediocre. Actors may use only 'stances', but not a complete choreography. The perfect use of voice 'modulation' and proper 'scanning' of dialogues make plays entertaining to the viewers. Moreover, the director needs to have a sound sense in music to present Tagore's lyrics to the contemporary audience, maintaining the authenticity of the tunes. In this case he may present only a few lines, and not every line so that the presentation appears as a drama, not



Still from *Charulata* (top) and *Chokher Bali*

Going over film adaptation of literature, Sabbir says, "There can be two ways to adapt: Literal and creative. Needless to say, it takes a gifted filmmaker's profound understanding of the literary work and the author's identity to be able to accomplish a creative adaptation."

Addressing film adaptations of Tagore's works, Sabbir says, "Around 70 films based on Tagore's novels, short stories and plays have been made so far in the subcontinent. Most of them are naturally in Bangla. However, there are a few adaptations in Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu etc. Apparently Bimol Roy's Hindi feature film *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) was inspired by Tagore's poem *Dui Bigha Jami*."

The number of film adaptations of Tagore's work is not impressive where as Sarat Chandra's *Devdas* alone has had over 8 adaptations. Are filmmakers discouraged to adapt Tagore's literary works? "There are a number of reasons for that actually. Bangla being a regional language in the Indian context, Tagore's works, specifically his novels and short stories, haven't had mass exposure throughout the region. Excessive melodrama is not present in Tagore's stories, whereas exaggeration of drama is a



and *Atithi* (1965). Among them, *Kabuliwala* was popular because of its mass appeal; the others were just below average adaptations.

"Even adaptations by ace filmmakers like Mrinal Sen and Purnendu Patri -- *Ichchhapooran* (1970) and *Streer Potro* (1973), *Maloncho* (1979) respectively -- cannot be considered 'Grade A' endeavours.

"Satyajit Ray was perhaps the only filmmaker who could successfully translate Tagore works into films. And to understand why, we have to consider Ray's

manifestation of a creative titan at his best. Ray reconstructed the whole story. Instead of using the stereotypical narrative voice that'd say, 'this is Bhupati's wife Charu. Charu is lonely...', Ray showed Charu looking through the window, watching passers-by on the street with her opera glass and then after a while getting bored... That is the language of films, that's how a master filmmaker lets images speak," Sabbir says.

Sabbir continues, "In recent year Rituporno Ghosh's adaptation of *Chokher Bali* (2003) was much talked about. The film boasts great art direction but efforts by the actors and the adaptation on the whole are not up to the mark."

"Three film adaptations -- *Shasti*, *Shubha* and *Kabuliwala* -- made in our country are drab and below average. However, *Raktokarobi* (by Mustafa Manowar) remains the best TV adaptation of Tagore's work," concludes the film buff.



Clockwise (from top): Scenes from *Achalayeton* (first two), *Raktokarobi* and *Muktadhara*

European dramaturgy. That is why his plays are low on 'dramatic conflict' -- the essence of western theatre. Instead Tagore plays focus on aesthetic sentiment highly influenced by the indigenous traditions. Tagore opted for a suggestive set. In opposition to the painted backdrop and the proscenium frame, Tagore preferred

carried out. "After the Liberation War, Tagore's play *Muktadhara* was staged at Suhrawardi Uddan in 1972. Director, Mostafa Manowar had used six water pumps on the huge stage to create the sequence of the destruction of the embankment in the play. I performed in the play and I still

a musical soiree." Besides Mostafa Manowar believes that Tagore plays are not for the average audience. According to him the frequent staging of quality productions of the plays can develop the 'taste' of the audience.