

Tagore's pride



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

RABINDRANATH Tagore was the grandson of Prince Dwarakanath Tagore, the industrial entrepreneur. The grandfather was welcomed by Queen Victoria, King Louis Philippe and Charles Dickens. Rabindranath was the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize for literature.

By his background, training and temperament he was an aristocrat. He was not a democrat. He never willingly became a member of any organisation. Satyajit Roy said that, when talking, Tagore never used a wrong word. If you recorded his

Tagore was very proud of his name. In a letter to his daughter Mira he said: "There is a nexus between my name and my work. My life started in the eastern horizon, and it will end in the western horizon. I wrote both prose and poetry in Bengali for half of my life, then why did I write Gitanjali in English...? He who has kept me busy in work during weal and woes, would make me work on his own direction. Work not of my country but his word's works."

normal conversation it would sound like a prepared speech -- the choice of words, the intonation, the inflection, everything was so incredibly perfect.

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Tagore felt intuitively authentic ties of blood and affection with the

earth. On August 20, 1892, in a letter to his niece Indiradebi Chaudhurani, he wrote: "I feel that once upon a time I was at one with the rest of the earth, that grass grew green upon me, that the autumn sun fell on me and under its rays the warm scent of youth wafted from every pore of my far-flung evergreen body."

As my waters and mountains lay spread out through every land, dumbly soaking up the radiance of a cloudless sky, an elixir of life and joy was inartificially secreted from the immensity of my being. So it is that my feelings seem to be those of our ancient planet, ever germinant and efflorescent, shuddering with sun-kissed delight. The current of my consciousness streams through

each blade of grass, each sucking root, each sappy vein, and breaks out in the waving fields of corn and in the rustling leaves of the palms.

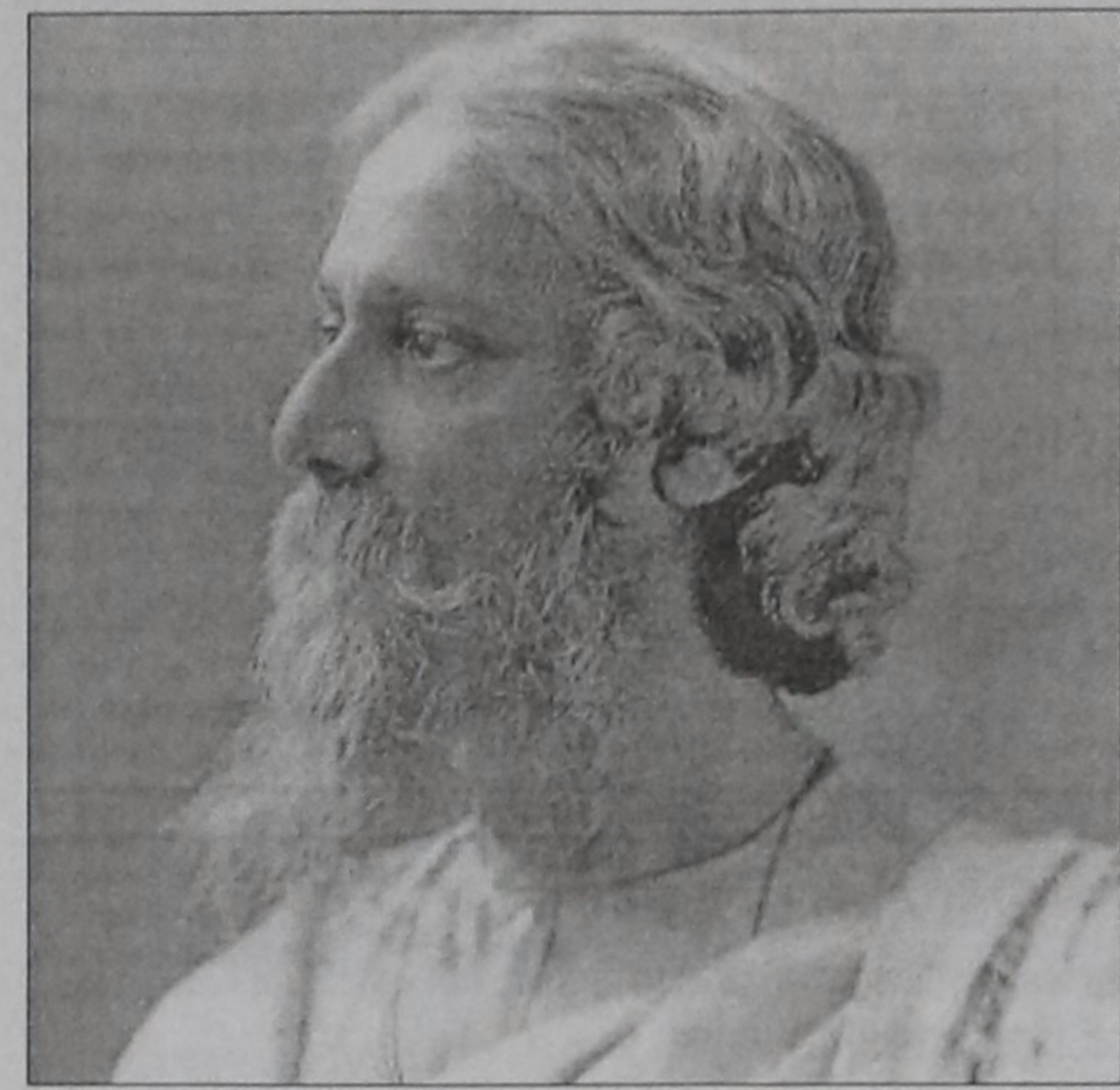
I am impelled to give vent to this sense of having authentic ties of blood and affection with the earth. But I know that most people will not understand me and think my idea distinctly queer."

Tagore loved this world immensely. He thought that a poet's job was to keep this world fresh and new. Only those who have faith in the world would get its wealth.

Brahmachari called Tagore Gurudeva. Gandhi started to call him by that name. Though Tagore disclaimed that honorific title he often behaved like a guru. He disliked criticism. Sometimes he gave a

rejoinder by writing an article anonymously. He proudly said: "I have heard it from many a person in the west that they were not only happy with my message, they got something from that -- a staple of life, a viaticum for the road."

Tagore had few friends. When he was sixty-six he wrote to Ramananda Chattopadhyay that there was something wrong with him and he had only one friend in the last few decades. Nirod C Chowdhury in his *Thy Hand, Great Anarch* termed him as a furiously egocentric individualist. Satyajit Roy says he found him unapproachable: "You could never get close to him." Tagore was a critic of unbounded Bengali camaraderie. He said in his *Western Traveller's Diary*: "Door is closed -- these are bitter words in a man's house, and it will be barbarity if there is no curtain at all in his house. It is not easy to find the middle path. Two opposing views may generate harmony, their separation will only cause great disturbance. In his manners man may often forget this and he gets the beating."



Tagore protested often against criticism against him that he hobbled with the westerners. He said that in foreign countries he

spoke on foreign civilisation in a manner that was never pleasant to his listeners. He was not humble when he reminded his readers that

when Deshabandhu and Mahatma were reticent it was he who protested against the Jalianwallabag massacre.

In his *Swadeshi Samaj* he regretted that congress people criticised him, saying that without reading Bentham and other savants he was not correct to say that the citizens could evolve their own path of self-rule. Later, many of his critics earned the encomiums of patriots by adopting fragments of his writing and passing them on as their own messages.

Tagore particularly referred to one of his lectures named *Samasya (Problem)*. Many people said it was unintelligible. Tagore said: "It was all bunkum. In reality they did not like to understand that. Some of them said they were the words of a poet, good to hear but worthless when put to work. And soon they would recite those sayings vociferously as if they were their own words."

Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman was Chief Justice and former Chief Advisor to Caretaker Government.

Structured questions in SSC and social exclusion

TQI-SEP (DSHE, MoE) and PEDP-II are two massive educational projects and programs of GoB where, for the first time, the government is focusing on social exclusion issues and trying to include all categories of children in education.

MAHBUBA NASREEN

THE Ministry of Education announced on April 25 that a structured question (SQ) system will be introduced at the SSC examination from 2010. The initiative has been taken with the support of a high-level review committee formed by eminent educationists. The new system will be partially applied (for Bangla 1st paper and Religious Studies) in the SSC examination of 2010 as the government is not prepared to introduce the system for all papers. The system will go for full implementation in 2011.

The question is, will the government be fully equipped to introduce SQ in 2011? There is no argument about increasing the creativity of the students. The question,

however, is whose creativity are we talking about? Was there enough consultation with people in all the sectors that are related to secondary education? What measures are being taken to give all categories of students the scope to adjust to the new system?

Will the Bangladesh Examination Development Unit or NCTB be strengthened for providing quality text-books to the students for free or at a low price (there is a gulf of difference between "free" and "low price," and it does matter to some categories of students), or for preparing a question bank for teachers and students before 2010/2011? If so, what are the steps that are being thought about? What will happen to other expensive projects such as

Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP), where teachers and head teachers of Bangladesh will be provided continuous professional development (CPD) training and subject-based training on the old curriculum (2006-2011)?

TQI-SEP (DSHE, MoE) and PEDP-II are two massive educational projects and programs of GoB where, for the first time, the government is focusing on social exclusion issues and trying to include all categories of children in education. Experience gathered through my involvement (including evaluation) in these two initiatives, SESIP II, and mid-decade assessment of Education for All indicates that creativity and performance of students depend on

many in-school and out-of-school factors.

Disparities in education, despite several commitments of the government, still exist because of these factors. Of these disparities, gender-based inequality is the most extreme form of social exclusion. Although girls in secondary schools outnumber boys (gross enrolment rate for secondary students is 49.15% for males and 50.85% for females), failure in retaining female students is still the most challenging issue for education programmers (drop-out rate of girls from class X is 49.06, whereas for boys it is 37.49).

The quality of secondary education, especially of girls, did not improve as much as expected. The completion rate for girls is 50.94 compared to 62.51 for boys. The lower completion rate of girls in SSC is mostly related to their gender identity and to socio-cultural factors like extreme poverty, lower socio-cultural status, early marriage, insecurity while moving to

and from school, lack of transport facilities, lack of toilets and drinking water facilities, and insufficient number of women teachers. Furthermore, there is less scope for girls to participate in co-curricular activities.

It is also evident that women teachers are facing gender specific problems, such as lack of an appropriate common room or separate toilets. Some children either drop out or remain excluded from the secondary education system for various reasons: gender identity, poverty, living in disaster prone areas, having minor problems in hearing or speaking, or being physically challenged. Data show that children from these categories do not go from primary to secondary schools.

Moreover, only a small proportion of women teachers received training relevant to the positions they hold. A successful project called Programme to Train and Employ Female Teachers (Promote) -- which ended in 2005 --

and the ongoing TQI-SEP, however, proved their worth in increasing the number of women teachers, and developing their capacities.

Disparities are also visible in the secondary level textbooks, where men/boys have been shown to be doing "productive" and women/girls are shown relaxing or doing homestead work. Moreover, there is no involvement of women in the writing, editing or publishing of most books. We need to know how the new SQ system will deal with such gender biased situations.

There are also some multiple-vulnerable children, often living in isolated communities with languages and cultures that differ from the mainstream. Many live in severely stressed families (subject to natural disasters, people in char, haor areas, remote rural areas, migrated to urban slums, indigenous communities), being constantly displaced or staying on-the-move (subject to river erosion, bedey community), in refugee camps, as orphans in women-

headed households, in other people's families, in institutions, or alone on the street.

There are also children who take care of younger siblings, work as migrants in the informal economy or as bonded labourers, are in prisons or correction homes, are abused and exploited as child sex workers or domestic servants, or even trafficked across international borders.

There are disabled children also, kept hidden away at home. Some may have access to the "special need schools" (under the Ministry of Social Welfare). These groups are at greater risk of dropping-out, as well as learning less and benefiting less from education. These children are always at a transition stage and vulnerable to exploitation. Researchers pointed out that they are not absorbed in the formal or informal skilled labour market.

In the developed world the transition stage and generating employment opportunities are the responsibility of the state, while in

Bangladesh such doors are closed. Without any linkage with vocational training these children are growing as unproductive citizens of the country.

There is no doubt that the SQ system is innovative. This is, however, going to be introduced without adequate preparation. Neither the state nor the secondary level education stakeholders are equipped enough to cope with the new system within a short period of time. A further review with mass participation is an urgent need before starting the SQ system.

The ongoing projects and programs (which are based on the old system), be those under grant or loan funding, should be reviewed in order to avoid wasting valuable times and resources. A massive media campaign on the SQ should be carried out to make students and teachers familiar with it, and free from anxiety.

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Changing Indo-Pakistan ties



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

A near sea-change has taken place in the political landscape of Pakistan following the parliamentary elections. All-Pakistan President Parvez Musharraf's supporters have been weakened, and his own position is also somewhat uncertain following the victory of his rivals in the polls.

The partners in the coalition government are all anti-Musharraf, and the president's supporters are in the opposition in the national assembly. The coalition government is also prematurely showing signs of discord on issues like bringing back the judges who were earlier dismissed by the president.

All these are the main issues of discussion in the post-election scenario in Pakistan. But another very interesting subject of discussions and curiosity, that has come to the fore following these polls, is the relations with archival India in the wake of the changes in Pakistan.

Undeniably, Indo-Pakistan ties are a major issue of debate, not only in both the countries but also beyond. How is this relationship shaping up in the present situation? It is heartening to note that leaders of both countries recently vowed to not only maintain the current process of normalisation of ties but also advance them for mutual benefit.

Will the topsy-turvy relations between two south Asian rivals continue to improve, or once again deteriorate, which has broadly been the hallmark of New Delhi-Islamabad ties?

The answer will be in the affir-

MATTERS AROUND US

Will the topsy-turvy relationship between two south Asian rivals continue to improve, or once again deteriorate, which has broadly been the hallmark of New Delhi-Islamabad ties?

mative since the process that began more than four years ago has not suffered any major setback. However, some ripples that run counter to the constructive trend can be witnessed from time to time in the positive ambience. This has led to some speculation whether the process will go on unhindered or face impediments.

Not long ago, both countries had complaints about each other's attitudes. When an agreement was signed between New Delhi and Washington on civilian nuclear cooperation, it caused some irritation in Pakistan. On the other hand, India felt that terrorist activities in the Kashmir region had not receded in the manner that New Delhi expected and, obviously, blamed Islamabad for this.

The India-United States military accord, and later the agreement on nuclear technology, were not taken gracefully in Pakistan. From the Indian point of view, Pakistan had failed to live up to the expectation in discouraging or stopping cross-border insurgency in the Kashmir area. Furthermore, certain comments from both sides were not seen as conducive to their efforts to furthering friendliness and, consequently, the future of the peace appeared little uncertain.

However, the present atmosphere is undoubtedly better. The uncertainty surrounding the ultimate fate of the Indo-US agreement and political developments in Pakistan have helped further improve the positive ambience.

During recent years, the peace process received a boost from the highest levels of the two countries. When Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan

Singh met on the sidelines of the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, they vowed to take the good initiatives forward.

The Pakistan president was in the Indian capital later for the Indo-Pakistan cricket match, but the bilateral talks that he had with the Indian premier were seen as a "success," given the sensitivity that governs New Delhi-Islamabad ties. The two leaders agreed to give impetus to the difficult peace process and declared the trend as "irreversible," a commitment that raised both optimism and skepticism. Broadly, the hostility was welcomed, since pleged and belligerence are the traditional characteristics of their bilateral relationship.

The happy developments between the perennially belligerent neighbours have become a matter of discussion in the international arena for the simple reason that their ties constitute an important factor for peace and stability in South Asia and, in a way, in the world. An optimism exists in many quarters that the two nuclear-powered inimical nations are now finding common ground to improve their badly strained ties.

The Saarc summit in Pakistan provided a badly needed dialogue at the level of the top leadership of the two countries on the sidelines of the conference, and the outcome of this contact had remarkably changed the nature of the New Delhi-Islamabad relationship. The last Saarc summit in April 2007 in New Delhi helped further develop the ties.

A glimmer of hope has also arisen that the two neighbours may be able to settle their prob-

lems through discussions. President Gen. Musharraf was upbeat that the irritants, including the main "Kashmir problem," were not beyond resolution. When Musharraf visited India over six years ago, he did not miss the opportunity of having a glimpse of his ancestral house in old Delhi. Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh hails from West Punjab, which is now in Pakistan.

The encouraging conditions notwithstanding, one cannot probably lose sight of the fact that the peace process is contingent upon settlement or understanding of the main bone of contention, which is obviously the Kashmir dispute. The two sides have diametrically opposite positions on the issue, but are showing readiness for flexibility. But how far this flexibility can go is the moot point. They have agreed to discuss it, but it is too complex a dispute, although not beyond settlement.

The Pakistan president has to take his people, and also a big chunk of the "Kashmiris," along with his policy on the subject vis-à-vis the peace process with India. Some Kashmiri outfits have said that Musharraf was seeking to compromise on the fundamentals of the problem. Realism is dawning on different circles that the dispute cannot be settled by military might and that negotiations are important.

In India, too, there seems to be increasing awareness that flexibility is required for resolving this contentious matter and, thereby, create a peaceful Indo-Pakistan relationship. The road towards eliminating the root cause of hostility is bumpy, but this is how difficult things are accomplished

in international relations. While one cannot say that the Indo-Pakistan peace process is "irreversible," hope can certainly be placed on the current efforts.

Some negative signs notwithstanding, the Indo-Pakistan peace process is unlikely to be affected much, unless unforeseen developments mar the atmosphere. Bilateral talks at different levels are moving. It is encouraging to note that their leaders are willing to ignore the discouraging signs and put them behind.

In the aftermath of the changes in Pakistan, it is worthwhile to note the indications emanating from Islamabad on relationship with India. Asif Ali Zardari, co-chairman of PPP, is the most powerful politician in Pakistan. He commented the other day that guns could not bring welfare to the people of India and Pakistan.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the PML, which is the second biggest constituent of the ruling coalition, also echoed the same sentiment. It was during his time that the famous "Bus diplomacy" between the two countries was launched, with A.B. Vajpayee as prime minister of India.

But both Zardari and Nawaz Sharif, as well as Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, are not oblivious to the fact that problems like "Kashmir" cannot be ignored by them. They are talking about peace while stressing on the need for resolution of the vexed issue. Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh has also recently spoken about good ties with Pakistan. It is noteworthy that bilateral irritants are not standing in the way of normalisation of their relations.

This approach is commendable, since the overall political climate in South Asia is inseparably linked with the relationship between two key players of the regional spectrum India and Pakistan.

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If dung can be art, does that mean art is dung?

THE young Asian artist was sitting at a table drinking coffee with strange objects (a chopstick, a pencil and a bulldog clip) in her hair.

Being a connoisseur of modern art, I immediately realized what was going on. "Hi, Nisha. This is an actual piece of Live Performance Art, right?" I said.

"No," she replied. "This is me having a cup of coffee."

That's the tricky thing about art today. You can't actually tell the difference between art and non-art.

There's a controversy in the art world at the moment, because the latest art installation at a top gallery in Israel is a group of Europeans with lice in their hair. Incredibly, we had exactly the same thing at my kids' school. Instead of grumbling, I now realise that I should have phoned the school principal to thank him profusely for providing the very latest modern art gratis to my offspring.

elephant dung sculptures.

She told me that Sotheby's last year auctioned an art object called *Merda d'artista* for 124,000 euros. This is a good example of how things always sound better in continental European languages. In English it would have been called

"Poop of an Artist" and I for one would have paid good money to have it kept away from me.

Last year, artist Anish Kapoor received 350,000 pounds in compensation after a storage company mistook his work for rubbish and threw it away. A piece of art was also thrown away in 2004, at the Tate gallery in London. I felt really sorry for the cleaner in that incident -- the art object she mistook for a bag of rubbish was Gustav Metzger's bag of rubbish. I mean, how does one know the difference when there isn't one?

At this very moment, New York artist Justin Vignac is selling art objects labeled New York City Rubbish, which he has cunningly made out of -- yes -- New York City rubbish. When is rubbish rubbish and when is it art?

"I used to answer that ques-

tion by saying art is something that has been manipulated by an artist," Nisha replied. "But since I have been studying Duchamps, I'm not so sure."

Marcel Duchamps, she explained, simply signed ordinary objects (one was a urinal). Art critics loved his work, describing it as "the least amount of interaction between artist and art" and "the most extreme form of minimalism."

My suspicion that the modern art movement is a massive joke being played by artists on the rest of us intensified why I heard that a man named Martin Creed won the Turner Prize for an installation which was actually an empty room.

"Could a column making fun of modern art be classified as an item of modern art?" I asked.

She thought for a moment. "Yes," she replied. "But only if an artist wrote it."

If this column is replaced by rubbish or elephant dung tomorrow, you will know that I have handed it over to an artist. On the other hand, you may not be able to spot the difference.

Like rubbish? You'll enjoy visiting our columnist's website at www.vittachi.com