

148th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore

## Poetry in the pain of ecstasy

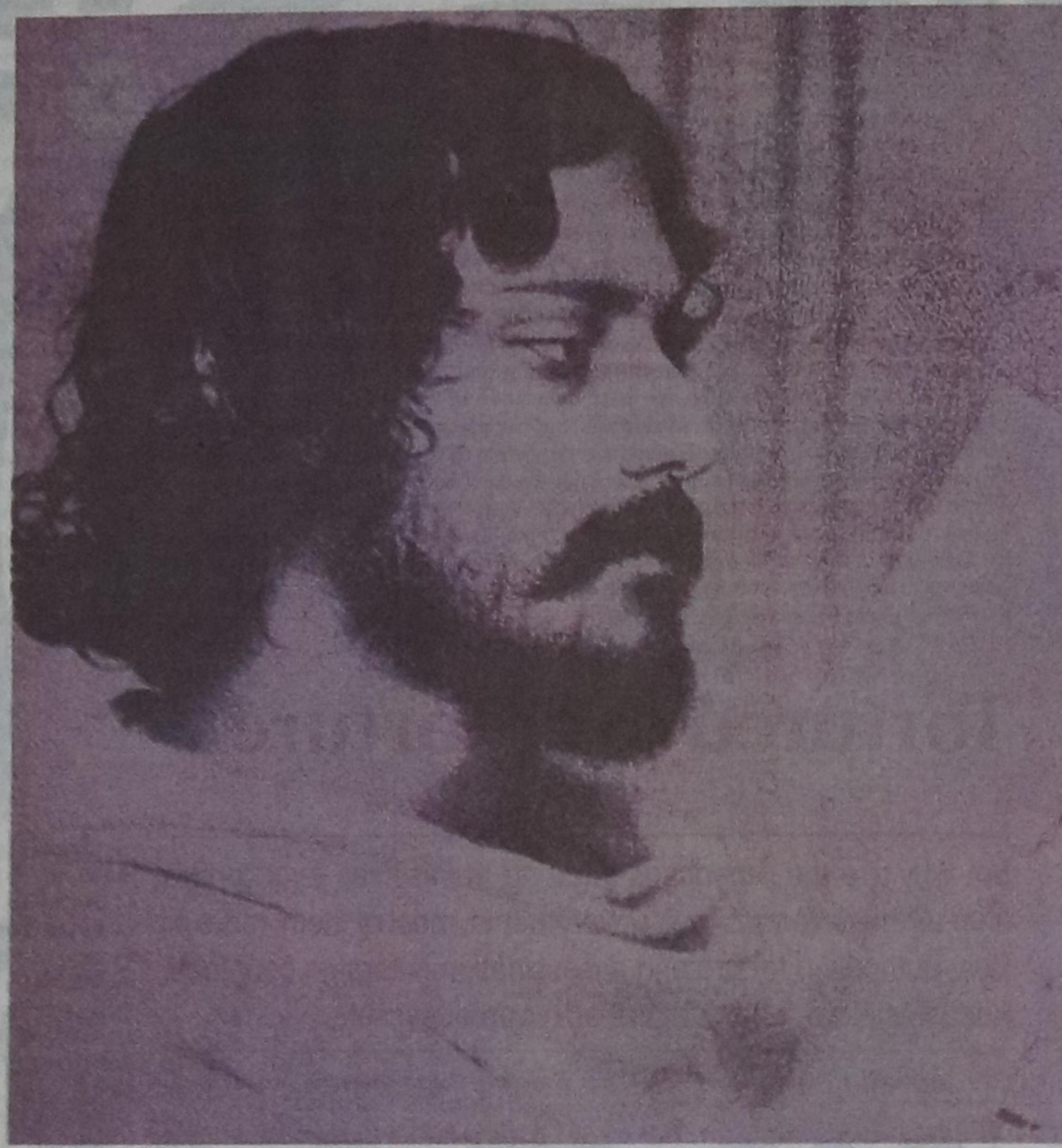
SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Rabindranath Tagore is at the core of your being. The Bengali in him approximates the Bengali in you. As you recite his poetry or sing his songs, you remain aware of certain inalienable truths. And they are pretty simple ones as well. The bard speaks to you through the turnings in the seasons. In your turn, you speak to him, absorb his sentiments as it were. The result is a harmonious whole.

And harmony is what Rabindranath has consistently focused on. Think of *shimar majhe ashim tumi / bajao apon shur*. It is a song that takes you closer to Creation, indeed imbues you with thoughts of the ties that bind you to your Creator. In his puja songs, there emerges all the brilliance of the universe as it goes through a dawning somewhere deep within time and space. And so you hear the gentle tones of *tumi daak diyecho kon shokale / keu ta jaane na*. In Rabindranath, it is the gentle and the tranquil which flows through the leaves of the trees. The poetry is the breeze.

And the poetry caresses, all the way through the verses given over to a celebration of love. Imagine the beauty and the poise of the one you adore, you worship. Imagine the silk softness of her being as you hum *aha tomar shonge praaner khela*. The soul is all in Rabindranath, be it in the links between man and woman or between you and the gods. Praan, the soul, takes on a sadder dimension when the loved one moves away, which is when you lose yourself in the pale light of the moon and sing *dekhate parine keno praan*. No pain can be more intense than that which the beloved does not see. Close your eyes and hear the pain of the one who sings *amar praaner pore chole gelo ke / bosho ter bataash tukur moto...*

And yet there is sometimes pleasure in Rabindranath's evocation of pain. You call it the agony of reaching for the heights and at the same time know that you cannot quite scale the peaks of desire. The soul wriggles through a delicate dilemma in the song, *shunil-o-shagorer shyamal-o kinare*. The pain begins at the beginning and then rises clear of you, of the earth your feet are firmly planted on, until it reaches its crescendo in *imone kedaraye behaage*.



## Rabindranath: Timeless echoes

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

Standing at the foot of the snow-capped mountains of the Himalayas, Rabi felt an overpowering sense of freedom. This was the first time in his young life that he had ventured outside the protected confines of his princely home and was amidst the natural surrounding he loved. He was only 11 then. Strangely enough, this would also be one of those treasured periods of time he would get to spend with his father Maharshi Devendranath. Rabi, in his later life, would call his childhood a period of 'servocracy' since he had grown up more under the tutelage of family servants than his parents. This trip to Shantiniketan and the Himalayas with his father was, therefore, all the more special to him.

Though Maharshi was a strict disciplinarian, Rabi grew up in luxury. His daily routine was filled with private lessons on drawing, reading, science, mathematics, exercises and schoolwork. Typically, Maharshi would wake up Rabi long before sunrise and practice Sanskrit with him. By the time the sun rose, they went off for the morning walk and on their return took a bath in icy-cold water. Maharshi also read to him select pieces from Bangla and English literature.

Rabi started to show his writing skills at the age of eight. His first poetry, *Di Barshik*, came out at the age of 13 in the *Amrito Bazaar* newspaper.

However, with time, his parents were worried if he would be able to support a family through his literary pursuits.

In 1878, Rabindranath along with his elder brother

Satyendranath sailed for England for further studies. After 17 months, Rabindranath returned home empty-handed, with no academic degree or distinction. The only thing he brought with himself was the unfinished manuscript titled *Bhagna Hriday*, which he had begun in London.

While Rabi continued to write in a prolific manner on social and political issues, his father wanted to harness his youngest son to the family chariot.

An 11-year-old girl named Bhavatarini was chosen to be the bride of Rabi. She was the daughter of Benimadhab Raichaudhury, an employee in the Tagore estate. The name, so old fashioned, was changed after marriage by Rabindranath to something that was dearer to him - Mrinalini.

Historians, who write about Rabindranath's life, say that his marriage was an irony. For, despite all her virtues, Rabi's heart lay elsewhere. Mrinalini was not always able to fathom the depth of Rabindranath's poems as he recited to her quite often. For a poet of Rabindranath's stature, it was frustrating not to be able to share his philosophy and thoughts within his own home. Thus it came about that the most romantic of men felt confined in the most unromantic of marriages.

In April 1884, Kadambari Devi, Rabi's sister-in-law, who showered deep affection on the young Rabi, committed suicide. She was only twenty-five then and the tragedy left a deep scar on Rabi's mind. Rabi immersed himself in work even more to overcome this grievous period in his life.

In the 19th century, Bangla art songs reached unprecedented aesthetic heights through the works of Rabindranath. His composition of nearly 2300 songs was categorised into four main groups titled Worship, Mother-

land, Love, and Nature. The seasonal festivals introduced by Rabindranath and the dance sketches composed by him on seasons are regarded as his greatest contribution to our culture. These two aspects of his creativity, along with his paintings brought about a change in the cultural life of Bengal.

In 1904, at the age of 40, he established Shantiniketan, an institution blending Indian and Western methods of education. He had visited this place at a tender age with his father, and the solace he had found in the surroundings brought him back to Shantiniketan time and again. Shantiniketan did not flourish immediately in the hide-bound culture of that time. The only way to earn money was from training troupes of actors and dancers who staged plays and ballets in different towns to raise funds other than the income derived from the landed property.

Today, Shantiniketan has truly lived up to his long held dream as the cultural frontier for millions.

Despite all the ups and downs in his life, Rabindranath remained prolific to his last days, composing songs, poetry, sonnets and novels. His work takes one along a whole spectrum of emotions. And almost as a vindication of his work's universal appeal, the collection of verses he translated into English named *Song Offerings* (*Geetanjali*) won accolades and he was bestowed with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

Nearly a century onwards, his work continues to move the hearts and minds of millions. And like his name, Rabi - the sun - his work continues to shine like a timeless gem in the archives of world literature.

Source: Tagore: A Life by Krishna Kripalani

*bahare*. There is ecstasy in that song, as there is in the sadder, quieter *jokhon eshe chhile ondhokare chand utheni / shindhu parechand utheni*.

There is forever the primordial in Rabindranath. It is life he celebrates and death he glorifies. The universe is a pattern of ever widening ripples and experience is the insistent falling of the rain on monsoon nights. When the melody of *tomay gaan shonabo / tai to amay jagiye rakho* seeps into you and goes into an intensification of your sensibilities, you realise that this canvas of aesthetic beauty will pass into a wider cosmos one day, in the way the river finds itself anew in the bosom of the sea. Some-where deep in the night, the wind brings to you the strains of *ogo nodi apon bege pagol para*. The beating in your heart is a sign of the expansiveness of melody. You know then that the earth is now poised to meet the sky, that the river prepares to consummate its romance with the heavens. The climactic comes through the whispered *megh bolechhe jaabo jaabo / raat bolechhe jai / shagor bole kul milechhe / ami to ar nai*. You are at peace. You lie back, until the pounding at the gateway of the heart tells you that newer songs have arrived.

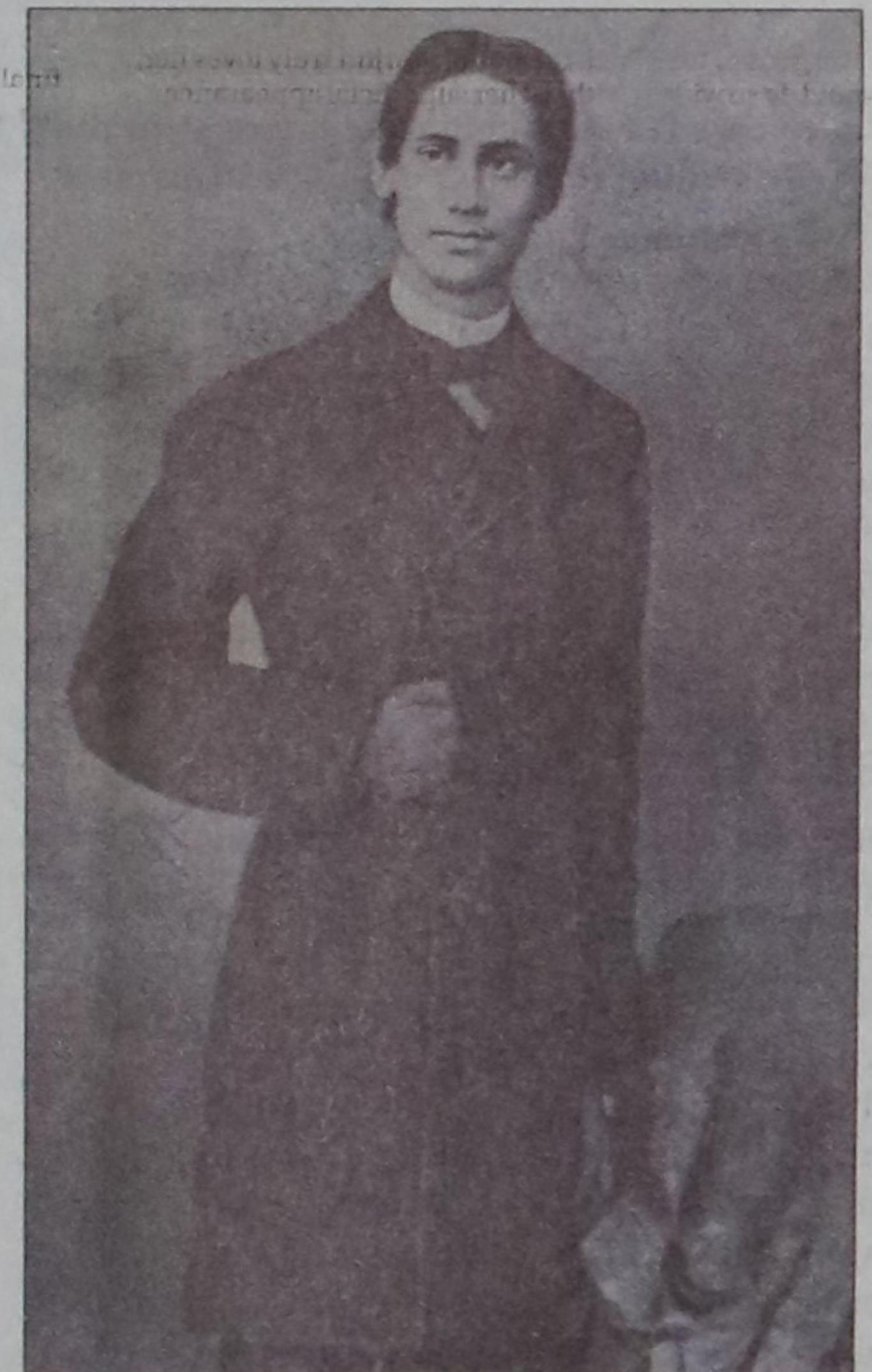
Images of the one lost to time flash before you. The sense of loss reveals the vacuum that the passing of a soulmate has left behind, crater-like. Your loneliness comes encompassed in *noyono shommukhe tumi nai / noyono majh khane niyechho je thain*. And then, swiftly and surely, you are pulled back to thoughts of your own mortality... *amar din phuralo / hyakul badolo shanjhe*.

The universe is what God has made of it. We are but atoms, infinitesimal beings in the consistently expanding frontiers of the universe. But we are the universe too, for the Creator redefines Himself within us, humbling us with His munificence. And so we cheerfully sing *amare tumi oshesh korechho / emoni leela tobo*.

You are thus part of the miracle. God's beauty comes conjoined with your song. At the edge of twilight is a new beginning... *amar bela je jaaye shanjhe bela te / tomar shureshure shur melate*.

Poetry has triumphed.

The writer is Editor Star Books Review



## More adaptations of Tagore's works needed

In conversation with Khaled Khan

NADIA SARWAT

For over a century, to Bengalis everywhere, Rabindranath Tagore has remained a source of inspiration, as bright as the North Star, touching all sections of literature and experimenting with almost every art form. Each era has its own way of explaining the works of Tagore. His plays are still staged regularly by theatre troupes in our country. Both plays written by Tagore and adaptations of his works, along with several hugely popular dance dramas, serve as elemental theatrical resources. Talented theatre personality Khaled Khan recently spoke to The Daily Star on how he views Tagore's work and its significance in the contemporary theatrical context.

As an actor and director, Khaled Khan had the opportunity to work in theatre productions based on Tagore's literary works. A member of *Nagarik Natya Sampraday*, he has acted in "Achalaayan" and the hugely popular "Rakto Karobi." Khan has directed "Khudhito Pashan" for Subachan Natyadal and "Mukto Dhara" for Nagarik.

"Personally, I don't think we always have



"Khudhito Pashan" directed by Khaled Khan.

to find a strong social or political message in a play. As a work of art, a play can simply be significant for its presentation of the eternal human emotions; Tagore's literature is particularly rich in this sense. Thus they always remain contemporary. Like every other world famous playwrights like Shakespeare, or Ibsen, or Shaw or Pinter, Tagore's plays have the prospect to be staged anywhere around the globe -- a gift, we, Bengalis could not utilise properly. Theatre activists can still work on this, and one way to present Tagore to the contemporary world can be adaptation. Experi-

ments and innovation have made Shakespeare universal. But we seem to be a bit conservative and 'regional'-minded when adapting Tagore's works," says the actor-director.

"Theatre is a visual media, and it is evolving with time. Once, it used to be based more on dialogues. Now the concept of 'complete theatre' has been introduced where theatre becomes a combination of all forms of art -- music, dance, recitation, acting or even poetry. To create an imagery through performance is crucial. Tagore's works boast a mingling of all these, so

much possibility to apply the idea of complete theatre here. Sensible and artistic adaptation can make them more communicative and entertaining," Khan continues.

The artiste is contemplating working on two more dance dramas by Tagore -- "Chitrangada" and "Chandalika."

"As a director, I think about the characterisation first of all. If I don't get an actor who fits the character, I don't proceed. I also plan about the set and what theatrical resources can be available for my production. There are two versions of both dance dramas -- "Chandalika" and "Chitrangada." I want to combine the versions and create something new. It's still limited to my thoughts, I have no idea as of yet whether I can manage to realise my plans or not," Khan smilingly says.

Khan is physically rather unwell, which has distanced him from the stage at present. This once-popular actor has been absent from the small screen for the last few years.

"To me, the significance of Tagore is that he had created multiple platforms to work on, so many threads of thoughts for the cultural activists," concludes Khaled Khan.

