

REFLECTIONS

Tagore --- spinning poems and songs

MOHIT UL ALAM

RABINDRANATH Tagore (1861-1941) remains a superman for us, even at this distance in time. He was the same to his contemporaries, though not until he reached the years when he would be recognised as a poet at home and abroad, and when this growing fame would be crowned with the 1913 Nobel Prize for Literature. It is interesting to see, though, how he evolved from a common man, from an uncle or father, into a literary giant in the eyes of his close relatives and friends.

I have recently had the chance to come by a rare volume on Tagore, entitled *Rabindranath Tagore: Centenary Volume: 1861-1961*, published by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, in 1961. In the second section of the book, *Personal Memories*, are five essays where the writers reminisce on Tagore. Given the diverse impressions of Tagore that these essays provide, a composite portrait of Tagore can be drawn from them.

The articles in my consideration are the following: *Uncle Rabindranath* by Indira Devi Chaudhurani; *Personal Memories* by Leonard Elmhirst; *Tagore on the Banks of the River Plate* by Victoria Ocampo; *Father as I Knew Him* by Rathindranath Tagore; and *Recollections of Tagore* by Guiceppe Tucci.

Indira Devi Chaudhurani was the eldest daughter of Tagore's second brother, Satyandranth Tagore (incidentally India's first Indian ICS). In her recollections in very lucid English, what transpires is that Tagore was very much the adorable uncle of the family, was always capable of inspiring children, arousing their creative interests about life, and himself a great entertainer in mimicking and producing histrionic performances.

Rabi Kaka had an excellent physical constitution (also noted by Rathindranath in his essay --- that Tagore was a very good swimmer), though a little darker in complexion with the generally fair complexion of the members of the Tagore family, and would wear *kurta* and *pyjama* at home, and *dhoti* and *chadar* when going out.

As a young man, the poet would wear on his head the *pirali pagri*, or the Iranian *topi* or the Turkish *fez*. While wearing trousers Tagore would wear English shoes, and slippers with *dhoti*.

Much to the delight of the children in the family Rabi Kaka used to compose songs in Bengali, fitting into them tunes from other parts of India that the children had heard. Though Tagore was never given to playing any instrument, at his request Indira and her brother Surendranath would often play the piano and the *esraj* to the accompaniment of the newly composed songs Tagore had made in the mode of European music, for which the Tagore family had a natural fascination. This probably explains the virtuosity of Tagore's songs in which the dazzling variant of the tunes has a delectable sonority.

Tagore also wrote the dramas *Visarjan*, *Raja o Rani* and *Valmiki-Pratibha* in his early life and produced them on the stage in the Jorasanko house. In one of the plays, Indira remembers, there was staged a duel with tin swords and "appropriate gestures and songs" between Rabindranath and Jyotirindranath, another brother.

The essay has a rueful recollection, however, of her aunt Kadamberi Devi, who, according to Indira, provided the much-needed affection to Tagore which he had been missing at the loss of his mother in his early life.

While Indira's essay mainly describes Tagore's artistic propensities, Rathindranath's reflections on his father focus on a reformative Tagore, much concentrated on the development of the villages around Shelaidah and Potisar. This article can be read in tandem with the essay written by Leonard Elmhirst, where Tagore is portrayed very touchingly as a man who failed in his reformative bid in the face of political action taken up by Mahatma Gandhi.

Tagore sent Rathindranath, Santosh Majumder and his youngest son-in-law, Nagen Ganguli (Mira's husband), to earn American degrees on agriculture in his conviction that what India needed was scientific agriculture. That also became the motto of the *Swadeshi Samaj*, a movement that



Tagore and Victoria Ocampo in 1930

Tagore would briefly lead as his only active political programme in life. This programme was based on the idea of bringing comprehensive development to the village, albeit by keeping the zamindar at the helm of things. Rathindranath states that in the Pargana of Kaligram there were 1,50,000 bighas (roughly 70 square miles of land) with sixty to seventy thousand people living in 125 villages. Tagore wanted to make these villages self-governing by introducing a system through which a central administrative body called the Hitaishi Sabha would look after all affairs of the villages, with the Pradhana and Panch-Pradhana at the head.

In Rathindranath's essay we do not get to know why Tagore failed in his philanthropic objectives, but Elmhirst's essay provides definite clues to the reasons why Tagore failed.

These two great men of their time, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranth Tagore, had the same vision --- the emergence of India as an independent country. But their paths diverged in methods. Tagore thought, as is also profusely reported by Ocampo in her essay, that struggling against the British in order to achieve political sovereignty was less important than placing India on economic self-governance. Tagore had an innate resentment of the idea of national-

ism and so wanted Indians first to develop scientifically. He understood that the West had a better technological edge by which it dominated other regions of the world. Instead of abandoning the technological West, he wanted some sort of accommodation for which reason he could not totally support Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. As far as his political goal was concerned, he thought improving one single village could be the starting point.

Elmhirst quotes Tagore on the conversation that took place between Gandhi and the poet. Gandhiji told Gurudev that his Swaraj movement was the natural child of Tagore's Swadeshi movement, so Tagore should join it to strengthen his hand. In reply, Tagore said to Mahatmaji that the Indians were by nature very emotional, and if in the name of nationalism their emotions were triggered the wrong way, then Gandhiji's non-violent programmes would not remain without bloodshed. Tagore, as Elmhirst says, could not digest the idea of Indians of burning the foreign cloth imported by Indian businessmen. His view was that ethically it was not right; before the nationalists burnt the cloth they should have bought it.

Gandhiji then said (quoted by Elmhirst as said to him by Tagore), "Well, Gurudev, if you can do nothing else for me you can at least put these young impractical *bhadrolog*, with their Calcutta degrees, to shame by getting them all to sit down and spin. You can lead the whole nation and spin yourself."

In reply, Tagore said, "Poems I can spin, songs I can spin, but what mess I would make, Gandhiji, of your precious cotton!"

Elmhirst's essay reveals the fact that Tagore failed in his agrarian policies at Surul and in Potisar because of stiff opposition from the followers of Gandhi's nationalistic movement.

The essay also throws significant light on Tagore's awareness of the progress China was making in agriculture. Perceiving the co-existence of the poetic and social selves in Tagore, Elmhirst writes, "The introspective artistic-mystic poet in Tagore had to try and make peace with the crusading philoso-

pher-humanist," and fittingly ends his essay by quoting a passage from a letter of Tagore, written to him on 2 June 1940, that again condemns nationalism: "History is waiting long for a perfect renewal of spirit through the elimination of short-sighted nationalism."

Victoria Ocampo, in her essay, *Tagore on the Banks of the River Plate*, mentions her deep adoration for these two great Indians. Ocampo, who had already written essays on both of them in *La Nacion*, Argentina's reputed newspaper, explains how they both affected her: "The debt that I, a Westerner and a South American, owe to men like Gandhiji and Gurudev is like the restitution of a treasure I had inherited without being aware of it."

But it is Tagore that she writes about, and how wonderfully does she do it!

Tagore was to go to Peru in September 1924. Elmhirst was with him, but as the ship anchored at Buenos Aires, Tagore developed a terrible cold and doctors advised him complete rest and an avoidance of travel and company. The bungalow at San Isidro on the bank of the River Plate was fixed by Ocampo to provide Tagore the necessary retreat. Tagore was recuperating and composing the verses, to be later on compiled in the volume called *Purabi*.

The relationship, however, got complicated, as Ocampo, out of deep respect for Tagore and also over great concern for his health, would not visit Tagore as often as she could, and Tagore, in his turn, would interpret that as her avoidance of him: "the young woman who took her role of a convalescent's nurse so seriously that she ran the risk of annoying him." Tagore also thought that perhaps Ocampo's little knowledge of English was in the way of her desire to talk to him. She writes about one such occasion when the misunderstanding would speak for itself: "In the afternoon, usually at tea time, having decided to be once and for all very bold, I used to knock timidly at his doors as if I came from the outside world: 'Is that you, Vijaya? You've had a busy day!' he would say. Indeed very busy, thought I, despising myself for my speechlessness. Waiting for the right time

to see you."

Naturally, Tagore's hurt tone tells us that Ocampo's shyness made him think otherwise.

However, the river view was exceptionally beautiful, and Tagore's favourite time of the day was dawn breaking on the banks of the river. So he would sit in his armchair--a gift from Ocampo, which Tagore would use until his last days--in the morning and enjoy the sunrise as he did many years ago in his young age from their Jorasanko house, and was prompted to write the famous poem, "Nirharer Swapnobhango" (The Breaking of the Dream of the Stream).

The river view in Ocampo's language may be quoted just to feel the immensity of the beauty it contained: "The river, true interpreter of our sky, was giving in its own way and in its own language the image of what we saw above. Tagore and I looked from the balcony of his room on the landscape where everything, the sky, the river, and the earth, decked in 'embroidered clothes', the willows weeping more tenderly with their new curly leaves, was bathed in the diffused illumination of an abortive storm."

Ocampo's feelings for Tagore are difficult to characterise because they are a mixture of sublime love and affection, deep regards and immense care at the same time. One day she found Tagore busily scribbling poems. She wanted to know what they were about. Tagore instantly translated them verbally, and Ocampo felt that they were the most sublime lines she had ever heard. The following morning, at breakfast, however, Tagore showed her the written translation of the poems. She was horrified, and asked him why he had not retained the first translation he had done extempore the previous day. Tagore said he thought western readers would not appreciate that. Then Ocampo used the image of the gloves to explain to Tagore that she felt the written translation now came to her like poetry in gloves, blunt to the sense of touch.

Professor Mohit Ul Alam is Head, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

POETRY



SHE

Shamsur Rahman

(In translation by Kaiser Haq)

I see a young woman walking alone at midday through the alley's sun-drenched silence. Standing with a hand on the window grill I wonder where she will go. A complete stranger yet for an unknown reason a shadow of affection for her, redolent of the scent of rain on dry earth descends on my soul. I wonder if she will walk like this one day and enter a slimy darkness or if unfathomable moonlight will rain on her the rich pollen of passionate love? But let her rest for the moment in the serai of these lines.

Kaiser Haq, reputed poet and literary critic, teaches in the department of English at Dhaka University.

NON-FICTION

Reliving time: Ted and Kara Kennedy

SHAHID ALAM

THE year: 1972. The month: February. The place: the main entrance to the Dhaka University Arts building hallway. The time: afternoon. Three or four of us, all students of that institution, were lounging on the long brown wooden bench that was placed adjacent to the high left wall of the entrance. All the three gargantuan heavy wooden doors with elaborate carvings were wide open, symbolically announcing that the massive building, looking more like an enormous lump of concrete rather than exuding any aesthetic aura, was open to entry and egress. The late winter sun, giving off wan rays, would, before long, be disappearing over the horizon in a blaze of red glory.

The air was deliciously crisp, but not chilly. Classes had ended for the day, and most students had left. Only a few of us were hanging out, waiting for the sun to go down before heading for home or whatever destination was on the cards. We on the bench were having a whale of a time, engaging in bawdy jokes, a lot of banter, and generally being blithe spirits. It just so happened that my eyes were on Nilkhet road at that particular moment, really simply staring without looking at, or for, anything or anyone in particular. That is when, out of the corner of my left eye, I saw a jeep entering through the outer front gate at a speed one would not normally expect, or encounter, inside any of the university building compounds.

The jeep stopped on the pathway running alongside the grassy open space where once had stood the venerable banyan tree (*bott gachh*---it somehow sounds so much better) that had once symbolized Dhaka University itself. Now an empty spot was a stark reminder of its lordly presence it had once held for those who had been in its proximity, and the painful reality of its premature death, cut down by the Pakistan army to remove a symbol that, to its top brass, signified Bengali yearning for freedom, and the struggle to attain it. The army, by its very act, only succeeded in underscoring the *bott gachh* a symbol of Bengali nationalism.

Before I could fully register the men almost jumping out of the jeep, I

watched a small motorcade, accompanied by several people half-running and half-stumbling, enter through the same gate and grind to a halt behind the lead vehicle. The spectacle drew my and my friends' attention all right. Not so much the twenty or so mostly university students who had accompanied the motorcade, and whose numbers had surely swelled to around one hundred by the time the vehicles were departing. The attraction was the man who had disembarked from one of the automobiles, big, dark haired, good looking, instantly recognizable. "Ted Kennedy!" I blurted, and moved towards the stationary motorcade. Security personnel cordoned off a relatively small circle inside which I saw the Massachusetts senator planting a *bott* sapling in almost the exact spot where the previous one had stood. Having done so, he got up, flashed a smile in the spectators' general direction, and got ready to depart.

He did spare some time to sign autographs for a lucky few, mostly women, who had managed to bring along at least a notebook. And, then, the convoy vanished, as swiftly as it had come. To me, it felt like the entire episode had hardly lasted for more than five minutes. There should be some people around who still possess an autographic memento of that day, all those years ago.

And now Edward Kennedy, among the greatest legislators to have graced the US Senate, is gone, lionized by his countrymen and women, respected by many around the world, a true liberal democrat who championed the cause of the underprivileged in his own country and beyond its borders, not the least Bangladesh. And those human failings of his? They only proved that he was, after all, a human being! In death he has become iconic, indeed, as he was in life, and I will always treasure the memory of that day in February 1972, when, out of the blue, he appeared, for replacing a fallen symbol of a nation that holds certain symbols sacrosanct.

Fast forward. The year: 1981. The month: March. The place: the library of The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Medford, Massachusetts, USA. The time: late afternoon. I was a second semester MALD student at Fletcher, and was working part-time as a library assistant. The rich library facilities of that prestigious institution



Senator Edward Kennedy with daughter Kara

were primarily used by Fletcher and cross-registered Harvard and MIT students. Outside of this limited circle, Tufts University seniors were allowed to use it. A number of them did, not the least for the "privilege" of being inside that hallowed area, and being able to check out books and other reading materials.

That afternoon I was on duty at the front desk, chatting away with my classmate Ned Desmond (the last I heard of him, which was more than fifteen years back, he was an associate editor of Newsweek magazine) standing on the other side of the checkout counter. He had just checked out some reading

materials, and was giving me company. Then, out of the library shelf room emerged a couple of Tufts girls (the seniors could be easily spotted simply because they were not around the graduate school most of the time, and the Fletcher community was small enough for every member to at least recognize each other), books cradled in their arms. They came up to the counter. I told them to go ahead with the routine formalities, and went back to my interrupted conversation. Once they had left the book cards on the counter, I densitized the magnetic security strips in each book, and they gathered their materials and made their way to the exit

door. As they were doing so, I collected the cards to file away, when I noticed that one set had not been signed by the student. The two had already walked out when I yelled at Dennis, the security guard, to call them back.

They came, and I gave a stern lecture to the guilty party on the proper procedure of checking out books and other reading material. She listened in silence, looking rather embarrassed, but so courteous, that petite blonde cute girl, signed, apologized for her oversight, and left. I felt good, having put the undergrad in her place! As I was collecting the signed cards, my eyes fell on the name, and I am certain my jaws fell open. I was staring at the neatly written Kara Kennedy on each card! I was aware that Edward Kennedy's daughter studied at Tufts, but until that fateful encounter, had never seen her.

I told Ned, and he was whooping with great glee! "Now we'll be able to get rid of you, Shahid!" That cad! My Fletcher mates had absolutely erroneously identified me as something of a hell raiser, a wild man! Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, but you cannot reason with unreason, now, can you? Anyway, good buddy Ned (who, by the way, was a Dartmouth graduate, a Massachusetts native, Irish-American like the Kennedys, but a staunch Republican who did not take to the American Camelot dynasty at all!) had a good time ribbing me, and then telling the rest of the Fletcherites for me to endure further good-natured banter for a day or two! I did not see Kara again, she having graduated in a couple of months, until I saw her on TV, at her father's Irish-style wake in Boston. She still looked self-effacing, in contrast to her father who, when alive, used to deliver some of the most memorable and passionate speeches I have had the pleasure of listening to. Rest in peace, Senator Edward Kennedy.

Dr. Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communications Department, Independent University Bangladesh.

Note

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