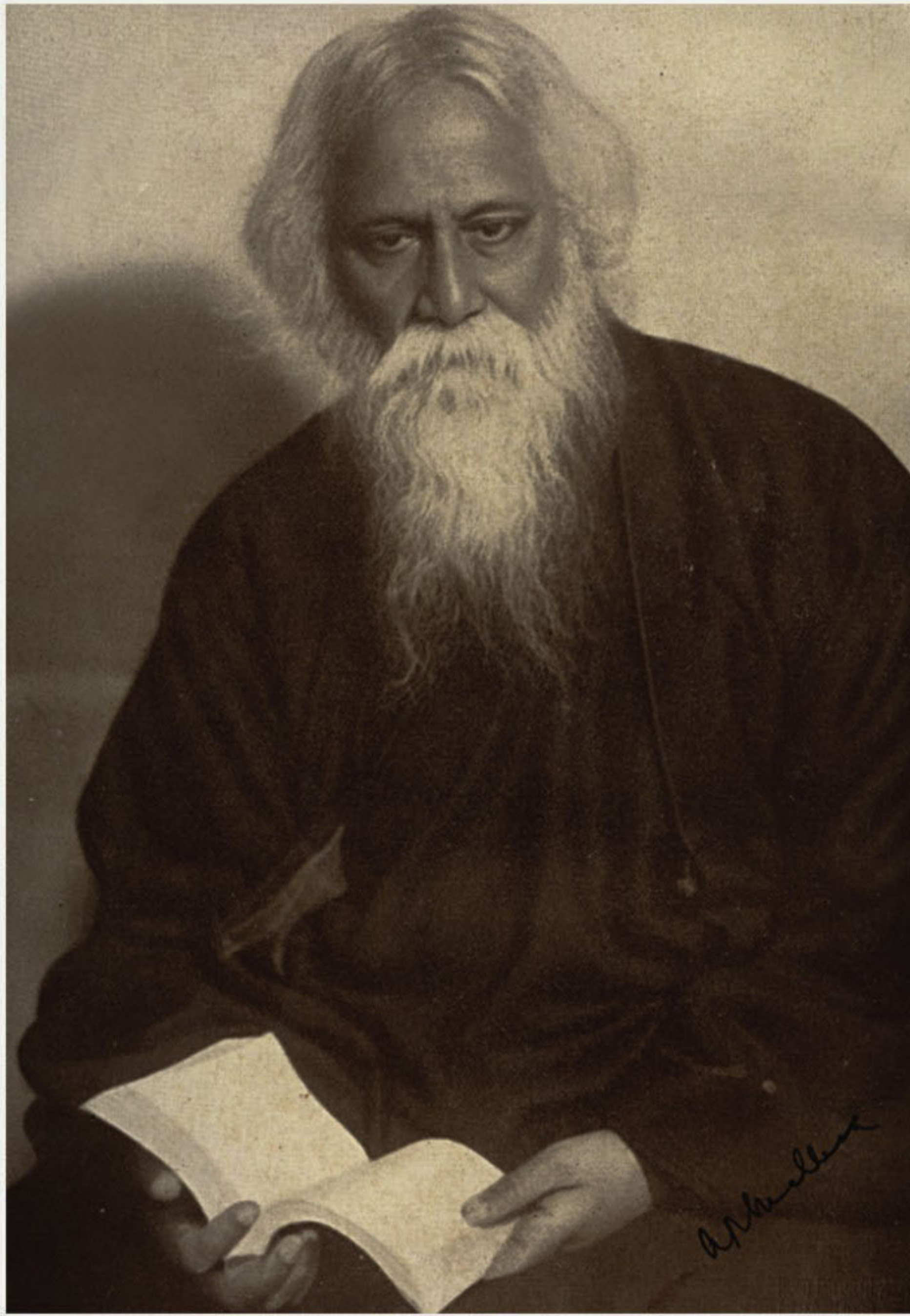


149TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF Rabindranath Tagore



A sparkle that never fades

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

"Rabindranath was one among the nearly seven hundred occupants at the Jorashanko Thakur Bari, and grew up with thirteen siblings: it was not that easy to be the shining star in an environment such as that," says Tagore enthusiast and educationist Dr. A.B.M Nurul Anwar.

It also didn't help that his immediate family was littered with a group of brilliant minds. His grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore was a merchant and a well-known humanitarian. Rabi's father Maharshi Debendranath founded the Brahmo religion. The eldest brother, Dwijendranath was a philosopher. Satyendranath, another brother, was the first member of the Indian Civil Service, while Jyotirindranath, was blossoming into a musician and playwright. Not to be

aka Jodu Bhotto was employed by the Tagore estate while noted musician Bishnu Chakrabarti was the family's 'house musician'. No wonder Tagore's musical construction was *Dhrupad* and *bhanga gaan* (songs recreated from Indian classical compositions) based.

In those days, Bengali songs like *Kirtan*, *Shyama Sangeet*, *Baul* songs had become comatose. Except a few religious compositions, there was hardly any other variety of Bengali songs appreciated by the elites and the middle class.

"Trained in classical musical forms, whenever Rabi came across *Kheyal*, *Baul*, *Kirtan* and regional tunes or western forms, he tried to develop a consistent musical system that was to later take Indian music to a whole new dimension and create its own identity. Some remarkable examples of western tunes that Tagore adapted into his songs are *Katobar Bebe Chhinu*, *Purano Shei Din-er Katha*

Purna Pran (Mysore) and *Anandaloke Mangaloke* (Mysore). *Kirtan*, *Baul* and folk music too had profound impact on Rabindra Sangeet. It was during this stage that some of his outstanding work emerged such as *Bhalobeshe Shokhi*, *Amra Milechhi Aaj Mayer Dahey*, *Hridayer Eku Okul*, *Oke Bolo Shokhi Bolo*.

His prolific style was matched by his innovative and open-minded approach -- it is said that Tagore composed *Nilanjono Chhaya* almost instantly after listening to a Telegu song by noted singer Sabitri Govinda.

In the phase that followed, Rabindranath's prolific nature seemed tempered by a more mature approach. He started to take an interest in folk songs, which were more soothing to the ear and more simplified than the typical raga-based songs.

Gradually, Rabindranath broke free of



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outdone by the men of the family, Rabi's sister, Swarnakumari was a novelist and his sister-in-law an editor of a magazine. Next to this array of stars, Rabi paled in comparison, appearing shy, withdrawn and spending his days writing simple verses.

So what sparked his meteoric rise to prominence, a dominant force in the re-awakening and nurturing of Bengali culture? Dr. Anwar stresses, that Rabi's music prowess as well as his overall creative genius grew in stages, moving from strength to strength.

He adds, "Tagore was hardly 10, when his musical skills started to develop under the tutelage of illustrious artistes such as Srijon Bai, Gauharjan and Kali Mirza who frequented the Thakur Bari and performed regularly. Being a centre of the cultural scene, other noted artistes also frequented Rabi's house very regularly. Artists such as Jodu Bhattacharji,

and so on.

"Rabindranath started to develop into a purist, thoroughly opposed to unnecessary ornamentation in musical notes. His music thus started to take on new forms, free of complication, which in time came to be recognised as the finest forms in music," says Anwar.

To express the enormity of the musical universe he composed *Akash Bhora Shurjo Tara* and more, with four stanzaic patterns the *asthaya*, *ontora*, *shanchari* and *abhog* following the *Dhrupad* form. In raga *Bhairavi* alone, Tagore created 25 different forms or compositions.

"The clean musical notes, *gayeki* and the holistic approach was what attracted me to Tagore songs," Anwar adds.

According to sources, several songs were inspired by regional tunes and blended easily with his compositions, for instance *Baro Asha Kore* (Kannada), *Aaji Shubho Din-e* (Kannada), *Eki Labonye*

the conventional norms of classical music and from those "ruins" emerged a brilliant mix of originality. During this phase, Tagore was an ardent admirer of Bishnupur Gharana of music and it showed in his work.

In the final phase, he seemed to be at his creative best, his work sparkling with ingenuity. During this phase, Tagore hardly adapted from any other songs or music of any *gharana*. A salient feature of his music was a unique amalgamation of classical and folk music.

In all phases through which Rabindranath's work seems to have evolved he showed remarkable adaptability and creativity. Far from being overshadowed by the brilliance all around him in his formative years, he outshone all. During his lifetime and since, his work remains a collection of gems that sparkle and ironically, seem to grow brighter with age.

Looking through a new window

Azad Abul Kalam talks about Rabindranath as a playwright

JAMIL MAHMUD

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Rabindranath Tagore was one of the greatest Bengali playwrights. Apart from his poems, songs, novels and short stories, Tagore's mastery as a playwright is equally admired. Nearly 40 short and full-length plays by Tagore initiated a new era of Indian theatre.

Tagore's works -- mingling lyrical flow and emotional rhythm -- were unlike previous Bengali plays. Tagore wrote his first play "Valmiki Pratibha" (The Genius of Valmiki) at the age of 20. In 1890, he wrote "Visarjan" (Sacrifice), regarded as his finest drama. His later theatricals such as "Dak Ghar" (The Post Office) explored more philosophical and allegorical themes.

Noted theatre activist and director [of Prachyanat] Azad Abul Kalam's post-modern approach to a Tagore play -- "Raja...Ebong Onnanyo" -- has been much talked about. On the eve of Tagore's 149th birth anniversary, Kalam discussed the Nobel laureate's plays.

"To me Tagore's plays can be categorised into three groups. Apart from his *geeti natya* (lyrical drama) and *nriya natya* (dance drama), some of his works are metaphoric," said Kalam.

"If we consider his works as modern classics then it shouldn't be sacrilegious to experiment or deconstruct them according to contemporary urgency. I'm involved with theatre because I want to

Without changing the original plot, Kalam gave the classic "Raja" a new look and tried to portray the ubiquitous King as a metaphor set against the backdrop of a contemporary chaotic world. The production has been both praised and criticised for its radically new outlook in presentation, use of contemporary music composition, dance and multimedia.

"Before Tagore, Indian plays were either melodramatic or based on western plays. Many of the pre-Tagore era plays were based on mythologies that were interpreted from a religious

will remain relevant because they can meet the need of any society at any time. In this regard, the theatre activist specifically mentioned "Achalayatan".

"'Achalayatan' can be staged whenever, wherever. To give it a contemporary look you don't have to change the storyline. All you have to do is to just change the costumes."

The director has been contemplating adapting Tagore's dance dramas. "Chandalika" would be my next project. At present I am studying his dance dra-



PHOTO: AMIRUL RAJIV

Azad Abul Kalam's post-modern approach to a Tagore play-- "Raja...Ebong Onnanyo" -- has been much talked about.

mas," he said.

According to Kalam, "Raktakarabi" and "Achalayatan" are two successful productions of Tagore's plays staged in Bangladesh. "Aly Zaker's direction and Khaled Khan's acting in 'Achalayatan' were tremendous," he said. Apart from these, Centre for Asian Theatre's "Raja"; Tirjak Natyadal's (Chittagong) "Bishorjon" and Prachyanat's "Raja...Ebong Onnanyo" are other Tagore plays produced in Bangladesh.

He added that of the Indian productions, "Raktakarabi" was a notable experimental work.

"We have to realise that when Tagore's plays are concerned, there's a lot of scope for experimentation. In the west, a lot of experimental works and adaptations are being done on Shakespeare. Compared to that, Tagore remains relatively untouched in the east. Tagore was a progressive individual. In this day and age, how we see, grasp and treat Tagore would be a good theme," said Kalam.

point of view. Tagore changed that trend. Though some of his plays were based on mythical characters, his approach was innovative. Those mythical characters were depicted in a way that's very human," said Kalam.

Kalam thinks that Tagore's plays

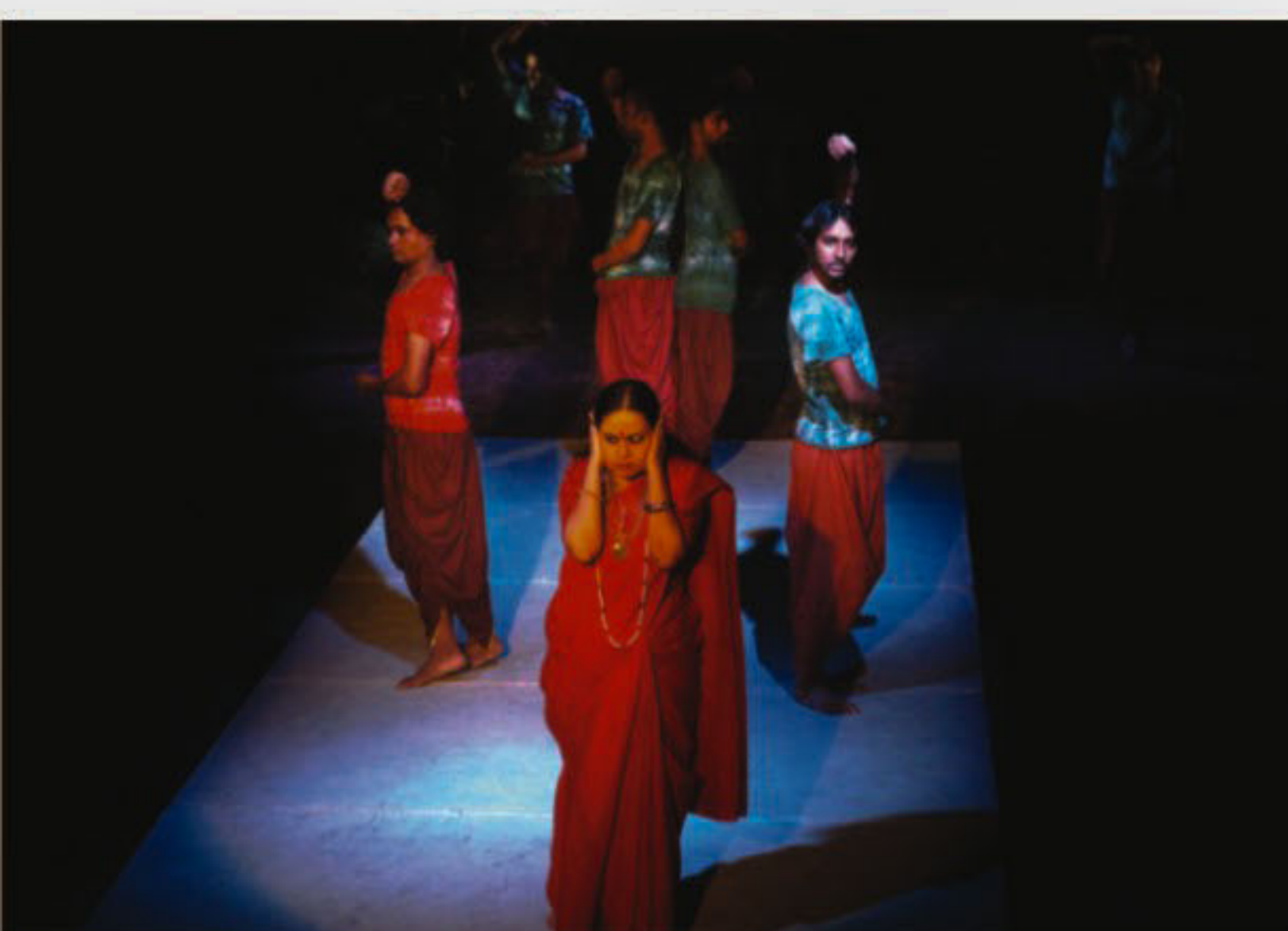


PHOTO: MUMIT M.

see the contemporary society from the viewpoint of the medium.

Rabindranath's works are phenomenal in the sense that they haven't lost their appeal as they are and they don't lose their essence when deconstructed," he added.

Hundred years of "Gitanjali" Readership waning?

KARIM WAHEED

Tagore's "Gitanjali" celebrates its centenary this year. There is confusion here, however. Noted writer, columnist and Chittagong Bureau Chief of the daily Prothom Alo, Abul Momen cleared the air.

"'Gitanjali', the original Bengali volume of 157 [mostly devotional] songs by Tagore, was first published in 1910. Later a collection of English poems, largely translations, by the poet was published," Momen says. Also titled 'Gitanjali', this volume attained popularity in the west and Tagore became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize [in 1913].

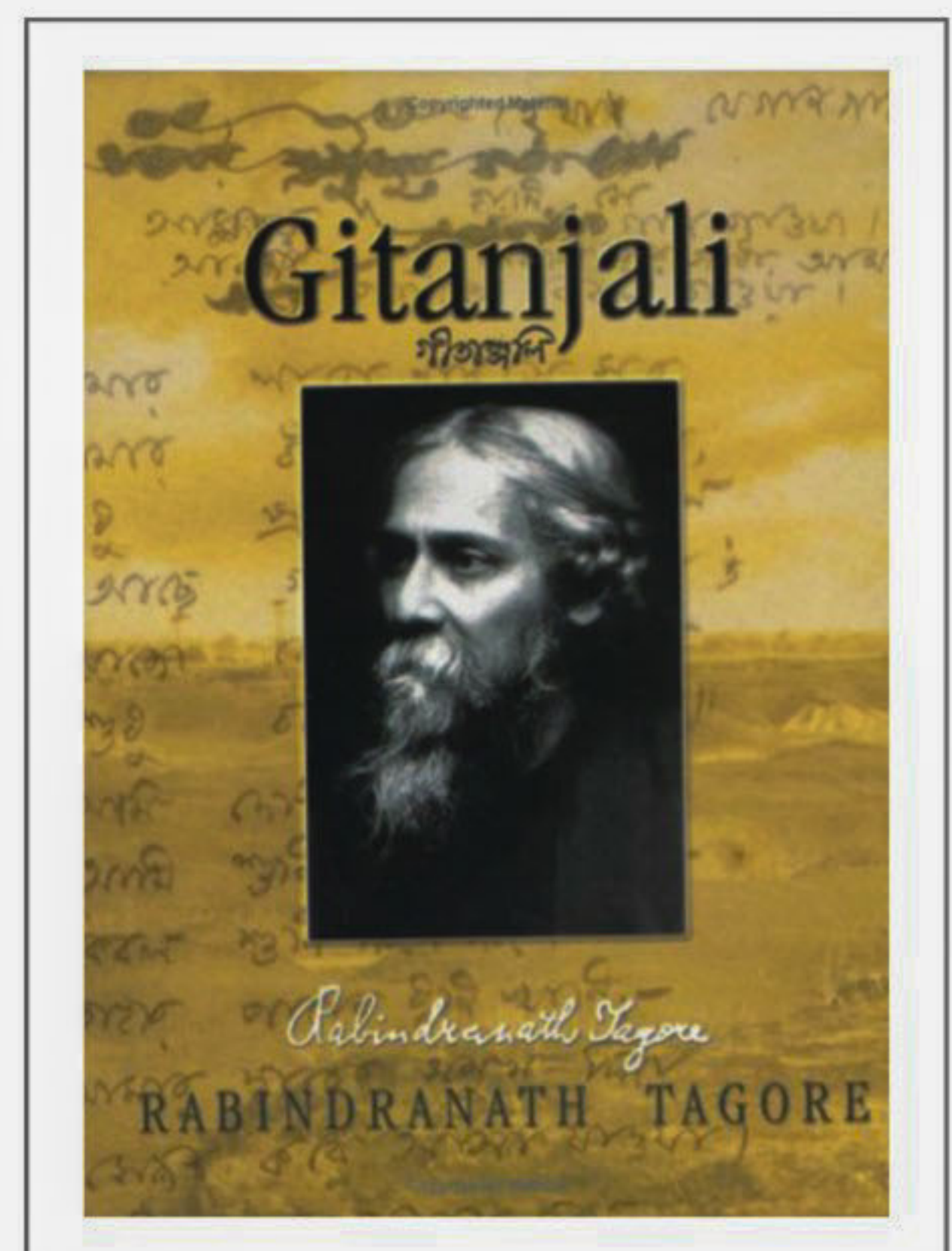
"The English collection, however, doesn't only include translations of lyrics from the Bengali 'Gitanjali'. While some of the poems in the English text were selected from the Bengali volume, the rest were taken from Tagore's other works -- 'Gitimallo', 'Noibeddo' and 'Kheya'," Momen continues.

"In the English-speaking world, 'Gitanjali' is no longer widely read. Some of the songs from the original [Bengali] volume are still popular among Bengalis because of regular renditions," Momen says.

Why is "Gitanjali" losing readership? "Readership of poetry, on the whole, is on the wane. In the hustle and bustle of city life, readers don't have time or patience for poetry. You have to realise that poetry demands a certain state of mind -- opening up your senses, if you will. Poetry asks for your heart, time and undivided attention. A poem can be brief but it needs to be fully consumed and this contemporary lifestyle doesn't allow the average reader that time or that frame of mind. Fiction, on the other hand, doesn't ask for that."

"Moreover, 'Gitanjali' is a collection of devotional songs and people are not moved by the spiritual dilemmas Tagore addressed in them. There's a lack of subjectivity but more objectivity in today's world," Momen responds.

Is "Gitanjali" losing its relevance then? "Not at all.



These songs can offer solace to anyone in a metaphysical crisis. Songs from the volume like 'Ami Jokhon Taar Duar-e' and 'Amarey Tumi Ashesh Korechho' are still widely rendered and admired," Momen says.

Very Healthy, Very Cool.



Coming Soon...