

CELEBRATIONS

LITERARY NOTES

LITERARY EDITOR'S NOTE

On 25 Baishakh, the day Rabindranath Tagore was born, we celebrate the achievements of the Bard and his place in the lives of Bengalis and others across the globe.

# Rabindranath---timeless echoes

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

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 surroundings he loved. He was only eleven 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.

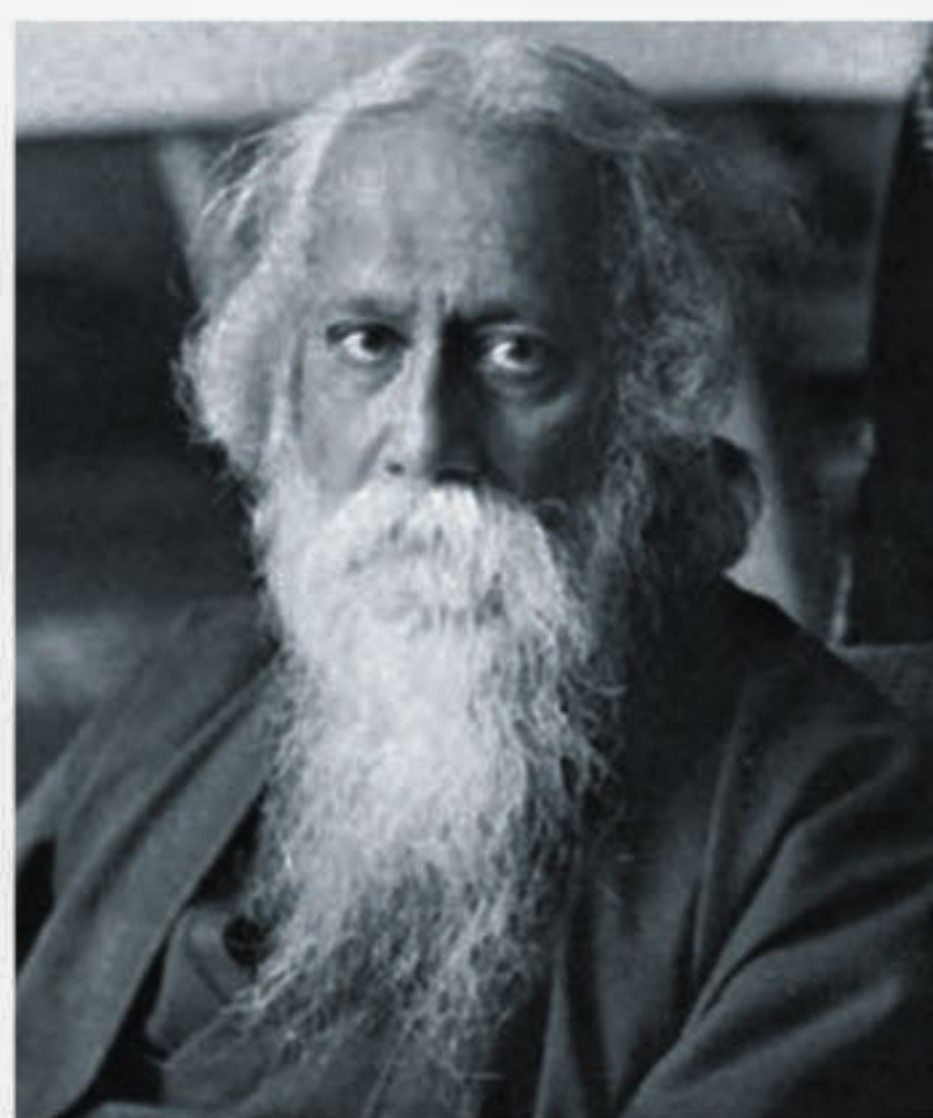
Though Maharshi was a strict disciplinarian, Rabi grew up in luxury. His daily routine was filled with private lessons on drawing, reading, science, mathematics, exercises and schoolwork. Typically, Maharshi would wake up Rabi long before sunrise and practise Sanskrit with him. By the time the sun rose, 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 poem, *Di Barshik*, came out in *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* when he was aged thirteen.

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 seventeen 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 writing in London.

While Rabi continued to write in a prolific manner on social and political issues, his father wanted to harness his talents so



the family chariot.

An 11-year-old girl named Bhavatarini was chosen to be the bride of Rabi. She was the daughter of Benimadhav Rai Chaudhury, 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 categorized into four main groups titled *Worship, Motherland, Love and Nature*. The seasonal festivals introduced by Rabindranath and the dance sketches composed by him on the 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, it can certainly be said that Shantiniketan has truly lived up to Rabindranath's 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.

Sadya Afreen Mallik is Editor, Arts & Entertainment, The Daily Star

# Sifting through children's literature

FARIDA SHAIKH

A daylong conference on children's literature in March this year came in combination with a creative writing workshop. Children from three English and one Bangla medium schools of classes three to five participated in creative writing, kids drawing and illustration. The result was the wallpaper made up of children's work later displayed in their respective schools. Support for the workshop came from children's story writers, illustrators, animation artists, performers in juvenile art, culture, cartoons, and choreographers.

At the inaugural session Golam Samdani Fakir, Pro Vice Chancellor of BRAC University, reflected on his childhood reading experiences. Eminent children's fiction writer Anisul Haq noted that children imagined themselves as no different from grown ups.

On the first day of the conference, Sara Zaker, project director of Nayanara Communications, introduced her team and the famous children's educational program 'Sesame Street' as 'Sisimpur' in Bangladesh, with the motto 'Pora Lekhar Notun Shoor...Jai Cholo Jai Sisimpur.' She shared her experiences of developing this children's program and the challenges she encountered.

Litu Sakhawat of Nayanara Communications laid emphasis on co-ordination in the process of writing, translating into cartoon character, animation and direction for a meaningful creation of children's Sisimpur. Writer-cartoonist Ahsan Habib pointed to the gaps in the Bangladesh experience in illustrating for children. R.N. Wassay captured the magnificence of poetry in a simpler form in a set of poetry book for children.

Student Rafiuddin presented a paper on Modern Day Fairytales, the Revolutionary Girl Utena, and an animated TV series. There are no literary versions of the series except in Japan. Movie titles of the same are available in Italian, French, Portuguese and Taiwanese. Student Islam presented a reflective paper on The

Hidden Truth of Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales. Though the writer's fairy tales were intended for young readers, they contained 'social overtones that most children would not understand.' There is much criticism of the Victorian society in Oscar Wilde's fairy tales.

The eminence of children's literature in European countries was focused on by Shamsad Mortuza, a teacher at Jahangirnagar University. He dwelt on Astrid Lindgren, the Swedish author of the best-known children's book series Peppi Longstocking. She received the Right Livelihood Award 1994 for her support for children and animal rights, and her opposition to corporal punishment. Most recently, the Belgian illustrator and author Kitty Crowther won the 2010 Lindgren Memorial Award for expressing 'deep humanism' in children's literature.

S.Karim, from Dhaka University, discussed issues related to the psychological development of imagination in children. Study of children's literature is central because of its influence on adults and children during the formative years. Kristine Peleg, now a visiting Fulbright Professor, an academic in political science with a background in women's studies, presented the keynote paper at the conference. She is a former student of Jack Zipes, author of Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature.

Peleg views literature as political. Reading literature is for pleasure and beyond pleasure.

The overall purpose of studying literature is to develop in students an ability to demonstrate an awareness of the scope and variety of works in children's literature. The students analyze these works as expressions of individual and human values within a historical and social context.

The conference arranged aimed at instilling in children a love for the written word, so that they could learn to love reading. Those were the thoughts of Professor FirdousAzim of BRACU. She noted that stories and books for children were an important aspect of every writer's world. This then requires analyzing and researching.

In examining modern children's literature too often, it is found that children's stories are 'tailored for purposes of political correctness, that these be wholesome and are in the right direction.' However, a careful analysis shows that children's stories are full of fear and elements of danger are clearly present. The presence of heroes in children's stories confirms this aspect. It was to examine such ambivalence that a daylong session held on the nature of children's stories.

This first collaborative venture, in the field of children's literature in Bangladesh by the department of EnH-BRACU and Nayanara Communications ended on a happy note.



Farida Shaikh is a critic and social analyst.

NOBEL PAEAN

POETRY

# Moving power of figurative language

A presentation speech was delivered by Harald Hjärne, Chairman of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, on December 10, 1913, on the occasion of Rabindranath Tagore's receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature. We carry excerpts from the address ---

In awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature to the Anglo-Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, the Academy has found itself in the happy position of being able to accord this recognition to an author who, in conformity with the express wording of Alfred Nobel's last will and testament, had during the current year, written the finest poems «of an idealistic tendency». Moreover, after exhaustive and conscientious deliberation, having concluded that these poems of his most nearly approach the prescribed standard, the Academy thought that there was no reason to hesitate because the poet's name was still comparatively unknown in Europe, due to the distant location of his home. There was even less reason since the founder of the Prize laid it down in set terms as his «express wish and desire that, in the awarding of the Prize, no consideration should be paid to the nationality to which any proposed candidate might belong.

Tagore's *Gitanjali*: Song Offerings (1912), a collection of religious poems, was the one of his works that especially arrested the attention of the selecting critics. Since last year the book, in a real and full sense, has belonged to English literature, for the author himself, who by education and practice is a poet in his native Indian tongue, has bestowed upon the poems a new dress, alike perfect in form and personally original in inspiration. This has made them accessible to all in England, America, and the entire Western world for whom noble literature is of interest and moment. Quite independently of any knowledge of his Bengali poetry, irrespective, too, of differences of religious faiths, literary schools, or party aims, Tagore has been hailed from various quarters as a new and admirable master of that poetic art which has been a never-failing concomitant of the expansion of British civilization ever since the days of Queen Elizabeth. The features of this poetry that won immediate and enthusiastic admiration are the perfection with which the poet's own ideas and those he has borrowed have been harmonized into a complete whole; his rhythmically balanced style, that, to quote an English critic's opinion, «combines at once the feminine grace of poetry with the virile power of prose»; his austere, by some termed classic, taste in the choice of words and his use of the other elements of expression in a borrowed tongue - those features, in short, that stamp an original work as such, but which at the same time render more difficult its reproduction in another language.

The same estimate is true of the second cycle of poems that came before us, *The Gardener, Lyrics of Love and Life* (1913). In this work, however, as the author himself points out, he has recast rather than interpreted his earlier inspirations. Here we see another phase of his personality, now subject to the alternately blissful and torturing experiences of youthful love, now prey to the feelings of longing and joy that the vicissitudes of life give rise to, the whole interspersed nevertheless with glimpses of a higher world.

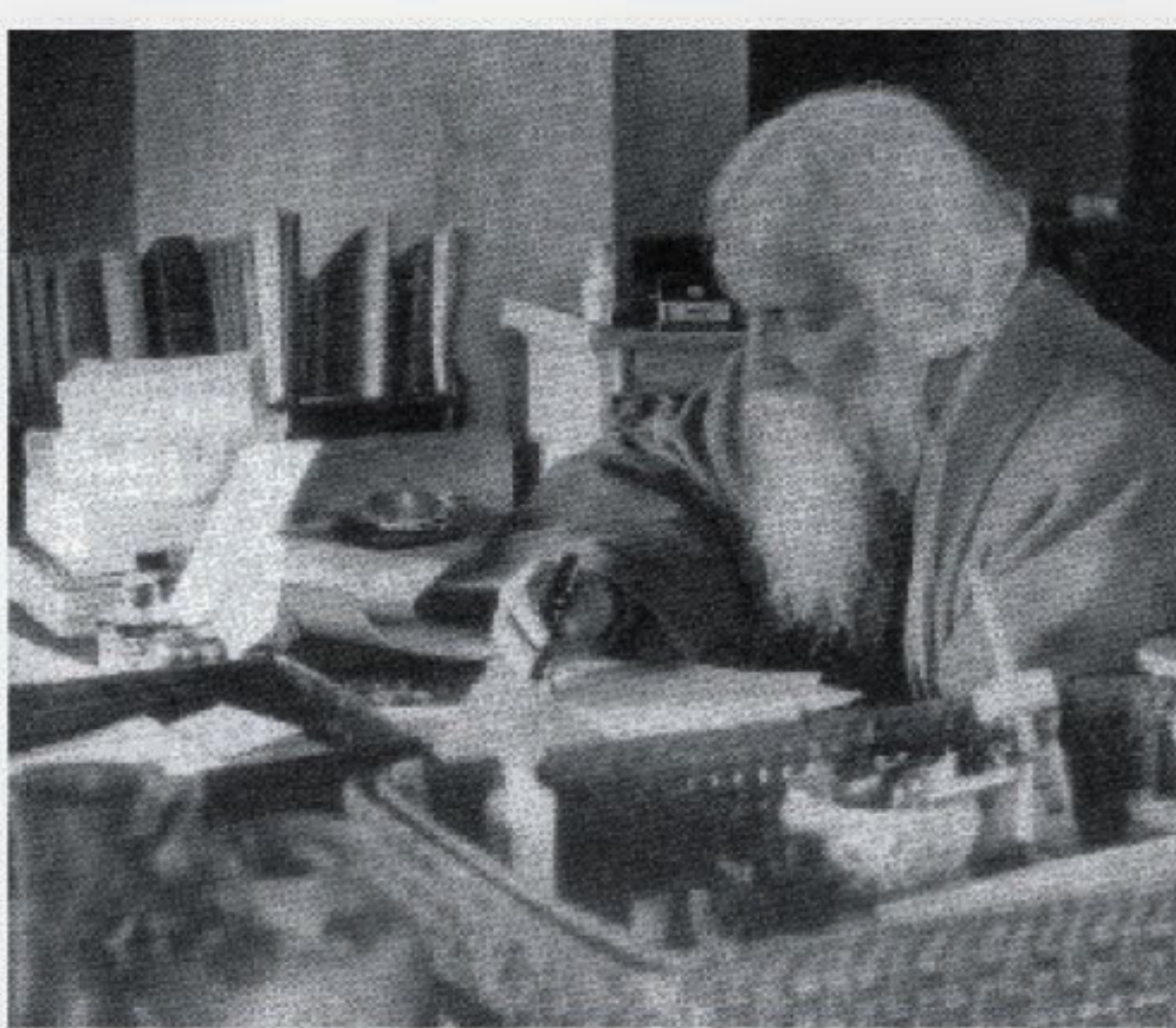
English translations of Tagore's prose stories have been published under the title *Glimpses of Bengal Life* (1913). Though the form of these tales does not bear his own stamp - the rendering being by another hand - their content gives evidence of his versatility and wide range of observation, of his heartfelt sympathy with the fates and experiences of differing types of men, and of his talent for plot construction and development.

Tagore has since published both a collection of poems, poetic pictures of childhood and home life, symbolically entitled *The Crescent Moon* (1913), and a number of lectures given before American and English university audiences, which in book form he calls *Sādhanā: The Realisation of Life* (1913). They embody his views of the ways in which man can arrive at a faith in the light of which it may be possible to live. This very seeking of his to discover the true relation between faith and thought makes Tagore stand out as a poet of rich endowment, characterized by his great profundity of thought, but most of all by his warmth of feeling and by the moving power of his figurative language. Seldom indeed in the realm of imaginative literature are attained so great a range and diversity of note and of colour, capable of expressing with equal harmony and grace the emotions of every mood from the longing of the soul after eternity to the joyous merriment prompted by the innocent child at play.

Concerning our understanding of this poetry, by no means exotic but truly universally human in character, the future will probably add to what we know now. We do know, however, that the poet's motivation extends to the effort of reconciling two spheres of civilization

widely separated, which above all is the characteristic mark of our present epoch and constitutes its most important task and problem. The true inwardness of this work is most clearly and purely revealed in the efforts exerted in the Christian mission-field throughout the world. In times to come, historical inquirers will know better how to appraise its importance and influence, even in what is at present hidden from our gaze and where no or only grudging recognition is accorded. They will undoubtedly form a higher estimate of it than the one now deemed fitting in many quarters. Thanks to this movement, fresh, bubbling springs of living water have been tapped, from which poetry in particular may draw inspiration, even though those springs are perhaps intermingled with alien streams, and whether or not they be traced to their right source or their origin be attributed to the depths of the dreamworld. More especially, the preaching of the Christian religion has provided in many places the first definite impulse toward a revival and regeneration of the vernacular language, i.e., its liberation from the bondage of an artificial tradition, and consequently also toward a development of its capacity for nurturing and sustaining a vein of living and natural poetry.

It was in Bengal, the oldest Anglo-Indian province and the scene many years before of the indefatigable labours of that missionary pioneer, Carey, to promote the Christian religion and to improve the vernacular language, that Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861. He was a scion of a respected family that had already given evidence of intellectual ability in many areas. The surroundings in which the boy and young man grew up were in no sense primitive or calculated to



hem in his conceptions of the world and of life. On the contrary, in his home there prevailed, along with a highly cultivated appreciation of art, a profound reverence for the inquiring spirit and wisdom of the forefathers of the race, whose texts were used for family devotional worship. Around him, too, there was then coming into being a new literary spirit that consciously sought to reach forth to the people and to make itself acquainted with their life needs. This new spirit gained in force as reforms ere firmly effected by the Government, after the quelling of the widespread, confused Indian Mutiny.

To carry out his life's work Tagore equipped himself with a many-sided culture, European as well as Indian, extended and matured by travels abroad and by advanced study in London. In his youth he travelled widely in his own land, accompanying his father as far as the Himalayas. He was still quite young when he began to write in Bengali, and he has tried his hand in prose and poetry, lyrics and dramas. In addition to his descriptions of the life of the common people of his own country, he has dealt in separate works with questions in literary criticism, philosophy, and sociology. At one period, some time ago, there occurred a break in the busy round of his activities, for he then felt obliged, in accord with immemorial practice among his race, to pursue for a time a contemplative hermit life in a boat floating on the waters of a tributary of the sacred Ganges River. After he returned to ordinary life, his reputation among his own people as a man of refined wisdom and chastened piety grew greater from day to day. The open-air school which he established in western Bengal, beneath the sheltering branches of the mango tree, has

brought up numbers of youths who as devoted disciples have spread his teaching throughout the land. To this place he has now retired, after spending nearly a year as an honoured guest in the literary circles of England and America and attending the Religious History Congress held in Paris last summer (1913).

Wherever Tagore has encountered minds open to receive his high teaching, the reception accorded him has been that suited to a bearer of good tidings which are delivered, in language intelligible to all, from that treasure house of the East whose existence had long been conjectured. His own attitude, moreover, is that he is but the intermediary, giving freely of that to which by birth he has access. He is not at all anxious to shine before men as a genius or as an inventor of some new thing. In contrast to the cult of work, which is the product of life in the fenced-in cities of the Western world, with its fostering of a restless, contentious spirit; in contrast to its struggle to conquer nature for the love of gain and profit, «as if we are living», Tagore says, «in a hostile world where we have to wrest everything we want from an unwilling and alien arrangement of things» (*Sādhanā*, p. 5); in contrast to all that enervating hurry and scurry, he places before us the culture that in the vast, peaceful, and enshrining forests of India attains its perfection, a culture that seeks primarily the quiet peace of the soul in ever-increasing harmony with the life of nature herself. It is a poetical, not a historical, picture that Tagore here reveals to us to confirm his promise that a peace awaits us, too. By virtue of the right associated with the gift of prophecy, he freely depicts the scenes that have loomed before his creative vision at a period contemporary with the beginning of time.

He is, however, as far removed as anyone in our midst from all that we are accustomed to hear dispensed and purveyed in the market places as Oriental philosophy, from painful dreams about the transmigration of souls and the impersonal karma, from the pantheistic, and in reality abstract, belief that is usually regarded as peculiarly characteristic of the higher civilization in India. Tagore himself is not even prepared to admit that a belief of that description can claim any authority from the profoundest utterances of the wise men of the past. He peruses his Vedic hymns, his Upanishads, and indeed the theses of Buddha himself, in such a manner that he discovers in them, what is for him an irrefutable truth. If he seeks the divinity in nature, he finds there a living personality with the features of omnipotence, the all-embracing lord of nature, whose preternatural spiritual power nevertheless likewise reveals its presence in all temporal life, small as well as great, but especially in the soul of man predestined for eternity. Praise, prayer, and fervent devotion pervade the song offerings that he lays at the feet of this nameless divinity of his. Ascetic and even ethic austerity would appear to be alien to his type of divinity worship, which may be characterized as a species of aesthetic theism. Piety of that description is in full concord with the whole of his poetry, and it has bestowed peace upon him. He proclaims the coming of that peace for weary and careworn souls even within the bounds of Christendom.

This is mysticism, if we like to call it so, but not a mysticism that, relinquishing personality, seeks to become absorbed in an All that approaches a Nothingness, but one that, with all the talents and faculties of the soul trained to their highest pitch, eagerly sets forth to meet the living Father of the whole creation. This more strenuous type of mysticism was not wholly unknown even in India before the days of Tagore, hardly indeed among the ascetics and philosophers of ancient times but rather in the many forms of bhakti, a piety whose very essence is the profound love of and reliance upon God. Ever since the Middle Ages, influenced in some measure by the Christian and other foreign religions, bhakti has sought the ideals of its faith in the different phases of Hinduism, varied in character but each to all intents monotheistic in conception. All those higher forms of faith have disappeared or have been deprived past recognition, choked by the superabundant growth of that mixture of cults that has attracted to its banner all those Indian peoples who lacked an adequate power of resistance to its blandishments. Even though Tagore may have borrowed one or another note from the orchestral symphonies of his native predecessors, yet he treads upon firmer ground in this age that draws the peoples of the earth closer together along paths of peace, and of strife too, to joint and collective responsibilities, and that spends its own energies in dispatching greetings and good wishes far over land and sea. Tagore, though, in thought-impelling pictures, has shown us how all things temporal are swallowed up in the eternal.

(Source: Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967)

... from Rabindranath

My Song

This song of mine will wind its music around you, my child, like the fond arms of love.

The song of mine will touch your forehead like a kiss of blessing.

When you are alone it will sit by your side and whisper in your ear, when you are in the crowd it will fence you about with aloofness.

My song will be like a pair of wings to your dreams, it will transport your heart to the verge of the unknown.

It will be like the faithful star overhead when dark night is over your road.

My song will sit in the pupils of your eyes, and will carry your sight into the heart of things.

And when my voice is silenced in death, my song will speak in your living heart.

The First Jasmines

Ah, these jasmines, these white jasmines! I seem to remember the first day when I filled my hands with these jasmines, these white jasmines.

I have loved the sunlight, the sky and the green earth; I have heard the liquid murmur of the river through the darkness of mid-night;

Autumn sunsets have come to me at the bend of the road in the lonely waste, like a bride raising her veil to accept her lover. Yet my memory is still sweet with the first white jasmines that I held in my hands when I was a child.

Many a glad day has come in my life, and I have laughed with merry-makers on festival nights. On grey mornings of rain I have crooned many an idle song.

I have worn round my neck the evening wreath of Bakulas woven by the hand of love.

Yet my heart is sweet with the memory of the first fresh jasmines that filled my hands when I was a child.