

IN CONVERSATION

'I like the challenge of translation...'

Dr. Fakrul Alam is among the most popular and influential academics of the Department of English, University of Dhaka (he also teaches part-time at East West University). One of the leading literary critics of the country, the range of his scholarly writings on literature and literary theory is wide. For almost two decades, he has been working on translating modern Bangla poetry into English. An outcome of his efforts was the critically acclaimed Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems (1999). Recently, Harvard University Press has published *The Essential Tagore*, a work he has co-edited with Radha Chakravarty, Associate Professor of English at Gargi College, University of Delhi. In conversation with Akram Hosen Mamun of *The Daily Star*, he talks about his recent works and his views on translation. What follows are excerpts from the conversation.

Akram Hosen Mamun: You have been translating the poems of Rabindranath, and have just finished working on *The Essential Tagore*. Please comment on the nature of your recent work.

Fakrul Alam: *The Essential Tagore* is essentially a big book--more than 800 pages! Harvard University Press has the publication and marketing rights for its edition in all parts of the world, excluding South Asia, where it will be published by Visva-Bharati in late April to coincide with the shardho shotoborshiki celebrations. The text will be the same but the getup will be different from the Harvard edition.

The book consists of mostly new Tagore translations but there are some old translations as well. It's divided into ten genres: poetry, songs, autobiographical works, letters, travel writings, prose, novels, short stories, humorous pieces, and plays. It features two plays, *Raktakarabi* and *Tasher Dosh*, ten short stories, extracts from four novels, around fifty poems, fifty songs, a lot of letters, and substantial extracts from the autobiographical and travel writing. And there is a "Humor" section too!

We include a few of Tagore's own translations and original English prose and three unpublished English *Gitanjali* poems. We have translations by established writers like Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chowdhury, and Sunetra, Kaiser Haq and Syed Manzoorul Islam. In all we have around 30 people translating, including Radha and myself. I am sure it's the kind of anthology of translations that Tagore has not had till now.

AHM: How did you choose the texts that have been translated?

FA: At first, we made a list of Tagore texts that could be translated and a list of possible translators as well. Then we circulated the list of texts among translators. And after that we left it to them to choose the text that they wanted to translate. When the translators submitted their works we edited them and made our selection on the basis of what we got.

Radha and I divided the work: I looked at five genres and she looked at five and then together we looked at all ten genres. Our translators are all from India and Bangladesh. So in a way it's a co-production: an Indo-Bangladeshi work!

Amit Chowdhury wrote a long preface and Radha and I a long Introduction as well as a glossary, genre-wise introductions, a chronology and a full reading list.

AHM: Besides literary theory, you teach modern and postmodern literature and culture. Your previous work of translation was that of Jibanananda Das, another great modern Bengali poet. How did you become interested in Rabindranath Tagore?

FA: Well, I did my doctoral dissertation on Defoe, the 18th century novelist. Before that I did a MA dissertation on Melville. In my literary/academic life I've moved on. Thus in the 90s, for a period I worked

on south Asian writing in English and postcolonial writing.

But in the mid-90s, you could say, I came home. I started looking at Jibanananda poet I had first read in those dark days in 1971 and who was since then lodged inside me. Now I began to reread his poems obsessively. And then I felt the urge to translate him. And it's not really that strange that I should have moved from Jibanananda Das to Rabindranath. In fact, it was almost inevitable that I would turn to Rabindranath the fountainhead of all modern Bengali writing! At the moment I'm working on a translation of the *Gitanjali* poems and ultimately I'll be working on more poems by Rabindranath.

AHM: Theories and methods of translating literary texts constitute a large part of the discipline; Translation Studies is also a course that you have been teaching at East West University for many years. Will you tell us the methods you have followed in your own translations?

FA: When I translated Jibanananda Das I knew nothing about translation studies or translation theory. And it's only after I translated Jibanananda Das

translator, at the moment of translating, the theory is almost irrelevant.

AHM: That is probably the reason why Gregory Rabassa [translator of Latin American literature into English] said that he follows his instincts while he translates.

FA: A translator follows his instincts but it is true to say that a translator gets better and better. And also, a translator learns through his/her mistakes. Also a translator cannot always succeed. To me, it seems, for every poem that you translate successfully there are two or three failures. And then, a translator has to keep working at a translation!

A poem is a tremendously mysterious thing. So understanding the poem and its secrets and appreciating its beauty and recapturing its essence are very difficult tasks and you can't always succeed.

I translate because: a) I love literature, I love poetry, I love reading Jibanananda Das, I love Rabindranath's songs and b) I like the challenge of translation. Also, I must confess that I feel very creative when I do so. I'm not a very creative person at all, in the sense that I don't write short stories or poems or novels. But when I



that East West University, where I teach as adjunct faculty, requested me to teach a course on translation studies. So I picked up translation studies after I had actually done a lot of translation. The practice came first and the theory came later! And the one thing that I understand about translating is that no one strategy fits a writer like Rabindranath. You can say that no one translating strategy can do justice to his works, or even Jibanananda Das' works.

What I think qualifies me for translation is that I love poetry and I love reading poetry and I think I'm a good and educated reader of literature. That's important; also a translator must be one who uses the target language easily, and also has a reasonably good command over the source language. And I think it is relevant to say that I have spent most of my life in English literature and speak and write the language fluently and Bengali is my mother tongue. In other words, my training in literature and my ability to use Bengali and the English language qualify me for translation.

While translating, I try to capture the source text. That's basically the strategy I follow. I think to the

am translating, I feel creative!

So, I think that Gregory Rabassa is definitely right: you must have the instinct and you must follow your instinct. You must not have preconceived notions. Sometimes when I translate a poem I don't even know the poem. I just read the first line and I think, why not translate this? So I take the challenge and keep discovering the poem. It is the discovery that I like. And this joy of knowing the text is what inspires me. It's amazing how the poem opens up and reveals itself to you and how you can discover the total poem. You can translate line by line by line, (thanks to the computer, thanks to the fact that we can rewrite, redo, restructure). By the time you finish, you discover something that you did not know before. The joy of translating is at the end, when you put everything together.

AHM: what will be your next work of translation?

FA: I'm hoping to publish a book of my own translations of the *Geetanjali* poems next year and a full translation of Tagore's poems in two or three years' time. I have decided that I'm going to translate a lot of poems but I'm going to publish only the ones that I think I have succeeded in translating.

REFLECTIONS
On Tagore, as a way of not letting go

To mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of India's Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate, Harvard University Press has just published *The Essential Tagore*, the largest single volume of his work available in English. Tagore was as prolific and diverse a writer as the world has known, and this volume presents selections of his work across many genres, with new translations by Tagore scholars and others, including Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhuri.

HUP's *Sharmila Sen* reflects on Tagore, and on "separation" as a foundational aspect of the modern Indian self.

When my parents and I first came to the United States we could only bring five suitcases with us. In the one suitcase allotted to me, I chose to bring the following: some dresses, my collection of miniature plastic animals, a red View-Master that my father had bought for me during a work trip to Bombay, an old atlas, and a few books in Bangla, my native language. Those are the only things I brought from my Indian childhood to my American life. Everything else was either sold or given away.

One of those Bangla books sits on my desk as I write this. It is a copy of Rabindranath Tagore's collection of poems titled *Shishu* (literally, Child). The book, a paperback issued by Viswa Bharati University Press, is lovingly covered with brown paper. On the half-title page I see that the original owner's name has been carefully erased, probably scraped with a razor blade, from the top right hand corner. At the bottom of the yellowed page is a dedication. Dated exactly two days before I left India for the first time, and addressing me by a name that few people recall these days, it says (I will transliterate here first):

Bidheshe giye amader edesher kobiguruke majhe majhe ei boita pore shoron korish.

The young girl who signed her name underneath these words used a name for herself she rarely uses these days. I have read this line numerous times over the years and still admire the penmanship, its elegance and self-assurance. I am struck by the maturity of the language, which came so easily from the pen of a young girl called Sujata. She and I, a few weeks apart in age, grew up together in Calcutta during the 1970s. In the West, we would be called cousins. But in India, we do not use that word. She is simply my sister. We cannot remember a time when we did not know each other.

When I left India, this was her parting gift to me. For precocious girls who grew up in a bookish family, a volume of poetry is an obvious gift. But Tagore is also a classic gift almost a cliché onethat any middle class Bengali girl would give. Indeed, the power of that gift lay not in its singularity, but in its ubiquity. This was my sister's way of saying goodbye and asking me never to forget our shared language.

Decades later, Jill Breitbarth's design makes this old Bangla book reappear on the jacket of *The Essential Tagore*, a ground-breaking new anthology edited by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty. As I look at Jill's elegant design, I am reminded of another poem, one not included in *Shishu*. This poem is called "Jete Nahi Dibo" ("I Won't Let You Go") and it appears in a collection called *Sonar Tari* (literally, The Golden Boat). Here is an excerpt from Fakrul Alam's crisp translation of the poem:

*Someone trying to snatch from darkness
The flame of a dying lamp exclaims
A hundred times, "I won't let you go!"
It's the oldest cry resounding from earth to heaven
The solemnest lament, "I won't let you go!"
And yet, alas, we have to let go; and yet,
Of course, we must go. And this is how it has been,
From time immemorial. Since creation's currents
Began streaming relentlessly towards extinction's sea
With burning eyes and outstretched arms
We've all been crying out in vain endlessly,
"Won't let go, won't let you go!"
Filling earth's shores with laments
As everything ebbs inexorably away.
The waves up front cry out to the ones in the rear,
"Won't let go, won't let you go!" But no one listens....*

*Everywhere around me this day I hear
My daughter's plaintive voice; it keeps ringing
In my ears and piercing the heart of the universe.
Earth resounds with a child's unreasonable cry.
Forever it loses what it gets and yet it won't
Slacken its grip; forever it calls us*

*With unending love like my four-year-old daughter:
"Won't let you go!" Though sad-faced and in tears,
Its pride shattered at every step,*

Love refuses to accept defeat and cries out

In desperation, "Won't let you go!"

Defeated each time it blurts out,

"Can the one I love stay away?"

Can anything in the universe compare

In strength or be as boundless as my desire?"

As I was re-reading Fakrul's translation of this powerful poem and thinking about the pain of leaving and being left, Ananya Vajpeyi sent me the manuscript of her forthcoming book on the political foundations of modern India. Immediately, I turned to her chapter on Tagore. The entire chapter is an eloquent meditation on *viraha* (literally, separation), an important trope in classical Indian literature. For Tagore separation from one's lover becomes separation from History itself. Ananya writes about Tagore's invention of the modern Indian self's longing a constitutive aspect of the self.

Is the book I have held on to for all these years a sign of my longing during the season of *viraha*? I had thought the book was given to me by someone who wanted to hold on to me. But I had also held on to it as a way of not letting go of a past, a language, a part of the self. What I didn't understand is that new pasts, new languages, new selves are being forged through this very longing even now.

What did Sujata write in the half-title page? Here is my rough translation:

When you are abroad, read this book from time to time and remember our country's great poet.

I marvel at the unabashed anticipatory nostalgia in those girlish lines. All migrants are told not to forget by those they leave behind. All migrants are afraid they will be forgotten by those they have left. I won't let you go is the cry of children, parents, lovers, nations, languages. Jete nahi dibo. I won't let you go, say two sisters (one in Calcutta and another in Cambridge), two books (one published by Viswa Bharati University Press in 1976 and another published by Harvard University Press in 2011), two languages (Bangla and English) to each other across the distance of decades, within the bounds of a dust jacket.

NON-FICTION

The village girl from Kathaltali

TASLIMA SHAHJAHAN MITHUN

Village girl from Kathaltali, you will never read this story I wrote about your short, wonderful and tragic life. But I write it anyway, so others can know your life's remarkable journey.

You came from a sleepy village called Kathaltali in the Bangladeshi district of Barisal. You spent your young years running to school through paddy fields, your long frizzy hair dancing in the breeze. You swam in your family lakes, told ghost stories to your cousins sitting on the branches of mango trees. You spent dusky evenings listening to crickets and watching frantic moths knock against night lanterns. You were incredibly beautiful and your family nicknamed you 'Beauty', a name that remained with you all your life.

You had village maids help your mother and aunts cook delicious freshly-made curries and rice every evening. The smell of saffron, cumin and chilli powder wafted through the corridors of your stone brick home.

Your mother heartbreakingly died when you were only eight and you greatly mourned her passing. Facing tragedy so young made you sad but strong. Your father remarried and you were sent to your uncles to be raised. You were separated from your siblings and felt alone sometimes because of this. Letters kept you in family contact.

When you were based in Dhaka, you met a junior doctor. After a year of courtship, you married. You gave birth to your daughter in the first tumultuous year of marriage. Your husband was a good man, but was quick-tempered and had very traditional family values. You were moved to bustling Jamalpur to live with your in-laws, while your husband came to the UK as a full-fledged NHS doctor. He was incredibly hardworking and dedicated and in later years would regret the seventeen-hour shifts he would sometimes do, as it meant less time with you. You joined him with your daughter in 1974. Your child kept you company on the long flight away from everything you

had known.

You embraced your new home, your new life with great anticipation. You took English language courses, you learnt to cook "British" meals, you enjoyed Saturday night television. You were the glue that kept the Bengali social scene going for your family. You tracked down friends and colleagues that had moved to the UK and forged life-long friendships.

Even though you settled well in the proceeding ten years, giving birth to a beautiful baby boy along the way, you still pined for Bangladesh. So you took your children home for a short while to steep them in their cultural heritage. They would be grateful for this act, as it gave them a complete sense of their identity. They were proud to be British but they were Bangladeshi too.

The years that followed were exciting. You truly nurtured who you were. Upon your return to the UK, you involved yourself in social work and writing. As your children grew up, went to university and went on to become an HR professional and solicitor respectively, you found yourself with more free time to feed your creative urge. Within fifteen years you published nine books in Bangladesh, appeared on Asian television networks, were interviewed by BBC Leeds Radio, had been awarded a gold medal by the Bangla Academy, received an "International Poet of Merit" award from the International Society of Poets and were a committed member in many charity projects.

You travelled the world and observed, absorbed ways of life, languages. This made you grow as a person, made you more culturally aware. You were a moderate Muslim in all senses of the word. You spread your energies in charitable causes across every class and religion, you helped diabetics, cancer sufferers, people Muslim and non-Muslim. Your children both met and married people outside of their race. You were the first in our family to embrace the inter-racial relationships and help set a precedent amongst your friends and extended

family for the acceptance of "love" rather than "arranged" marriages.

In the next six years, your daughter gave birth to your two grandsons, the apples of your eye. Your smile when you saw them dazzled like the summer sun.

Then Fate decided you had done enough with your life. First diabetes, then cancer. You fought a determined battle for many years, endured treatments, countless medications. You lost your hearing in one ear, had problems walking, your sight began to fail you. You had operations, chemotherapy and physiotherapy. You were in and out of hospitals.

Your once old-fashioned husband became a modern day man. He became your carer. In turn, he began to appreciate the truly wonderful, capable homemaker you were. You were a gifted cook and as you became less able, he began missing his home-cooked meals and finally learnt to cook. As your health failed, the arguments you had in your volatile marriage melted away into a deep, unfathomable love for each other. He retired early and you spent your last three years together. When you became bedridden, your children and your husband wept for the once-active woman fading before their eyes.

You finally fell asleep on 8 May 2009, aged only 57. Your last request was to be buried in Kathaltali. To go back to the village you were born in. Your family honoured that request and amongst the glistening palm trees and fluttering butterflies on jasmine bushes, they laid you to rest in your family graveyard.

You are gone, but I like to think of you as that young village girl running carefree through the paddy fields, nothing but the thoughts of happy tomorrows filling your dreams.

Rest in peace, Khadija Shahjahan "Beauty"; rest in peace, darling mum.

I love you.