

A hundred and fifty years after his birth, Rabindranath Tagore remains a pre-eminent, indeed the pre-eminent, man of letters on both sides of the old, historical Bengal. Humanist, poet, storyteller, artist, playwright, mystic, thinker, he is yet South Asia's voice in a wider global perspective.

On the eve of 25 Baishakh, 8 May, Star Literature pays tribute to the Bard.

--- Literary Editor

Rabindranath: He belonged to the world

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

All Bengalis will observe the 150th anniversary of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore on 25 Baishakh 1418 with respect, love and gratitude. India and Bangladesh have planned joint state-level birthday celebrations for the greatest poet of the Bangla language.

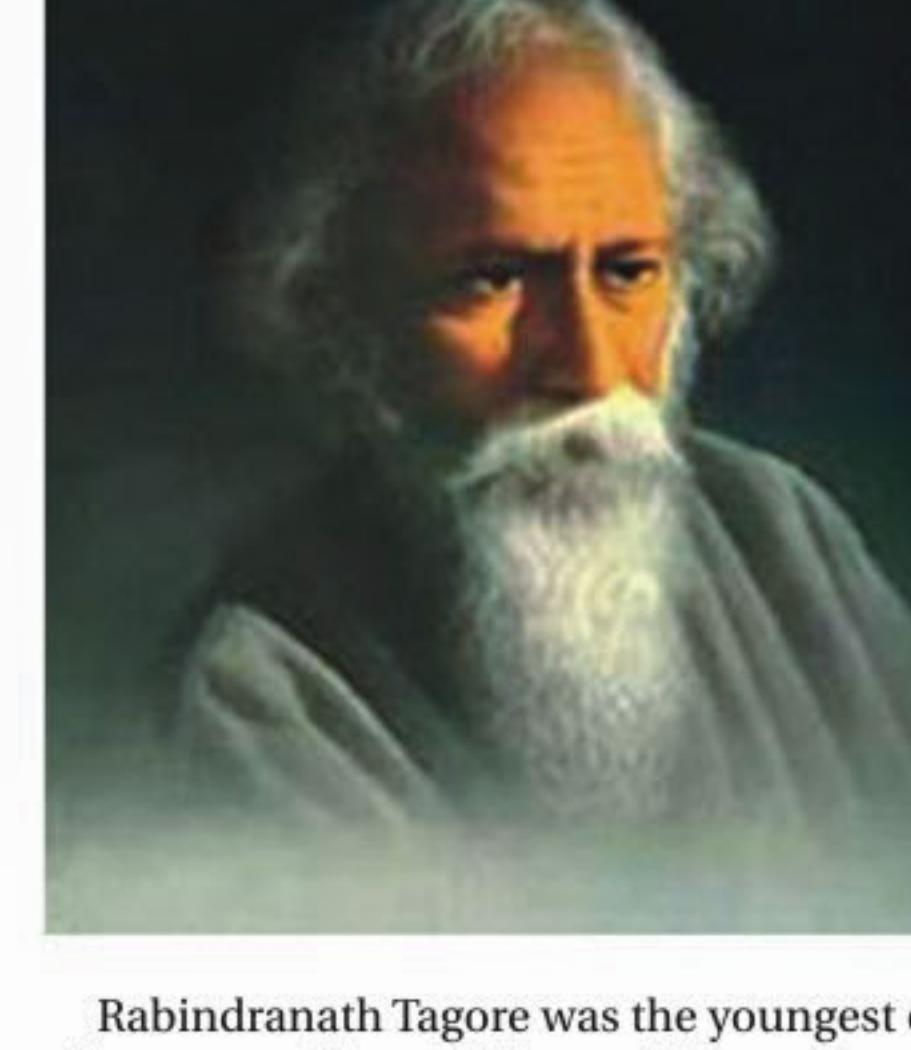
Rabindranath expected his readers to read his poetry a century later. ('Aji Hotey Shotobarsha Porey...'). His readers haven't disappointed him. We expect them to read him in the coming centuries too. One hundred and fifty years after his birth, he remains the most influential writer in his language.

Rabindranath Tagore to Bangla is what William Shakespeare is to English. As mentioned before, he is the best poet of the Bangla language. Add to it the fact that he is the best writer of Bangla short stories. In fact, as a story-teller, he is second to none. Only Anton Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant can be bracketed with him. His brilliantly lucid, lyrical prose and his grasp of human psychology are unique. It is said that he dealt with every human emotion in his stories and his songs. Tagore is the foremost lyricist of his language and one of its most celebrated composers. His songs and his short stories will keep him immortal for at least a few more centuries. What about his novels? They are also some of the very best in Bangla. He wrote lovely plays. He was also a painter of note. Like Shakespeare, he also acted in his plays. He was a creative man almost all his life from his 16th to his 80th year. He composed rhymes even as a child. To use a cricketing term, he is the greatest all-rounder among Bengali writers. He was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in literature. The year was 1913 and he was only 52.

Rabindranath has no equal from many angles. Take the case of the national anthems of South Asia's three important countries India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. India and Bangladesh proudly selected his songs as their anthems immediately after becoming independent. In April 2011 we learned that Sri Lanka's national anthem was also penned by Tagore. 'Apa Sri Lanka, Nama Nama Nama Mata, Sundar Sri Boroni' was originally 'Nama Nama Sri Lanka Mata' in Bangla, written and set to tune by Rabindranath. He did so at the request of his favourite Sri Lankan student at Shantiniketan, Ananda Samarkun, in 1938. In 1940 Ananda returned to his native land and in 1946 he translated the song into Sinhalese and recorded it in Tagore's tune. Sri Lanka became independent in 1948. A couple of years later a National Anthem

Committee was formed. It chose Ananda's song, after a lot of discussion, on 22 November 1951. No other poet has written the national anthem of two countries, let alone three. Rabindranath is also the pre-eminent literary genius of not only Bengal but the whole of South Asia as well. Or perhaps of the whole of Asia.

It can be claimed that Rabindranath reshaped Bangla literature and music. He modernized Bangla art by refusing to follow rigid classical forms. The Nobel Prize Committee as well as most westerners found his poetry deeply sensitive, fresh and beautiful. They considered his verse spiritual, found his personality mesmerizing and gave him a prophet-like status. His countrymen found his poetry magical and his prose elegant. They admired him when he denounced the British Raj and supported Indian independence. He was knighted in 1915 but he renounced his title in 1919 after the British army's killing of innocent civilians in Jalianwalabagh.



Rabindranath Tagore was the youngest of thirteen surviving children of his parents and was born in the Jorasanko mansion in Kolkata. His father Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) was the son of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. His mother was Sarada Devi (1830-1875). He was raised mainly by servants since his mother died early and his father travelled a lot. He remembered his mother very touchingly in his early poems. He didn't have much of schooling and studied literature, biographies, history, modern science and Sanskrit at home. He very seriously read the poetry of Kalidasa. At seventeen he went to England and attended the public school at Brighton, East Sussex. He wanted to become a barrister but returned home without a degree.

He married Mrinalini Devi (1873-1902) on 9 December 1883. They had five children, two of whom died before reaching

adulthood. Tagore died on 7 August 1941 (Shrabon 22, 1348). Between 1878 and 1932 he visited more than thirty countries of five continents.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote eight novels and four novellas. *Gora*, *Jogajog*, *Chokher Bali*, *Noukadubi* and *Shesher Kobita* are remarkable for their quality. *Shesher Kobita* is very lyrical and has elements of satire and post-modernism. Satyajit Ray has turned some of Tagore's novels into excellent films. He wrote a lot of non-fiction, ranging from Indian history to linguistics. He wrote autobiographies, travelogues, essays and lectures. *Europe Jatrir Patra* (Letters from Europe) and *Manusher Dharma* (The Religion of Man) were admired a lot at home and abroad.

Rabindranath wrote more than two thousand songs, widely considered his best creation. His songs are an integral part of Bangla culture. He started to paint at sixty and turned out to be a prolific painter. He even had an exhibition in Paris. His plays are also world class. They have been staged around the world.

Between 1891 and 1895 Rabindranath wrote more than half of his stories. They are noted for their profundity not only in Bangla but also in world literature. Like his songs, they are also his finest work. Many of his characters are simply unforgettable. Kabuliwallah, the Afghan fruit-seller, and little Mini, the postmaster and young Ratan, Subha, the speechless village girl, Mrinal of *Strir Patra*, the lonely Charulata and Neela, the elegant but deprived heroine of *Poila Nombor*. He dealt with every human emotion and did so with deep insight and matchless compassion.

Rabindranath is ultimately a poet. His poetry is primarily romantic. The poems are varied in style, from the classical formalism down to the comic, visionary, ecstatic. The Vaishnava poets influenced him considerably at the beginning and so did the Upanishads and saint Kabir. The Bauls influenced and enriched him. Later modernism made an impression on him as well. Great European composers have set Tagore's poetry to music.

On this 150th anniversary of his birth Rabindranath Tagore will be remembered not only in Bangladesh and India but in Europe, the United States and Latin America as well. He belonged to the world when he lived; and he belongs to the world even now. As a thinker he was well ahead of his time. Such is his reputation that he will be remembered even a thousand years later.

Junaidul Haque, literary critic and novelist, is a senior airline official.

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If we go back a hundred years, we will note that in 1911, the fiftieth birth anniversary of Rabindranath was observed by the students of his own institution, the Brahmacharya School. Though it was not done in a grand way, it was not to be overlooked. It was a three-day programme and it was at that point in the poet's life that we got the first biography of the poet. The biographer was Ajitkumar Chakravorty (1886-1918), a writer, singer and a devoted teacher of the school. The long essay that Ajitkumar read out at the celebrations was named *Rabindranath*, which was subsequently published in the literary journal *Probashi* before appearing in book form in the year 1912.

One may be reminded here that Rabindranath on his own was preparing an autobiographical sketch of his early life during those days. As Ajitkumar was sketching his work, Rabindranath did not publish his right then. But after the publication of Ajitkumar's book, the poet's memoirs were published as *Jibonsmriti* (Reminiscences).

Many of the episodes that we go through in *Jibonsmriti* are to be found in *Rabindranath* as well. The poet's reflections on school, his disinclination to attend classes, his childhood days in the care of servants are among the primary components that constitute the introductory chapter of Ajitkumar's work. What Ajitkumar did was to present a chronological sketch of the development of the poet's literary achievements. From this point of view, *Rabindranath* is yet a good

resource for the Rabindra-readers. Ajitkumar goes all the way up to the composition of the Bangla *Gitanjali* and shows the various phases in life.

Let us not forget that *Jibonsmriti* was not the first attempt by Rabindranath to recapitulate his past. Before that, in 1904, he was requested to write, and for the first time, on his personal life. The result was *Atmaporichay*. But it was not an autobiography in the true sense as it rather put forth some of Rabindranath's thoughts.

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Within a year of the publication of *Rabindranath*, the poet was honoured with the most prestigious global literary award in November 1913. Everyone knows that before the announcement of the Nobel Prize, Rabindranath was on a tour of America; and in July an article on him was published in the journal *Open Court*. The writer Basanta Koomar Roy (? 1949), a Bengali academic at Chicago University, Roy, who met the poet several times during the tour, published his book *Rabindranath Tagore: The Man and His Poetry* in 1915.

It may be interesting to note that almost all American newspapers had to depend on the *Open Court* article for preparing news items on Rabindranath Tagore's getting the Nobel. Comprising 246 pages, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Man and His Poetry*, was no doubt a praiseworthy effort, though it failed to draw the attention of the poet. The chapters of

The poet's mystique

SYED BADRUL AHSEN

My first encounter with Rabindranath Tagore was on a cold winter's day in early 1964. He was there as a sketch in pencil, on the mantelpiece of a Bengali home in Quetta. The flowing beard, the penetrating eyes, that sense of gravitas --- all of this came alive in that sketch. I asked the host, a colleague of my father's, who the gentleman was in the sketch. A great man, said he. He is Rabindranath Tagore, a poet. Young as I was, in primary school, I asked no more questions.

That was a long time ago. Between then and now, I have known Rabindranath or think I have known him, fundamentally through his songs. In the dark days of 1971, when monsoon showers added to the gloom of an enemy-occupied Dhaka, it was the poet's *Amar Shonar Bangla* that I heard day after day on Shwadhin Bangla Betar, making sure that no Pakistani soldiers were on the prowl, that no one who looked suspiciously like a quisling was around. In the midst of that twilight struggle, I knew that Rabindranath was contraband item in genocide-driven East Pakistan. Some months later, with Bangladesh having taken birth, I came to know a little more of the poet, came to hear of the courage a few Bengali men and women had demonstrated in observing the centenary of his birth in 1961. The term *Chhayanaut* took on a note of familiarity.

My education in Rabindranath has gone on. There are some ideas that keep growing, keep taking newer shape, keep enriching human experience. When on a spring day in the mid-1970s my neighbour in Wari played *tomaaye gaan shonabo* on his long-playing record, in Hemanta Mukherjee's voice, I knew I had to learn that song. I did, within weeks. And I have sung that song since then.

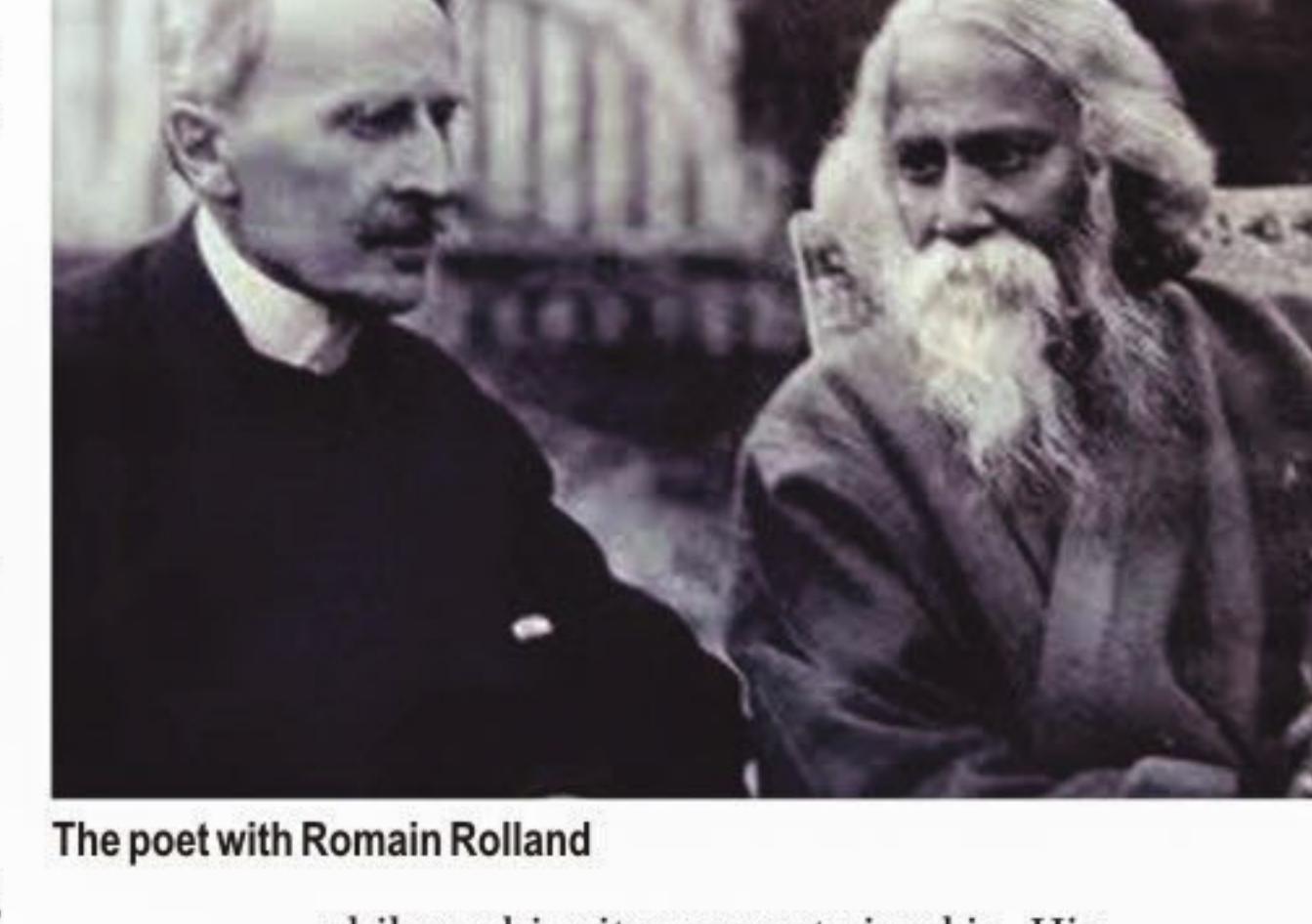
And I have heard many others. But, then, I ask myself if my understanding of Rabindranath or indeed my ever closer encounters with him would be what they are today had Waheedul Haque not let me in on the wider world of Tagore philosophy. Every rickshaw ride with Waheed Bhai, all the way from the offices of the New Nation and to the university area, was a new lesson in Rabindranath. It was that dark period in life when military autocracy ran wild, in the early 1980s; and Waheed Bhai, one of those intrepid souls behind the 1961 celebrations, invariably sang *ekhono gelo na andhar / ekhono roilo baadha*. The symbolism was all.

That Rabindranath Tagore remains, and will remain, our strongest hold on history comes through the many layers of thought his personality was made of. He was a poet. He composed songs which brought into their melody all the pains and pleasures we associate with living. His fiction was a portrayal of life in all its lucidity of meaning. His paintings were images of Bengal. There was the Renaissance man in him, the likes of whom we have not quite spotted in Bengali life of late. On his travels in China in the 1920s, he deftly deflected every insinuation of his poetry being weighed down by colonial dominance. Yet he knew that politics could not be separated from literature, that poetry could be a potent weapon against political chicanery. It was his pain, every Bengali's agony, that rose as a loud cry unto the heavens when the British colonial power drove a knife through the heart of the land and called

it the partition of Bengal. That was in 1905. Bengal was to be reunited and then segmented once more, in 1947. The cracked heart thus sings on... *o amar desher mati / tomar pore thekai matha*.

It is the deeply religious, a resurgence of faith that I have spotted in Rabindranath. Could any invocation to God, any admission of guilt consequent upon a commission of sin, be higher than the forever moving *amar hiya' ber majhe lukiye chhile / dekhate aami paaini tomaaye*? Deep in the nocturnal hours, even as the rain falls in rhythm on the trembling leaves of the pastoral trees, something of the power of Creation wells up in the soul. In *tumi daak diyechho kon shokaale / keu ta jaane na* comes an acknowledgement of your limitations, of your inability to identify with the divine.

Rabindranath's modernity, in these post-modern times, sends out spasms of romance into your being. His interaction with Victoria Ocampo in Argentina, his friendship with William Butler Yeats and his conversations with Albert Einstein and Romain Rolland give off a sure idea of how far he was ahead of most of his countrymen in his approach to life and the



The poet with Romain Rolland

philosophies it came entwined in. His Shantiniketan conversations with Gandhi were that rare moment in history when nations are privy to a presence of the great and the glorious. History often comes in the form of miracles. Rabindranath lived in miraculous times, through weaving miracles in his songs.

Love, that abiding call of the heart and insistent yearning of the soul, becomes a sanctified song in Rabindranath. Love, besides being a many-splendoured thing, is almost always a shattering of the emotions into a thousand and one pieces. That is the point you make as you hear *dekhate parine keno praan / khule go taare*. If that is agony at its most complex, there is the expectant in *gopone dekhchhi tomar / byakul noyone bhaber khela ... in aaji mormoro dhoni keno jagilo re*.

On lonely, silence-drenched treks through my ancient village, I spot the low hanging stars lighting up the heavens in cosmic charm. A spontaneity of melody rushes forth... *akaash bhora shurjo taare bishwa bhora praan / tahaari majh khaane aami peyechhi mor staan*.

The lover's voice pierces the ageing night. She throbs in the sheer excitement of the consummation to be. I go back to Rabindranath, to convey to her the simplest of emotions that can arise in the one who waits:

Dibosh rojoni aami jeno kar / aashaye aashaye thaaki ...

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Literary Editor, The Daily Star.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The memoirs and the biographies

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize, created much enthrallment among the European and American communities after the publication of the *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), in November 1912 from the India Society of London. A novelist, short story writer, playwright, composer and essayist, Rabindranath was an educationist, actor and organiser as well. And all these made this myriad-minded literary personality well known across the western zone of the globe. The sharpness of his philosophical height demanded many documents on him which resulted in many biographies of the poet being published, not to mention the memoirs of the bard.

In 2011, as the world prepares to observe the 150th birth anniversary of the internationally acclaimed poet, it is noticed that many of the events of his life were not properly sketched even in the voluminous and most resourceful biographical book by Prashantakumar Paul (1938-2007), a reputed researcher and devotee of Rabindranath. The untimely death of Prashantakumar caused a sudden stop to his initiative, which ended at the ninth volume of his work called *Rabijiboni*. The most worthy job, comprising thirty three hundred pages, on the biographical study of Rabindranath was stopped in the year 1926 when Rabindranath reached the age of sixty five. It is a well known fact that the remaining fifteen years of the poet's life were more eventful and will demand much more space to be deliberated on. But the more we penetrate the pages of that excellent work, the more we feel that

much information was left unnoticed by Prashantakumar himself. It is thus fair to suppose that researchers in the future will dig deeper and bring to the fore information that has remained unknown so far.

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Absanta Koomar Roy's book included: Family Early Years Precocious Poet, Romantic Youth Realistic Poems, Transformation Practical Idealism Devotional Poems, At Silaidah, Tagore the Feminist, As Poet of Indian Nationalism Universalism, Tagore and His Model School of Bolpur On Music, Tagore's Philosophical Message, Tagore and the Nobel Prize His Place in Bengali Literature.