

Celebrating Tagore

His place in our lives endures

THE observance of the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore symbolizes the deep reverence in which the poet has always been held by Bengali-speaking people not only in Bangladesh and West Bengal but elsewhere around the world as well. Such reverence has to do with the fact that it was Tagore whose poetry introduced a powerful dose of internationalism in the way Bengalis looked at the wider world around them and the other way round. His was a comprehensive way of looking at life, not just through his poetry but through his prose and his art as well. Rabindranath Tagore happens to be one of those rare of illustrious individuals whose comprehension of life and death and everything happening in between has been total and layered with meaning at various levels.

It is surely a matter of pride for the people of Bangladesh that Tagore has consistently been a huge symbolism for us, one we could always fall back on in times of critical note. In 1961, on the anniversary of the Bard's centenary of birth, we as a people defied every attempt by the then ruling classes to have the poet banished from our culture. Even when the Ayub Khan regime decreed a ban on Tagore songs, we fought back. In our armed struggle for freedom in 1971, it was Tagore whose inspiration was all, enough for us to adopt his Amar Shonar Bangla as Bangladesh's national anthem. The formidable hold he has on our psyche can be gauged from the fact that both India and Bangladesh sing his songs as their national anthems. And now we have stumbled on the discovery that even the Sri Lankan national anthem owes its lyrics and its melody to him.

A century and a half after his birth, therefore, Rabindranath Tagore's place in our collective life endures, indeed becomes stronger by the day. A broad hint of that comes in the reality of his birth anniversary being observed this year jointly by India and Bangladesh. It is just as well, for in Tagore resided a poet, a writer of fiction, a humanist, a seeker of truth through a search for divinity in his music.

Tagore keeps our path illuminated.

Employment abroad

Ensure safety for women workers

WE are all for expanding our global labour market. It ensures employment of our large work force as it also contributes towards socio-economic development of the country. Remittances from workers abroad have been substantial over the years. During the July 2010- April 2011 period remittances was \$9587.15 million, registering a growth of 4.3 percent over the same period of the last fiscal.

The recent government decision to send ten thousand female workers to Saudi Arabia as domestic help is a good one provided it ensures the physical safety and security of these women, some of whom may become victims of abuse and deprivation.

Saudi Arabia has been the principal market for Bangladeshi workers which roughly employ around two million Bangladeshis. With recent political crises in a number of Arab countries and bans imposed by some governments particularly of South East Asia on our workers, Bangladesh faces severe overseas employment crisis.

Our concerns over the safety of women workers stem from bad experiences in the past. A Human Rights Watch member informs that there is no provision for domestic help under Saudi labour law. Therefore, they neither have weekly holidays nor is there fixed working hours. Many have to work for years without break. Many also go without payments for months and kept confined inside the house. They are also subjected to physical hardships.

We want the ministry concerned to make it known as to what measures it plans to adopt to ensure protection of our workers especially the female while sending them to work abroad as domestic help.

There should be clear guidelines regarding workers protection, pay and privileges to be agreed upon by the employers and the employees; workers should be trained in their jobs and in the local language of the receiving countries to make communications easy; and increase the capacity of our missions abroad with trained and supportive officials who will be able to handle the employment related issues without much hassle.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 8

1821

Greek War of Independence: The Greeks defeat the Turks at the Battle of Gravia.

1914

Paramount Pictures is founded.

1933

Mohandas Gandhi begins a 21-day fast in protest against British oppression in India.

1945

World War II: V-E Day, combat ends in Europe. German forces agree in Rheims, France, to an unconditional surrender.

1945

Rejoicing at end of war in Europe. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, officially announces the end of the war with Germany.

SUNDAY POUCH

Assassination of Osama and beyond



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

Several things should now naturally follow.

We must have a dead body to prove that he has been killed. Or we must be shown pictures of the dead man. We must at least have photos of the religious rites being conducted before his burial. And lastly there should be pictures of the burial itself.

We are told that pictures of the dead cannot be shown as they are pretty gruesome. It may raise emotions and trigger violence against Americans. We are also told that the rites had been performed as per Islamic religion. The body had been washed, wrapped in a shroud and prayers with translation in Arabic had been said. Then it was buried not on land but at sea.

Fine, if a corpse raises sentiments at least there must be photos of the dead taken from a distance. Is that not expected? However, al-Qaeda has issued a statement confirming the death of Osama. But we are yet to get all the facts about what happened.

The president of the US, after the execution-style death, had pronounced tersely: "Justice has been done." Without capturing Osama and bringing him to trial through due process of law the penalty of death was meted out. The president interrupted a scheduled programme to announce the news of the assassination himself.

True, Osama and his al-Qaeda had summarily killed more than 3,000 innocent people on 9/11 in the New York Twin Tower tragedy. Other innocent people elsewhere in the world were also killed by them over the years. But what was the basis of the order the US gave the Navy SEALs to kill Osama? Why was he not captured, interrogated and sentenced as per law?

We are aware that one of the detainees at Guantanamo Bay had spilled information to US spy operatives regarding the pseudonym of the most trusted courier of Osama. The CIA followed up the lead and over several

months tracked the courier and located the house in Abbottabad, Pakistan, where Osama was hiding. They raided it and took out Osama.

It is natural that the detainee becomes entitled to the \$25 million reward announced by the US State Department. This reward is a kind of "bounty money" for this elimination. We need to ponder about the US policy of "targeted assassination."

About the burial of Osama in the Arabian Sea, experts tell us that only a Muslim who dies after sailing the seas for many days can be consecrated to the waters. So, was this burial in accordance with the religion or was it a deviation?

Questions? Questions? Too many of them. No photos. But let us stop asking. Let us look at what may happen now

Al-Qaeda is likely to regroup under a new leader. No one is sure who that will be. But we do know there is rivalry between the Arab and the Egyptian components of al-Qaeda.

that Osama has gone for good.

The Navy SEAL assault team that went into the Abbottabad compound left with a large number of computer drives and disks. It was as one US official said: "A mother lode of intelligence. If 10% of the contents are actionable, it will be great." So we are not likely to see the departure of the US spy operatives from Pakistan and Afghanistan soon. They will be following up seriously and quickly on this intelligence.

Therefore, we can safely say that the next phase of the "war on terror" has begun.

Al-Qaeda is likely to regroup under a new leader. No one is sure who that will be. But we do know there is rivalry between the Arab and the Egyptian components of al-Qaeda. Also, al-Qaeda has branched out into regional affiliates working independently of any central command. So there could be some uncoordinated moves among them for some time.

Yet the jihadist groups in Pakistan, especially the Pakistan Taliban, are deeply unhappy about the killing of Osama. They are likely to exact retribution. What we may see is distinct al-Qaeda groups in small numbers attack-

ing multiple targets. But the intensity of the attacks will depend on how much precaution the US and its allies take to thwart their attempts.

But let us not forget that Osama in his last days was not involved in operations of the al-Qaeda. He remained a charismatic leader acting as a lightning rod to attract funds and be an inspiration to recruit people to the cause of al-Qaeda. He also was the one who painted the big strategic picture, the others in al-Qaeda drew along the margins. He gave the vision, the rest charted the course. There is no one now who can wear his unique mantle.

The death of Osama also brings to the fore other important issues. Ten years back the US went into Afghanistan for the sole purpose of capturing Osama

likely to accept this behaviour of the Pakistanis to "hide Osama" from them. Since 9/11, US has given \$20 billion to Pakistan just to counter terrorism. The US will now be reviewing its aid policy to that country.

The killing of Osama has given a spike to the popularity of President Obama. He is seen by the American people as a resolute leader capable of taking the right decision boldly, especially in foreign policy. Will this sweep him to power for the second time?

But the killing of Osama seems to have complicated India's agenda for possible reconciliation with Pakistan.

Indian officials are insisting that Pakistan now arrest and prosecute all those involved in the November 2008 attack on Mumbai. They fear that Pakistan could be harbouring and protecting them, like they did Osama. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is scheduled to visit Pakistan. But this visit has now become uncertain.

The 10th anniversary of 9/11 will be observed in a few months. This time there will be no Osama speaking to his followers through audio or video tapes. Yet it is unlikely that he would be forgotten. His ideas and ideology have many takers. Many agree that he was right in challenging the activities of the sole superpower of the world.

But Osama misjudged two aspects of American behaviour. The first was that 9/11 had etched a deep scar on the psyche of the ordinary American. They sought justice and a closure. The other was that the American authorities, even after a decade, would not stop pursuing him. At every turn Americans were there to exact revenge.

Osama should have guessed that it is easy to destroy the infrastructure of a country but quite difficult to smash the determination of a people. It is America that, this time, taught Osama this important lesson.

But what Osama has succeeded in doing is to keep the world in a state of perpetual fear of al-Qaeda. Thus, even after his execution-style death, the world continues to function with the same set of fears. The first green shoot of a terror free world is yet to emerge.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

The praise society



MILIA ALI

ing back the driving license with the ticket, the police officer said: "Have a great day, sir." Sitting next to my husband I was busy making a quick mental calculation of the hike in our auto insurance premium resulting from the driving offense. The officer's words startled me. He was, of course, being courteous, but, to me, his remark sounded hollow and meaningless. How could anyone "have a great day" after being caught for violating the speed limit and having to pay a hefty fine for it?

The truth is, we live in a culture where we are programmed to use hyped-up words like "great, remarkable, lovely, amazing" without reflecting on their intrinsic meaning, or we utter them with doubtful sincerity. Businesses, too, are prone to using superlatives and often advertise: "Our pool of best professionals will help you find the deal you want." The statement is confusing because how can everyone in the pool be best? According to my grammar book the "best" are -- well they are the "best" relative to others who are not!

Even the English language seems to be evolving in a way that words of high praise now seem quite standard. Many of us have fallen into the habit of showering friends and even casual acquaintances with lofty tributes such as "Oh! You look absolutely smashing," or "What a gorgeous outfit you are wearing."

Moderate phrases like "quite nice" or "not bad" seem to have fallen into disuse. It's also quite unfashionable to "like" people any more -- you have to "absolutely love" them or at least "adore" them! It appears that, although

the world economy is sinking into a recession, the "word industry" is moving upward on an inflationary path!

Given the prevailing milieu of exaggerations and florid praise styles, I often experience problems since I am too forthright and plainspoken in expressing opinions. This is a real negative, especially when you are trying to survive in an environment where candour and honesty could push you into the danger zone of the social outcast. Since I can't put on the right smile or frame the right flattering sentence to appease people, I really have to work hard to get things done. I see friends and colleagues leap ahead to their desired goal with

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half the effort that I put in, simply because they have a rich vocabulary of complimentary words that they can employ skillfully.

A recent research conducted in the University of California, Berkley, has shown that flattery always works and there are no limits to how far it can take you. The Study also concludes that people have an infinite capacity to absorb praise, even when they know that the flatterer has a hidden agenda. It just feels good to have someone tell you how "awesome" you are!

A particularly frustrating aspect of surviving in a praise-based society is that you are subjected to the most blatant form of boasting, especially about children. Most parents incessantly talk about how "gifted" and "brilliant" their kids are, irrespective of whether the child is a pre-schooler or a PhD student. Judging by the parents' accounts, the number of A's that each child brings home every semester could actually fill

an entire supplement of a week-end newspaper! Also, everybody's son or daughter seems to border on the "genius" and is so unique that he or she is destined to change the world! This is, in one sense, good news since it's always encouraging to know that the next generation is making such remarkable strides and that the world promises to be a much better place in the future!

For me, the real challenge lies in facing the follow-up loaded questions relating to my children's accomplishments/situation. I am always inclined to underplay their success stories since I sincerely believe that's the decent thing to do. It may be because of what my

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parents taught me: "Don't flaunt your achievements. Wait for others to praise you," or something to that effect. While I think this advice to be most impractical for a society that is so heavily praise-dependent, it has been so deeply entrenched in my psyche that I have difficulty digressing from it.

Most people misinterpret my modesty and offer their sympathy for the utter failure of my mothering skills. Their reasoning seems to be quite simple: if I say my child is doing "okay" it must mean that he/she is in the dumps, since no mother uses a term like "okay" to describe the achievements of her offspring in a society where self-promotion is the norm, not merely a deviation!

Bragging has now become the new social sport, to the extent that many people are openly competing to win the medal for the most "skillful boaster!" I am reminded of an interesting experience. A friend of mine has an excep-

tionally brilliant daughter. More importantly, my friend is well-known for her prowess in recounting her daughter's achievements in blatantly immodest terms! When the girl was in high school she got a B in one of her assignments. It turned out to be quite a shock for the mother since this was the first B her daughter had received in her entire school life.

When the mother shared her concern with me, in confidence, I suggested that it might be instructive to ask the teacher the reason for the grade. However, my friend went into a tail spin and responded tersely: "Definitely not. In today's world you have to assert that you deserve an A and fight for your rights with confidence! My daughter must convince the teacher that she is too good to get a mere B and the teacher made a mistake in grading the paper."

She called me a week later and announced triumphantly that her aggressive strategy had worked. The teacher had caved-in and changed the grade to an A! I learned an important lesson from the episode: success is not just about how good you are but also about how adept you are at making people believe that you are "superb!"

After reflecting hard on the merits and demerits of self-aggrandisement, I have realised that there are two distinct paths that I can choose to take. I can either rebel against the praise society by holding up a banner which says: "I have nothing to declare, except my stupidity," or go all-out on an aggressive, self-marketing mode. Since I am now convinced that the meek shall not inherit this world, I have decided to choose the latter option, though a little late in the day.

So, dear readers, after reading my column please don't simply pronounce that you "like" it. I expect you to declare unequivocally: "It's absolutely awesome!!!!"

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