

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# Rabindric celebrations: The inner meaning



**I**T was blissful for New Delhi -- the inaugural of simultaneous Indo-Bangla celebrations of the 150th birth anniversary of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

We arrived to the welcoming arms of Indian cultural ministry on the night of last Friday (May 6) to revisit Rabindranath Tagore's legacy through a celebratory event in the Indian capital. Interestingly, it was prophetically reminiscent of poet's famous line *Aji hote shata barsha* pore in a poem titled *1400 Sal* that he had penned in 1300 BS.

It also befit the new cityscape spruced up elegantly for the Commonwealth Games. Never mind, the embarrassing preparatory downside to the event, the city had bounced back quickly into its rhythm. It has just emerged freshened up and vibrant from the strain momentarily put on political equanimity of the happening and yet stoically solemn capital of India. The telecom corruption scandal by minister A. Raja, and Suresh Kalmadi for his devious role as chief of the organising committee for the Commonwealth Games receded into the background as both have been arrested. Earlier, a corruption fighting code scripted by virtue of a civil society movement led by Anna Hazare had been adopted by the union government.

Of course, the date of Rabindranath's

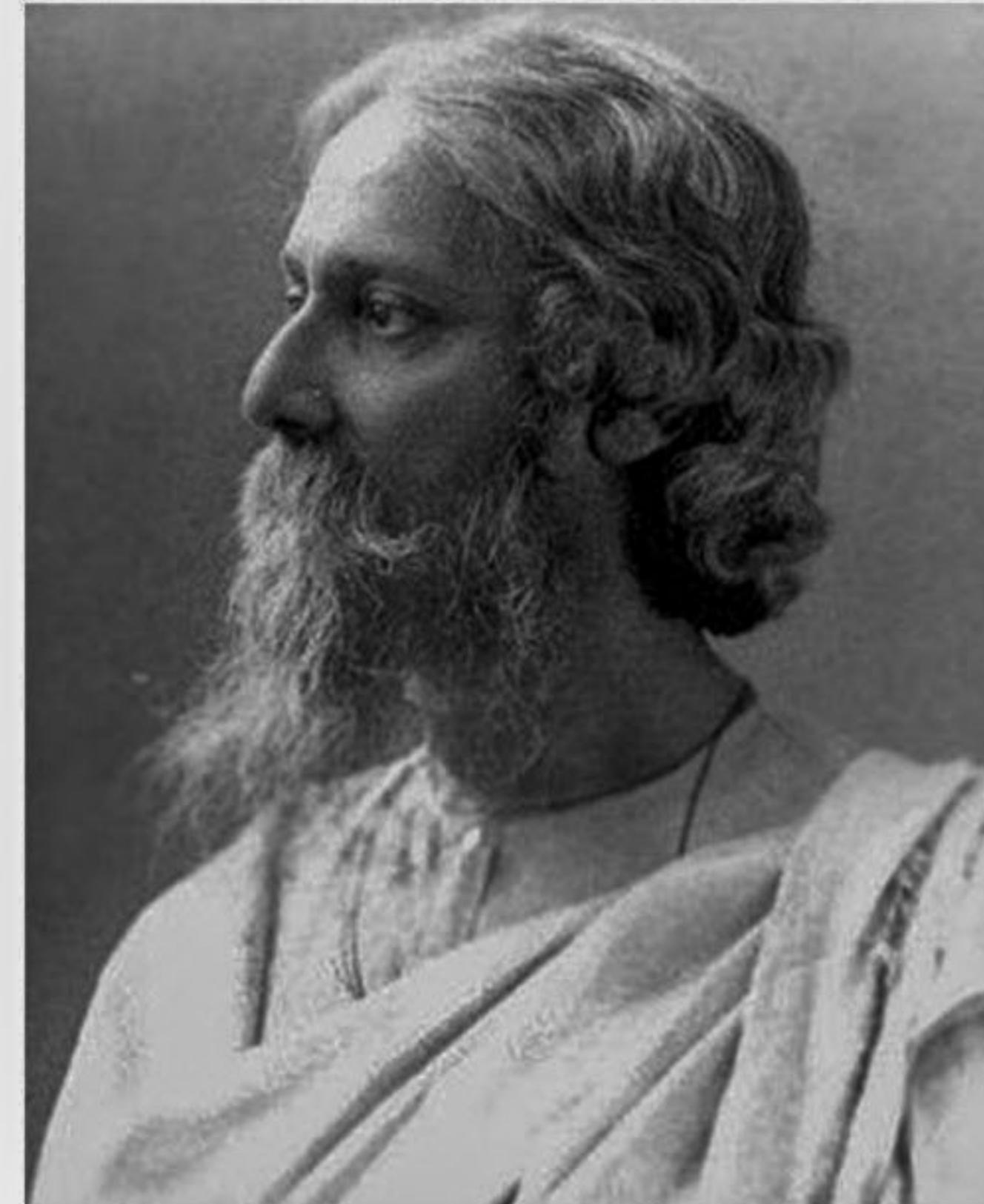
birth had no celestial link to the improved New Delhi ambience, but it has been an auspicious coincidence, to be sure, for the organisers, participants, audience and spectators alike.

The only two statements with any political overtone that one could discern from the speeches on the inaugural day came from the chief guest Bangladeshi Minister for Planning A.K. Khandker and Sonia Gandhi, the President of Congress and Chairman, United Progressive Alliance.

From A.K. Khandker it came in the form of a reiterated assurance: Bangladesh wouldn't allow her territory to be used by elements working against the interests of any country. He also asserted that the government of Sheikh Hasina waged an uncompromising fight against terrorism, extremism and militancy.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi, on the other hand, while underscoring the Nobel laureate's message of unity through diversity added: "Some forces mistake uniformity for unity and find themselves uncomfortable with the diversity of our country."

We can take pride in the fact that the idea of jointly celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of the poet came from Prime



Minister Sheikh Hasina. That it was promptly embraced by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is a measure of importance India attaches to cultural bonding between our two countries.

Bangladesh is also the proud possessor of a number of heritage sites of

Rabindranath's sojourns and sources of inspiration for his masterful lyrics and poems that need hardly any recital. Yet, the places where he set his feet and stayed for long periods were dusted and prepared for the celebrations enlivening them, we hope, to be on a sustainable basis.

Rabindranath's part in shaping our sense of cultural identity to which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave an utterance with his longing for a "Sonar Bangla" he had coined after Tagore himself. Those who sought to stamp out Rabindranath from the Bengali psyche during the colonial rule of Pakistan only strengthened our resolve to resist onslaughts on our cultural ethos. The names of poets, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Sufia Kamal and Abdul Wadud were mentioned by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his presidential address to the inaugural function.

The joint celebrations have been held in the capitals of the two countries and, of course, Kolkata, together with places Rabindranath had made his abode in the two countries, including Shantiniketan. Although the inaugurations were somewhat exclusive in nature, yet the entry fees for students and enthusiasts in New Delhi were

thoughtfully kept very low for the cultural programmes.

It is understood that the yearlong celebrations will reach out to some other cities of India, and eventually encompass the 150 million-strong Bengali Diaspora drawn from Bangladesh and West Bengal. The Indian PM has hinted at functions to be held in countries with which Rabindranath had an association.

On the sideline, a Bangladeshi enthusiast put a question to a Delhite: How might Rabindric celebrations go down in a multi-lingual yet mainly Hindi and English-speaking cosmopolitan city like New Delhi? Let's not forget, New Delhi has 1.5 Bengalis.

To turn to the question, perhaps the answer to it is to be found in Sonia Gandhi's speech, she recalled Pundit Nehru's words that three persons influenced his mind and outlook, his father Motilal Nehru, Gandhiji and Rabindranath Tagore. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recalled Mahatma Gandhi calling Rabindranath Tagore "the Sentinel." Sonia quoted from Nehru to say to the effect, "test of your homage to him is not what you say but how you act out his message." The words speak volumes of the all-India appeal of Rabindranath Tagore, who has been profusely translated in the regional languages.

"An internationalist through and through," his appeal is indeed universal.

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

E-mail: [husain.imam@thedailystar.net](mailto:husain.imam@thedailystar.net)

## Bangladesh's defence: A debatable dialectic

S. MAHMUD ALI

**T**HE armed services of democratic states leave politics to politicians, concentrating instead on professional concerns e.g., national strategy, defence doctrine, threat perceptions, and military preparations for their constitutionally-ordained responsibilities, i.e., defending territorial integrity from external aggression, and safeguarding sovereign control over internal affairs.

Armed forces abjure politics since their involvement is often considered unwarranted. This is why a recent commentary by a brigadier-general serving as a Director at the Army Headquarters, serialised in a daily newspaper, is intriguing. The author noted, given its role in "relief distribution, repatriation, rehabilitation, demobilisation of guerrillas and military components" since December 1971, the army's "prolonged counter-insurgency operation in CHT (Chittagong Hill Tracts)," the provision of "medical support" etc. during training exercises, "the employment of the army during floods, cyclones, cleaning collapsed buildings" and other disasters, the military is a nation-building institution.

The author posited the army's record in "the preparation of voter list and National ID card, machine readable passport, construction of different roads in CHT, Dhaka flood protection embankment," building housing schemes and "the participation of the army in UN peacekeeping" operations proved the military's ability to deliver developmental services: "In

Bangladesh, the army's social face is working for the extreme benefit (sic) of the nation and the government. More expansion of the social face of the army will demonstrate the capability and capacity of the government to achieve its constitutional obligations."

The logic of his socio-economic perspective is: the government must fulfil its constitutional obligations which are proving challenging; the military has performed socio-economic developmental activities; enhancing these capacities will enable the government to meet its constitutional obligations; so, the military should deliver civil-administrative services.

**The logical challenge**

The author concludes: "Constitutional guidelines may be included in any future constitutional amendment/revision on the role of the army

in peacetime socio-economic development. Till that constitutional inclusion is done, a law may be enacted amending the role in aid of civil administration or ministerial directive through inter-ministerial meetings." The defence minister, concurrently the prime minister, should order the army to engage in civil service-delivery which, it is surmised, should become the military's focus.

The commentary precipitates several observations: firstly, as a Director at the Army Headquarters, the author is likely to have written this with clearance from the higher command. His views may, therefore, reflect the command's views. Secondly, this is not the first time that a senior officer urged the army to engage in "national developmental activities" rather than focus on its professional tasks and competencies.

In January 1981, the Chief of the

Water & Sewerage Authority, Public Works Department, and similar organs.

### Fundamental purposes of military organisations

- To defend their citizens, territorial integrity, national independence and sovereignty in a competitive milieu, states must possess the capacity to impose greater costs on adversaries than the adversaries would gain by attacking it.
- States need effective deterrent capabilities to combat aggressors and to backstop diplomacy in securing the national interest. Credible deterrence inheres in professionally proficient combat forces optimising resource utilisation.
- Armed forces can aid civil power, provide succour to disaster victims, and deliver essentials in emergencies only if they retain organisa-

Minister Morarji Desai stopped this proxy campaign, and negotiated the militants' repatriation.

Since 1976, the Shanti Bahini insurrection against Bangladesh's authority in the CHT engaged the national military and paramilitary in two decades of counter-insurgency operations, causing much loss in blood and treasure. The insurgents operated from safe bases in Tripura. Only when Delhi decided to terminate this campaign was Bangladesh able to reciprocate.

The India-Bangladesh border, sections of which India is fencing off, still carries disputed claims. The Bangladesh Border Guards (BGB) had exchanged fire with the Indian BSF. The worst incidents occurred in 1999-2000 when they fought virtually pitched battles. The Padua/Pyrdiwa dispute and the Borobari clashes in 2000 caused the deaths of several BSF soldiers inside Bangladesh.

Deaths of Bangladeshi nationals shot by the BSF, too, reflect relations. The BSF reportedly killed 907 Bangladeshis over January 1, 2000-31-March 2011 according to Odhikar's, *Human Rights Monitoring Report*, of April 1, 2011.

Maritime tensions, too, simmer. The Indian navy deployed warships to Dakshin Talpatty in early 1981, challenging Bangladesh. Myanmar, too, has threatened Bangladesh. Indian and Myanmarese navies deployed warships to Bangladeshi-claimed waters in 2008. With energy demands rapidly rising, and offshore reserves and maritime trade acquiring growing significance, maritime disputes add to Bangladesh's national security challenges.

National defence is a critical responsibility of the state. In a highly competitive security environment, only Bangladesh can uphold and advance its collective interests. It already has a sound foundation of that capacity in the form of its armed forces.

If the professional capabilities of these forces are further enhanced, they will not only boost the state's deterrence and defensive potential, but also raise the state's ability to secure the citizens' interests in times of disasters and emergencies. Any dilution of their core competencies will, however, assure the erosion of their military and civilian-administrative capabilities irretrievably. No country could find that desirable.

The writer is a PhD in War Studies and former BBC Senior Editorial Coordinator for Asia Pacific.

Army Staff (CAS), Lt. General H.M. Ershad, wrote: "The role of the military, especially in the context of a national army, should very much be that of a participant in the collective effort of the nation." He explained his concept in press interviews in October-December, 1981.

Whether this newspaper commentary indicates similar thinking is not clear, but the precedent set by General Ershad might prompt consideration. Given governmental control over military leadership, the latter's views presumably accord with the former's. That would suggest the government wishes the military to construct roads, bridges and housing schemes, deliver essential supplies to citizens, expand electronic communications networks, and help the civil administration meet its "constitutional obligations."

These tasks bear little relationship to the military's constitutional mission to deter aggression and, if deterrence failed, to defend Bangladesh in battle. If the recommended constitutional amendment and statute were enacted, Bangladesh's military could become a uniformed combination of the Roads & Highways Department,

national coherence and professional proficiency.

Bangladesh's successive rulers, identifying the military as both an instrument essential to their survival and a potential threat to it, sought to co-opt it by promoting officers of their choice, rather than on proficiency, to command. Polarised political leaderships consecutively damaged the force's professional ethos by promoting those considered loyal to them-selves and disregarding the chain of command by using "favoured" subordinates to bypass it. The military, therefore, began to appear as divided, and ineffective, as other state organs.

Bangladesh has fortunately avoided major combat against foreign aggressors. However, since August 1975, it has often faced pressures from the two neighbours who alone can mount ground offensives against Bangladesh. In late 1975, some members of an erstwhile guerrilla force of 1971 sought refuge in Meghalaya state where, reportedly, they were offered sanctuary, arms, ammunition, and explosives for mounting attacks against Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and police outposts. In April 1977, Prime

ministers of India and Pakistan, and the

Myanmar government, signed the Tengnafai Agreement, which ended the 1975-77 conflict. The Tengnafai Agreement was a significant step forward in the peace process in the CHT. It established a joint committee to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

National defence is a critical responsibility of the state. In a highly competitive security environment, only Bangladesh can uphold and advance its collective interests. It already has a sound foundation of that capacity in the form of its armed forces.

If the professional capabilities of these forces are further enhanced, they will not only boost the state's deterrence and defensive potential, but also raise the state's ability to secure the citizens' interests in times of disasters and emergencies. Any dilution of their core competencies will, however, assure the erosion of their military and civilian-administrative capabilities irretrievably. No country could find that desirable.

The writer is a PhD in War Studies and former BBC Senior Editorial Coordinator for Asia Pacific.

## 10 signs bin Laden's next door



**A**NALYSTS are trying to guess where Osama Bin Laden lived before he got to Abbottabad six years ago. I'm sure he lived next to me. My neighbours were so noisy they either

had 50 children or were terrorists making homemade nuclear bombs (a uranium-235 centrifuge makes a racket). I'm not sure which is scarier. Probably the 50 children. Anyway, Osama's more recent neighbors claim they had no idea he was there. Analysts are sceptical. But not me! I typed "neighbour shocked" into a Google search box and got 7,470,000 results. Neighbours are always shocked about something. That's what they're there for.

This is about to change. Snapscout is a dotcom start-up which will make getting your neighbour arrested easy and fun -- and you can even win prizes for doing so. The site encourages kids to record everything around them on cameras and upload it to Snapscouts.org.

The cartoon-heavy web page says: "Makes reporting a potential crime fun and easy. If you see something suspicious, Snap it! If you see someone who doesn't belong, Snap it! Not sure if someone or something is suspicious? Snap it anyway!" Participants can win "tons of cool badges and prizes." (Pakistan secret service agents, please note.)

The Snapscout people hope to turn a whole generation of children into camera-clutching spies, recording every incident. But kids are already doing that! These days I can't make a simple visit to the toilet without being recorded from three angles for live streaming on the Internet.

I put the site on my family computer's block list just in case it prompts my innocent children to become Snapscout crime recorders in my neighbour's shower, in the vault of the local bank, in the health club changing room, etc.

No, a much better strategy is to look for clues. Here are 10 reasons your neighbours might be the world's most wanted terrorists.

1) Their weekly grocery order list includes five kilos of rice, two kilos of vegetables and three tons of Semtex.

2) When kids accidentally kick a football over the fence, it gets "taken out" by a hidden anti-aircraft missile.

3) The Pakistan government's spies have detailed records on everyone in the town except these guys.

4) While English and math tutors visit most homes in the area, your neighbour's house has a visiting suicide bombing tutor.

5) Graffiti on the wall of the outside toilet says: "America is the Great Satan."

6) Letters received by teachers at the kids' school says "Daddy can't come to the parents evening because he is finalising a plan to blow western civilisation back to the stone age."

7) Instead of playground swings in the garden, there's a jumbo jet for "cockpit storming practice."

8) In scripture readings at the local temple your neighbour always crosses his fingers and skips the part beginning "thou shalt not kill."

9) Your neighbour tells you that he would only break his strict vegetarian diet for "George W. Bush's head on a platter."

10) Women from your neighbour's house buy baggy clothes from the boutique and ask: "Does this make my bomb look big?"

To know more visit our columnist at: <http://mrjam.typepad.com>