

SHIFTING IMAGES

Boundless Tagore



MILIA ALI

RABIN DRANATH Tagore's message of humanity guided me through the various phases of my life. It

sharpened my power of introspection and helped me develop a compassionate outlook toward the world at large. In the process I learned to confront life's challenges with a degree of equanimity.

"My Golden Bengal, I love you." Turbulent tides of change swept through our country in the late sixties -- a change that altered the map of the Indian sub-continent. It impacted the lives of Bengalis in a major way, leading to the creation of Bangladesh -- a homeland for the people of former East Pakistan. Even before Bangladesh came into being, the region was overpowered by a surge of patriotism that sowed the seeds of Bengali nationalism. Tagore's literary works were an integral part of this movement.

Like many of my generation, my pride in Bengali culture and heritage was rooted in Tagore's writings. I developed a natural love for Bengali music early in life when I started to take lessons in Rabindra Sangeet at home and in the music school, Chhayanaut, under the tutelage of Wahidul Haq. The latter introduced me to the fascinating world of Tagore's songs in a manner that helped me appreciate their nuances and intricacies.

Consequently, Rabindra Sangeet generated an ownership of Bengali language and ethos in me, to the extent that, when the movement for a separate Bengali entity took root, I embraced it as a struggle for my own identity.

If I were to single out the defining moment of my life, it was when I crossed the border from Bangladesh to India in June 1971, to participate in the Liberation War. Unwittingly, I had stepped into a very important crossroad of history and was destined to be a part of a momentous era. I joined a group of Bangladeshi musicians and roamed the camps for the displaced Bengalis who had taken refuge in India. We sang Tagore's patriotic songs to keep the spirit of a "free Bangladesh" alive for the unfortunate thousands who were dislocated and demoralised. Through this rare experience I realised that, along with the struggle for Bangladesh's independence, my inner struggle for a greater identity had begun and continues until today.

The forced exile in India was yet another step toward getting to know the real "Robi Thakur." It took me to his ashram "Santiniketan" where I met my music gurus -- legends Kanika Banerjee and Nilima Sen -- and other notable Tagore personalities like Debabrata Biswas and Shubha Guhathakurta. I was but a novice trying to make a modest entry into the Rabindra Sangeet world.

What I discovered was that, in the monastic environ of Tagore's ashram, egos had been shed. Hence, an insignificant young girl from a country with only a name

but no territory was readily accepted into the affectionate fold of his disciples! In addition to Rabindra Sangeet, my gurus taught me the virtues of humility and dedication through the precept of their own lifestyles. I was offered a small niche in the extended family of Tagore singers, which I accepted with immense gratitude.

Tagore provided me with the opportunity to show case the cultural treasures of my native land and helped me bond with people in most unusual ways. In Armenia, I developed a unique friendship with a 70-year-old Armenian painter, Armine Kalentz, who, in our first meeting, recited the Russian translation of Tagore's "A Tamed Bird Was in a Cage." I

made a brother of the stranger." "Thou hast made me endless such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life."

Last month, I was sitting in my home in Virginia, USA, on a rainy afternoon, and humming strands of Rabindr Sangeet. Lost in a day-dream, I felt nostalgic about my childhood friends, the monsoons of Bengal, the afternoon tea sessions and idle chit-chats with family, and, even the clamour of loud conversations and honking cars in Dhaka. But above all, I missed my music which is no longer in the centre stage of my life, primarily because I am in a setting where Tagore is not part of the mainstream.

Reluctantly, I have accepted the fact that the singer Milia Ali, like T.S. Eliot's Alfred Prufrock, is not destined to play Hamlet on the Tagore stage, but can at best be described as "an attendant lord to...start a scene or two." However, my desire to express myself through my songs has never waned, although some days I feel Rabindra Sangeet has deserted me. The thought fills me with a sense of dejection, because "the song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day"

The phone rang, interrupting my reverie. On the other end was my friend, singer Zafar Billah from New Jersey. After the initial exchange of niceties, he said: "Mahmud Dulu and a few of us are staging a show for the Rabindrajayanti celebrations organised by the Cultural Association of Bengal. We would

like you to sing with us. Can you?" The very thought of singing for Tagore's birthday with friends who share my love for his music filled me with joy. "Yes. Of course," was my definitive response.

Two weeks later, I was at the Rutgers University campus in New Jersey with Sharmila Roy Pommot, Zafar, Dulu, Jhumur Chakrabarty, Malabika Guha and other Tagore enthusiasts, singing "Praner manush ache prane..." "The man of my heart, my indwelling man dwells in my heart of hearts which is why I see him everywhere."

I realised how aptly the words expressed my deep relationship with the poet. Of course, Tagore is and always will be in my heart. Some days I am deluded into thinking that he has abandoned me since I search for him in the material world, forgetting that he dwells deep within me. Each time I feel that I have lost him, he makes his presence felt by filling up the empty receptacle of my heart with new elixir of life.

Thank you, Gurudev, for making the finite journey of my life an infinite experience!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank

Note: Most of the translations are by Rabindranath Tagore. A few have been collected from other sources.

Correction

In the article "Endless Tagore," printed on May 15, in para.5, please read "in his book ..." instead of "in her book ..."

Transparency in development projects

M. MIZANUR RAHMAN

WE want to see the fund to be used for constructing the Padma bridge spent in a transparent way to benefit the people of Bangladesh," the World Bank (WB) Managing Director Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala told reporters after a meeting with Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith at his ministry. This statement of the WB managing director shows how worried this top organisation is about corruption in our development projects.

Her words were like an anxious mother's giving some money to her wicked child and saying: "Here is some money for your school fees, don't waste it in gambling." The WB is giving the money to the government to use it for the common people, but is uncertain that the money will be used properly and the common people will get the benefit. Why did she say it publicly?

Behind the approval of every developmental project, illegal monetary transactions are common. Again, in the entire implementation process in government and non-government projects, a huge amount of money just disappears. Besides these, a good amount of money is spent as organisational cost.

Even Planning Minister A.K. Khandaker expressed his frustration that the government was facing difficulties in implementing development projects because of corruption. From local government to the upper authority, from small to large projects, corruption is deeply rooted at every level. And, very unfortunately, people are getting used to this. The WB is very conscious about the procurement process of the Padma Bridge project because of the unbridled corruption.

Food import by the government may not be different. The government, instead of procuring rice

from the fields, has decided to import 80 lakh metric tons rice from Thailand and Vietnam. Prothom Alo reported on April 12 that the government is paying \$580 and \$575 per ton for rice from Thailand and Vietnam respectively when private traders are purchasing it at \$420 to \$430 per ton.

Most of the rice will be supplied by a company which has reported been blamed for bribing in Iraq and

even the nation can hope for anything good from them. It has become an open secret in the country. So, we cannot blame the WB managing director for her straightforward speech in front of the press, rather it is we who gave her the scope to do so.

Corruption in developmental projects works very adversely in two ways. It helps create turmoil in a country as the people go against the

without bribe. When the concerned people cannot restrain themselves from taking bribes from those poor people, how can a conscious man put his or her faith on these people? I have observed the misery of those poor people who borrowed Tk.3,000-5,000 taka from local mohajons at a high rate of interest only for bribing the Union Parishad member, but did not get the facility. This single testifies our society is gradually plunging into darkness.

We are just enthusiastic about our growth but never think whether it is pro-poor or not, we pay little heed to the growing inequality among people, and we reward the flatterers but not the performers. So, people are not getting the incentive to work for the betterment of the country, unfit people are getting involved in politics, sincere and meritorious government officials are being made useless and of no help for the country, and most of us love our own selves, not the country.

Why people are losing faith in the successive governments, government organisations, and officials is really an important question that needs to be answered. Common people are keeping away from politics, they do not pay homage to the leaders, they do not even respect government officials like they used to do. This is really a symptom of a great catastrophe for the democracy of the country.

Share market issues, failure to control inflation, deterioration of rule of law, prevalence of corruption in every sphere, and so forth, have already placed the current government in a very critical situation. It is undoubtedly ominous not only for the government but also for the entire nation that the international agencies are losing their trust in us. Only our transparency and honesty can return the faith, but we will have to prove it by ourselves.

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RAJANIKAT/DRIK NEWS

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some countries in Africa. The entire imported quantity will cost Tk.350 to Tk.390 crore taka extra. Doesn't this indicate an attempt to create the scope of enriching some people by some illegal means?

When almost every monetary transaction of a government increases the scope of corruption of the people in the government, not

government, and it reduces scope of further funding by the donors and the common people become the ultimate losers.

I had the opportunity to talk to the people in 13 unions in different part of the country, and all of them told me that no facilities under the Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNP) are provided to the people

World to end soon: Proof



MONDAY news flash: The world is ending. This is the final generation. No, really. There's widespread agreement on this. Consider the evidence.

First, the TV news. I arrived home to find the kids spooked by a jittery climate change documentary. "I don't want the world to end next year," said one child crossly. "My hamster's not married yet."

I postponed worrying about the hamster's love life until after I had opened the bills. There were so many that it seemed to me that the world ending would be rather helpful just now.

That's probably what people in Taiwan were thinking last Wednesday. A prophet ("de-ranked bearded male") named Wang Chao-hung predicted that the island would be flattened by an earthquake on May 11 at 10:42:37. As the appointed time approached, watchers held their breath. Tick tick tick tick! The moment came and went. Nothing happened. Believers looked sheepish. Non-believers mocked, but also looked rather relieved, it must be said.

In Japan in 2000, a guru named Yuji Taniguchi, 65, said the only way to escape the eminent end of the world was by singing a song composed by a space alien named Elina, who would then rescue them. The song went like this: "What's your name? I feel wretched about myself, oh yay, yay."

Thousands in Japan sang the song (the lyrics were actually superior to those of most Japanese pop songs that year) but the world failed to end, except for music lovers, who probably felt suicidal.

Coming bang up to date, some Americans think the world

will end on May 21, 2011, which is the coming Saturday. Harold Camping, an 89-year-old American, says he and his flock will be lifted into the sky in a religious event called The Rapture.

(Hearing this, one entrepreneurial man put up an ad on Craigslist, a web-based classified ads board, offering pay-in-advance dog-sitting services.)

Mr. Camping reminds me of Edgar Whisenant, the king of failed predictions. In 1988, he published a book called 88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Be in 1988. That year came and went. Mr. Whisenant remained ground-bound.

Unrepentant, he published a new book in 1989 explaining that the world would end in 1989 for sure. That year also passed uneventfully.

In 1993, Mr. Whisenant (oh how ironic was his name) published a book saying that the world would definitely end in 1993, following by a book in 1994 saying it would definitely end in 1994. Then he shut up.

No, forget all these wacko religious nuts. The best bet is to trust science. Scholars have been examining the works of Sir Isaac Newton, listed in numerous history books as the greatest scientist who ever lived.

In 2003, unpublished papers revealed that he'd calculated that the world would not end -- until soon after the millennium. He specifies 2034 or 2060 at the latest.

At the same time, today's most popular scientific "futurist" is a guy named Ray Kurzweil, who reckons the physical world will come to an end on or around 2030.

So basically everyone agrees that the world is going to end in 20 years or so. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Yes! Anyone know any banks which are giving out 30-year mortgages just now? Muah ha ha ha ha!

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