

## ESSAY

## Stories behind 1913 Nobel award

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In 1913, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was the first non-European to receive it. His coming by the Nobel created much excitement not only in India but outside it as well. Rabindranath, not at all known outside India before the publication of his *Gitanjali* in its English version in November 1912 from London, made millions of people sit up and take notice of him through the prize. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), a reputed Irish poet even before 1913 and eventually a Nobel laureate himself, in 1923, was a great admirer of Rabindranath during his *Gitanjali* days, though he did not rejoice at the declaration of the Nobel Committee on November 13, 1913. A study of Nobel nominations will perhaps give us an idea of the process involved. On 10 December every year the year's laureate has to receive the prize and deliver a lecture. Very recently the web site of the Nobel Committee released a wealth of information that gives us a fresh perspective on the Nobel process itself.

Let us take a look at the nominations for Nobel Literature Prizes from India and Bangladesh from 1901 to 1950. A name that was sent up five times, the highest in our perspective, was that of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), the noted philosopher. He was nominated in the five years between 1933 and 1937 by Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, a member of the Swedish Academy. Additionally, between those years there were some more nominations --- for Devadatta R Bhandarkar, a professor of History and Sanskrit at Calcutta University by Hari Mohan Banerjee in 1936, for instance. In the following year the name of Satyendranath Sen, a professor of Literature, was put forth by Bensadhar Majumdar. In 1938, Sanjib Chaudhuri was nominated by Professor

Mahmoud Hasan of Dhaka University. Sanjib Chaudhuri obtained a second nomination in 1939 from Professor K R Danungo of the Department of History, Dhaka University. Mukundadeb Chatterjee nominated Bensaor Mazumder in 1939 for the second time. In 1939, Sri Aurobindo was proposed by Francis Younghusband, member of the Royal Society of Literature, London. But before all these nominations came the name of Roby Datta (1883-1917) from two individuals, Raya Yatindra N Choudhury of the Bengal Academy of Literature and Mano M Gangedy of Indian Royal Asiatic Society of London. It may be mentioned here that Roby Datta's *Echoes from East and West*, published from Cambridge University in 1909, included eleven poems and songs of Rabindranath. It is interesting that Rabindranath never proposed a name for the Nobel from India or from any other country, though he obtained the right to nominate after winning the prize in 1913.

It is a well-known fact that among the eighteen members of the Nobel Literature Committee, only the Orientalist Esaias Henrik Vilhelm Tegner (1843-1928) knew Bangla. Save for him, *Gitanjali* could make no impression on the other members. But one person who was most impressed was Verner von Heidenstam (1859-1940), a well known poet of Sweden later awarded the Nobel in 1916. It is generally less known that Heidenstam also was nominated in the year 1913 beside Rabindranath. It is noteworthy that his name had earlier been proposed in 1909, 1911 and 1912 and afterwards in 1915 too. In 1913, Heidenstam's name was proposed by Fredrik Wulff, a reputed professor and linguist of Sweden. Wulff proposed the name of another Swedish writer, Sven Hedin, (1865-1952) as well. Heidenstam, a poet senior to Rabindranath, was deeply impressed by *Gitanjali*.

Now let us take a look at the case of W. B. Yeats, who attained the Nobel in Literature for 1923. Many people, with and without hesitation, easily suggest that it was Yeats who polished the text of *Gitanjali* as a result of which the work was able to draw the attention of the Nobel Committee. Yeats' name was first proposed for the Nobel in 1902. He was subsequently nominated in 1914, 1915, 1918 and 1921. In 1922, the Nobel Committee itself proposed his name, to no avail. In the following year, 1923, again the committee made the proposal. This time Yeats triumphed.

Noted individuals and organisations propose nominations to the Nobel Committee. Among the latter, one has been the Royal Society of Literature in England. In 1913, the Society proposed the name of the noted British poet and fiction writer Thomas Hardy (1840-1924). As an individual member of the society, T. Sturge Moore proposed the name of Rabindranath Tagore. He wrote to the Secretary of the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy in Stockholm:

'Sir,  
As a Fellow of the Royal Society of the United Kingdom, I have the honour to propose the name of Rabindra Nath Tagore as a person, qualified, in my opinion, to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

T. Sturge Moore.'

Moore's letter was the only document on the basis of which a judgement on Rabindranath could be made. The work before the committee was *Gitanjali*. The other books that were taken into consideration included *Glimpses of Bengali Life*, an anthology of the stories of the poet done by Rajaniranjan Sen, a teacher and advocate from Chittagong. The other books were *The Gardener* and *The Crescent Moon*.

Ninety-seven members of the Royal Society proposed the name of Hardy. To evaluate this from a non-partial point of view, we have to

browse the case of Hardy in the Nobel context. Indeed, Hardy's name was put up in nomination the highest number of times --- in 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926 and 1927. Regrettably, though, he could not bag the Nobel.

In 1912, an important name that came up was of George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950). In the same year another writer, James G. Frazer (1854-1941), was suggested as a probable winner. In 1913 the litterateurs who got nominations from the United Kingdom included John Morley (1838-1923), John L. Lord Avebury (1834-1913) and Francis C Welles.

The twenty-eight names proposed in 1913 included those of Grazia Deledda (1875-1936) and Anatole France (1844-1924), who are known figures to Bengali readers. Though Deledda got the prize in 1926, except for 1916, her name was proposed every year between 1913 and 1925. On the other hand, Anatole France got the prize in 1921 though his name was nominated in 1904, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1915 and 1916. Beginning in 1902, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) was nominated five times. The Nobel was never to be his, though.

Rabindranath was sent the following telegram on 14 November 1913: 'SWEDISH ACADEMY AWARDED YOU NOBEL PRIZE LITERATURE PLEASE WIRE ACCEPTATION SWEDISH MINISTER'. The message reached Rabindranath on 15 November. On 17 November the 'ACCEPTATION' was sent. A reply from the Secretary of the Swedish Academy came on 20 November: 'Nobel Prize will be solemnly handed over Stockholm 10th of December Invite you heartily though fear time will not allow your coming'. On behalf of the poet, the British ambassador in Stockholm was invited to receive the award. The ambassador contacted Lord Carmichael, then Governor of Bengal, for a note of thanks from the poet. The note of thanks from Rabindranath

read, 'I beg to convey to the Swedish Academy my grateful appreciation of the breadth of understanding which has brought the distant near and has made a stranger a brother'. On 10 December, Ambassador Clive received the Gold Medal and the Diploma. He read out the note from Rabindranath. On the diploma was inscribed in Swedish, 'Awarded to Rabindranath Tagore, because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh, and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West'. On 9 January 1914, Lord Carmichael handed over the medal and diploma to the poet at Governor's House, Calcutta, before a distinguished gathering.

Every laureate is supposed to deliver a lecture but what was the case of Rabindranath in this regard? During the poet's America tour in 1920, when the Secretary of the Swedish Academy Dr. Erik Axel Karfeldt (1864-1931) came to know about the possibility of the poet's visit, he sent a telegram on 9 November saying, 'If you intend going Sweden Swedish Academy bids you welcome to Nobel Feast December 10'. Sadly, however, the poet could not reach Sweden in time. When he did, it was 24 May 1921. He was warmly received at the Stockholm railway station.

On 26 May the poet delivered his Nobel Lecture. A sixteen-page typed lecture commenced thus: 'I am glad that I have been able to come at last to your country and that I may use this opportunity for expressing my gratitude to you for the honour you have done to me by acknowledging my work and rewarding me by giving me the Nobel prize'.

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## LETTER FROM BOSTON

## Nazrul and Tagore: Two contrasting offerings

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

My mother often used to say that when you don't have a choice, "dudher shad gholey mitao", i.e., satisfy your yearning for the taste for fresh milk with the taste of buttermilk. My wife Rumi and I would have loved to be in Kolkata or Dhaka to celebrate Rabindra and Nazrul Jayanti this year, but since that is not an option, we decided that we might as well take my mother's advice and celebrate these twin birthdays with gusto here in Boston and Connecticut, even if that leaves you with the taste of buttermilk. My letter today will offer my dear readers a glimpse of our efforts and I hope that you will see what we lack in scale and extravaganza we make up with our zeal, creativity and a little bit of bravado, not to speak of our boundless love for these two literary giants.

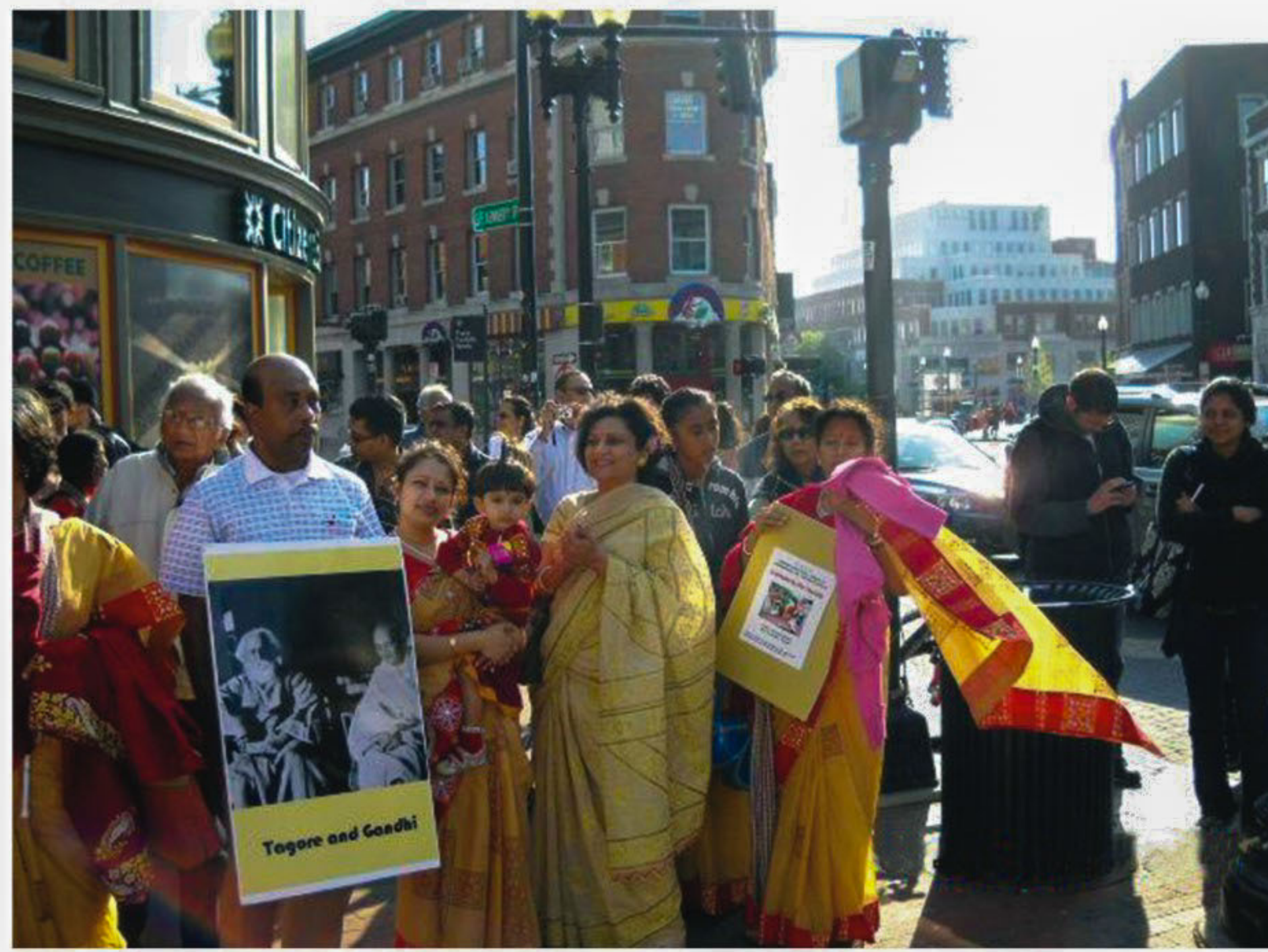
Let me first confess to the bravado I alluded to in the introduction. A few weeks ago I had forwarded an announcement by email to some of my literary friends with the opening line, "Greetings from Boston, the world headquarters for Tagore's Sesquicentennial Celebrations". The pushback from my friends far and afield was strong and furious. Some objected to my audacity and cheek. "How dare you try to steal the thunder from New York?" one said, while another one fumed, "If there is a world headquarters for the Tagore celebrations, Los Angeles should claim the honor, you dumb skull!" As my readers will probably understand, I only meant it tongue and cheek, but the anger and vituperative that was hurled towards me made me realize that Bangalees living in diasporas were very possessive about Tagore. Anyway, in the interest of global harmony, I refrained from any further references to the "world headquarters" title, and decided to let Shantiniketan, Churulia, Jorasanko, or even Dallas lay claim to that title. We the Bangalees of Boston are just happy to offer our best when it comes to paying tribute to our National Poet, and the author of our national anthem.

The first call to participate in a commemorative event came through an email from Swapna Ray, founder of Swaralipi, "The Rabindrasangeet Academy", to an open-air concert and parade to honour Tagore at Harvard Square, a popular and colorful gathering place in the middle of Harvard University, on 8 May 8, a Sunday. We had missed last year's gathering but have seen the video and images of the event and knew we had to attend the homage to Tagore this year, to sing, to enjoy, and to join

Swapna and Rahul, her husband and accomplished writer, singer and scientist, in this unique annual outdoor tribute. We were not disappointed. It was a warm sunny afternoon, and Harvard Square was teeming with visitors from across the globe, who come to taste the food, browse the books at its two well-known bookstores, the Coop and the Harvard Book Store, or just to listen to its street musicians and performers.

In spite of the much dreaded "parking problem" at Harvard Square, a big crowd of Bangalees came to this outdoor concert-cum-festival. When we approached the Square, we could see the colourful crowd that was making its presence known by the posters, bright and eye-catching clothing and the loud music. Tapash, our musician and impresario friend, had the harmonium slung across his shoulder; Zahed Mamun, a virtuoso percussionist, was playing a type of dhol, with Rahul, with the violin, completed the ensemble. Swapna's students were already singing and dancing to Rabindra Sangeet and we rushed to join the group. The Square, which is surrounded by boutiques and businesses on two sides, serves as the entry point to the various schools of Harvard University, as well as the underground subway station. The nice weather and the location provided the Tagore enthusiasts with a bonus, as the celebration was joined by curious passers-by who had any familiarity with Tagore, or onlookers who were drawn in by the colourful performers in their traditional outfits, saree, kurta, fatua, and sadria. Our numbers started to swell and we soon found ourselves overflowing onto the street and running into vehicular traffic navigating through the normally busy circular road in front of the Coop. Unlike other celebrations, usually indoors, this one had an international flavour, as Harvard Square is always a big draw for tourists from Japan, China, and South East Asian countries. The organizers had brought banners and festoons, which boldly declared in English the purpose of this gathering with pictures of Tagore. Even the casual passer-by got a quick introduction to Tagore and his accomplishments. The art director of the event must be credited for the catchy design of the many posters, particularly for one that capitalized on the more photogenic and well-known figure of Gandhi, and showed Gandhi and Tagore sitting next to each other under the caption "Gandhi and Tagore".

After two hours of singing and dancing, we decided to take the show on the road, and the entire group of performers crossed the road and



marched in procession heading first towards the Kennedy School of Government, another local landmark, and went around the block coming back to Harvard Square by way of John F. Kennedy Street. We held the posters high for everybody to see as well as to tempt the onlookers to join our procession as we marched and chanted in commemoration of a national hero.

No sooner had we finished Swaralipi's public event than we received an invitation from Kazi Belal (known to us as Shahjahan Kazi), and his better half, Gulshan Ara Kazi (Pushpa Apa), a charismatic couple well-known in North American literary and cultural circles, to a private Nazrul-Rabindra jayanti at their house on the 29 May, during the Memorial Day long weekend. Shahjahan Bhai and Pushpa Apa, Nazrul and Rabindra Sangeet singers, respectively, are instrumental in setting up two Nazrul Endowments in the USA, one at the University of Connecticut and the other at California State University, Northridge. On a personal level, Rumi and I have spent countless nights in their living room over the last quarter of a century in planning and executing various cultural events and in learning to dance, act and sing from this duo. The email from Shahjahan Bhai indicated that this was a very intimate tribute to Tagore and Nazrul and invited us to spend the evening from six o'clock onwards and ended with the reminder:

"Bring your poetry book and songs with you". The only problem is, now they live in Northford, Connecticut, a small town near Yale University and University of Connecticut, a full two and a half hours drive from us. Furthermore, having done a few all-nighters when they lived in Medford close to the Tufts University campus, I knew what Shahjahan Bhai and Pushpa Apa's invitation to celebrate the twin birthdays meant: party until you drop dead. Our wiser friends always caution us that while all night musical soirees are good for the spirit, they might be bad for health especially when you are no longer a spring chicken!

But we went and did not regret it although by the time we came back home after 3 a.m. the next morning, we were completely wiped out. The food (which is always a big attraction for me), the company (more on that later), the ambience, and finally the presentations of songs, recitation, and jokes (during coffee breaks) were unparalleled. The trademark of a Shahjahan-Pushpa get-together have always been a. everybody participates, and b. the hosts back you up whether you are doing Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Sangeet, ghazals, or Hindi geets. Tonight, it was a cozy gathering of twenty people, where we each know the other devotee, and you get the feel of a family gathering with everyone sitting on the floor in the "jalsha ghar", except for the children who are allowed

to opt out and watch TV or read in other rooms.

By the time we reached the Kazi home a little after 6, the set up for the jayanti was ready and we could hear Shahjahan Bhai and his nephew, Jazir, putting the final touches on the sound system. After a quick detour to the kitchen to sample the array of delectable snacks (including my favorite samosa and shandesh) we entered the artfully decorated music room in their basement. Pushpa Apa was at one of the harmoniums and Shahjahan Bhai at the other, and his brother Babu at the tablas. To put everyone at ease, Pushpa Apa reminded us that at this celebration of Nazrul and Tagore's birthday, there were no prepared programs, and we each could participate in our own way, with a song or two, and choose to read our own or borrowed poems.

The evening's offering flowed in an organic manner, as we all started with a few devotional songs leading to solo recitals, interspersed with recitations from Tagore, Nazrul, Nirmolendu Goon, Pablo Neruda, and other poets, which were then followed by more songs after dinner with a slight detour with stand-up comedy. I recited a section of Tagore's "Jetye Nahi Dibo" and segued into an English translation of the same by Fakrul Alam. I could barely finish before Jayanta and Mehdi pointed out the difficulties inherent in

translating Tagore, and this led to an interesting discussion on the topic of presenting Tagore and Nazrul to the Western readers. A recent observation by Adam Kirsch in the New Yorker also caught our attention. Kirsch, in an otherwise interesting review of "The Essential Tagore" recently published by Harvard University Press remarked that Tagore's "literary genius ... remains elusive in translation" (New Yorker, May 30, 2011).

When Jayanta, a poet himself, cited favorably a translation by William Radice, a firestorm broke out about the strengths and weaknesses of various works of translations. I reminded him that I had read some critical comments on Radice's works in a blog where one blogger had commented that Radice's translations pale in comparison with that of his wife Ketaki Kushari Dyson. It was interesting that so many of us, living thousands of miles away from our land, still feel so passionate about a word or two, or a twist in the translations. The question on which we ended the debate was, "can you really, with high fidelity, convey the meaning of Tagore's line, shomukh-urmirey dakey poschater dheu?" We did not resolve the issue that evening nor could we agree on whether something is lost in translation, but we all felt blessed to be able to read Nazrul and Tagore in its original, and noted with laughter how nostalgic we get after even living away for so many years.

When it was Mehdi's turn, he came up with a number of excuses for staying away from the microphone. A Professor of Engineering by profession, he reminded us that at BUET, where he had his undergraduate education, his life was spent pursuing mathematical formulas and strength of materials rather than the "cultural stuff". But, finally he succumbed to the mounting pressure on him, and obliged us by reading aloud "Juddho" by Nirmolendu Goon, a three-line poem. The most interesting thing is I probably last heard this poem many ages ago, but, when I heard Mehdi recite it, it all came back. I wonder if poetry is then like love that stays even when memory fades. As Tagore once said "raater shob tara..." Or, maybe not. As we were driving home with Rumi at the helm, I was ruminating about it, and she consoled me by offering to debate it at the next jayanti. I relented and fell asleep as she did two encore presentations from the previous evening's repertoire just for me: "megho medur boroshay kothai tumi" and "piu piu birohhi papiya".

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