

*Literary Editor's note: The following is the concluding segment of Dr. Fakrul Alam's paper at the First International Literary conference organized by Bangla Academy on 27 June 2011. The first segment appeared in Star Literature last Saturday*

# Rabindranath Tagore in the twenty-first century

So the science of the west and its learning is to be looked at positively and not cast aside unthinkingly in any retrogressive gesture. However, Rabindranath is valuable today also because he reminds us again and again that uncritical adoption of anything can be harmful for modern day Asians. In "Civilization and Progress," a talk he delivered in China in 1925, the same year that he was repudiating the Mahatma's cult of the charka, Rabindranath decries the section of Chinese intellectuals who "go seeking for civilization amongst the wilderness of skyscrapers, in the shrieking headlines of news-journals, and the shouting vociferation of demagogues" (628). To slight the best of one's civilization, to leave the prophets of one's own culture "who had a far-seeking vision of truth" and to scant the accumulated wisdom of the east, was a dangerous path to pursue for the current generation of Asians (ibid). It is all too obvious from this essay that Rabindranath would have been scathing about the culture of conspicuous consumption and the commodification of everything that we are now in sight of since "systems which mainly are for making profits and not for supplying life's needs encourage an obesity of ugliness in our society obliterating the fine modulation of personality from its features" (629).

Rabindranath was a fierce critic of the factionalism and divisiveness bred by nationalism as well as of imperial arrogance, of atavistic impulses as well as imperial lure. Significantly, he was dismayed by the events that took place in Bengal at the turn of the century that would lead at first to the partition of Bengal and later to the widening of the gap between Hindus and Muslim because of the excesses committed by Hindus during the swadeshi or self-rule campaign. Initially an ardent opponent of the movement to thwart that partition, he moved away from it steadily when he realized that it had created division instead of preserving unity in the people of the province. This is why in an essay titled "Shodupaye" or "The Right Way" that was published in 1909, he is quite critical of Hindu Bengalis who had been slighting Muslims for welcoming the partition of Bengal. He is also critical of Hindu Bengalis because they had also been trying to treat Biharis, Oriyans and Assamese living in Bengal disdainfully. As he points out in the essay, Hindu Bengalis had always "insulted" or looked "down upon" these people. (136). He argues that the right way for Hindu Bengalis to respond to the partition of Bengal would be to desist from actions that created further division between themselves and Muslims. About the treatment meted out to poor and disempowered Muslims and other races by the Hindu upper class in greater Bengal he has this to say, "We have never

pondered on or worked for the welfare of the poor and the downtrodden, we have never acknowledged them as our own, and we have never shown them any respect" (137).. Did the Hindu Bengalis ever "pause to think that because we never worked for the welfare of the Muslims or other ordinary people of the country, we couldn't blame them if they are suspicious of our recent overtures of friendship"? (138).

Rabindranath's anxiety about the way Hindu Bengalis had been treating Muslims and other races in pre-partition India is something that increased over the years. In "Hindus and Muslims", one of the many excellent essays collected in *Kalantar* (1935), he ponders over the problems besetting Hindu-Muslim relationships in Bengal. He points out that problems are bound to occur when one race erects "a wall of custom" to keep out other races (197). The answer to this and other formidable problems keeping the peoples of the subcontinent away from each other can only be solved, he suggests, by "changing our mindsets and by moving on to a new era of relationships" (ibid). To move to such an era, both Hindus and Muslims must "venture forth from the walls hemming them in" (ibid). What he says in the conclusion of this essay published in the third decade of the twentieth century is as relevant now for us in the subcontinent as it was then: "If religion is made into a grave and if the entire nation is confined to the past forever there is no way that we can tread on the path to development and there is no possibility of us melding with one another" (197-98). To tread the path of development, education is essential, for only it can dispel superstition and break down barriers erected by minds that have stopped growing. What Rabindranath says here about Hindu-Muslim relationships and the relationship between a dominant race and marginalized peoples living within a state is surely as important for us at this point in time as we struggle to overcome fundamentalist forces in the countries of our region and the tyranny of people who constitute the majority in nations containing indigenous people and/or racial minorities.

There is a lot, then, that Rabindranath can offer us as individuals and as nations as we move further and further ahead into the new millennium. What one learns gradually from any sustained exposure to Rabindranath's oeuvre, for sure, is that there is a rich legacy of ideas in his prose works as well as his poems, songs, and plays that can be invaluable for readers everywhere coping with the problems of our era. This is because he was a man who always thought about his people and country in both practical and visionary ways. He had read widely and traveled far and wide mentally and geographically, questioning age-old assumptions and daring to experiment to

change the way things were, for example, by adopting new methods of farming and microcredit. He was always ready to discard old ways of doing things and never hesitated to change tack when necessary. He was truly a man who never stopped growing or looking forward though he was always rooted in the land in which he was born.

A case in point is the late essay called "The Tenant Farmer" that is also part of *Kalantar*. In this essay, we see Rabindranath critiquing Pramathnath Chaudhury's book on the tenant farmer and meditating on problems of land tenure in Bengal created by inequitable systems of land ownership and revenue collection. Wryly, he acknowledges his own interests as a zamindar in discussing the issue of the tenant farmer at the mercy of landlords. But Rabindranath writes with the conviction that he is in no worse a position to reflect on the problems than young revolutionaries who thought they had all the answers to the problems of small farmers perpetually at the mercy either of money lenders, emerging landowners, or zamindars empowered to exploit them by the permanent settlement. The conclusion that Rabindranath comes to after surveying the problems and the remedies offered is that we would all have to keep questing for a comprehensive solution to a complex situation. What he knew for sure when he was writing the essay was that the solution to the problem of the tenant farmer could not be found "in a special piece of legislation, in the spinning wheel, in homespun clothes, in the limited right that enables one to vote for the Congress" (209). The only thing that he knew after thinking about it for a long time was that the right answer would take time and would have to be based on the concept of a "wholeness of life" and not in "any out-of-the-way system" (ibid) but he leaves us with no doubt that he would continue his quest for a worthwhile solution as long as he lived.

What is amazing as we consider Rabindranath's legacy in this his sesquicentennial year is that he had thought so extensively about these and other problems facing us even now and had offered not a few solutions for them so that they can still be useful for us. For instance, he had not merely made us conscious of our natural world through his writing and music he was also concerned about the dangers posed to the environment by unplanned urbanization. As early as 1896, he had published a poem called "Sabhayati Prati" or "To Civilization" in his verse collection titled *Chaiti* where he wrote passionately, "Give back the wilderness, take away the city/Embrace if you will your steel, brick and stone walls/O newfangled civilizations! Cruel all-consuming one, Return all sylvan, secluded, shaded and sacred spots/And traditions of innocence" (241). The

protest registered through the poem against environmental degradation in the name of civilization has a special resonance for us in contemporary Bangladesh. So of course he plays such as *Mukhtadhara*, written in 1922, where he dramatizes the depredations caused by big dams, or *Roktokorobi* (1926), where he depicts a state relying on its repressive apparatuses to extract resources endlessly at the bidding of an avaricious king.

In all that he did, Rabindranath was clearly ahead of his time. That is why he remains our contemporary, and of great use to us in our journey into the twenty-first century. His ideas about making education creative and organic are very well-known and have been written about by many. I have written about his very progressive ideas about university education elsewhere but let me note here that his notion of teaching creatively, of making learning fun, and of mingling cultures and incorporating art and crafts into the curriculum as well as teaching science, and of melding western knowledge traditions with eastern ones have been acknowledged as innovative and thoughtful by many expert educators. As Amartya Sen has pointed out in his fine essay on Rabindranath in *The Argumentative Indian*, he remains an exemplary figure for his total commitment to a concept of education based on an "uncompromising belief in the importance of 'freedom of mind'" (113). Indeed, as far as Sen is concerned, "it is in the sovereignty of reasoning/fearless reasoning in freedom that we can find Rabindranath Tagore's lasting voice" (120). And let us not forget that his fiction and his poems reveal him to have sympathies that make him an early advocate of the rights of women in the Indian subcontinent.

Ultimately, what makes Rabindranath an indispensable guide as we make our way both as individuals and nationally into the twentieth-first century is the example of a man who kept developing not only for his own sake but also because he was conscious that he was the citizen of a country in chains as well as a citizen of the world. In his long and probing essay on Rabindranath titled "The Illegitimacy of Nationalism", Ashis Nandy shows how the later Rabindranath pursued "concepts of creativity, intellectual responsibility and universalism" that were very different from those that he started with when he first began to get involved with the politics and culture of his country (252). Showing great insight into Rabindranath's evolution as a thinker, Nandy suggests that he moved away from where he began in his thinking about the individual, the nation and the world in exemplary fashion. Nandy tracks the course of a writer and thinker who went beyond a "facile synthesis of India's civilizational categories and the values of the Enlightenment" to a position where he attained "a heightened awareness of the global

politics of cultures" (232).

In other words, Rabindranath's great value for us is that he teaches us by the very trajectory of his life to move beyond "the limits of nation and geography" to a kind of rooted cosmopolitanism, to quote Julie Mehta in "Tagore's Global Soul: In Flight between Nationalism and Liberalism" (68). One is reminded here of Rabindranath's wonderful poem *Balaka* or "A Flight of Geese" where the trajectory of the flock of migratory birds convey to him the message "Not here, not here, but somewhere far away" (263). It is a message conveyed equally vividly, one recalls, in the companion poem of the *Balaka* collection, "Chanchala" or "The Restless One" where the flow of a river reminds the poet to keep reaching beyond one's self and one's position in history. As he tells himself at the end of this beautiful poem, "Do not look back any more./Let the call of what lies ahead/Draw you forward/On this vast stream/From the clamor behind/To unplumbed darkness, boundless light" (267)..

However, as I end this paper I would like to remind everyone present that while there is a buoyancy in Rabindranath's vision that would prevent him from transmitting only melancholy to readers who would be reading him in another century as was the case with the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh with whose sad tone poem "Wet Evening in April" I began this paper, I do not want to downplay for a moment Rabindranath's consciousness that there is a world full of problems that we must surmount day after day. But Rabindranath's life shows him negotiating through a sea of troubles/personal and public without giving up hope in the future at any point of time. This is why I would like to end with the unforgettable lines from what was his last message to a world beset by what seemed to be an all-consuming war, "As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of loosing faith in Man" (214). It was this conviction in humanity and of human kind's capacity to survive and transcend that makes him the eternal messenger of spring that will follow winter, for us this day in this his sesquicentennial year.

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## NOTES

# Remembering Paul Valéry

NASIMA ZAMAN

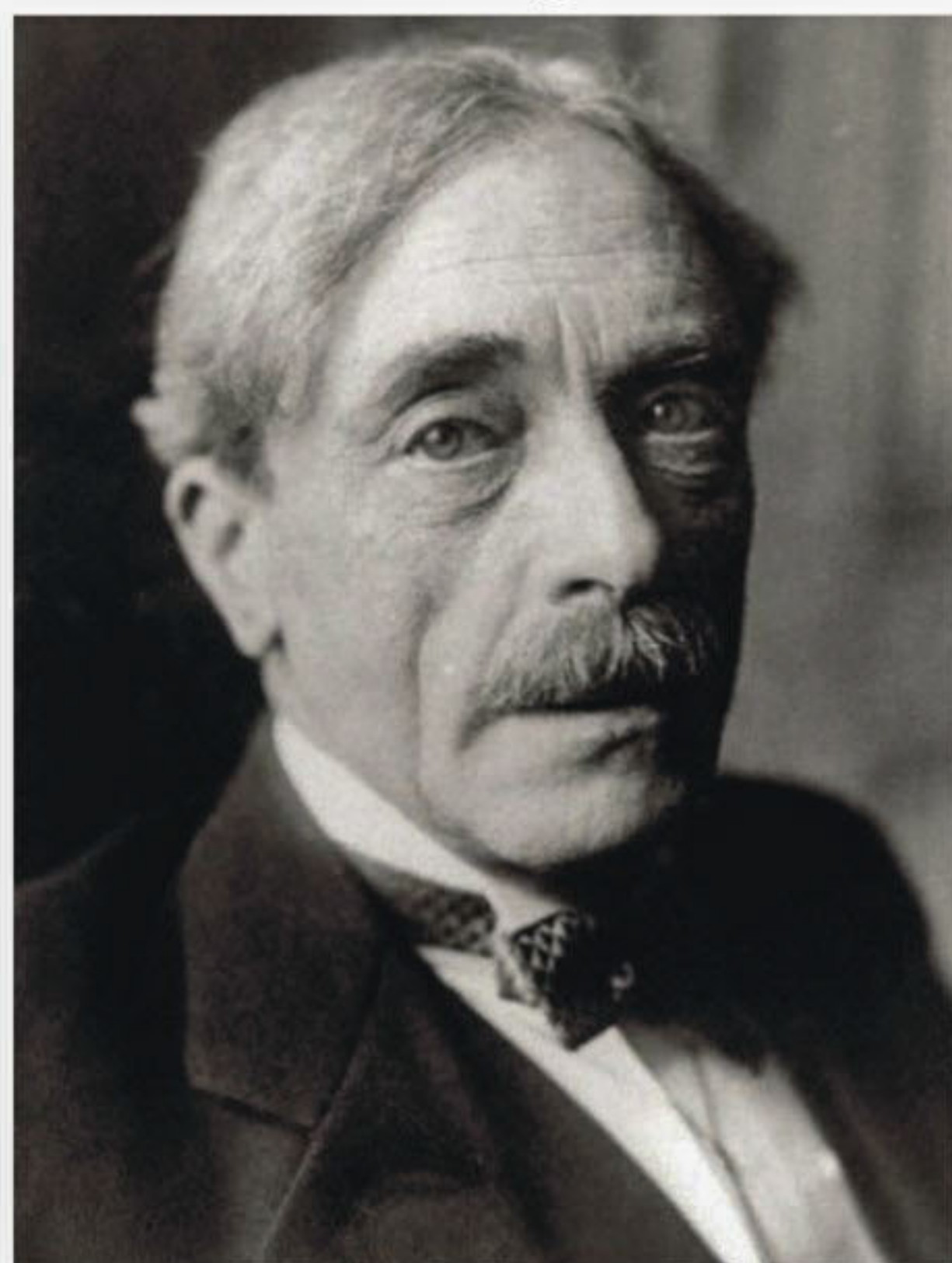
July is not only the month of the Fall of the Bastille but of the death of Paul Valéry (30 October 1871-20 July 1945) as well. He was not only a poet and essayist of rare talent, but also a rigorous and passionate explorer of thought who devoted his life to both literature and science. Though known as a poet, Paul Valéry also wrote essays and aphorisms on art, history, letters, music and current events. His interests were so sufficiently broad that he can be classified as a polymath.

It is interesting to note that none of his poems drew much attention till 1892, when Valéry underwent an existential crisis, an event that had a huge impact on his writing career. *La Soirée avec monsieur Teste* (An evening with Mr. Teste) appeared in 1896. The protagonist, Monsieur Teste, is nothing but an allegorical representation of self-consciousness. In many ways he resembles the author, yet Teste does not represent the whole of Valéry, who not only knew what rapture and folly were, but also proclaimed their virtues.

It is difficult to understand Paul Valéry's spiritual and aesthetic evolution without considering his youth. Until age twenty, the writer had kept his childhood faith. He was a precocious author whose perfect verses were well received by the literary avant garde in France. The young Valéry also greatly admired Stéphane Mallarmé, leading figure of French symboliste poetry. Answering a letter that Valéry had sent him, Mallarmé wrote, "My dear poet, with your gift for subtle analogy and your time sense of music you have all that is essential."

The young writer, with a passion for Mme. de Rovira that totally unsettled him, decided to free himself from the "idols" of love and poetry, and henceforth devote himself solely to the intellect, to understanding what consciousness and knowledge were. This awakening is fundamental to Paul Valéry's writing, which is an attempt to make a science out of the workings of the mind.

Paul Valéry's most striking achievement is perhaps his monumental intellectual diary (over 20,000 pages) called the *Cahiers* (Notebooks). Two years after this mystical experience, he moved to Paris and resided there for most of the remainder of his life. Every morning, at dawn, he began writing his famous *Cahiers*, which remained secret until his death and were published twelve years after his death. Every morning he contributed something to the *Cahiers*, prompting him to write: "Having dedicated those hours to the life of the mind, I thereby earn the right to be stupid for the rest of the day." These large notebooks, that



included sketches and figures, clearly reveal their author's intent: "to advance towards knowledge, through a multitude of questions and precautions." For Paul Valéry, who once wrote "I am quick or I am nothing", virtuosity can only be acquired through a slow and long process of learning and apprenticeship. In this methodical exploration of the spirit lies Valéry's secret.

Paul Valéry sought a creative unity of mind and found it in Leonardo da Vinci, who had the rare capacity to combine both a scientific and artistic spirit. He found inspiration in the Italian master through *L'Introduction à La Méthode de Léonard de Vinci* (An Introduction to the Method of Leonardo de Vinci) in 1895. He became familiar with painters like Edgar Degas, Odilon Redon and Edouard Vuillard, and with the writer Jean Cocteau as well.

Paul Valéry's technique is quite orthodox in its essentials. His verse rhymes and scans in conventional ways, and it has much in common with the work of his mentor Mallarmé. When, in 1913, the Parisian publisher

Gallimard requested poems of Paul Valéry, he wrote *La Jeune Parque* (The Young Fate) that resulted in a short masterpiece. He finally broke his 'great silence' with the publication of this obscure, but sublimely musical, masterpiece of 512 alexandrine lines in rhyming couplets, which had taken him four years to complete and proved to be an enormous success in 1917. Such lyricism is bound to have an effect for this is about the drama of our lives, about how our reason and mind say one thing and our innermost feelings another. His verses have the transparency of purity and the profundity of meaning. However, it is also possible to read the poem as an allegory on the way fate moves human affairs or as an attempt to comprehend the horrific violence in Europe at the time of the poem's composition. Though it is not about World War I, it does try to address the relationship between destruction and beauty.

In 1920 and 1922, encouraged by the success of *La Jeune Parque*, Paul Valéry published several works in rapid succession: *Le Cimetière marin* (The Graveyard by the Sea) and *Odes* and *L'Album des vers anciens* (Album of Ancient Verses), *Charmes* (from the Latin carmina, meaning "songs" and also "incantations"), which further confirmed his reputation as a major French poet.

Paul Valéry went on writing till the end of his life. Though he had no great penchant for the genre, he felt the temptation to write a "cerebral and sensual novel", the fragments of which constitute *Histories Barisées* (Broken Histories). In four collections of essays, entitled *Variété* (Variety, 1922-1944), he presented his philosophical considerations, his reflections on poetry, music and art, his thoughts on science and civilization, and the future of Europe, conveying the deep moral crisis that the continent experienced after World War I. Paul Valéry was elected a member of the *Académie Française* in 1925. He became a tireless public speaker and intellectual figure in French society. He represented France on cultural matters at the League of Nations. In 1937, he was given a chair at the *Collège de France*, which was the first time ever that a poet and essayist received such an honour. In the year of his death, he was still working on a prose poem, *L'Ange* (The Angel), and his play *Mon Faust* (My Faust) was published. Paul Valéry died in Paris on 20 July 1945. A state funeral was held for this great figure of France. He was later buried in the cemetery of his native town, Sète, the cemetery celebrated in his famous poem, *Le Cimetière marin*.

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## POETRY

### Unforgettable leaf

MUJTOBA AHMED MURSHED

Wouldn't it be possible to take this leaf back to the tree?

Wouldn't this leaf see our moments of conversation  
Seated with other green leaves,  
Seated once again on the brownish curved branch of the tree?

Wouldn't this leaf forget its drops of dry tears  
To stand up from patient dust of Mother Earth?  
And thus wouldn't it regain the  
Massive shape of an ancient tree shade then?

Or this leaf would go far from here, waving through the air,  
Would walk mile after mile, leaving our heart's blue courtyard!  
Wouldn't this leaf stop on the tree for one last time?  
Or would it only go too far away forever from here?

Wouldn't this leaf gaze in curiosity at cosmic stars?  
Write a letter for us on the windy pages in silence?

Wouldn't this leaf go back to the tree one more time  
To touch the conversations of our final days  
With its finger line? #

### Choice abundance

OBABUR RAHMAN

In the midst of the cynical red  
Lies the tranquil of the sonic of seasons,  
When the flesh of the cube reveals the spirit of the circle  
The power illuminates the magic of the reasons.

Time after time, blinding the scenic eyes of the sub-lime  
Raids in, the mesmeric from within  
And the tempest of the melodic ferocious,  
The senses-euphoric settles the score of the fleetingly tragic  
In a hallucinating spell of the conned victorious.

Run for cover? Every time fear takes over?  
Be enslaved by desire? Or master the earth, wind, fire and water?  
Or let the mystic of my wisdom  
Rule the heart of my kingdom,  
And command the path to the grandeur of my empire.....