

Humble life and small miseries

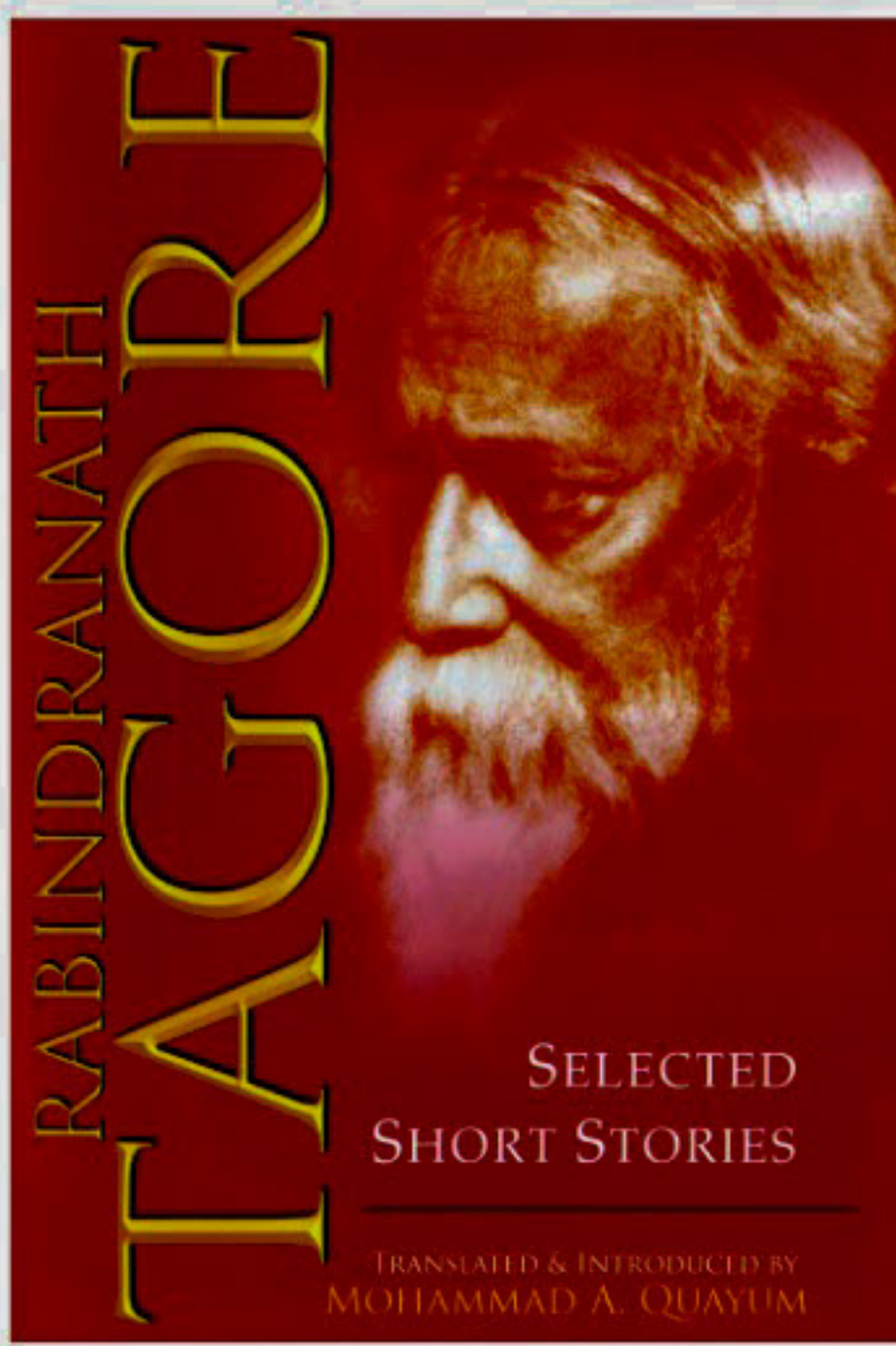
Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura reflects on Tagore's endless relevance

Mohammad A Quayum, a Bangladeshi, teaches English at the International Islamic University Malaysia and has taught at universities in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Singapore and the United States and has published 21 books and numerous research articles. He found his niche in the literary scene of South-East Asia through his works.

Quayum's translation of nineteen of Tagore's selected short stories with a biographical essay on Rabindranath and an insightful introduction is a timely publication when all over the world people are commemorating the 150th year of Tagore's birth. Professor Quayum's book is a welcome addition to his oeuvre and rich legacy. Tagore's collection of translated short stories will lift the readers, I believe, to the ecstasies of literary delight.

Tagore was the first Asian and non-European to win the Nobel Prize for literature which was awarded primarily for his book 'Gitanjali', a collection of poetry. Besides poetry he wrote plays, novels, songs, non-fiction ranging from travel-ogues to history to essays and, of course, short stories. There were few precedents in the genre in Bengali when Tagore began to write short stories in the late 1800s. He had to invent language for the form as he composed. He liberated Bengali literature from the shackles of traditional rules and models based on ancient Sanskrit literature.

Tagore was greatly influenced by his contact with the "humble life and their small miseries" of the village folk he was in contact with while living in relative isolation managing his family estate in Bengal. He concentrated on creating a new form, the short story. Many of his best stories were written during this period having a distinctive poetic lilt, poignantly capturing the elements of rural Bengal, rightly acclaimed as vivid portraits of Bengal's life and landscapes, set in the milieu of the time --- the Bengali speaking region of India during the British colonial era. But the British are mentioned only peripherally; the stories are about the natives. An



Rabindranath Tagore
Selected Short Stories
Translation Dr Mohammad A Quayum
Macmillan India

important point to note is that Tagore's talent is great enough to get western readers into the minds of the characters so that they become familiar to readers, though the customs and beliefs are very different from those of the West.

Tagore is not only a master storyteller, but also an artist and a poet. So in his short stories, apart from believable characters, there are wonderful descriptions of the Bengal countryside, storm and sunshine, floods and droughts, rivers and plains, trees and flowers, as well as the scents and sounds and the feel of quiet villages. The characters of the stories are highlighted by their uniqueness and yet so typical of the period, region, culture and customs, all portrayed brilliantly.

Tagore wrote almost 100 short stories and elevated this serious art form in

Bengali literature to a lofty height. He easily intermingled stark realism and poetic idealism, portrayed conflicts or tensions between the new and the old, cruelty and sensitivity, solitude and crowd, male and female in his short stories. At a time when the market and the ideology of consumerism are propagating an ethic based on individual needs, Tagore's short stories, permeated with values based on care, attachment and empathy, strike a deep chord, precisely because this value orientation is fast eroding all over the globalized world. His stories represent a multiplicity of voices; have a timeless ethical relevance in terms of their commitment to social and cultural plurality. Moving representations of the subjectivity of variously marginalized persons signify Tagore's attachment to the cause of social justice that is equated with his love for God, whom he regarded as the profundity of life personified. That is why he is still relevant today.

The scholarly introduction by Professor Quayum provides an excellent overview, background and the context of the stories. The notes at the end of each story provide a key to an understanding of Bengali culture and customs. The most difficult part in any translation is to convey the delicate beauty of the original. Many of Tagore's creations were obscured and partly forgotten for so long mainly due to inadequate translations of his writings. But luckily the short stories have been translated into English for more than a century now. Translation activity in this sphere continues as the ideas and feelings in Tagore's short stories are perennially relevant to a humanitarian society where universal themes transcend regional and cultural barriers.

It is indeed a matter of great pleasure to come across such a high quality of translation as done by Professor Quayum for which he deserves to be congratulated. In any translation it is very difficult to keep intact the sense of each context. Quayum's translation is as close as one can get: clear,

contemporary and accessible to a modern English-reading global audience. It is not handicapped by the ignorance of the translator of certain delicate nuances of the Bengali language, especially in the context of intimate household expressions. There is commendable fidelity and honesty in Quayum's translation. It once again opens up the possibility of discovering a relevance of Tagore's creations more than a century after they were composed. The appreciation does not end with reading but endures in the reader's perceptions from then on.

As an example of quality translation, I cannot desist quoting from 'Postmaster': "When he got into the boat and it started moving out of the dock, the rain-inundated river appeared surging like the earth's eyes suffused with tears, and he began to feel anguish in his heart --- the melancholic face of an ordinary village girl seemed to tell the story of an inexplicable tribulation of the entire world. A passionate thought crossed his mind, 'Let me go back and bring that forlorn girl with me.' But the sail had set; the monsoon currents in the river were flowing rapidly. Crossing the village they were already in sight of the crematorium ground, and a notion dawned in the mind of the listless traveler drifting on the stream --- separation and death were a recurrent fact of life. What is the point of going back? Aren't we all solitary on this earth?"

Without hesitation I recommend Professor's Quayum's "Rabindranath Tagore; Selected Short Stories" as an authoritative and readable translation, an essential Tagore for collectors. It should find a place on every discerning reader's shelf.

Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura studied English literature at Dhaka University and is secretary to the government of Bangladesh

Rehashing a rough side of life

Shahid Alam is worried about Bangladesh's child labour

"Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in Asia, still has a serious child labour problem despite its commendable progress in terms of basic education" (Ch. 1, "Introduction: Child Labour in Bangladesh"). Thus does Kristoffel Lieten, editor of *Working Boys and Girls at Risk: Child Labour in Urban Bangladesh*, introduces the book, although, considering the social norms and stresses obtaining in the country, it is difficult to see a direct correlation between progress in basic education and serious child labour problem. He then proceeds to concentrate on the topic of child labour in Bangladesh, beginning with a crucial observation: "The Bangladesh Child Labour Law 2006 primarily acts to prohibit hazardous work for children below 18 years old.... The implementation of the law, however, remains the key challenge." Indeed! True to form, laws abound on paper in Bangladesh, but their practical application, more often than not, falls below par. Lieten then brings up a fundamental problem that impedes scrupulous implementation of the law: "The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its 2009 tri-annual assessment of the progress in Bangladesh, reiterated its concern that there is no uniform definition of the term 'child': definitions and legal provisions vary between civil law, the Convention, and *sharia*."

Lieten's opening chapter is one of the more compelling of the seven making up the anthology. Anna Ensing's "From Hide to Shoe: Boys in the

Bangladeshi Leather Production Chain" (Ch. 5) is another. *Working Boys and Girls at Risk* is a decidedly mixed bag, with some pedestrian work and presentation leaving one to wonder: well, so what's new? Is this a book written for any of the authors to advance their professional career? Or indulge in an exercise in report churning to fulfill and/or justify substantial funding? These kinds of reports, both from Bangladeshi and foreign authorship, are a dime a dozen, many gathering dust in some archive or the other, in equal measure because of the inertia and lackadaisical attitude of policymakers and implementers in Bangladesh, and because, not infrequently, they effectively turn out to be exercises to satisfy ones individual or group's intellectual ego, and which do not take in the social and cultural environment of Bangladesh.

Lieten is canny enough, though, and stands out with his observations and

conclusions. For example, judging from the aspect of ground reality, he questions the applicability of universal standards for determining conceptual childhood: "Their (many children in Bangladesh) reality of childhood is vastly different from that of children in the West and, incidentally, from that of many children in the better-off sections of Bangladesh society." He stresses that, until political movements, labour unions, technological modernization, demographic changes and increasing profitability helped to diminish the use of



Working Boys and Girls at Risk
Child Labour in Urban Bangladesh
G.K. Lieten, ed.
The University Press Limited

child labour in the advanced countries, "Child exploitation became one of the pillars of industrial capitalism in Europe and North America, roughly until the second half of the nineteenth century." And, significantly, he questions the estimates of high child labour population in developing countries (where the statistics vary bewilderingly from survey to survey), contending that the "higher estimates were also useful for some Western countries arguing for the inclusion of a labour clause in international trade agreements, and for NGOs claiming more development aid." Now that is a racket, and is not an isolated instance restricted only to the area of child labour.

In fact, NGOs, as the editor points out, have tended to use a broader definition of child labour, at times contending that any child not in school is a child labourer! Lieten suggests that, "All production and services, including services within the household, which interfere with the normative development of the child, should be considered child labour." He looks at the causes of the serious child labour problem in Bangladesh from two perspectives: the socio-economic, which considers socio-economic conditions of the working poor (on the supply side) and the greed for profit (on the demand side), and the socio-cultural, which contemplates terms of consciousness, that is, parents and children who have not adapted to modern society's requirements and who still opt for labour income rather than for investment in education and future gratification. Nanna Baum, in "Supply of Girl Domestic: A Matter of Semi-Feudal Relations" (Ch. 4), broadly hints at the second viewpoint: "...parents are aware of the employer's real intentions. Employers need a household labourer, but tolerate or even accept the parents' wish for informal relations. It is exactly because of the twisted interests on the parents' side that parents often choose to turn a blind eye to their child's complaints, as long as the employer successfully fulfils their other desires." And, at the first: "...the mix of capitalist and semi-feudal relations enhances the dependency of parents on the employer." Her theoretical construct based on her study, however, is more comprehensive: "Domestic work is...a social and political phenomenon and cannot merely be analyzed in an economic manner."

Anna Ensing (Ch. 5) reinforces a truism that other studies have also found: that large-scale leather factories are usually export-oriented, while the small-scale ones mostly cater to the local market. "Children are mostly found in small-scale factories." The large-scale enterprises obviously do not want to fall foul of international regulation and monitoring and periodic inspection! She finds Hazaribagh, where a big chunk of the tanneries is located, to be one of the most polluted areas in the world, echoing the environmental magazine 'Ecologist' classifying it in 2008 as among the 30 most polluted places on the planet. Her evaluation of NGOs working in this area is pointedly mixed. "Individual projects have had their successes, but a poor coordination and

exchange of information between the various project holders, decreases the efficiency. Parallel projects are sometimes working at cross purposes and without much coordination between them." Ensing's analysis of the demography of most child workers in the leather industry in Dhaka is incisive as well as instructive: "It is hard to reduce child labour in Dhaka when the flow of migrant children looking for work keeps on coming. Thus eradication of hazardous child labour should involve preventive components for children in rural areas as well."

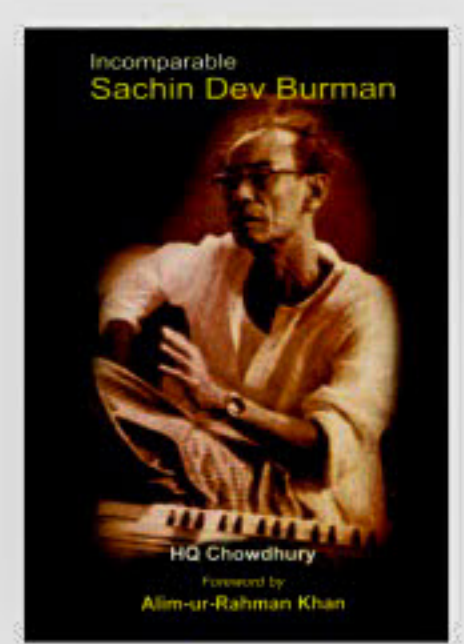
In the course of summing up, Lieten (Ch. 7, "Recommendations") brings up the fundamental issue underlying child labour: widespread poverty. "The causes and solutions to child labour are manifold and complex," he concludes, "and policies calling for major changes in the economic and social environment tend to...be too abstract and devoid of reality. Some of these measures, like poverty eradication, more equal development and high quality education, are a distant dream. But the eradication of poverty is crucial for a sustainable solution." Lieten is realistic in his assessment, but leaves us with a singular dilemma: poverty eradication is critical to a tenable solution, but it also remains a distant dream! So, are we in for a protracted period of the child labour syndrome? Only time will tell.

The essays contained in the volume are based on quantitative and/or anthropological methods of research. Some might argue that the sample size was relatively small, and the location of the respondents (for domestic workers, scavengers, street vendors, garment industry labourers) restricted to comparatively better-off sections of Dhaka (Hazaribagh was selected for only child labourers in the leather industry, and is self-restrictive), or that Dhaka is certainly not representative of urban Bangladesh, as the subtitle of the anthology claims, for the book to portray a definitive picture of the study undertaken. That might be legitimate academic carping, but it does not hide the fact that the child labour problem is indeed serious in Bangladesh. At least *Working Boys and Girls at Risk: Child Labour in Urban Bangladesh* reminds us of that unpleasant truth.

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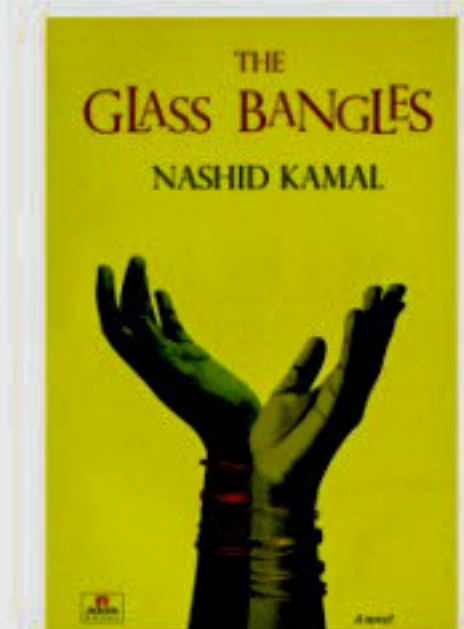
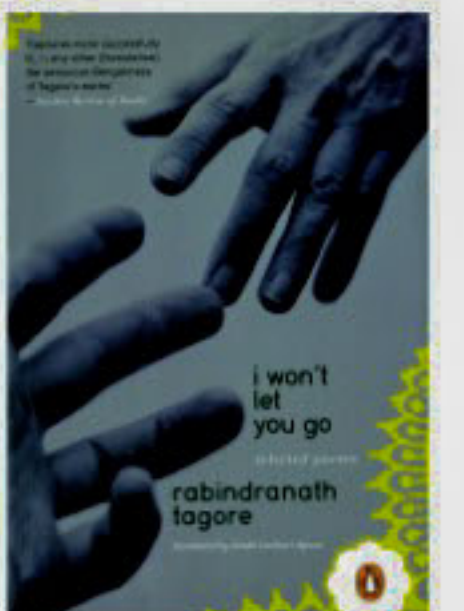
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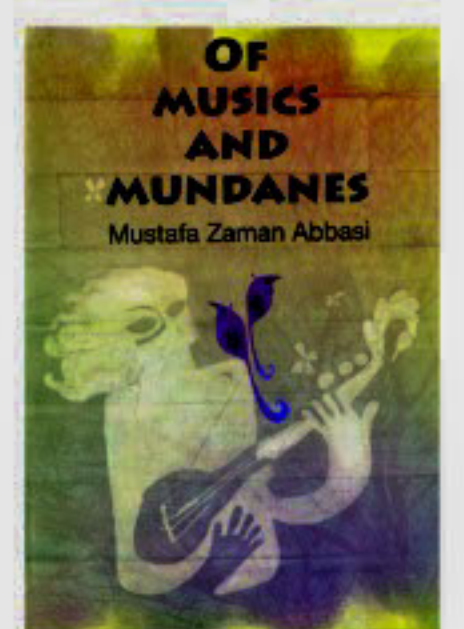
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I Won't Let You Go
Selected Poems:
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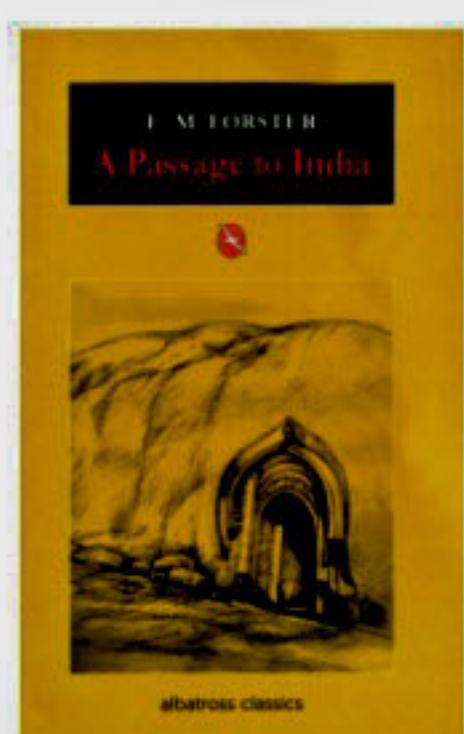
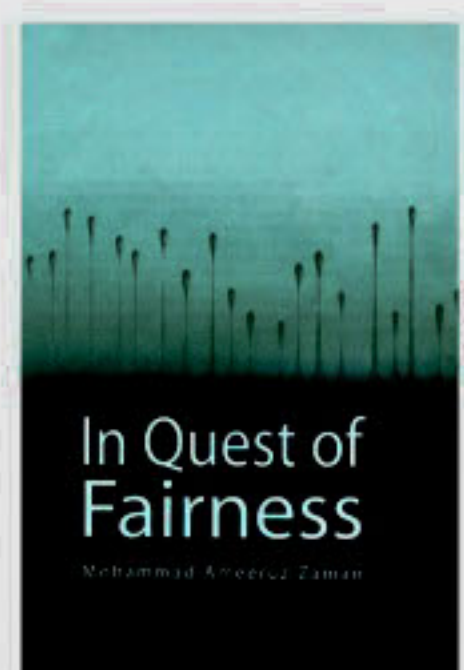
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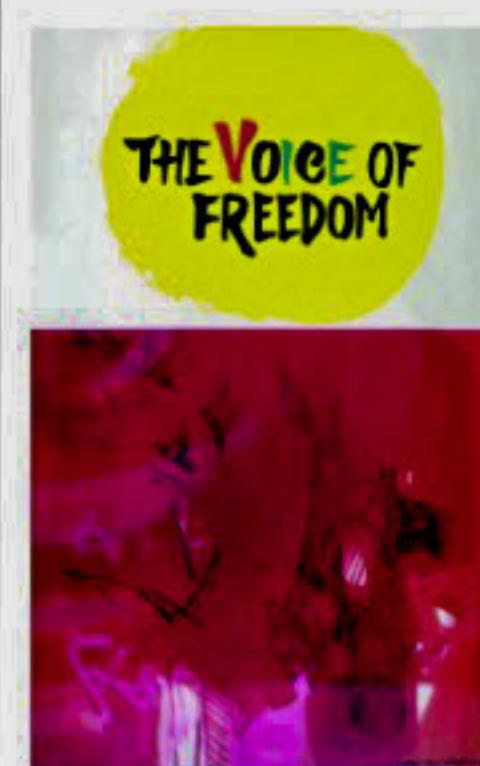
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