

RABINDRANATH SPEAKS

'Bengalis have an inborn respect for learning'

The life of Rabindranath Tagore, pre-eminent intellectual voice of Bengalis on both sides of the political divide, drew to a close on 22 Shrawana in terms of the Bengali calendar, a date which coincides with 7 August 1941. As a tribute to him and in recognition of his formidable, purposeful presence in the lives of Bengalis across the world, we reproduce below excerpts from his autobiographical work, *My Life in My Words*, for readers of *Star Literature*. Edited and with an introduction by Uma Das Gupta, the book was first published by Penguin India in 2006. --- LITERARY EDITOR

I still remember the first magic touch of literature which I experienced when I was a child and was made to struggle across my lesson in a first primer strewn with isolated words smothered under the burden of spelling. The morning hour appeared to me like a once illumined page grown dusty and faded, discoloured into irrelevant marks, smudges and gaps, wearisome in its moth-eaten meaninglessness. Suddenly I came to a sentence of combined words which may be translated thus:

It rains, the leaves tremble.
At once I came to a world in which I recovered my full meaning. If it were a sentence that informed me of a mere fact, it would fail to rouse up my mind from its boredom. The world of facts pleasant or unpleasant has its restricted range, but freedom is given to us by the world of reality, the reality which is truth made living, which has to be the same assurance of its entity as I myself have to my own self.

Shortly after my birth, my father took to constantly traveling about. So it is no exaggeration to say that in my early childhood I hardly knew him. He would now and then come back home all of a sudden, and with him came foreign servants with whom I felt extremely eager to make friends... Anyhow, when my father came, we would be content with wandering round about his entourage and in the company of his servants. We did not reach his immediate presence...

When my father was at home, his room was on the second floor. How often I watched him from a distance, from my hiding place at the head of the staircase. The sun had not yet risen, and he sat on the roof, silent as an image of stone, his hands folded on his lap.

When my mother died I was quite a child. She had been ailing for quite a long time, and we did not even know when her malady had taken a fatal turn. She used all along to sleep on a separate bed in the same room with us. Then, in the course of her illness, she was taken for a boat trip on the river, and on her return a room on the third storey of the inner apartments was set apart for her.

On the night she died, we were fast asleep in our room downstairs. At what hour I cannot tell, our old nurse came running in weeping and crying: 'Oh my little ones, you have lost your all!' My sister-in-law rebuked her and led her away, to save us the sudden shock at dead of night. Half awakened by her words, I felt my heart sink within me, but could not make out what had happened. When in the morning we were told of her death, I could not realize all

that it meant for me.
As we came out into the verandah we saw my mother laid on a bedstead in the courtyard. There was nothing in her appearance which showed death to be terrible. The aspect which death wore in that morning light was as lovely as a calm and peaceful sleep, and the gulf between life and its absence was not brought home to us.

My sister-in-law was a great lover of literature. She did not read simply to kill time, but the Bengali books she read filled her whole mind. I was a partner in her literary enterprises. She was a devoted admirer of *The Dream Journey*. So was I, the more particularly as, having been brought up in the atmosphere of its creation, its beauties had become intertwined with every fibre of my heart...

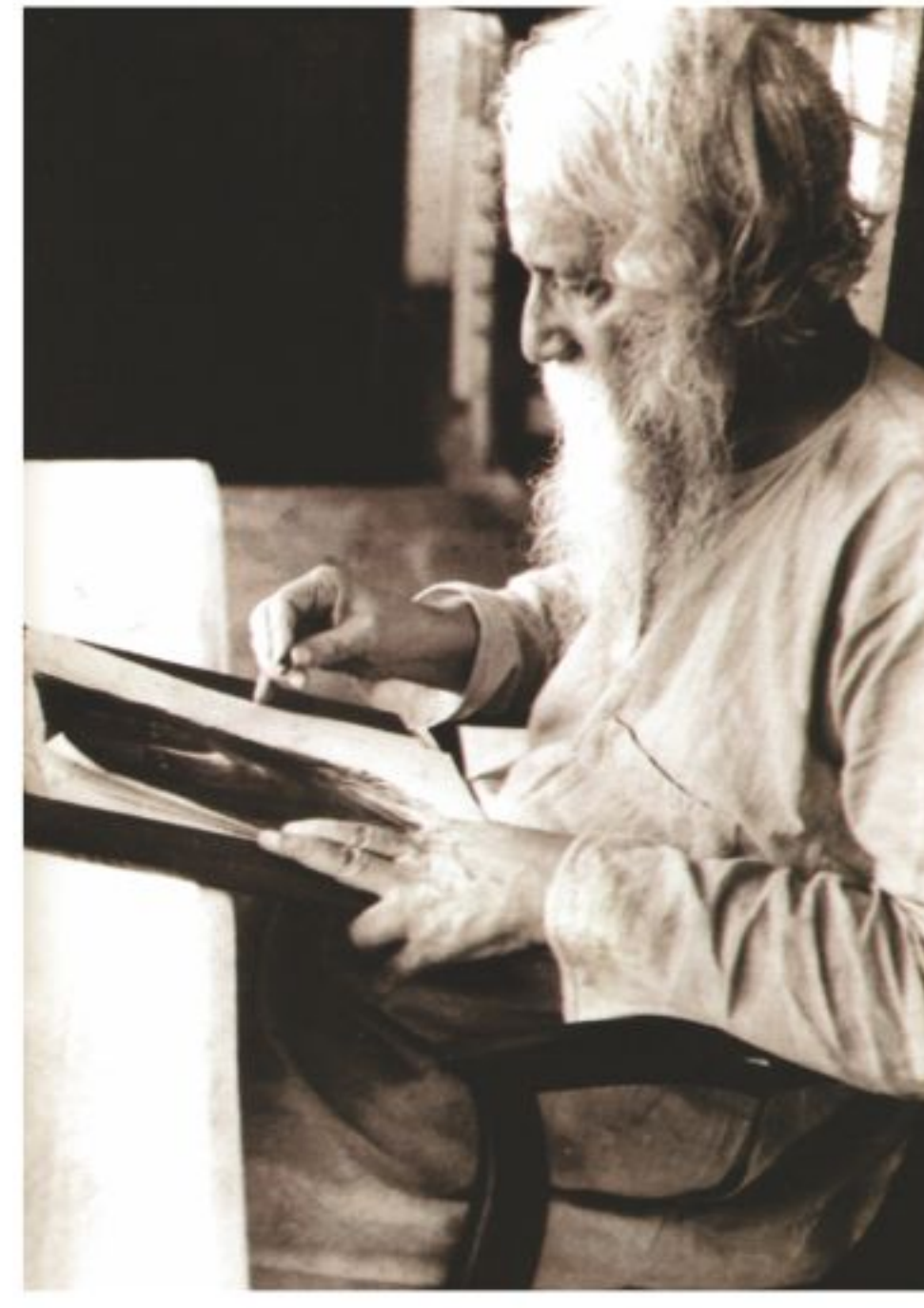
At this time, Biharilal Chakravarti's series of songs called 'Sarada Mangal' were coming out in the *Aryadarshan*. My sister-in-law was greatly taken with the sweetness of these lyrics. Most of them she knew by heart. She used often to invite the poet to our house, and had embroidered for him a cushion-seat with her own hands. This gave me the opportunity of making friends with him. He came to have a great affection for me, and I took to dropping in at his house at all times of the day, morning, noon or evening. His heart was as large as his body, and a halo of fancy used to surround him like a poetic astral body, which seemed to be his truer image. He was always full of true artistic joy, and whenever I have been to him I have breathed in my share of it.

Before coming to England, I had imagined like a fool that this small island would be filled with Gladstone's oratory, Max Mueller's explications of the Vedas, Tyndall's scientific theories, Carlyle's deep thoughts and Bain's philosophy. I suppose I was lucky to be disappointed. Just like anywhere else women here are preoccupied with fashions, men with their jobs, and politics is a great source of excitement.

Women want to know whether you went to the ball, if you liked the concert, they will tell you that there is a new actor, that a band will be playing tomorrow somewhere, etc. Men want to know what you think of the Afghan War, they will tell you how Londoners honoured the Marquis of Lorne; they will tell you that the day is nice, that yesterday was miserable. Women here play the piano, they sing, they sit by the fireside reading novels, they keep the visitor engaged in conversation and, occasionally, they flirt. Unmarried women keep themselves active in public life and speak up on public issues.

They can be heard at Temperance meetings or at the Workingmen's Society. But they don't go to work like the men, and there is no question of their raising children.

I have tried to experience the wealth of beauty in European literature. When I was young I approached Dante, unfortunately through a translation. I utterly failed, and felt it my pious duty to stop, so Dante remained closed to me.



I also wanted to know German literature and, by reading Heine in translation, I thought I had caught a glimpse of the beauty there...

Then I tried Goethe. But that was too ambitious. With the help of the little German I had learnt, I went through Faust. I believe I found my entrance to the place, not like one who has keys for all the doors, but as a casual visitor who is tolerated in some guest room, comfortable but not intimate. Properly speaking, I do not know my Goethe, and in the same way many other great luminaries are dark to me. This is as it should be. Man cannot reach the shrine if he does not make the pilgrimage.

This was the time when my acquaintance with Bankim Babu began. My first sight of him was a matter of long before. The old students of Calcutta University had then started an annual reunion, of which Babu Chandranath Basu was the leading spirit...

While wandering about in the crush at the students' reunion, I suddenly came across a

figure which at once struck me as distinguished beyond that of all the others and who could not have possibly been lost in any crowd...

After that I often longed to see him, but could not get an opportunity. At last one day, when he was Deputy Magistrate of Howrah, I made bold to call on him. We met, and I tried my best to make conversation. But I somehow felt greatly abashed while returning home, as if I had acted like a raw and bumptious youth in thus thrusting myself upon him unasked and uninvited.

Living in the villages of Shelidah and Patisar, I had made my first direct contact with rural life. Zamindari was then my calling. The tenants came to me with their joys and sorrows, complaints and requests, through which the village discovered itself to me. On the one hand was the external scene of rivers, meadows, rice fields, and mud huts sheltering under trees. On the other was the inner story of the people. I came to understand their troubles in the course of my duties.

I am an urban creature, cityborn. My forefathers were among the earliest inhabitants of Calcutta and my childhood years felt no touch of the village. When I started to look after our estates, I feared that my duties would be irksome. I was not used to such work --- keeping accounts, collecting revenue, credit and debit --- and my ignorance lay heavy on my mind. I could not imagine that, tied down to figures and accounts, I might yet remain human and natural.

The schoolmasters of this place paid me a visit yesterday.

They stayed on and on, while for the life of me I could not find a word to say. I managed a question or so every five minutes, to which they offered the briefest replies; and then I sat vacantly, twirling my pen, and scratching my head.

At last I ventured on a question about the crops, but being schoolmasters they knew nothing whatever about crops.

About their pupils I had already asked them everything I could think of, so I had to start over again: How many boys had they in the school? One said eighty, another said a hundred and seventy five. I hoped this might lead to an argument, but no, they made up their difference.

Why, after an hour and a half, they should have thought of taking leave, I cannot tell. They might have done so with as good a reason an hour earlier, or, for the matter of that, twelve hours later! Their decision was arrived at

empirically, entirely without method.

Last night I had dinner with the poet Yeats. He read out from the prose translations of my poems. He read beautifully, and in the correct tone. I have hardly any confidence in my English --- but he definitely said that anybody who thought my English needed improving had no sense of literature.

My work has been received with great enthusiasm here, so much so that I can barely take it all in. I feel they expect nothing much from our part of the world, and that is why they are so overwhelmed. Anyway, Yeats himself has undertaken to edit my poems, write an introduction to them, and see to their publication. I feel very elated by all this but also a bit overwhelmed myself. I do not enjoy being in this limelight and want to escape to Germany.

I am still suffering from Nobel Prize notoriety and I do not know what nursing home there is where I can go and get rid of my latest and greatest trouble. To deprive me of my seclusion is like shelling my oyster --- the rude touch of the curious world is all over me. I am pining for the shade of obscurity.

I know that Bengal takes pride in education. I am also sure that Bengal will not reject Western scholarship. Whatever the politics, Bengalis, more than all other Indians, have an inborn respect for learning. Even the very poor among them long to go to school. Bengalis know that they will not attain social status without education. That is why even the poorest widow in Bengal undertakes every hardship possible for her child's education.

This world has been my very own for a long time but, like one loved from time immemorial, is forever new to me...

I can remember a time when many ages ago a young earth emerged from a bath in the sea to welcome the young sun. It was then that I too sprung out of this young earth as a tree blossoming with life...

I have no anxiety about the world of nature. The sun does not wait to be trimmed by me.

But from the early morning all my thoughts are occupied by this little world of myself. Its importance is owing to the fact that I have a world given to me which is mine. It is great because I have the power to make it worthy of its relationship with me; it is great because by its help I can offer my own hospitality to the God of all the world.

REFLECTIONS

Bhikari: Nawshad Noori's protest

AHMED ILIAS

On the occasion of tenth death anniversary of renowned Urdu poet Nawshad Noori, I intend to trace out those circumstances that had influenced the late Urdu poet to write his most popular, famous and fabulous Urdu poem *Bhikari* (Beggars) in 1949.

Nawshad Noori was born in Bihar in 1926, at a time when Bihar was considered to be the most backward Indian state in the social and economic context. Due to this backwardness frustration was growing among the common people and the young educated class was getting influenced by various political movements. Against that background the thoughts and images of the poet developed, to enrich his writings.

Nawshad Noori was ten when the well-known Sajjad Zaheer formed the Progressive Writers Association in Lucknow in 1936. Earlier in 1930, the Communist Party was founded in Tashkent. One of its founders, M. N. Roy, initiated the establishing the offices of the party in India.

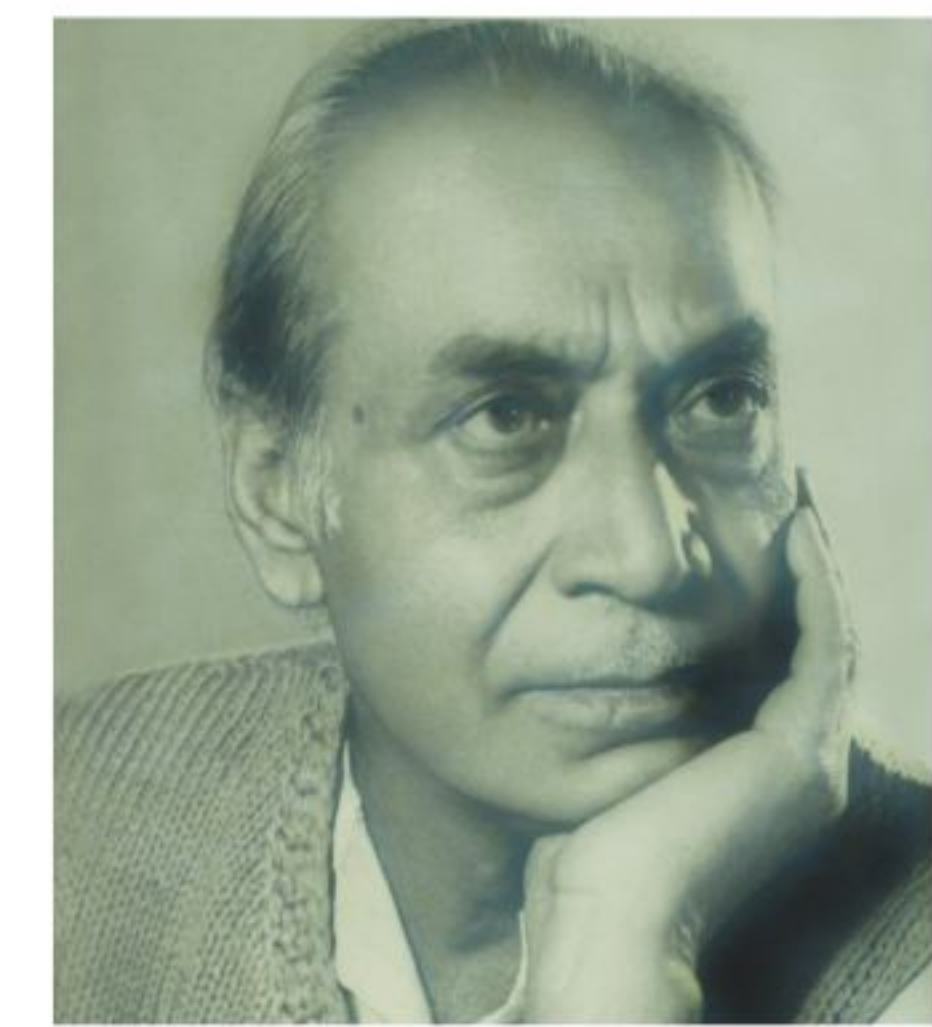
Noori completed his graduation from B. N. College, Patna, and joined the Progressive Writers Association, where Urdu poets and writers like Sohail Azimabadi, Akhtar Orainwi, Mukhtar Uddin Arzoo and Kalam Haideri nurtured his progressive views. Nawshad Noori now began taking part in the programmes of the Communist Party, which had already adopted a new policy to support the leadership of Pandit Nehru in leading the democratic movement on behalf of the peasants and the downtrodden. But at the same time, the Communist leaders and progressive writers were demanding a system similar to that in the Soviet Union by replacing the capitalist-industrialist system in India.

When US President Harry S. Truman invited Prime Minister Nehru to Washington in October 1949, Indian capitalists asked the latter to accept the invitation and seek American aid to avert the grave economic crises in India in the offing at the time. Obviously, the Communist Party and progressive Indian writers could not favour such a visit at that juncture. The Communist Party organized a huge public meeting in Patna to protest against Nehru's to the US. At that meeting Nawshad Noori read his poem *Bhikari*.

The vocabulary of this poem is different from Nawshad's other poems. Instead of Urdu and Persian, the poet used many Hindi and Sanskrit words and phrases in this poem, keeping in mind that his audience at the public meeting would not be Urdu poets and writers. Most of his audience would be rural Indians, peasants, workers and daily wage earners. He wanted to

convey the message of his poem to the poor. The poem begins thus:

*A beggar has come to your door from far away
He has brought with him the horrible tale of his sufferings.
Famished Bharat Mata salutes you, O King
Please give us aid in the name of Sita and Ram*
The above stanza refers to the economic crises that India faced after World War II. In Bengal 30 lakh people died in a famine. The drought in Assam caused the death of thousands in the post-independence period. India had inherited a collapsing economy from



Nawshad Noori

the British colonial government. In contrast the US market was prospering and its economy was booming. Nawshad Noori has painted this contrast in the next stanza of the poem:

*Your warehouses are stocked up with gold and silver
God may bless you; bless us and the entire world
We were happy in our house with plenty of food
But, O brother, drought has befallen us
Nehru was not a communist, but a democrat and socialist. His ideological contradiction has been dwelt upon by the poet in the following verses:*
*Meri junta dukh such sab mey geet sunaney wali
Terey naqsh-e-qadam par Raja paon badhaney wali
Tum ho pacchim, hum hain purab phir bhi aik hai jaan
Bharat Mata dey gi apney bhai ko balidan
Raj sanbhaley muddat biti lekin phir iss saal
Bhooaka hai Punjab ray bhai bhooaka hai Bengal
Karti bhooiki Bharat mata Raja ko parnaam*

*De dey Ram diladey dey Ram, deney waley Sita Ram
My people always sing songs in happiness and sorrow
And when they walk, they follow your footprints
You are west and we are east but we both have the same soul
Bharat Mata will give sacrifice for her brother
I am ruling my country for a long time but this year again
Punjab and Bengal are facing starvation
Hungry Bharat Mata salutes you, O King!
Please give us aid in the name of Sita and Ram*

Nawshad Noori had learned from the great Hindi poet Ram Dhari Singh Dinkar the art of how and where to use Hindi words in poetry. In the last stanza of his poem, Noori has reached the art of poetic composition at its highest. This stanza is the conclusion of the compassion under which the poem was composed:

*Dar par terey door kahin sey aik Bhikari aya hai
Apni nangi Mata ko wo London sey ley aya hai
Such hai bhai desh mey merey her shay payee jati hai
Jhoot hai Raja un key badley goli khayee jati hai
Jhoot key bhooiki ma balak ko doodh nahi dey pati
Jhoot key chalni goli sey hai mahilaon ki chati
Jhoot key bhookey nangan par hai Birlaon ka Raj
Jhoot key Tata loot raha hai mazdooron ki laaj
Bharat jug mey sab sey uooncha uoonchi hai santeaan
Hath pasarey kab sey khadha hai bhoooka Hindustan
Washington ki galyon mey hai Bharat ka neelaam
De dey Ram diladey dey Ram, deney waley Sita Ram*

The authorities in Bihar issued a warrant of arrest against Nawshad Noori for reciting *Bhikari* in Patna. To escape arrest, he migrated to Dhaka in 1951. He got a job in the Military Audit and Accounts Department and was posted in Quetta. In 1952, he wrote another extraordinary poem "Moheno Daro" in Urdu. In this poem he in a beautiful poetic style protested the move by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, to impose Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan. For this poem Nawshad Noori was asked to resign from the public service and he did so.

AHMED ILIAS IS A WRITER AND LITERARY CRITIC.

Timeless echoes...

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

Standing at the foot of the snow-capped mountains of the Himalayas, Rabi felt an overpowering sense of freedom. This was the first time in his young life that he had ventured outside the protected confines of his princely home and was amidst the natural surroundings he loved. He was only eleven then. Strangely enough, this would also be one of those treasured periods of time he would get to spend with his father Maharshi Devendranath. Rabi, in his later life, would call his childhood a period of 'servocracy' since he had grown up more under the tutelage of family servants than his parents. This trip to Shantiniketan and the Himalayas with his father was, therefore, all the more special to him.

Though Maharashi was a strict disciplinarian, Rabi grew up in luxury. His daily routine was filled with private lessons on drawing, reading, science, mathematics, exercises and schoolwork. Typically, Maharashi would wake up Rabi long before sunrise and practice Sanskrit with him. By the time the sun rose, they went off for the morning walk and on their return took a bath in icy-cold water. Maharshi also read to him select pieces from Bangla and English literature.

Rabi started to show his writing skills at the age of eight. His first poem, *Di Barshik*, came out at the age of thirteen in the *Amrito Bazaar* newspaper. However, with time, his parents were worried if he would be able to support a family through his literary pursuits.

In 1878, Rabindranath along with his elder brother Satyendranath sailed for England for further studies. After seventeen months, Rabindranath returned home empty-handed, with no academic degree or distinction. The only thing he brought with himself was the unfinished manuscript titled *Bhagna Hriday*, which he had begun in London.

While Rabi continued to write in a prolific manner on social and political issues, his father wanted to harness his youngest son to the family chariot. An eleven-year-old girl named Bhavatarini was chosen to be the bride of Rabi. She was the daughter of Benimadhav Raichaudhury, an employee at the Tagore estate. The name, so old-fashioned, was changed after marriage by Rabindranath to something that was dearer to him - *Mrinalini*.

Historians, who write about Rabindranath's life, say that his marriage was an irony. For, despite all her virtues, Rabi's heart lay elsewhere. *Mrinalini* was not always able to fathom the depths of Rabindranath's

poems as he recited to her quite often. For a poet of Rabindranath's stature, it was frustrating not to be able to share his philosophy and thoughts within his own home. Thus it came about that the most romantic of men felt confined in the most unromantic of marriages.

In April 1884, Kadambari Devi, Rabi's sister-in-law, who showered deep affection on the young Rabi, committed suicide. She was only twenty-five then and the tragedy left a deep scar on Rabi's mind. Rabi immersed himself in work even more to overcome this grievous period in his life.

In the 19th century, Bangla art songs reached unprecedented aesthetic heights through the works of Rabindranath. His composition of nearly 2300 songs was categorised into four main groups titled *Worship*, *Motherland*, *Love*, and *Nature*. The seasonal festivals introduced by Rabindranath and the dance sketches composed by him on the seasons are regarded as his greatest contribution to our culture. These two aspects of his creativity, along with his paintings brought about a change in the cultural life of Bengal.

In 1904, at the age of 40, he established Shantiniketan, an institution blending Indian and Western methods of education. He had visited this place at a tender age with his father, and the solace he had found in the surroundings brought him back to Shantiniketan time and again. Shantiniketan did not flourish immediately in the hide-bound culture of that time. The only way to earn money was from training troupes of actors and dancers who staged plays and ballets in different towns to raise funds other than the income derived from the landed property.

Today, Shantiniketan has truly lived up to his long held dream as the cultural frontier for millions.

Despite all the ups and downs in his life, Rabindranath remained prolific to his last days, composing songs, poetry, sonnets and novels. His work takes one along a whole spectrum of emotions. And almost as a vindication of his work's universal appeal, the collection of verses he translated into English, named *Song Offerings* (*Geetanjali*), won accolades and he was bestowed with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

Nearly a century onwards, his work continues to move the hearts and minds of millions. And like his name, Rabi--the sun--his work continues to shine like a timeless gem in the archives of world literature.

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