ESSAY

BEHIND THE NAME

From Thakur to Tagore When self-obsession

SYED ASHRAF ALI

Once in a century a man is born with a genius that seems to be godlike and fortunate indeed is the country where such salt of the earth are born, for it becomes deathless for all time. Such a man was Tagore poet, philosopher and patriot! For sixty long years did the magic wand of this great Maestro create poems and dramas, songs and novels, stories and essays and paintings. It may perhaps be too much to claim that he never wrote anything commonplace; but even the commonplace in him was touched with the light of genius. That indeed is something memorable. And memorable also was his amazing versatility, his manysidedness. He was an educationist with unique ideas, a poet with incomparable vision, a painter who won international recognition, a seer who would look beyond the limitations of time and place, a complete and all-round man such as the ancient Greeks would have loved to behold and honour.

Each and every Bangla-speaking person loves and admires the exquisite and inimitable works of the great genius. But unfortunately very few know how he came to be known as Tagore. His ancestors were not known as Thakurs or Tagores. The transition from *Thakur* to *Tagore*, which took many centuries, is really more picturesque and interesting than history!

In the middle of the eighth century AD, after a long period of political unrest and religious and social chaos, Bengal was consolidated as a powerful Hindu kingdom. To restore the purity of the then Hindu society corrupted by Buddhist anarchy and to rehabilitate it on the ancient foundations of caste hierarchy, five Brahmins were imported from the Western Kingdom of Kanauj, which was a stronghold of Brahminic culture. The progeny of these five Brahmins whose names are remembered to this day made up the new racial aristocracy of Bengal which has continued since then. History has little to say of the interesting and colossal eugenic experiment which has made Bengal what it is. However, the breed must have prospered, for in Bengal the number of Brahmins is legion and they all trace their descent from one or the other of these five Brahmins sacred stud bulls in human form, if ever there were any. One of them was named Daksha and is reputed to be the ancestor of the Tagores.

"The Hindus", claims Krishna Kripalani in her work on Tagore, "so proud of their social organization and caste hierarchy that they gloried in destroying the democratic legacy of the greatest of their race, the Buddha, were soon to suffer the abject humiliation at the hands of an alien race with an alien religion. At the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century Bengal was overrun by Turko-Afghans from the west and in course of time came to be ruled as a province of the Muslim Emperor in Delhi. Many Hindus were converted to Islam, some by persuasion, some by force, some lured by greed to share the power of the new masters. A Brahmin adventurer in love with a Muslim girl was clever enough to kill two birds with one stone. By voluntarily adopting the new religion (Islam) he got the woman he loved and rose to be an influential dignitary, the Dewan or right-hand man of the Muslim Governor of Jessore, a district in South Bengal. His name was Pir Ali Khan. Two of his trusted officers were the Brahmin

brothers Kamadev and Jayadev, descendants in direct line, after many generations of vicissitudes unrecorded by history, of the legendary ancestor Daksha." (Krishna Kripalani, Tagore,

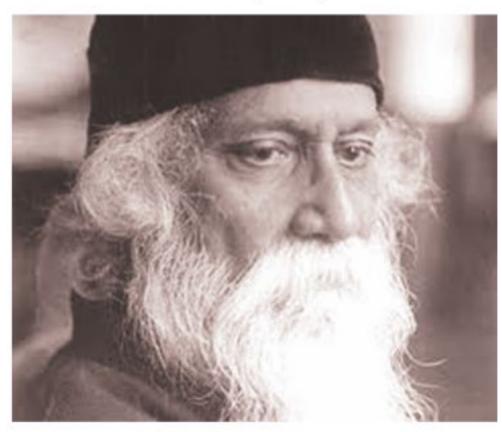
Oxford University Press, London, 1962, p.15).

One day, during the festival of Ramadan, when every devout Muslim fasts during the day, Kamadev found Pir Ali Khan smelling a lemon and jestingly remarked, "According to our religious code smelling is half-eating. You have therefore violated your fast."

Pir Ali Khan said nothing, but having been born a Hindu, the words rankled in his mind. Some days later he invited the Brahmin brothers, along with several other Hindus, to a music concert in the Governor's palace. In a room adjoining the hall where the audience was listening to the music, a feast of choice Muslim dishes which included beef was laid on the table. When the smell penetrated the concert hall the Hindus began to feel

Pir Ali Khan smilingly remarked, "If smelling is half-eating, as your religious code enjoins, you have all tasted of the forbidden food and have lost your caste."

A panic ensued and the Hindus fled, covering their noses. But the stigma remained. Since then the Tagore family is said to have fallen in the hierarchy of caste and is looked down upon by the orthodox



Brahmins who refer to them derogatively as Pirali or Pirili Brahmins. "The Brahmin's position in Hindu

society", says Krishna Kripalani in Tagore, "depends almost entirely on the assumed purity and holiness of his caste. Having lost that 'purity' the family must have found it difficult to live in a community which judged it harshly and gave it little quarter. The predicament must have been particularly galling when it came to finding suitable husbands for the daughters. And so the family, hounded from their ancestral home, must have wandered from place to place, each member seeking fortune for himself and husbands for the daughters. He would be a bold Brahmin who accepted the daughter of such a family. Such a bold fellow was one Jagannath Kushari, who married a niece of the ill-fated brothers Kamadev and Jayadev, whose indiscreet jest had caused the family all the trouble. Jagannath Kushari had to pay a heavy price for his boldness, for he too was obliged to leave his home and settled down in a village called Uttarpara in what is today known as Khulna district in South-East Pakistan. It was a descendant, named Panchanan Kushari, in the male line of this bold and rash man who may be said to have founded what is today known as the Tagore family."

Exile, misfortune and social persecution had made the descendants of the family

pride of caste they lost their fear too, for not much else was left to lose. Adventure was in the air. White men from across the seas had opened a factory and trading centre on the banks of the holy river Ganges and, though 'unclean barbarians', such was their power and prestige that even the Muslim rulers thought it prudent to keep on good terms with them. So Panchanan and his uncle Sukhdev left home in the last decade of the seventeenth century, as their forefathers had done earlier, and settled down in a village called Govindpur on the bank of the Ganges not far from the British settlement. Govindpur (now part of the teeming city of Kolkata) was at that time a small fishing village whose inhabitants were all of the so-called low caste. Seeing a Brahmin family settle in their midst they felt elated and gave the uncle and his nephew all the honour due to their caste as Brahmins. Panchanan was always referred to or addressed by them as Panchanan Thakur - Thakur meaning Holy Lord, as the Brahmins are often addressed even to this day. Panchanan had found a lucrative occupation in supplying provisions to the foreign ships that sailed up the river. The British and other foreigners had thus ample opportunities of dealing with Panchanan and naturally assumed, as most foreigners would still do, that Thakur was Panchanan's surname or family name. So they referred to him as Mr. Thakur and unable to articulate the unfamiliar name pronounced it as Tagore or Tagoure. This is how the Tagores came to be known as such and are still known even in other parts of India beyond undivided Bengal.

defiant and adventurous. Having lost the

"The Muslims", claims Krishna Kripalani in Tagore, "polluted the family's holy caste, the Christians its no less holy name. The change was more than nominal, it was symbolic, for the Tagores were soon to represent in their new destiny a fine fusion of the three great strands of culture Hindu, Muslim, and Christian which have made modern India what it is."

Edward Thompson also testifies to this fact but in a slightly different way. In his excellent treatise entitled Rabindranath Tagore, he opines: "A few remarks on the relationship between orthodox Hindu society and the Tagores will be in place here. The family are Pirili [((Persian) pir + ali. A pir is a saint] Brahmans; that is, outcastes, as having supposedly eaten with Musalmans in a former day. No strictly orthodox Brahman would either eat or inter-marry with them. Thus, they have no real place in the orthodox Brahman organization. 'Apart from their great position as zemindars and leaders of culture (chief saint)', a friend writes, 'from a strictly social point of view the Tagores would be looked down upon with a certain contempt as pirilis. The irony of the situation is their outstanding influence despite this, in everything that matters. The family name is Banerji (Bandopadhyaya). But Thakur ('Lord') is a common mode of addressing Brahmans, and was used by the early British officials for any Brahman in their service. Anglicized as Tagore, it was taken over by this great family in their surname." (Edward Thompson, Rabindranath Tagore, Delhi, 1991, Pp. 12-13).

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is all ...

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

Happy birthday to me!

Whether you liked to be born or not, whether you desired to be born or not, whether you planned to be born or not (the last being an impossibility of the highest order), you are born!

Whether this overpopulated planet of ours called Earth welcomed you or not, you are born!

Let us therefore assume that it is a happy beginning of your life, at least in the circle of your near and dear ones, the opposite of which may as well be true in some cases or perhaps in rare cases. A number of factors can readily be put forward to account for the latter. However, as things have been changing too fast in the whirlpool of one's life, it is often quite challenging to keep pace with it --- a situation hitherto unknown to many of us. Thus we keep on creating and re-creating phenomena, some of which appear as fads, some others as fashions lasting longer and yet some others making an intrusion to carve a permanent niche in the heart of our society.

People look in awe at the profusion of newly born ideas while struggling to store, rather 'save' as is the terminology these days, the newly acquired knowledge, thus constructing one's own model

of encyclopaedic entries, however haphazard that may be. After all, what most of us appreciate these days --- and have appreciated quite long --- is the factor of speed as the determinant of success. Another equally strong determinant is the exterior of things, including those which hide our shortcomings by putting a garb of ego-centrism on us. In fact, we ourselves put it on us. The motive? To make oneself look important, superior to others and obviously different from others. Self-love leading to self

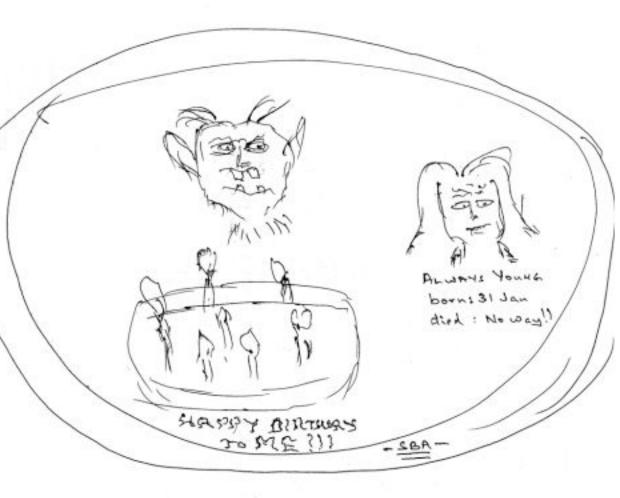
adulation takes an upper hand at the cost of having the right degree of esteem for oneself which truly leads to the building of a healthy personality. A very new phenomenon that has

emerged in the recent past in our society is making a pleasant yet queer-looking news item on the birthdays of people in various walks of life. This has come about all of a sudden as things in Bangladesh every time undergo an onrush of birth and growth. For example, there are garment factories, private educational institutions and hospitals, English medium schools, Chinese restaurants, fast food joints, boutiques, newspapers, television channels, discovering 'fabulous' singers sprouting up overnight, skyscrapers, shopping malls, supermarkets and what not. Start one or two, the rest grows at an alarming rate. Things get dated as they are born, each having a birthday as we people have been covering all three hundred and sixty five days of the year on account of our arrival in this world.

Hence, these birthdays galore! How one will look at the recent matter of revelations of dates of birth and that also through publicity in newspapers and on television news is a subject of serious concern open to public debate. In the case of women, it

becomes all the more intriguing as there is often no mention of their years of birth, thus creating an air of mystery around them as if they had not been calculating the years since they were born. It is thus left completely to the power of one's imagination in which not all would like to engage themselves. However, the psychology underlying this particular behaviour centering around birthdays of this mode is anybody's guess, befitting the trend of the modern-day craze for show --- or call it exhibitionism. It may very well be argued that that they being famous, some others feel like bringing the news and the attendant celebrations to the attention of the public. All focus is to be given to such observances. Whatever the reasons, it is obvious that the source of the news is the person himself. He desires it, so it is done. Exceptions are there, of course.

We observe the birthdays of a revered teacher, a philanthropist, a great politician, dedicated people in any field, a valiant freedom fighter, a sacrificing social worker and such others. In these cases there is an outpouring of emotions that come from within the heart. No one asked that these feelings be there. But when the owner or occupier of a certain date is the cause of such a notification, it sends some other messages to people, though to some it is a



great trait --- albeit to be regarded as sycophancy --- that serves their own interest, which is to solicit favour this way or that. In cases of well-known people who are deceased, their works, achievements and contributions are recalled on their dates of birth in a befitting manner which again fulfills a great historico-socio-educational purpose. Arrangements are made by the organizers with a clear view to publicizing the objectives behind the holding of such programmes. In contrast to this, whatever we happen to be witnessing these days is, if not bizarre, certainly awful. Some ethical norms are at stake here. It smacks of drawing one's own portrait by oneself, marinating it in the sweetest essences of one's own heart,

Be that as it may, this practice has come to stay. Indeed, it may proliferate, 'enriching' our culture. In this age, when most of us are involved with our own selves, self-applause becomes a normal part of life. It may well be that the majority of us might get conditioned to such realities sooner or later. Whatever may be the case, one thing that will keep ringing in our ears is: these birthdays are not those birthdays.

And so, happy birthday to me!

DR. NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE, AN EDUCATIONIST, IS A MUSIC BUFF AND LITERARY ENTHUSIAST.

POETRY

Will you not hold me...?

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

Nothing has changed As far as the eye can see The dawns and dusks Are moving in their own

The two white swans are

cycles

exquisitely Playing on the golden

sand The cars are all moving At their normal pace

I am also driving relentlessly

To my destiny Though life has all its checkers

Intact on the chessboard Your heart keeps saying It is not the same It is not ever going

To be the same again

Will you not take me To the land of dreams? Will you not dance with Me tonight?

Will you not hold me in Your arms and count the stars?

Will you not let me know We can dream together again?.

Cognizance.....

MALEKA PARVEEN

Then, at once the rosy reason behind your repugnant reluctance

to recognise the ruthless reality

transpires transparently.

Your mindset in its meandering morbidity, in its ignominious ignorance

doesn't allow you to see the light of the day.

If you could think otherwise, with a bit of solicitude-

you could realise for certain.

You could feel sans doute a new dawn's arrived.

Your adherence to the past

is sure admirable; But must you also learn to live lively through the wavering waves.

To laugh loudly with a clear conscience at the present time that presents itself before you preciously.

If, rather unwisely, you couldn't adapt to what people around talk about, tease about in sort of tilting way,

You will at one time find yourself abandoned as once you had decided not to swallow the sheer truth gracefully.

Thus lesson is learnt, one must adjust, acquiesce or admit as per the change that is happening.

That is not also surely sacrificing your identity; rather holding fast to it, bracing the wind bravely and taking the truth truly...

That is cognizance calm, which you come to earn at the cost of something you do not happily want to name its proper name.....

The music of silence

ABU TAHER MOJUMDER

Her parted lips froze the Universe Eternal cold prevailed

overpowering smashing Her head lay on my left arm cold unmoving My arm on the cold pillow On the embroidered

flower she adored My right palm on her left cheek Trying to hold back the

fleeting bird My mind stonily blocked

'I can't lie down hold me

up' I obliged She was like a bird just moaning on wearily away How far is Super Clinic...

Dr. Liton... But you were then going faster beyond gaining back any warmth

'Far far more now beyond reach-across oceans of time.' 'Oh please, I can't hold my

head up The world is without air --- can't breathe

What's wrong... whats...

whats... whats... She kept her head on my left shoulder Let me lie down...

My trees... flower tubsvases... She recited verses from the Holy Quran

She loved so much repeated all the time... Remembered... audibly... inaudibly... ...

Yes, it's the Moazzin finishing his Fajr Azan She mumbled lastly 'a

forlorn journey' "Assalatu khairum minan naom..." But Oh! ... I'm falling asleep O' Allah!

The Azan ended and her

on the pale face fixed gaze The lips remained parted, something not yet said Some songs not yet sung

A shadow of pain settled

eyes turned totally still

while the birds chirped The world rumbled a deep-deep moan

The parted lips seemed to quiver--some days of my life...

An extension of yours... look after my flowers, my trees, plants Mine will be the birds'

voice, voice of the wind Of the rivers and the

oceans

Of the blue sky during day of the starry night A shadow by you day and

night A soul in your soul A memory ever wakeful

Your fond music in silence Forever...and forever...and forever.