

TAGORE

# The Chittagong connection

In this first part of a two-segment article, Uday Sankar Das writes from the port city on the visit of the poet there in the early part of the twentieth century. The second part will appear next week ---  
Literary Editor

A poet so desirous of wandering into distant lands is rare not only in Bengal, but one might say, in the whole world. Rabindranath Tagore was one such rare poet.

No poet in his era had travelled as extensively as Tagore, be it abroad or in his own country. As far as his travels in his native Bengal are concerned, in particular in what is today's Bangladesh, his visits to his family estate in Shilaidaha, and also to other places like Dhaka, Mymensingh, Barisal and Sylhet have all been well documented and widely read.

Although avid followers of and researchers in Tagore's works (including the eminent author of West Bengal, Pratap Mukherjee) have delved into his connection with the south-eastern port city of Chittagong, general readers have very little insight into his love for and interest in Chittagong. And add to that his only two-day visit to this beautiful city in the early part of the last century. This city later became so much intertwined with his literary works and music.

The first ever written evidence of Tagore's interest in Chittagong can be found in the writings of a young poet of Chittagong by the name of Nalini Kanta Sen who, while he was a student of B.A. at Presidency College, Kolkata, wrote a letter on 25 July 1897 to his friend in Chittagong, Surendra Nath Mitra, about his meeting with Tagore at the poet's house in Jorashanko, Kolkata:

"I had been to the poet's house the other day. Almost all the conversation was related to retaining our national culture and heritage. Rabi Babu has decided not to wear Western attire ..... I had informed him about our organisation being formed with similar aims. He smiled, to indicate his

affirmative opinion and satisfaction."

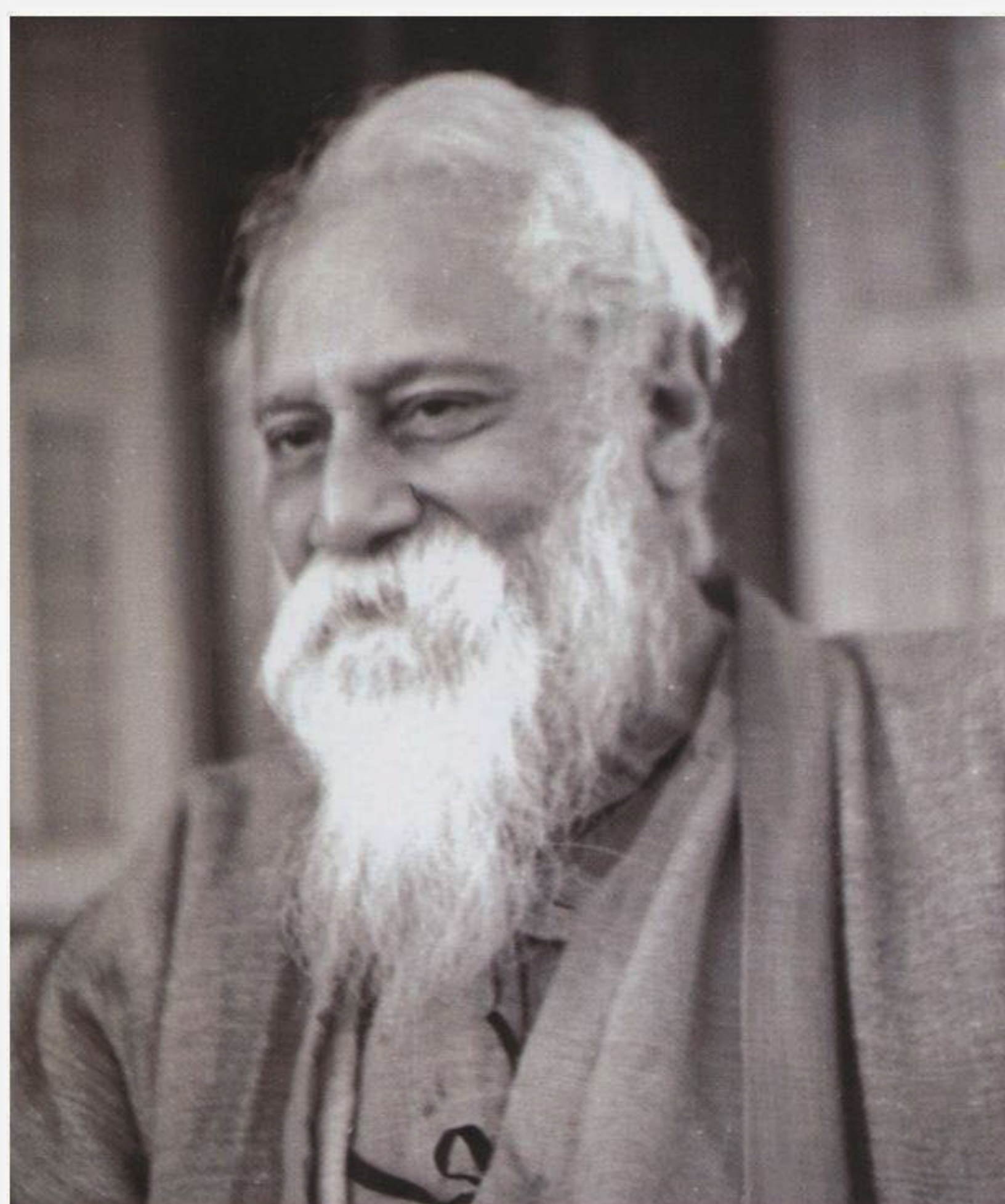
Tagore's very clear comment about natural-beauty clad Chittagong can be seen in a letter he wrote to the prominent author Thakurdas Mukherjee on 23 October 1899. Mukherjee had a letter of condolence to Tagore on the death of the poet's nephew, Balendranath. In a very long letter of reply, Tagore in one place wrote: "From the address in your letter, I see that you are now in Chattagram (Bangla name for Chittagong). By hearing the name of the place, one can visualise a picture of a hilly area covered with the shadows of trees, and in the horizon one could see the blue linings of the ever-vacillating sea."

Another prominent literary figure of Chittagong, Shashanka Mohon Sen, had the opportunity of reading a part of his poem "Sindhu Sangeet" to Tagore, and his brief comment was, "In this book, one can see a natural compassion and poetic talent".

During the Maghotshab (Winter Festival) of 1900, Jamini Kanta Sen, a student of B.A. at Presidency College, Kolkata, and hailing from Chittagong, met Tagore in his house in Jorashanko, and became so close to him that later he joined the poet's school in Bolpur. Through his acquaintance, in March 1906, the revered leader of Chittagong, Jatra Mohon Sen (father of veteran Congress leader and six-time elected Mayor of Kolkata Corporation, Deshapriyo Jyotindra Mohon Sen) invited Tagore to visit Chittagong.

On 14 and 15 April, 1906, the Bengal Provincial Conference and Bengal Literary Conference were organised in Barisal. Tagore was to visit Chittagong after the conferences, but because of his busy schedule and other urgent work related to his youngest daughter Mira's wedding, he could not go to Chittagong that year.

Tagore did visit Chittagong the following year, and Jamini Kanta Sen wrote about the poet's acceptance of the invitation: "Tagore was invited to visit Chittagong in 1907 by the citizens of the main centre of the anti-British



movement. Generally, he would not accept any invitation of this type outside Kolkata. Chittagong has overcome that".

After receiving Tagore's consent, a committee was formed to accord a befitting welcome to him in Chittagong. Prominent among the committee members, comprising Chittagong's literary figures and eminent citizens, were poet Shashanka Mohon Sen's father, Braja Kumar Sen, Sheikh-e-Chatgaam Kazem Ali, Jatra Mohon Sen, Tripura Charan Chowdhury and Jamini Kanta Sen. The members went to the authorities of East Bengal Railway to seek permission to decorate the station

pleader of Chittagong".

A huge crowd had already gathered in front of the house and Tagore came out to wave at them. He, thereafter, returned to the 'large drawing room' to be introduced to the prominent citizens of the city.

On the same day, the ICS judge of Chittagong, B.K. Mullick came to invite Tagore to dinner that day at his place, which the poet politely declined with a smiling face.

Tagore, however, did send his nephew Surendranath to the judge's residence for dinner that evening, and he himself held a meeting with the literary figures and music connoisseurs of Chittagong.

Having seen the poet from such close quarters, especially in his own house in Chittagong, Jamini Kanta wrote, "What I had seen in Bolpur, I have seen in my own house..... Rabindranath's extraordinary restraint - as in Bolpur, here also he was calm and quiet, unperturbed, always like the Sphinx..... Even as a guest, his food was very simple --- in the Western style, just boiled vegetables and rice pudding. He never took any food cooked with spices".

On the following morning, (Tuesday, 18 June 1907), Tagore with a few companions went on a tour of the city and landed up on the banks of the River Karnaphuli at Jahajghata. There, he asked one of the labourers working on ships (khalashi, as they are known locally), "How is your Chattagram?" In reply, the khalashi told Tagore, "Babu, there is no place like this on earth. The place we consider after Makkah-Madina is Chattagram".

The venue selected for according Tagore a grand reception and have him deliver his lecture was an auditorium built by Jamini Kanta's father in the city's Sadarghat area. It was called Kamalakanta's Theatre Hall (this hall later came to be known as Lion Cinema and was demolished only a few years back).

In those days, there was no such big

auditorium outside Kolkata. The auditorium was brimming with a huge crowd, despite another heavy downpour early in the evening. Reporting on the reception, the newspaper *Bande Mataram*, in its edition of 20 June 1907, commented, 'despite bad weather, the meeting was a crowded one'.

Tagore delivered an extempore speech delving on the crisis that the country was enduring at the time, saying that not a single party was working for the real good of the country, although that was the call of the day.

Prominent Hindu and Muslim leaders of Chittagong were present on the occasion. Among the Muslim leaders were Sheikh-e-Chatgaam Kazem Ali and his eldest son Ekramul Huq.

Braja Kumar Sen, who was one of the prominent organisers of the reception, and also a music lover, requested Tagore to render a song. Tagore duly obliged and sang a patriotic song.

After the reception, Tagore, accompanied by his nephew Surendranath and others, arrived at the railway station to board the night train. There was no let-up in the rain. Despite the atrocious weather, distinguished citizens and ordinary people turned up at the station to bid farewell to the poet.

Jamini Kanta Sen, in his memoirs, while describing Tagore's visit to Chittagong, wrote, "The reception accorded to Tagore was unparalleled; it was a rare sight in those days, anywhere outside Kolkata. Receiving such adoration as a litterateur was only possible here (Chattagram)".

The train carrying Rabindranath Tagore and his entourage pulled out of Chittagong railway station at around 8:30 in the evening, with hundreds of people waving him goodbye on the platform, thus bringing down the curtain on a very busy but historic two days of 'poetic' sojourn in the city of Chittagong.

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REFLECTIONS

## They lived --- for each other, for others

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Simone de Beauvoir was certainly not a wreck after Jean-Paul Sartre died in April 1980. But for the next six years, until her own end in 1986, she was a terribly lonely soul. The decade of the 1980s, in more ways than one, was fundamentally the end of an era, one that Beauvoir and Sartre had both epitomised for years together. They were academics who loved a good, spirited debate between themselves and with their friends. They frequented bars and restaurants, spent time reflecting on the vagaries of life and sat for hours writing and watching the world go by. Existentialism, they believed, was all. The mundane, well, it did not appeal to them much.

But that is the not the beginning and end of the Beauvoir-Sartre relationship. There was a whole lot more. From early on, indeed from the time they met in their twenties, the two individuals were drawn to each other in ways that remain inexplicable even by the standards of the twenty first century. It was more than a moth-drawn-to-the-flame



Simone de Beauvoir

story. Who was the moth? And who the flame? Sartre was impressed by the furious intellect at work in Beauvoir, who in turn quickly came round to the conclusion that she needed to ditch her boyfriend and link up with Sartre because of the powerful mind at work in him. From there onward, it was sex that soon took over. The physical relationship that the two shared was one of overriding passion, proof that the libido was what mattered to them most. That was not surprising. But surprise was to come along soon, through Beauvoir and Sartre reaching a deal that would allow them room for intimate relationships with others they came in touch with. And they surely did develop likes and strong attachments for men and women (in Sartre's case it was usually a bevy of young women who made their way to his bed) down the years. Amazingly enough, they never felt there was any reason to let all those relationships, some of them quite peripheral to the love they had between themselves, come in the way of their scholarly attitude to life. He called her his little Beaver. She constantly worried over his

health when he was away from her.

Like Abelard and Heloise, as Hazel Rowley points out at the very beginning of this unputdownable work, 'they are buried in a joint grave, their names linked for eternity'. But eternity in terms of the contributions Beauvoir and Sartre made to academic life, indeed philosophy, remains on a grander scale. Both produced volumes of work that remain hugely remarkable not only for their sheer amount but also for their intensity. There were all the philosophical essays and the plays, the novels and the travel narratives, biographies, memoirs, et al, that they produced over a fairly long stretch of time, almost till the end. Through the governing passion of their love for each other, through their search for physical gratification in other women and men, they did not cease to be writers. Indeed, it was the raw need for the pleasures of the flesh that often seemed to push them toward greater heights of intellectual creativity.

And what impact did their love for each other have on all those others whose lives they entered at some point? The American Nelson Algren, for one, fell in love passionately with Simone de Beauvoir, and she with him, before matters took on a bitter hue with Beauvoir writing about the relationship in not so flattering terms about Algren. For his part, Sartre went through a series of relationships, one of the most intense being with Olga Kosakiewicz. He soon followed it up with her sister. There were the others, like Evelyn Lanzmann, who killed herself in November 1966. Sartre's clandestine affair with her had gone on even as he kept himself sexually involved with Michelle Vian. And then there were, of course, the lesbian relationships Beauvoir felt drawn to, with young women like Sylvie Le Bon. As Le Bon was to note years later, she and Beauvoir were intimate, their relationship 'carnal but not sexual'.

For almost the entirety of their careers, both Sartre and Beauvoir believed intensely in the power of politics to save the world. To be sure, Sartre's commitment to politics was a whit more involved than Beauvoir's, but what united them in outlook was their feeling that too much of hypocrisy and an abundance of inhumanity came in the way of the making of a happier world. Which is probably why Sartre was not terribly impressed, let alone cheered, when news of the Nobel Prize for literature being awarded to him, in 1964, came along. He would not accept it; and he did not. The writer, Sartre (and with him Beauvoir) believed, did not need to be a celebrity. But the writer of necessity had to be associated with all those causes that affected the human condition. In the late 1940s, Sartre made his first trip to the United States. He came away unimpressed. By the early 1950s, he would make the first of quite a few trips to the Soviet Union, get



Jean-Paul Sartre

drawn to what he thought was a huge enterprise poised to change the world. His infatuation with the Soviet Union would last a long time, until one morning he thought he was seeing things he had not observed before. But by that time he had already incurred the displeasure of other writers, those who had noted Sartre's earlier reluctance to condemn the Moscow authorities for the degrading treatment of their intellectuals.

Rowley stitches together a fine tale here, through an inter-weaving of the ways the minds in Sartre and Beauvoir worked. The world has, without ambiguity, always known about the depths which they both plumbed in order to assert their relationship over and over again. What Rowley does differently is to give the two lovers a life that applies to them both, that brings them to life, as it were, in the form of a single whole rather than two disparate entities. On the morning of Sartre's death, Beauvoir lay beside his corpse, on top of the sheet that covered him and concealed his gangrenous bedsores. On the day of the funeral, as the undertakers prepared to close the coffin, she kissed him on the lips to say goodbye. In the days following the burial, Beauvoir fell ill; but once she began getting back her strength, she sat down to write the moving *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*. She began thus: "This is the first of my books --- the only one no doubt --- that you will not have read before it is printed."

In April 1986, five thousand mourners followed the hearse carrying Simone de Beauvoir's coffin down the streets of Montparnasse. Her ashes were placed in the grave that contained Sartre's.

(The article is based on a reading of Hazel Rowley's *Tete-a-Tete: The Lives and Loves of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*, a Chatto & Windus publication).

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.

TRIBUTE

## The passing of a friend

MUSHTAQUE CHOWDHURY

Masrur Choudhury, Founder and Chairman of the Nandan Group passed away recently. He succumbed to a short illness on August 5, 2013.

Masrur was a dear person among all his acquaintances. He possessed in him numerous qualities that will keep him alive for years, and perhaps ages. He was a visionary, an innovator in business, a sportsman, a cultural personality and a great singer. To us, his friends, he was the "ashor jomano" person. No gathering will be as complete and as enjoyable without him. He always occupied the centre stage with his sense of humour, knowledge and articulation. We cannot imagine he is no more. To be honest, I had expected that he would be the one to write an obituary for me, for he was physically much stronger than most of us. Alas! What man proposes God disposes! Today I am writing it for him. It is not easy.

Personally, it is an irreparable loss, a loss that can never be recovered. There are memories that go back all the past 51 years that we have known each other. It was 1962 when I got admitted in Class VI of Sylhet Government High School, where Masrur was already a student. However, perhaps our friendship started at birth. He was a cousin and we were born a few weeks apart. Although I was born before him, he still argued with me that he was older! This is not mentioning the many fights we had over many things, but all were friendly. In school, we became very close and along with Zahin (Zahin Ahmed, Founder & Executive Director of FIVDB, a successful NGO of Sylhet) we started being called 'The 3' by some of our teachers. In the First Term exam of Class VIII, Masrur and I did poorly in both Urdu and Dinyat. Sensing a disaster in the coming annual exam, we persuaded our parents to get the help of a teacher, Mannan Sir. He tutored us every Friday for about two months. When the results for the Second Term came out, Masrur scored the highest in class in Urdu and I in Dinyat. We always shared this with our friends as a funny coincidence as we never found a clue whether it was real or if it was our tutor's favouritism. A happy culmination of our competition occurred when we both got exactly the same marks in the SSC exam!

There were occasions when I could never beat him. In the School Chess competition, he was the champion and I was the runner-up. Likewise, in the Table Tennis Championship at M. C. College, the same thing happened. Masrur was a successful cricketer as well. In the Sylhet League, his club, the Ismail Sporting, clinched the title several times. He was also a great and passionate singer. Not many of our friends could actually sing so he had an edge over most of us and he always used to entertain us with Tagore songs. Every year, our immediate family (numbering several dozen) goes outside Dhaka for a few days for a 'get-together'. Although Masrur was not a member of our 'immediate' family in that sense, we would hardly go without him and Lipu Bhabu, his wife. In this he was also a main 'ashor jomano' person. After hearing his sad demise many of our friends living abroad called. Raquib (a Chartered Accountant) called me from London. He said he and all our friends living in UK were devastated. He recalled Masrur's last visit to his home a few months ago. At that time Ripa, Raquib's wife, had

just bought a harmonium. Masrur wanted to sing a song for them with their new instrument and he sang 'Ei kothai mone rekho...' He is now immortalized!

Masrur was a dear husband and a proud father. July 23rd is Masrur and Lipu Bhabu's marriage anniversary. This year this day, he was gravely ill at United Hospital, and was unable to speak most of the time. He was, however, fully alert and wrote in a piece of paper "Marriage Ann...."! Before he could finish Lipu Bhabu stopped him saying they all knew and wished him 'Happy Anniversary' thinking that the writing might be too much exertion for him. He was so proud of his children and sent them to top American schools. His eldest son, Arham, completed undergrad in Economics from Washington University in St Louis; daughter, Tarzia, completed an MA from Columbia, and youngest son, Ayan, is a senior at Penn State University. He was very proud of his friends as well. In December 2004 I was confirmed as a professor at Columbia University. Masrur threw a party to celebrate this by inviting a large group of friends and families. Manjur Bhai (Prof Syed Manjurul Islam of Dhaka University) made a brief speech and said that he thought I was the first Bangladeshi to be appointed a professor in an Ivy League university. After this, whenever Masrur introduced me to any he would never miss to mention this.

During our school and college days, we both had the ambition to become a CSP (member of the Civil Service of Pakistan). Things changed after the liberation war as the civil service lost its glamour. A new cadre started to emerge with the rise of the NGOs. We both joined BRAC. He joined a few months before me and became a Logistics Officer. I joined as a statistician. Within a year both of us were sent for higher studies in England. Masrur went to Manchester Business School and I went to London School of Economics. After his return, Masrur was assigned the job to set up BRAC's first social enterprise, BRAC Printers, and became its first General Manager. Within a very short time BRAC Printers became one of the top five printing houses in the country. Our fields were different, but we used to meet at the staff canteen for lunch. Sometime we were joined by other senior colleagues including Salehuddin Bhai (Dr Salehuddin Ahmed, Managing Editor, DS). We talked about anything and everything, including politics, economy, NGOs, Magsaysay award, Rabindranath Tagore, Stephen Hawking, and many other things.

In 1981, Masrur moved to Chittagong to manage a new chemical industry that his family had acquired. That was the start of his new life in business. He excelled in the new field, rose up and quickly became well-known in the country as an honest, fair and innovative entrepreneur. His creations such as the Nandan shops and Nandan Park are just a few examples.

Masrur was a versatile genius. He was very well read and was extremely good at heart. Through Nandan he introduced a new concept in supermarket shopping which is gaining quick currency now in Bangladesh. He will live forever in the hearts of many.

I already miss you so much, my dear friend!