

# Connecting the dots

Pallab Bhattacharya takes us on a historical journey

**D**IPLOMAT-SCHOLAR Veena Sikri rues that not much research has been done on centuries-old multi-dimensional linkages, ethnic, trade, religious and cultural, between South Asia and South East Asia. And her latest book, *India and Malaysia: Intertwined Strands* (Manohar Publication) is sure to be a source of inspiration for young researchers to look deeply at links between the two contiguous regions that had existed for two thousand years before European colonial powers like the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British came and disrupted them.

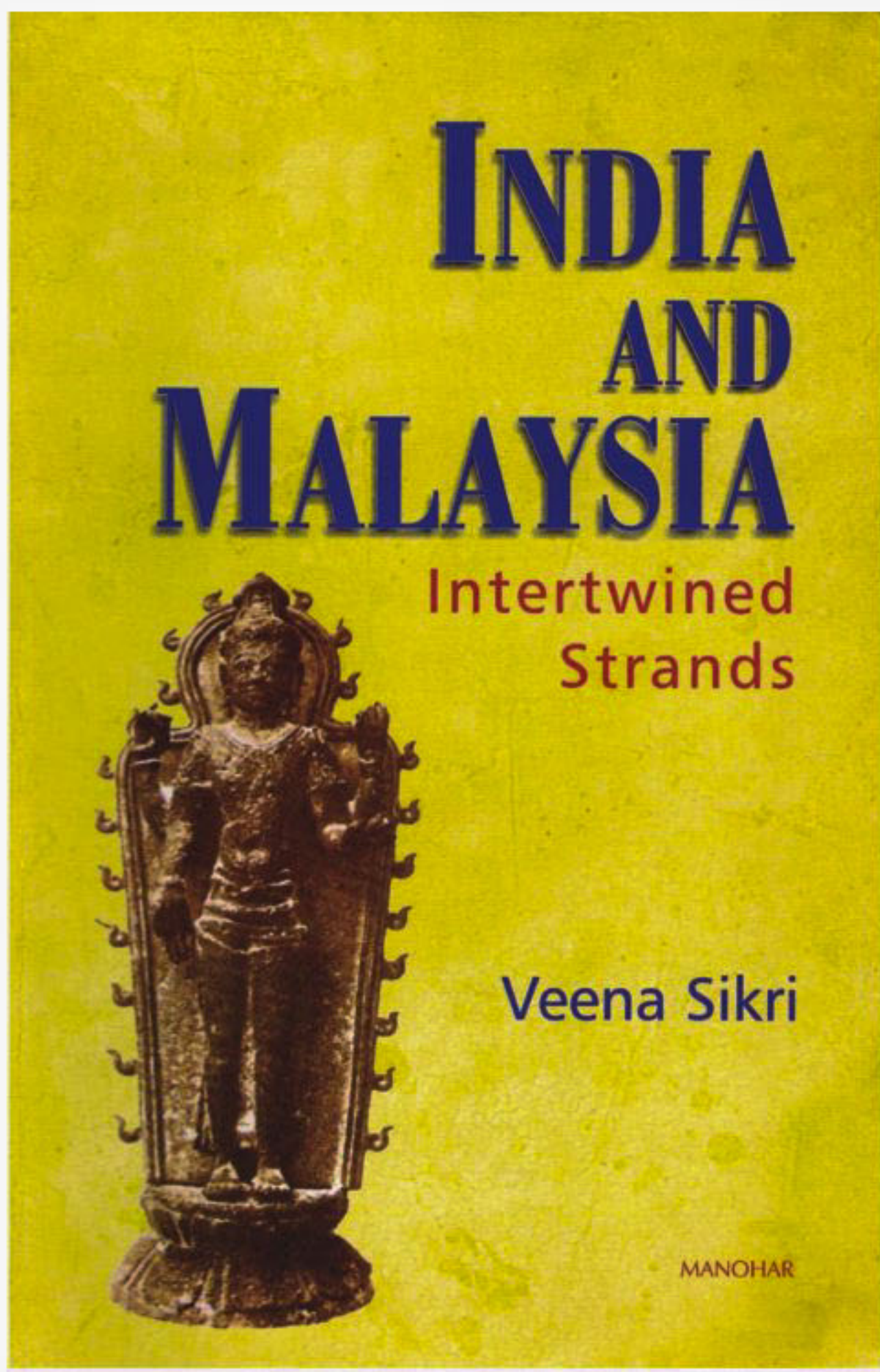
The nearly 500-page book talks of civilizational links between India and Malaysia. But that is just a microcosm for the much larger picture of relations between South Asia and South East Asia. And that comes out best when it talks about an intermingling of race, language and culture across South Asia and South East Asia.

It says the Mon-Khmer languages are spoken in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Northeast Thailand, parts of Malaysia, by the Nicobarese in Nicobar Islands and by the Khasis in Meghalaya state of India. The Munda languages, distantly related to Vietnamese and Khmer, are spoken in by Munda tribe people who live in parts of Bangladesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Assam. Chittagong port has seen settlements of Persian merchants involved in pepper trade with what is now Malaysia, then known as Malay.

The most important facet of contacts between South Asia to South East Asia, as Prof Sikri's book points out, is that it was not characterized by conquests in any form, military or commercial, and there was no victor-vanquished relationship. The success and longevity of trade between the two regions as it evolved over two millennia stemmed from complementarity rather than competitiveness, a well-balanced trading process based on mutual benefit rather than domination through conquest or subjugation, says the book.

Given these commonalities and non-adversarial ties, the book builds up a convincingly strong case for much greater interaction between South Asia and South East Asia.

Readers are further enthused when the book, quoting a scientific study initiated by Prof Edison Liu, Executive Director at the Genome Institute of Singapore, tells us that "Dravidians and Chinese



**India and Malaysia: Intertwined Strands**  
Veena Sikri  
Manohar Publication

had common ancestors" and "the people of South, South East Asia and East Asia are linked by a unifying genetic thread".

The study challenges the long-held belief that Asia was populated by two waves of migration—one from South East Asia to and the second from Central Asia and claims it was just a single wave of migration from Africa to India and South East Asia and East Asia.

Prof Sikri, a former High Commissioner of India to Malaysia and Bangladesh, has chosen to devote a considerable section of the book in analysing the India-Malaysia ties and the plight of Indians who migrated to and settled in Malaysia (known as Malay before its independence in 1957) through the perspectives of three leading personalities of India—Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru and Netaji Subhash

Chandra Bose (Tagore and Nehru had visited Malaysia between 1927 and 1937) and their influences on relations between India and Malaysia as also on Indian migrants, many of whom were indentured labourers taken by the British to work in rubber plantations, in that country.

Tagore's journey to Malaya was a "voyage of rediscovery" of the "intense cultural and commercial linkages between South and South East Asia that had existed in the pre-colonial era", says the author adding "it was Tagore's ardent hope that the rediscovery of India's historical links with the east would form the bedrock of the revival and strengthening of India's linkages with all Asian countries", a view all scholars agree inspired Nehru's thoughts on Asian unity and convening of the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947.

During the Second World War and Japanese occupation of Singapore when India has been fighting its own independence battle, Bose had "exerted the foundational influence" on a "whole generation" of youths in Malaya and Singapore. Netaji's impact on Indian immigrant community was "transformational" as his calls for freedom, equality and an end to injustice and exploitation "touched a sensitive chord" among the immigrants subjected to discrimination and maltreatment in rubber plantations under British rule.

A fascinating feature of Veena Sikri's book, based on her extensive research for three years as a visiting Senior Research Fellow at Singapore's Institute of South East Asian Studies from 2008 and 2011 and her own experience as India's Ambassador to Malaysia earlier, is that it is written in such a manner that it has kept in mind a cross-section of readers—scholars, students and laymen.

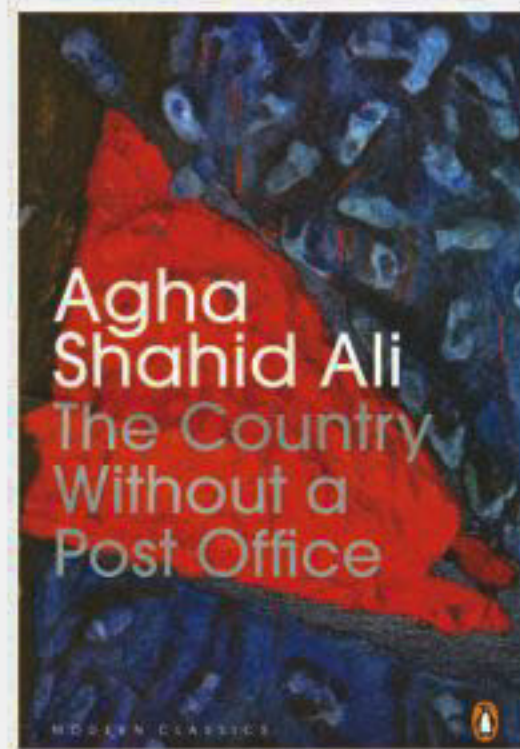
It is in the fitness of things that the book concludes with a poem by Rabindranath Tagore he composed after his visit to Malaysia and Indonesia in 1927. One of the lines of that poem is "the old that has been lost, to be regained and made new". As we finish reading the book, one ends up convinced by Sikri's conclusion that the poem remains as much "strikingly relevant today as" 86 years ago to not only India's but on a larger picture: South Asia's links with South East Asia.

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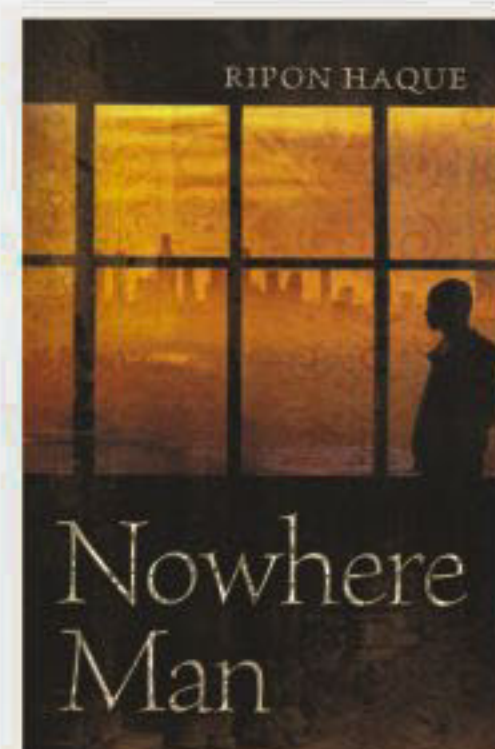
# BOOK choice



**Lekhoker Kotha**  
Eds Papri Rahman, Jackie Kabir  
Writers.ink



**The Country Without a Post Office**  
Agha Shahid Ali  
Penguin Books



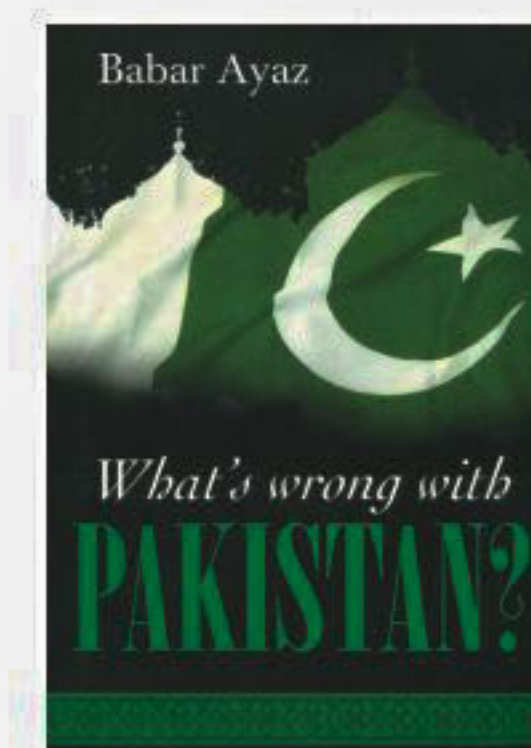
**Nowhere Man**  
Ripon Haque  
Strategic Book Publishing & Rights Co.



**Ontordaho**  
Manju Sarkar  
Bengal Publications Limited



**Amar Ei Dehokhani**  
Nari'r Kotha: Golpe O Rochona-e  
Purabi Basu  
Bengal Publications Limited



**What's Wrong with Pakistan?**  
Babar Ayaz  
Hay House

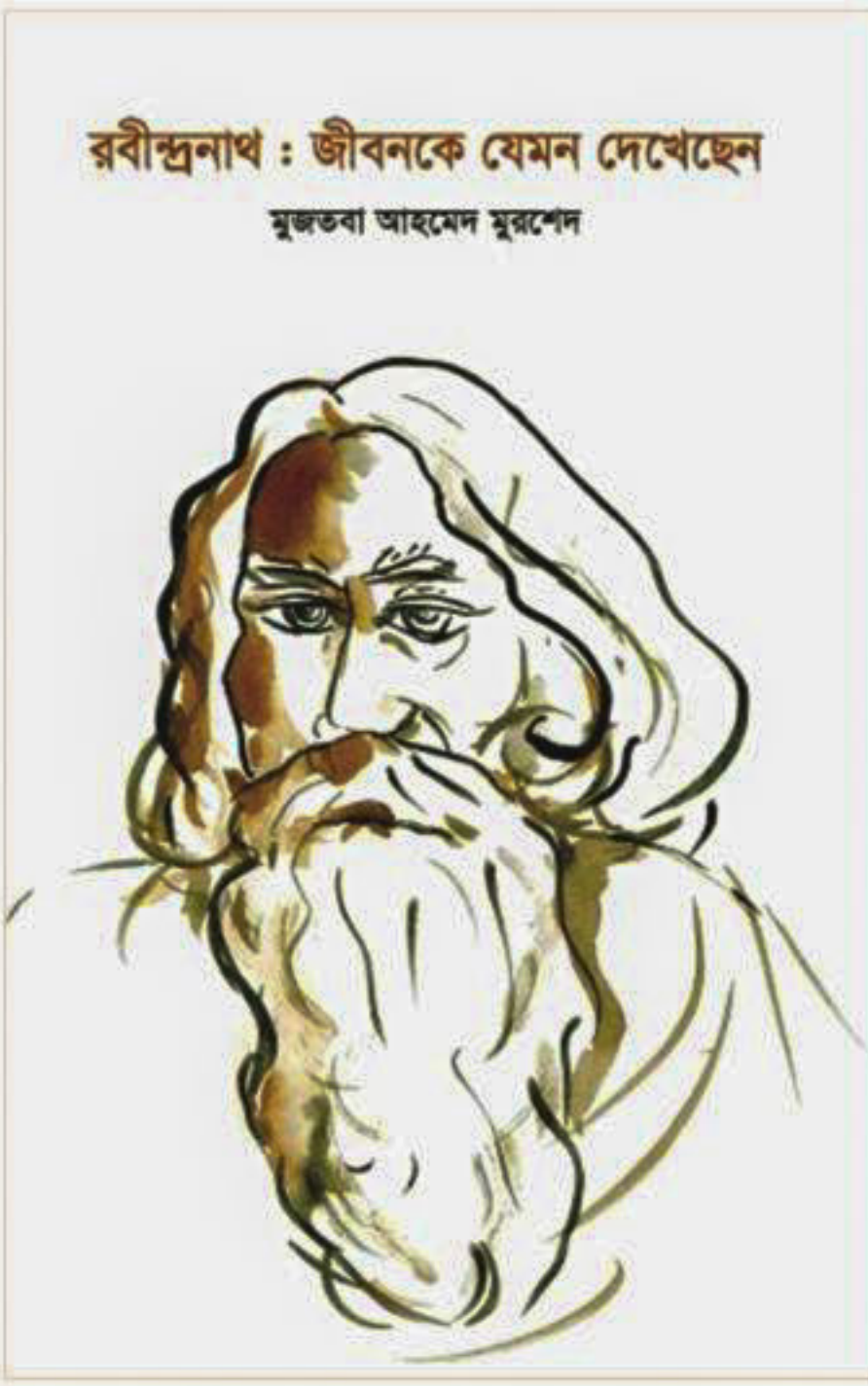
# Wanderings through Tagore territory

Tusar Talukder reflects on poetic dimensions

**T**ILL now, five of a series of 151 books on Rabindranath Tagore, published on the occasion of his 150th birth anniversary, have reached me. In addition to that I have skipped as well as scanned a few more pages of some books of this series while searching for some books on Rabindranath at a book shop with a view to penning a research article. But I must confess the last one I got, namely *Jibonke Jemon Dekhechen* (Tagore: A View of Life) by Mujtaba Ahmed Murshed is exclusive. In a word, Mujtaba Murshed has applied different kinds of perspectives to view Tagore from various angles. His volume is exceptional and he has used his numerous strengths to explore Tagore's realization about life.

Having been come across a few volumes in the series, I feel a major problem in those pieces is that most of the authors of this series have attempted compiling Tagore's excerpts from his vast literary works to finish their assigned projects. I don't know whether the members of the advisory board of the series suggested that the selected authors cite Tagore's own words as much as possible to give readers his different visions. Whatever the case may be, Mujtaba Murshed has done a praiseworthy job by adding a good deal of comments alongside Tagore's citations. Consequently, it has become easier for readers to figure out how Tagore viewed life. And it has also become conspicuous how the poet in Murshed views Tagore as a life-discoverer.

Only within the frame of eighty two pages, Mujtaba Ahmed Murshed, a poet, short-story writer and political analyst, has excavated a number of facts: how we are indebted to Tagore in running our everyday life, how he prevails in the middle-class sense, realization and feelings, how his multi-dimensional thoughts and deep realization of life always give birth to a tendency in people to become greater and bountiful, etc. As a matter of fact, an aspiration was deeply rooted in Tagore's tendency of viewing life. And this aspiration helped him engage himself in forming a real identity of the Bangalee people. Murshed as a political analyst has attempted to unveil why Tagore only considered Hindus as Bangalees. Why did the Muslims of this region fail to consider themselves as Bangalees? The author clearly has a response: the forefathers of the Muslims in these parts failed to consider themselves as Bangalees because at that time they were not ready to come out from the cocoon of fundamentalism. Needless to say, the Muslims of East Bengal were responsible for their own faults. Furthermore, Bangalee Muslims failed to embrace our age-old culture, philosophy, literature and art. In reality, during the language movement of 1952 we, the Muslims of this region, for the first time began thinking of ourselves as Bangalees. However, Mujtaba Murshed opines that if Tagore had a chance to see our heroism in 1952 as well as 1971, he would never indicate only the Hindu people as Bangalees; rather he would consider Hindu-Muslim, Buddhist-Christian, in a word, all people regardless of cast and creed as Bangalees.



**Jibonke Jemon Dekhechen**  
Mujtaba Ahmed Murshed  
Murdhonno

Readers of this work will find how Mujtaba Murshed has wandered through Tagore's realm of thoughts. He brilliantly unfolds Tagore's never-ending capability of understanding people's needs. Tagore took up his pen for people across the spectrum, those do love to think deeply and also those who do not have a philosophical bent of mind. Tagore never even forgot to write for children who, he strongly believed, would be the real makers of future one day. This book also focuses on the vastness of Tagore's reflections on life. Even his keen realization of the roots of human beings has been expressed here. Murshed has journeyed through Tagore's mystique of life. He encapsulates what Tagore felt --- that one may inhabit the world but it may not be possible for him to realize this mystical power or the Infinite fully. Thereupon, from the viewpoint of Murshed, a little dissatisfaction can sometimes be seen in some of Tagore's expressions.

In the middle of the book Murshed has divided Tagore's view of life into a number of phases to make a complete sense made of it. The phases are following:

"Rabindranath as a man / Rabindranath as a member of our infinite nature/

Rabindranath as a creative man / Rabindranath as a companion of human beings/ Rabindranath as a member of our society / Tagore as a world citizen/ Tagore as a perishable being"

A plethora of questions come to the fore through Murshed's analysis of the above mentioned aspects. The author has provided us with a quintessential aspect of Tagore's being a poet. He argues that if Tagore had not gone to England, it would have been a grave problem for him to discover the vacuum in Bangalee life. Having been gone there, he realized what the Bangalees have and what they do not have; and this discovery was essential for the upliftment of our culture, literature and, above all, our nation. Mujtaba Murshed quotes from Tagore's essay *Literature* to stress the necessity of the freedom of the soul, a vital ingredient to develop the sense of beauty in us. And a deep sense of beauty, in the many phases of life, creates aestheticism in us.

Mujtaba Ahmed Murshed as a keen analyst assumes that Tagore's process of viewing life include his inevitable desire to change our society both outwardly and inwardly, his deep sense of necessitating education for all, his non-communal thoughts in every branch of life and so on. However, one approach Rabindranath took as a root solution to all problems is for us to know our souls and broaden our hearts. Otherwise our anticipated freedom will remain unattained. Needless to say, Tagore's sense of viewing life was impossibly powerful as well as intense.

Rabindranath Tagore worked in different mediums to create different notions, views or realization of life suitable to us so that we become capable of discovering the true being in ourselves.

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# Stories that buoy the spirit

Tulip Chowdhury feels her heart brim with excitement

**S**OON after her little brother was born little Sachi began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. The parents worried that Sachi might be jealous and try to hurt the baby. However, after days of cajoling, the parents finally left her baby brother with her. Elated, she went into the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack--- enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Sachi walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say quietly,

"Baby, tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget."

This story is just a drop from the ocean of wonderful, soul-searching stories in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. This book is a collection of marvellous real-life stories that beg to be read slowly, savored and recalled time and again. The hundred and one stories are inspirational life experiences that do not fail to touch the heart as you read them. It is a gift to anyone on his or her own journey of growth and healing. It is all here, written with wit, compassion and integrity. Divided into subtitles such as "On Love", "Learning to Love Yourself", "On Parenting" "Live Your Dream"; the book spans a wide array of life experiences. The pages unfold with inspiring stories and touch readers with wisdom for all ages.

Patty Hansen writes about love between a father and daughter in "Heart Song". Her father has brought her up with a little song of the heart, "I love you little girl." Then as she grew up the little-girl-who was-not-little-any-more would remind her father of her womanhood. But still the father would sing his song. Then one day her father had an accident and could speak no more. However, the little-girl-who-was-not-little any more felt as if she would suffocate and die unless she heard the song. She put her head on her father's chest and listened to the heart beat. She was sure the heart beats were singing, "I love you little girl."

Jack Canfield and Mark V. Hansen write about a judge in "The Hugging Judge". The judge went about giving hugs to people in exchange for a little red heart. The hugging judge would go around finding people who were having a hard time and offer them a hug. People smiled and accepted his hugs with momentary relief. He even made a San Francisco bus driver, known as toughest, chubbist and meanest of people smile. Then he went into a hospital for the disabled and managed to make Leonardo, a severely disabled young man, smile. Every doctor, nurse and orderly was crying, for that was the first time Leonardo had smiled in 23 years.

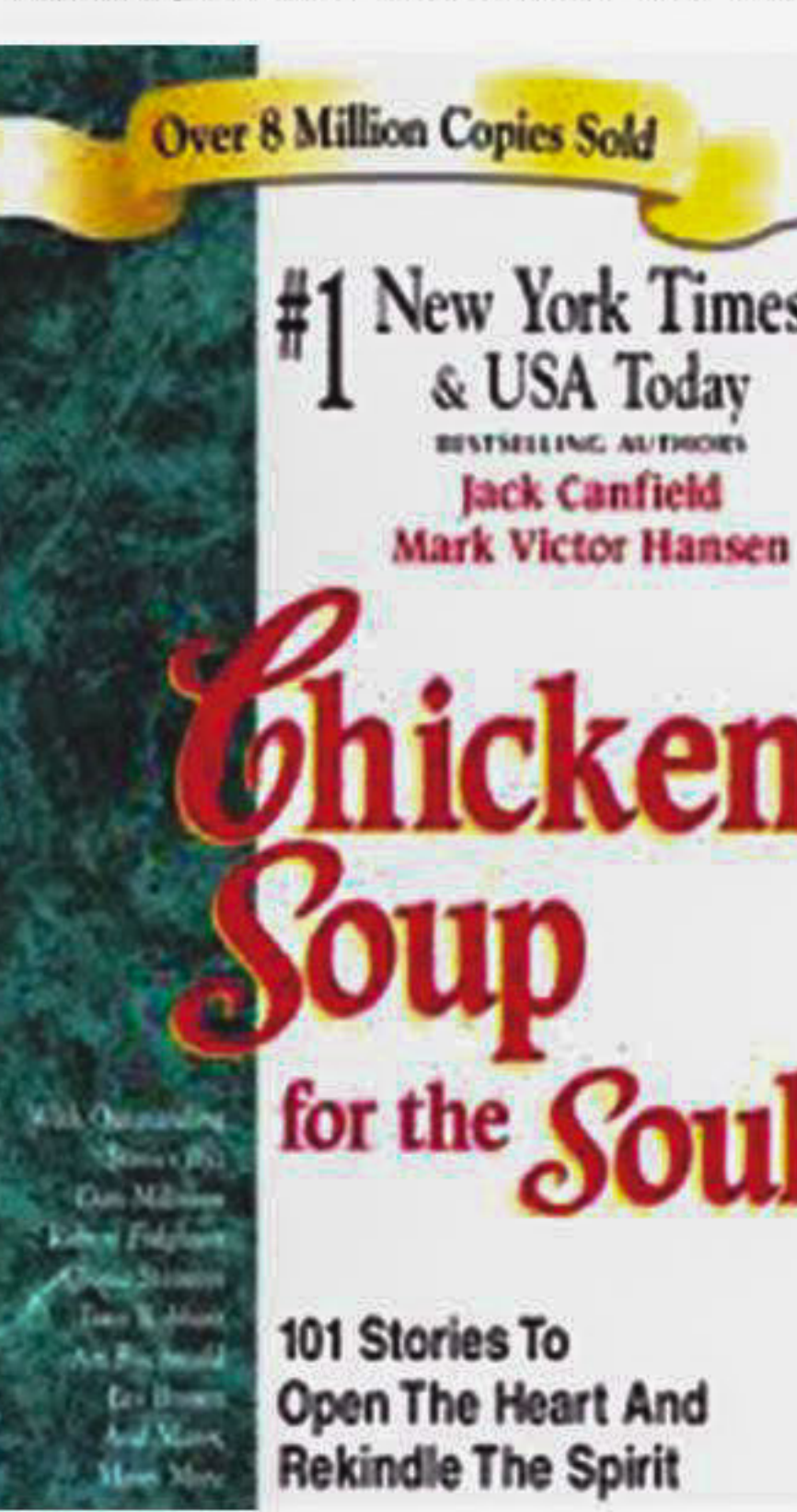
The stories under the subtitle "Overcoming Obstacles" begin with a quote from Henry Ford: "Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal." It continues with

a message from the Wall Street Journal. The message says,

"You've failed many times, although you may not remember. You fell down the first time you tried to walk. You almost drowned the first time you tried to swim ...

Heavy hitters, the ones who hit the most home runs, also strike out a lot. Don't worry about failure. Worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try."

The humorist Art Buchwald writes about a friend who used to tell taxi drivers that they were doing a great job, that they were really patient to be holding out against the heavy traffic. Buchwald asked him what the use of his lone ventures in boosting up the cab drivers was? His



**Chicken Soup for the Soul**  
Compiled by: Jack Canfield and  
Mark Victor Hansen  
Health Communications, Inc.

friend replied,  
"I am trying to bring love back to New York. I have just made the taxi driver's day. Suppose he has 20 fares. He is going to be nice to all those people because he will remember me. The fares in turn will be kinder to their employees, or shopkeepers or waiters. Eventually the goodwill could spread to 1,000 people!"

The story "Simple Gesture" by John W. Schlatter revolves around Mark and Bill. One day Mark was going home. On the way he met Bill, who had dropped all his books, a baseball bat, a glove and a small tape. Mark helped to pick those up and helped him to carry them home. Five years on, Bill confided to Mark,  
"I had stored Mother's sleeping pills

and was going home to commit suicide that day. But after I met you I realized that the world still had hope with people like you. So you see, Mark, when you picked up my books that day, you did a lot more. You saved my life."

And before Mark and Bill's story comes a message from Martin Luther King, Jr:

"Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

Throwing light on the importance of early education, Robert Fulghum writes, "All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Fulghum confesses that most of what he really needed to know about how to live came from his kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school but there in the sandbox at nursery school. In kindergarten he learned: Play Fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where they belong. Clean up your own mess. Say sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm milk and cookies are good for you. When out in the big world hold hands and stick together....all those kindergarten lessons are still finding ways into greater wisdom, opening up like a flower in later life.

Jack Canfield writes about following his dreams into owning a horse ranch. He was very poor, an itinerant horse trainer going from stable to stable. But once in a school project he wrote a seven-page paper describing his dream of owning a ranch and even drew a diagram showing the location of all the buildings, the stable and the track. His teacher gave him an F saying it was not a practical idea. The teacher suggested that he make some changes and he would also change the grade. After three days Jack handed the paper back, without any change and said,

"You can keep your grade and I will keep my dream." And this was the beginning of the boy's determination to own a horse ranch. Today he owns a 200-acre ranch and his teacher brings his class every summer to show how dreams are realized.

In *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, two of America's best inspirational speakers, Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, share the very best of their collected stories. All the stories contain wit and wisdom, hope and empowerment to buoy you up through life's dark moments. They simply illuminate the path we walk on. If you wish to make a point, inspire a friend, or teach a child, you will find just the right story in this heart-warming treasury.

Money and fame do not automatically make people happy. Happiness comes from within. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* is bound to put a million smiles in your heart.

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