

Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo



Maitreyi Devi



Kadambari Devi



Rabindranath Tagore and Mrinalini Devi in 1883.

# Tagore's Women

**FAYZA HAQ**

Laila Afroze, the well-loved reciter on TV for decades says, "Rabindranath was married at a very young age. He was maybe 21, and his wife Mrinalini 11 or 12. The Colonial English, the then rulers of the Subcontinent, taunted him for marrying a young girl. But he did love her deeply, and they had many children."

She thinks that although male British doctors frequented the Tagore family, the women's treatment for illnesses connected with childbirth was not discovered at that time. There was not the opportunity to say everything to the doctor attending either; Mrinalini died at childbirth at the age of 29.

"For a long time after her death, Rabindranath had struggled along in his life. He was a men with natural male desires. He was not an ordinary man. He needed mental support; he wanted to share his height of intellectual outlook. His urges as a human being had to be fulfilled before he could stride ahead," Laila says.

Tagore did not have the chance to get married a second time. He was not a Hindu but belonged to the Brahma faith. It was not easy to find a bride in that faith. As he had left the Hindu faith, or rather his forefathers had done, they became untouchable for the Hindus. She says, in richness, talent and education the Tagores were not surpassed by any other. They led Calcutta. Their way of prayer was different from that of the Hindus. Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, Rabindranath's grandfather, had rebelled against the society. The title of Prince had been given by the British since Dwarkanath had excelled in trade and commerce.

"Rabindranath was a great poet, a lyricist, and was so handsome that women were attracted to him. Rabindranath wrote under a pseudonym, in praise of Bhanu. Mind you, Ranu (Ranu Mukherji) rhymes with Bhanu," she says.

There was Victoria Ocampo, who came to know about Rabindranath through newspapers. Victoria, who visited Shantiniketan several times, was called Bijoya by the poet.

Rabindranath was aging but he was physically fit all the time. Sometimes he wrote a poem three times



Rabindranath Tagore

over. "Maitreyi Devi, who wrote *Na Hanyate* was a progressive individual. Mircea Eliade a Romanian wrote a book on Devi – *La Nuit Bengali* (Bengal Nights). *Na Hanyate* was actually her response to Eliade's book," she says. Eliade alluded that Devi, Tagore's protégée, was attracted to her mentor.

Kadambari Devi, Tagore's sister in law, had the greatest attachment to Rabindranath, says Laila. "She wore the sari with pleats, being the first lady to do so. She rode on a horse to go bathing. Rabindranath, about the same age as her, ran to recite his poems to her," she continues. Devi later committed suicide. Tagore wrote a poem on her. ■