

WHAT'S ON

Group Art Exhibition
 Marking 13th Anniversary of Galleri Kaya
 Venue: Galleri Kaya, Uttara
 Date: May 5-28
 Time: 11am-8pm

Concert
 Richard Marx Live in Dhaka
 Organiser: Creinse
 Venue: BICC
 Date: May 16
 Time: 7pm

Group Art Exhibition
 Title: Can the Divine Presence be Felt So Easily?
 Venue: Alliance Française de Dhaka
 Date: May 5-17; Time: 3pm-9pm

Solo Art Exhibition
 Title: Proximity of Line
 Artist: Ruhul Karim Rumeed
 Venue: Shilpangan, Dhanmondi
 Date: Apr 21- May 5
 Time: 3-8pm

Photography Exhibition
 Title: Story of Phrases
 Venue: Drik Gallery
 Date: May 5-6
 Time: 3-8 pm

Solo Art Exhibition
 Title: Golden Doors
 Artist: Proshanta Karmakar Buddha
 Venue: Radius Centre Art Gallery, 57 Gulshan Avenue-1
 Date: May 6 - June 1
 Time: 3-10pm

The lost reels of Tagore the helmer

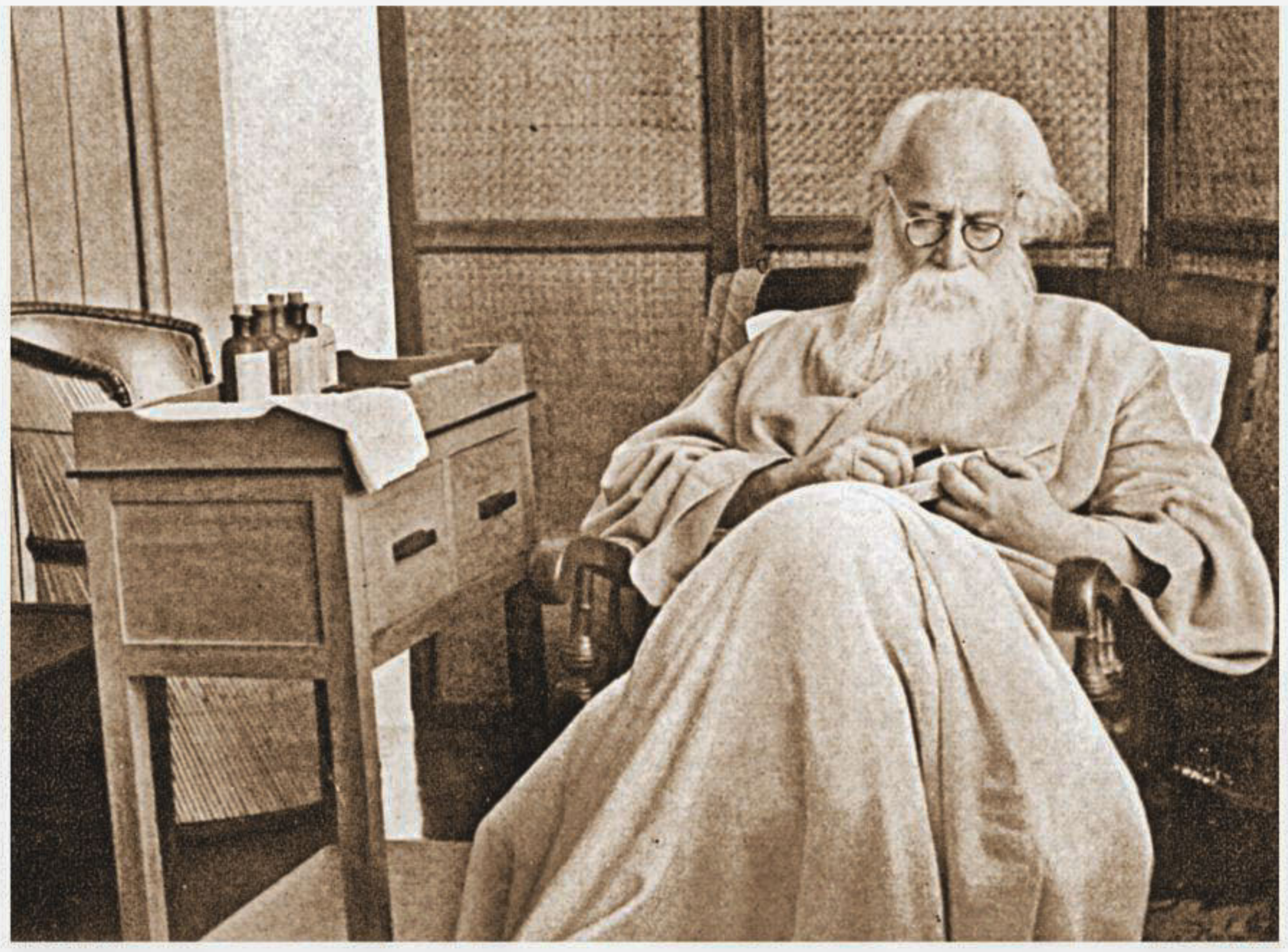
THE TALE OF FILMING "NATI'R PUJA"

FAHMIM FERDOUS

Rabindranath Tagore was born in an era where moving pictures were a mere fantasy. By the time the technology of motion pictures came to the subcontinent, (the first film to be screened in the subcontinent was at Mumbai's Watson Hotel in 1896) Tagore was in his 30s. But the creative genius that he was, Tagore was amazed by the prospect of this new storytelling format. In his book "Poshchim Jatri'r Diary"), he wrote about his experiences with films, while traveling to the West.

The first film to be directed based on Tagore literature was Nareshchandra Mitra's "Manbhanjan" (1923), in which Tagore also appeared in the opening sequence. A few other films were made in subsequent years, like Shishir Kumar Bhaduri's "Bicharak" (1929), Madhu Basu's "Giribala" (1929) and "Dalia" (1930), and "Nitin Basu's "Dena Paona" (1931). In 1929, Dhirendranath Gangopadhyay began filming "Tapati" in Shantiniketan, where Tagore himself was cast in the lead role, but the film could not be completed due to his travels abroad.

The dance-drama "Nati'r Puja" was a period piece based on Tagore's poem "Pujarini", in which students of Shantiniketan acted. The story is set in a time when anti-religion fanatics are destroying Buddhist temples, with support from King Debdutta. A brave Nati (dancer) Bhaktimati Shrimati prepares to perform her puja (prayer)



in the face of imminent death, and she is stabbed to death as she completes her prayer.

Rabindranath, in a tight financial spot for the Visva-Bharati at the time (late 1920s), bought the play to Kolkata to do some fund-raising stagings of the play. Sensing the discomfort among Kolkata's conservative mindset to see women performing songs and dance on stage, Tagore added a major male character, Dimu Upali, and himself took

the stage in the role. In 1931 when Tagore was in Kolkata to stage the play, owner and chief of New Theatres BN Sarkar requested Tagore to direct it into a film and offered to donate a part of the ticket sales for Tagore's Shriniketan project.

New Theatres made all efforts to ensure smooth operations of the filming. The filming was going on in the summer, and the fans on the shooting floor could only operate

between shots. The Kolkata summer heat proved difficult for the 70-year old Tagore, who would often have to go outside to catch a breath before coming back. Knowing this, BN Sarkar ordered for a thatched roof 'gol-ghar' rest-house to be built outside the shooting spot by a pond, where Tagore could rest. Tagore was so impressed by the studio and the rest-house he termed it his 'second Shantiniketan'.

A 25-member unit of New

Theatre shot the film in five days, as Tagore was in a tight schedule; he was scheduled to take the play to Europe for staging to get additional funds for the Shriniketan project. Nitin Basu was on camera for the film, while Mukul Basu did the sound design, Dinendranath Tagore directed music and Subodh Mitra was the editor. The film was shot entirely as it was staged, with Lalita Sen playing the lead role of Nati Shrimati, Sumita Chakrabarty playing Queen Lokeshwari, the role of Utpala was played by Leela Majumdar and Tagore himself as Upali.

The film released on September 22, 1932 at the Chitra Cinema Hall, with press reviews praising the film's format of portraying it as a stage play, saying it "broke the rule of conventional cinema". The film was screened again on December 4 the same year at the Shri Rupa Cinema Hall.

Despite the positive reviews and Rabindranath's iconic stature, the film did not do a great deal of business. BN Sarkar attributed it to the short duration of filming. Ironically, Tagore did not have to go abroad with the play at the time (for which he had to rush the film); Mahatma Gandhi sent donations to Tagore for Shriniketan, so he did not have to travel to Europe at the old age and frail health to raise funds.

Sadly, there is no copy in existence of "Nati'r Puja" any more, as almost the entire 10,577 feet of film reel were burned down in a fire at New Theatres in 1940. Only a small piece of 16mm film is kept in the collection of Rabindra Bhavan.



FIRED BY MANIPURI DANCE

In conversation with Warda Rihab

ROBINA RASHID BHUIYAN

Manipuri dance gained new significance in 1919, when Tagore was quite taken by a performance during his Assam tour, leading him to invite the guru as faculty to Shantiniketan. Since then the dance form has been an integral part of the curriculum at Visva Bharati, and a century later, it is still gaining popularity thanks to the faithful exponents who work tirelessly to promote the dance form. Warda Rihab, a prominent Manipuri dancer and teacher, and director of Dhriti Nartanalaya, speaks to The Daily Star about Manipuri dance and its importance in a recent interview. Excerpts:

"Tagore placed special emphasis on Manipuri dance because he felt that this style could be blended most into his compositions. In the beginning, it was introduced as a physical exercise session to maintain one's health, as the society was quite conservative then. Gradually over time, the dance became popular and today it stands as one of the most prestigious subjects at Shantiniketan. Although Tagore was a great patron of Manipuri dance, his songs are accompanied by a blend of various dance forms. As a Manipuri dance artiste, I do my best to stay pure to the form in every performance."

"When I was still a student in Dhaka, the dance seemed confined to the capital. Over the last five years or so we have travelled to regions beyond the capital to promote and spread knowledge on the art form. I consider this as one of our biggest achievements because a few years ago, people did not have proper knowledge of the dance form and appeared in national competitions without the right costumes or music. But now the scenario is different, and as the dance form gained more popularity, dancers are able to deliver their performances in the correct manner."

"There is a rich history behind the costumes used in Manipuri dance. Maharaja Bhagya Chandra, ruler of Manipur in the eighteenth century, saw the costume as part of the Rash Utsav in a dream, and he called upon the gurus in attendance to describe what he saw. What sets Manipuri dance apart from other classical dances is that we have different costumes for Lasya and Tandava. To learn about the accessories is one of the preliminary lessons students receive."

"My troupe Dhriti Nartanalaya and I are currently rehearsing for a dance drama titled "Prem o Prakriti" for a show on BTV that will be aired on May 8 as part of Rabindranath Tagore Jayanti Utsab. We also have plans to work on the Charyapada later this year, for which we are currently waiting for the music. After it comes through, we hope to have a dance drama performance at the end of this year."



PHOTO: STAR

Where the world makes a home in a nest

Time-honoured festivals and fairs at Shantiniketan

ZAHANGIR ALOM

Tagore's cultural epicentre Shantiniketan offers an artistic assembly of bauls, urban artistes, classical artistes, academics and many more. Perhaps no other university has had such an integral ethnic component and cross-cultural assimilation during the colonial period. Tagore's experiment greatly influenced educational experimentation worldwide.

Tagore was a 'free spirit in movement' and emphasised endless learning. In 1901, the bard started a school at Shantiniketan named "Brahmachari Ashram", modelled on the lines of the ancient Gurukul system. It later came to be known as the Patha Bhavan, with the idea that learning in a natural environment would be more enjoyable and fruitful.

With financial backing of the Maharaja of Tripura, the Visva-Bharati Society was established in 1921. Tagore envisioned a centre of learning combining the best of both East and West. The school was expanded into a university named Visva-Bharati, which was defined by Tagore as "Where the world makes a home in a nest." The open-air education as opposed to confinement within the four walls of a classroom became a reality here.

Tagore envisioned the festivals as a celebration of diversity that united all. For him it was to be cluster of events in which individuals and



The festive premises of Shantineketan (top); classes take place under the shades of trees.

groups from all sections of the society would come together. Festival therefore represented a holistic celebration of the whole of human society, which presented the opportunity for shared aesthetic experience and creativity.

The festivals of nature welcome everyone to participate under the canopy of the trees, the blue expanse of the sky, in the soft sunlight and in an air redolent with fragrance of blossoms. The nuances of seasonal changes in Shantiniketan beckon festivals. The monsoon arrives with a special appeal; the singing of cuckoos declares the onset of spring while the cool air hints of autumn. Various festivals revolve around the seasons. Tagore therefore organised festivals

in Shantiniketan heralding different seasons. The celebration of the seasons through songs, dance and fairs became a regular event in the Shantiniketan calendar. The Barshamongol would be observed to celebrate the advent of the rains, Sharad Utsab to celebrate autumn, Poush Mela to celebrate winter, Bashonto Utsab to celebrate spring and finally Pahela Boishakh celebrating the Bengali New Year.

Rabindranath's familiarity with the Bengal monsoon intensified during his trips to the family estate at Shilaidaha. The vast landscapes and the swirling rivers seemed to foster a sense of liberated creativity in close proximity with nature. Monsoon, for Tagore, was not merely a personal

experience; it was a symbol of life and nature's amazing variety; a message that he sought to transmit to his students through the festival of Barshamongol. The educational programme at Santiniketan was thus deeply rooted in an ecological consciousness.

While the Bashonto Utsab, observed on the full moon night of the spring, coinciding with Holi or the festival of colours, would be the most spectacular and aesthetic of all festivals, the most important event from all accounts would be the Bengali New Year celebration which would be celebrated on the first day of Baishakh along with bard's birthday.

In addition to these, Tagore would also introduce with great beauty and splendour, special commemorative events like brikkho ropon (tree planting) as a part of an annual environmental awareness campaign. Many ethnic groups who lived in and around Shantiniketan were invited to be part of these celebrations.

All these festivals give a very strong feeling uniting all in diversities. Not only did these festivals bring people together, they also encouraged the arts, particularly rural artisans who would sell their goods in the adjunct fairs. There would also be a lot of feasting circling these events.

Tagore composed a large number of songs, plays and poems specifically for these occasions and more often than not sang and performed in plays during these festivals.