

MUSINGS

My Tent of Hymns

SHUBORNA CHOWDHURY

Our house rules required us siblings to sit before our father every morning for a session on the literary classics. It was the first task of the morning and an imperative, unless Abba was abroad or hospitalized, which could be for a prolonged period at times. The sessions with him, however, had nothing to do with our school curriculums. Indeed, it was anything but that. Through literature came in glimpses of world history and basic lessons in philosophy.

Before the sessions began, I used to finish my *rejay* or vocal music sessions. By this time the younger ones amongst us would wake up and we would be sitting around Abba for that compulsory session. Done with it, we were free to go for morning walks and breathing exercises. We would then have breakfast before setting off for school. For us, things like studying for school or exams were of little significance compared to such "life" studies. Sometimes we used to have a 'No-Study' day when no one was allowed to read anything. Those were the days for studying Nature - days of watching gatherings of gorgeous looking clouds. Studies and exams could wait, but the drifting clouds couldn't! Before a heavy rainfall when the sky, covered by thick layers of dark clouds, turned darker and darker, wasn't watching them so, so necessary?

One day a house tutor showed up for us. A well-chosen one with a perfect sense of humour! The reason he was chosen was obvious in the very first meeting. He asked each of us, what we were studying and whether we liked what we studied or not. Our conversation went more or less like as follows:

"How was your last exam?"
"Not that good!"
"Why not?"
"I have no idea!"
"I see. How did you do?"

"I was second in my class."
"Really?"

And then he said in a calm and composed voice:

"Ok, tell me, how many schools do we have in Bangladesh? And every year, students who stand first in all the classes of all the schools in our country, what happens to them? Do they all become successful people? Do they grow up as good souls? So, what should we opt for?"

Since then, I have thought a lot about what we really should opt for. I still do. But I never again thought of coming first in any exam. Later, that fabulous teacher became a famous person ... Don't ask me his name though ...

On one of those 'hermitage days', on the morning of my 13th birthday, Abba was playing music on a record player. It was a recording of *Chitrangoda* - Tagore's dance drama. Repeated listening had stored the play in my memory by then. Nevertheless, I would still listen to it and enjoy it too! In juvenile joy, *Chitrangoda* - The Queen, sang ... "My dearest, what rays caress my eyes ..."

("Bondhu, Kon Alo Laglo Chokhe"). We discussed the characters of the play and *Chitrangoda*'s transformation with Abba. Then he said, "Let me know first when the rays reach you ..." Only after he had said these words did I guess what rays he had mind. But I wish now I could have told Abba what I had sensed about them then. But some fathers just pass away. Who could have known he would be in such a hurry to go? He had initiated our learning but he never got to tutor us fully in the sacraments. His mentoring remained partial. But we would all eventually be initiated into the mysteries of the world through contemplation, through glimpsing the world of the subconscious, and through

the guidance of our mother.

Geography teaches us that the planet earth stays on its route, keeping its balance because of centrifugal and centripetal forces at work. At the two ends of our world, we had our parents. While Abba was offering us a liberal education, we would always go back to our mother's very strict and conservative world once his sessions were over. There was nothing in between for us. And our charmed childhood was made out of such contradictory moments. When in our lofty moments we were looking for liberty in light; in the real world we were leading life viewed according to conservative beliefs. Ah, the life we lead! But I have no real wish to return to childhood. After all, I always wanted to grow up! But I would like to be with them once more too - the people out there!

But in silence, processions, war and music, in family festivals, professional strife, in embraces and socialization, trust and suspicion, in anger and love - I have this vast panorama at my very own quiet yard. Among the innumerable attainments of life, a sudden small gift made the south breeze blow ... my soul-searchings will never end for sure ... and I will keep searching for the 'ME' within me. But I will always have Rabindranth's *Geetobitan* as my guide--always and always--my tent of hymns! It is where I exist most fully, a part of me that articulates my innermost being. It knows what I am, speaks for me, sings of and for me! Its pages flutter in the soft breeze and resonates in my soul ... and my days go by in an effort to set my tunes to its scale, unite my past with my present, and take me to the future that awaits me.

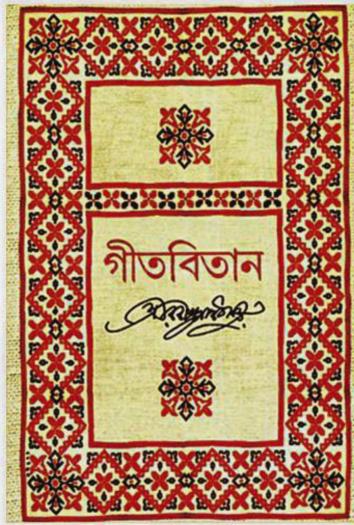
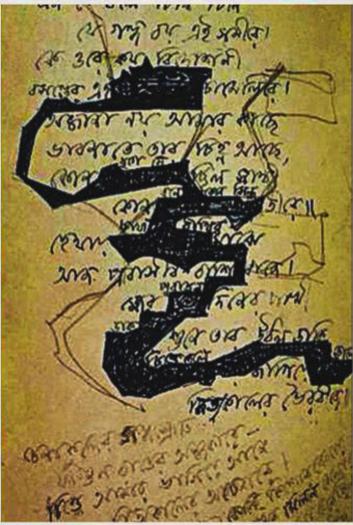
"Can anyone and everyone join in that play of melody ... or set tunes to its scale?"

Shuborna Chowdhury lives in Toronto, Canada

"I am happiest when composing songs; the work I do when I give speeches, write prose, or discharge my duties is nothing compared to that feeling."

"When I work, my Lord gives me something precious; when I compose songs, he gives me his love!"

Rabindranath Tagore



Anandoloke Mongol Aloke

It's in joy and love's realm that the truly Beauteous One reigns!
Your splendor pervades the heavens!
At your feet is the entire universe, spread out beauteously
Planets and stars, moon and sun, all keep flowing fervently,
Lapping up your abounding endless gifts and dipping in it.
Your grace is showered generously on earth. You are lovely!
Flower blossoms, songs and delightful fragrances greet you.
You bestow your blessings on our existence endlessly.
And life keeps flowing day after day in ever new channels
Love, mercy, pity and devotion mellow our hearts.
You lavish on us compassion in our agonies and distress.
The universe turns into a joy-filled place and pays you homage
And unprompted acknowledges you for your benedictions.

Aaj Josnarate Shobai Gekhhe

Enticed by the giddy spring wind on this moonlit night
Everyone has headed for the forest this day
But I'll stay exactly where I am and won't be lured away
I'll remain all alone in a corner of my room
And just won't be lured away by this crazy wind!
I'll have to keep my room all spick and span,
And must clean it and wipe the dust as well as I can
I'll have to stay wide awake, for He just might come my way
But that can only happen when I come to His mind
On this moonlit, windy and giddy spring day!

Tobu Mone Rekho

And yet remember me when I have gone far away
And even if your former love has been covered up by a new one's net,
Remember me if I am still living somewhere close by
And you can't figure out what you see is a shadow or really me
Yet remember me!
Remember me if one day tears well up in your eyes
And if all play suddenly stops in what had been till then a honeyed night
Yet remember me!
Remember me if on some autumnal dawn your work hits a snag
And it occurs to you you couldn't go on because you had thought of me.
Remember me even if your eyes didn't moisten when thinking of me
Yet remember me!

Boisakh He Mouno Tapash

Oh Boisakh, tight-lipped austere one,
In what depth did you discover your profound message?
With burning forehead, a sluggish cloud drifts in
And casts a deep shade over heated foreheads.
You seem ready then to harbor in your heart a fierce resolve
To light up a sacrificial fire in front of some oblation spot.
O pitiless one, you put on death's ravenous look,
Displaying bloodshot, wide open eyes!
Dreadful one, cruelly you seem intent on unraveling life's bonds,
So vulnerable to hurt inflicted absent-mindedly.
But all of a sudden you will then sound out a message of hope
And donning youthful green garbs pour down soothing rain!

Aamar Moner Koner Baire

Every now and then I keep peeping from a window,
Taking in the outside world from a corner of my mind.
Whose presence do I sense in the sad tune
Drifting in from somewhere far away?
Is she really there or merely an illusion?
Quite lost, my eyes soon begin to stray
In which sphere will they find their evening star
And whose shadow caresses me so fleetingly?
My heart begins to flutter,
And all aglow, I start humming and singing.

Aakash Aamay Bhorlo Aloy

Since the sky fills me with light I'll fill it with my songs.
I'll hurl the tints of my tunes at the wind and lilt it.
All you palash flowers glowing oh so brightly
Make your petal tips flame in brilliant hues everywhere
My mind has been lighted up by their radiant tunes.
The south wind makes the flower garden quiver forever
Young leaves chime like bells under the blue sky's golden light.
All you shirish trees swaying oh so softly
With a serene smile you weave fragrances that suffuse the air
Your scents fill my heart and overwhelm my soul with songs!

Translated by Fakrul Alam.

Visva-Bharati: A Civil Public Space for All Ages

KUMKUM BHATTACHARYA

All of us are products of our times - but while most of us are carried on time's shoulders only a few are able to carry time on theirs. Rabindranath Tagore can be counted among those few. He continues to attract our attention, admiration and reverence endlessly - and in trying to explain this phenomenon, our words tumble out and our thoughts jostle with each other. Some of us are deeply moved by his songs; others by his poetry, still others by his novels and plays - he is for sure a wordsmith par excellence. But are we not equally moved and awakened by the untiring ways in which he gave shape to his ideas and dreams? Apart from the literary treasure trove of his legacy there is an equally important and abiding legacy of all that he did in manifesting his ideas that arose from his philosophical cogitation and cognitions about the meanings of human life, and from his weaving of varied social fabrics, in order to add to the fulfillment and perfection of human society. There will only be a handful of people of Tagore's age who thought as carefully as he did about the creation of an environment that would foster creativity, joy of learning and the wish to do things, and extend the self to include others as parts of the community to which she/he belongs.

I see Visva-Bharati with its twin campuses of Santiniketan and Sriniketan as the creation of a civil public space where one does not have to follow rules other than that of engaging with the space and discovering one's area of interest. It is a public space that asks for nothing more than maintaining dignity of the self and respect for others and allows one to express oneself in multiple ways. It is a space that is non-invasive and unobtrusive; it is up to the individual to make a choice to be a part of it or stay away from it.

In the early days of the Santiniketan Ashrama, as it was then called, historical accounts and anecdotes suggest that there were strict rules of decorum and

discipline, albeit tempered by faith in democratic processes through which these were imposed or applied on the inmates. However, as the ashrama evolved and transformed into a Visva-Vidyalya the goal-posts shifted to focus on the synthesis of knowledge of the east and west; it altered also to open the doors to those who believed in alternate paths to education or its ends; it focused now on giving expression in as creative ways as possible to dissent; and it strove to find ways through which traditions could be built without the shackles of religion and superstitious beliefs that spawned only social distance and conflict in the subcontinent. This space also created an ambience in

simple and stark - a reminder of what rural life experiences could be without the benefits of education and other services, and an example of how rural life can be made meaningful by engaging people in inclusive and evolving development programmes through creating a level playing field for all. Sriniketan seeks out the strengths of villages and village life - its music, craft, customs and lore aim at revival and resuscitation of the local heritage and its components. Its intrusion into village life is non-invasive and gradual - tempered by a sense of respect for the people and their ways.

At the social and cultural levels, Visva-Bharati has carved for itself by now a secure niche and

There is an important by-product of the existence and continuation of Visva-Bharati perceptible in the generation of a local and extra-local economy involving a fairly large number of people apart from those employed directly by the university. Birbhum as a district does not fare well in socio-economic markers and offers a striking contrast to Bolpur and its surrounding areas that appear to be thriving because of entrepreneurship and individual initiative. Some of the villages around the campus too appear to be progressive, sensitive to the cultural ambience of the university and with aspirations that are laudable. Certainly, Visva-Bharati does not have any resemblance to ivory towers and does not display the snobbery one associates with the intelligentsia. In this special space everybody feels that they have their roles as stakeholders in things that concern the university.

There are of course neighborhoods that are (un)occupied by the non-resident population - mostly from Kolkata but also from other places from around the country and world. For many it is a get-away, but for many, on the other hand, it is a place they would much rather be in than any other place. Santiniketan is strategically placed near Kolkata and well-connected by train and road. Life here is relatively comfortable and negotiable and there is no absolute reason for residents to own a motorized vehicle though they now are increasingly visible here nowadays. But most importantly, Santiniketan is a place where you have definitely the chance of encountering the 'world in a single nest' (Tagore's motto for Visva-Bharati). Rabindranath straddled epochs of time - the ancient, the contemporary and the modern in all that he did and Visva-Bharati is a living testimony of his position in this respect.

The author is a Professor, Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati.



which the secular life of the scholar and the householder could be accommodated side-by-side, or almost cheek-by-jowl with each other, so as to radiate its light to even the benighted rural areas surrounding the university.

Physically, the campuses are almost oases in dry and arid Birbhum - its lush green foliage and its flowering trees reflect the colors and scents of the various seasons experienced so intensely here; its buildings embrace nature; it is as if the subtle beautification of the open spaces and the intermingling of spaces have been used variedly. While Santiniketan is lush and its effect more intellectually nuanced, Sriniketan is comparatively shy,

space arousing curiosity and eagerness among diverse people from all over the world. Its ceremonies and rituals have assumed a timeless quality and have set a standard for all that is believed to stand for Tagoreana. Even in the present age, Visva-Bharati uses natural props of flowers and leaves for decorating its cultural function venues. It is a reminder of how during Tagore's time, artists like Nandalal Bose and others seriously engaged in set and costume design with very little resources at their command and yet caught the attention of audiences. How much care went in the design of the invitation cards for special occasions that are still followed today!