



Maharaja Bahadur Sir Jatindra Mohan Tagore of Pathuriaghata with male members of his family, circa 1901.

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The Prasad or Palace of Maharaja Bahadur Sir Jatindra Tagore at Pathuriaghata, circa 1901.

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THE FABULOUS TAGORES

of Pathuriaghata, Calcutta

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My five day sojourn in Calcutta in the winter of 1991 was a revelation. All the places I had ever wanted to visit in Calcutta, I managed to do so, because of the luxury of having a sedan car at my disposal with a chauffeur throughout my stay. This was a rare privilege, courtesy of my late Pesho-Moshai (uncle) the then acting Head of the Bata Shoe Company (India) at Batanagar, south 24 Pargana district. And, what a beautiful colonial era mansion known as the "Boro Baboor Bungalow," they lived in! Pesho-Moshai's wife, my Kum Kum Pishi (aunt), pampered me with love, affection, food and gifts. I was over the moon.

The whole ambience of the place was such that it seemed I was reliving the Raj. Time stood still. The elegant white neo-classical colonnaded mansion on acres of well-tended grounds with immaculate gardens stood on the bank of the river Ganga (Ganges). The uniformed staff added to the stately living. Two turbaned Sikh security guards manned the main gate. During our wintry morning walks on the grounds of the house, they would suddenly emerge through the fog like apparitions to greet us with folded palms.

On a particular morning of my sightseeing tour, I had gone to pay homage to the enduring memory of Rabindranath in his ancestral home at Jorashanko Thakur Bari. A short brief on the Jorashanko Tagores: The first Asian Nobel laureate (1913), the



The Tagore Castle, Pathuriaghata, circa 1901.

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deified Bengali Poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), looms large in the collective consciousness of the Bengali people on both sides of the divide, that is, in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. The sheer adulation of his ardent admirers border on worship. His hallowed legacy is that of a semi-divine. He defines the core of our Bengali ethos. Kobi Guru Rabindranath, was born into the renowned Jorashanko Tagore family in Calcutta, which became the seat of a branch of the Tagore clan, when Nilmani Thakur left his family home in Pathuriaghata, Calcutta, in the 18th century.

Rabindranath's grandfather, "Prince" Dwarakanath Tagore (1794–1846) was famously wealthy. He was known both for his flamboyant lifestyle (hence the popular sobriquet of Prince), as well as

for his munificence. There was hardly a worthy cause he did not support morally or financially. Along with his close friend Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), they belonged to the Brama Samaj and played a pivotal role in the Bengal Renaissance.

Dwarakanath's extravagant lifestyle in India and Europe, was greatly responsible for his financial ruin. He died in London in 1846, and lies buried there. Years later, his grandson Rabindranath had this to say of him, "my grandfather had lighted lamps of wealth everywhere, but they went out with him. All that remained of that festival of wealth were the soot marks from the burnt lamps, ash, and a single quivering weak flame". Rabindranath's father the Maharishi Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905) was a saintly figure. Although a renowned zamindar, he abhorred high living and led a simple, austere, spiritual life. The family still possessed considerable landholdings as zamindars, especially in east Bengal, but they could never recoup the financial losses incurred by the pompous lifestyle of Dwarakanath, nor build anew. Actually, both Debendranath and Rabindranath were temperamentally ill suited to be the atypical landlords of that era.

In the evening over dinner, I excitedly narrated the days trip to the Jorashanko Thakur Bari to my hosts. Suddenly, my sombre Pesho Moshai asked me if I was also aware of the Pathuriaghata branch of the Tagore family. Until then I had never heard of them. Because of the iconic status of Rabindranath, I had always been enamoured of Jorashanko. And,

rightfully so. However, given my penchant for history, I was a trifle embarrassed when my hosts enlightened me about the fabulous, princely Tagores of Pathuriaghata, Calcutta. They spoke in particular, of the foremost three—Jatindra, Sourindra and Prodyot. I listened intently. And, I resolved then, to visit Pathuriaghata the very next day. I was, however, told to lower my expectations as the whole place lay in utter neglect and ruin.

A short note on my trip in search of the magnificent Tagores of Pathuriaghata: Maharaja Bahadur Sir Jatindra Mohan Tagore (1831–1908), KCSI, of Pathuriaghata, was the eldest son of the illustrious Hara Kumar Tagore (1798–1858). When Jatindra came of age and into social prominence, it used to be said in the British India of the 19th century that, "there is no name more familiar in Bengal, or, on that matter, in India, than that of Maharaja Jatindra Mohan Tagore." His opulent residence known as the Prasad or Palace, was fit for a prince. The many rooms of the house used for various purposes were lavishly furnished with rich trappings. It was here that the Maharaja entertained his Indian and European guests lavishly. The musical soirees of this house were famous throughout India. When I visited it, the façade of the Prasad looked uncared for and grimy, a sorry reminder of its past glory. The pointed pediment of the portico was still supported by six massive Corinthian columns. The house was hidden in a narrow alley reminiscent of our old Dhaka goli.

Opposite the Prasad on the northern

side of the street was the sad remnants of an extraordinary building known as the Tagore Castle. An earlier three storied building on the site was drastically renovated in 1896 by Jatindra, for a princely sum of eleven lakh rupees. He named it the Tagore Castle. The curious looking building in mock medieval 13th century Gothic style, had an impressive 100 feet high centre tower like that of the Windsor Castle, England. A big handsome clock once adorned the tower, now derelict and broken. The clock used to chime the quarter hours in similar strains to those of the Big Ben at Westminster, London. The Tagore Castle then deceptively represented the more famous landmark in the Scottish highlands, Balmoral Castle. The interior of Tagore Castle used to be tastefully decorated with gorgeous furnishings. The building is in a ruinous state today, occupied mostly by squatters. However, it is still capable of drawing the attention of the itinerant traveller and history buff. The river Ganga flow close by. A jumble of electric cables, garish advertisement hoardings impeded a proper view. Yet the gables, oriels, turrets and the castle gate could still be seen with a little effort. It is a shame that Calcutta failed to save what was clearly an unique historic edifice in the whole of India. The filth, squalor and congestion all around was not only depressing but dampened my initiatives. Illegal occupants roosted like bats in the forlorn, dilapidated castle. Their multi-coloured washings hung outside from every nook and corner. Meanwhile, my chauffeur driven car had aroused sufficient curiosity.

Soon there was an inquisitive crowd around me. A plethora of street vendors raucously hawked their merchandise. Sacred bovine stood on heaps of putrid garbage, solemnly masticating. I left the abode of the Pathuriaghata Tagores, with the deep sense of loss of a great cultural heritage.

The legendary Raja Sir Sourindra Mohan Tagore (1840–1914), CIE, of Pathuriaghata was the younger brother of Jatindra. He became an eminent Indian musicologist in his lifetime. He founded the Bengal Music School and the Bengal Academy of Music. His in-depth knowledge of the theories of Hindustani classical music was phenomenal. The Raja is the originator of the system of notation in Hindustani music. The most distinguished foreign travellers visiting India at the time, including Asian and European royalty—the 18th American President, General Ulysses S Grant (1822–1885) and his wife visited his palatial villa. They would listen with rapt attention to his superb brief on Hindustani music and inspect his extraordinary collection of Indian musical instruments with great curiosity, all the while enjoying his princely hospitality. The Raja was the first Indian to receive the degree of Doctor of Music from the universities of Philadelphia, USA, in 1877, and Oxford, UK, in 1896, in absentia, a rare honour in those days.

The old exiled King of Awadh, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (1822–1887), himself a celebrated connoisseur of Hindustani music, once invited the Raja to his palace at Garden Reach (also known by the "pars pro toto" of Metiabruz), in south western Calcutta. On listening intently to the Raja's vast repertoire of knowledge on Indian classical music, the Nawab was so overcome with emotion that he clasped the Raja in an affectionate embrace and decorated him with a garland of silver threads, all the while lamenting with tearful eyes his inability to garland him with a rare pearl necklace instead, befitting the Raja's rank and attainments.

Jorashanko and Pathuriaghata along Chitpur Road used to be the major centres of Bengali arts and culture. Pathuriaghata Street is so named as it once led to a stone-flagged ghat on the Hooghly River. This is where the older and established Bengali gentry families who traded in gold, silk, salt and cotton, and were involved in money lending, shipping, and transport in the mid-18th century Calcutta, such as the Mullicks, Ghosals, Deys, Tagores and Sils, lived. These merchant-princes built palatial colonnaded houses here, especially in the 19th century, in what was once known as Sutanuti, one of the three original villages comprising old Calcutta.

In 2006, a handsome young man, Arijit Tagore, a scion of the Pathuriaghata Tagore family visited Dhaka. He is an accomplished tabla player. He showed off his superb skills on the tabla at my home, as we watched mesmerised.

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