

Human, All too Human!

Durbhabona O Bhabna: Rabindranathke Niye. Akbar Ali Khan. Prothoma Prokashan, 2019

REVIEWED BY FAKRUL ALAM

For anyone harboring misgivings about Rabindranath Tagore but doing so with an open mind, as well as anyone who treasures his works but is realistic enough to know that though superhuman in some ways, he was human—all too human!—this is a must read book. Certainly, I found it unputdownable. Akbar Ali Khan—historian, economist, academic, international civil servant, distinguished bureaucrat and liberation war veteran—deserves our thanks for offering us facts interwoven with insights that should be illuminating for all unprejudiced Bangladeshis interested in our literature and culture. The book should appeal also to long time aficionados of the bard.

Khan structures his book on the doubts and misgivings about Rabindranath circulating over time, as well as key thoughts the poet has disseminated through his works in a very commonsensical manner. His central chapters deal deftly with controversies centering on the man. He begins each of them with a particular objection/criticism articulated against the poet and then presents the truth of the matter as objectively as he is able to. His conclusions, invariably, show that the poet-haters and doubters were mostly wrong. But Khan also indicates that Rabindranath did have a few blind spots. He could be—surprise! surprise!—ambivalent, contradictory and even prejudiced every once in a while (who isn't?). By the time one finishes reading Khan's book with an open mind though, the reader's admiration for the bard should increase manifold and not



Shelaibada kuthibari

of Gold") as Bangladesh's national anthem. They clearly felt that the song smacked of idolatry. But as Khan points out in Chapter 4 of his book, the song is aimed at upholding the motherland and is not a paean to a female goddess. Khan goes on for good measure to list 10 Muslim countries with national anthems celebrating the motherland. He adds that tonally this beautiful song is rooted in rural Bangladesh. Why shouldn't this song be Bangladesh's national anthem then?

Khan's next chapter attempts to substantiate Rabindranath's developing perspective about Muslims. He responds in it to some caviling Muslim Bengali intellectuals such as the redoubtable Professor Ahmed Sharif, who felt strongly that Rabindranath had never spotlighted Muslims adequately, or if he did so in a few of his narrative poems based on historical figures, did so critically. I myself would answer the first objection simply by saying that a writer writes about what he knows best and so Rabindranath mostly stuck to the upper caste Hindu and Brahmo milieu in his fictional works. But Akbar Ali Khan offers a more persuasive perspective by showing how in his narrative poems Rabindranath recounted history as it

mostly on *bhadrolok* or Hindu upper class characters and featured only a few Muslims in his fiction, he had even fewer lower caste Hindu men and women in them. Khan concludes that whatever he wrote about Muslims was never communal in tone or intention; indeed, one of his last works, "Musalmanir Galpa," is entirely laudatory.

After these chapters vindicating Rabindranath against charges of communalism, Khan turns to aspersions directed at the bard by *bhadrolok* types in his lifetime. The author describes the endless attacks on the poet by some upper caste Hindus, petty in outlook and unable to appreciate the Brahmo literary giant who had upstaged them without meaning to do so by garnering the Nobel Prize. Here too were Rabindranath haters castigating him for sins of omission and commission. Among the list of wrongs he was supposedly guilty of was debasing the language of the tribe, writing difficult verse, dillitainment, lack of originality, etc. I found of particular interest the pages on Dwijendral Ray's jealous attempts to slight a poet who, to his alarm, was getting too much attention nationally and internationally at his expense. When Rabindranath

Rabindranath in his lifetime and later because of ideological obsessions, literary fashions and societal and cultural changes. Chapter 7 traces the complex relationship of Rabindranath and Gandhi revolving on paths India should take towards freedom and modernity. Chapter 8 highlights questions about Rabindranath's relevance that keep cropping up from generation to generation. Chapter 9 exonerates Rabindranath from charges occasionally brought against him of being a landlord who like his cohorts thrived directly or indirectly on the misery of others. Chapter 10 discusses his contradictory views about female emancipation. Other chapters deal with Rabindranath's position on casteism, racism, imperialism, education and rural development, reminding us that here was a truly myriad-minded man evolving over time, adapting to modernity and commenting on contemporary issues out of a vast appetite for life and love of his people.

I have space left now to merely list some of Rabindranath's blindspots dwelt upon by Khan, hoping that the reader will read his book carefully to see his nuanced understanding of the bard's frailties/prejudices. One is that though a

free of the shackles of patriarchy and assert their rights, he had married off his own daughters early. According to Khan, Rabindranath held on to the belief that women had their special province and should not inhabit certain spaces of the workaday world. He was critical of Brahmins and untouchability to a point but failed to indict the racism that propped Brahmins up in society.

But these and other ambivalences and contradictions only confirm that although over the years Rabindranath Tagore kept progressing towards modernity and internationalism, and was always guided by humanistic impulses, he was in some ways unable to shake off completely the detritus of tradition and some of the prejudices infecting his contemporaries. He was clearly far ahead of his time but also in some ways of it. But that makes him like us in many ways—Human! And it is the great virtue of Akbar Ali Khan's book to make us see this truth without making us feel even for a moment that he was anything but the greatest Bengali of his time, a Bengali for all seasons, and worth commemorating for all the right reasons.

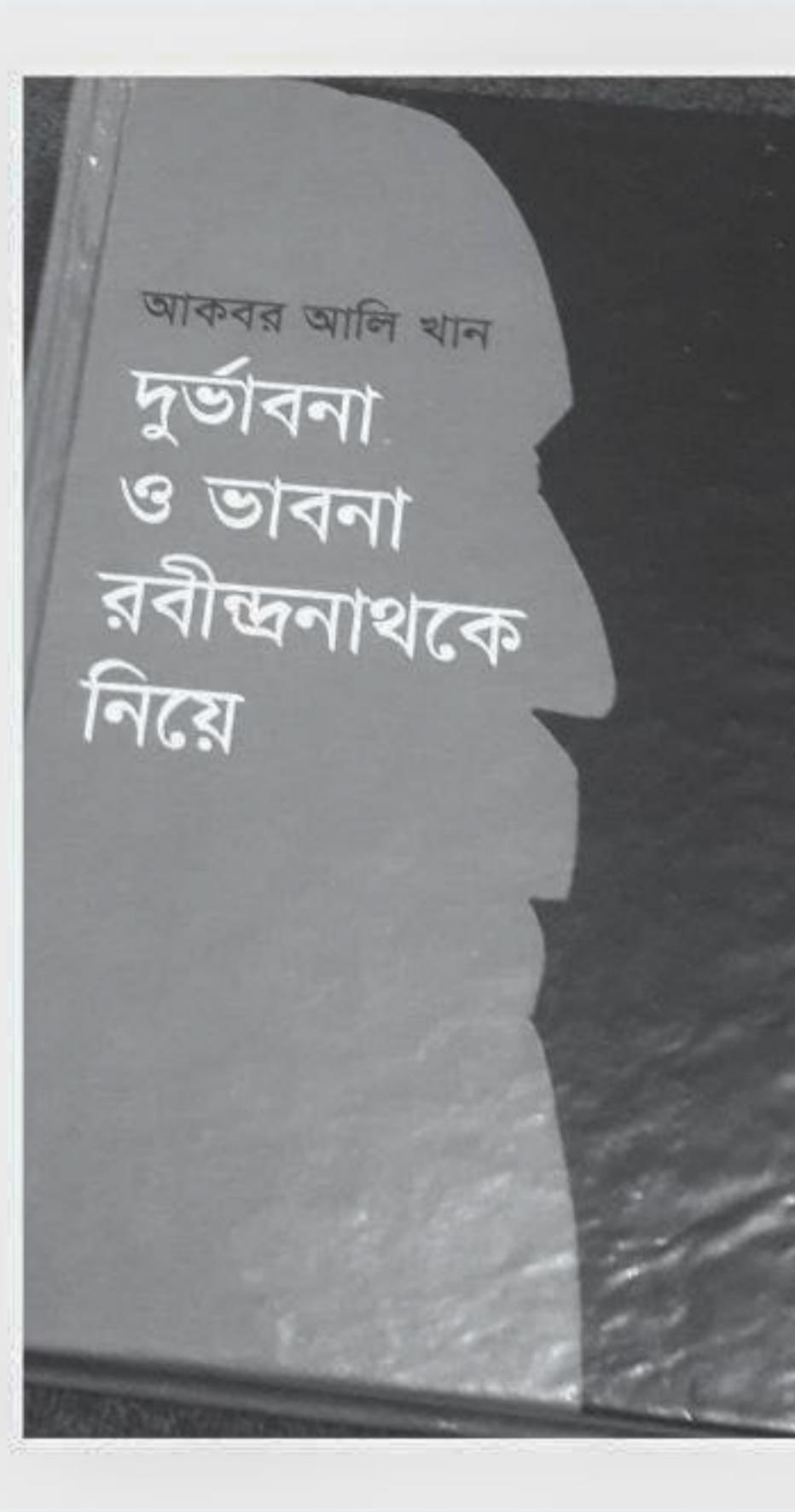
In concluding, this reviewer can't help reflecting on how Rabindranath, like a few of the greatest writers of all ages, has survived contemporary and later critics, endless pettiness and prejudice masquerading as knowledge. Shakespeare, as we know, has been accused of all sorts of things, including plagiarism, racism and sexism. Pope was flayed by his critics endlessly. For most of his writerly career, he said nothing to his critics and suffered silently. But he had collected all the harsh things said about him for decades and late in life decided to consign his critics to eternal infamy through his final satires. And Keats was said to have been hounded to death, or at least arraigned mercilessly by condescending critics, unable to appreciate a cockney genius. Jibanananda was accused of being a "Bangal" by a Kolkata know-all critic, who is now almost forgotten, while the poet is fondly remembered as the greatest of the Bengali modernist poets.

True genius triumphs over all else. And the greatest writers take all criticism in their strides and transcend everything—their own contradictions, petty critics, and prejudiced people. At the eve of his 158th birth anniversary, and in the commemorative spirit, let us treasure what Rabindranath Tagore has bequeathed to us—his works, his exemplary stance on innumerable issues, and ideas that can still illuminate our lives. And let us remember what he had said in one of his last poems (in my rough translation): "I am one of you/ Let that be my Introduction." Akbar Ali Khan's book nudges us assuredly in a direction that will make the bard even more acceptable to all of us.

diminish at all.

Take Chapter 3, for example, whose starting point is the expatriate scholar Taj Hashmi's repetition of a long-standing accusation against Rabindranath. For this poet hater, the bard had opposed the setting up of the University of Dhaka and sided with those who had met in Kolkata to campaign against an institution that could rival Calcutta University. But Khan proves that Hashmi bases his case on the quicksand of hearsay; there is simply no proof in any of the bard's published writings or in independent reports to implicate him thus. On the contrary, Rabindranath's letters as well as house vouchers that he had signed indicate that he was in Shelaibada at that time. And, of course, the Nawabs of Dhaka and the city itself had welcomed the poet warmly in 1926, while its university had conferred a D. Lit. degree on him a decade later. What, did the Nawabs, the citizens of Dhaka of the period, and the university authorities honoring Rabindranath not know that Hashmi and people of his ilk claim as a fact? But then haven't communalists of all stripes thrived forever by spreading misinformation in the name of "truth"?

Khan goes on in his long chapter on Rabindranath and his views about Muslims to show how as the years went by, the poet drew attention to inequities Muslims had suffered since they were bested by the British colonizers. However, communalists in Bangladesh seemed to have found a new reason to attack Rabindranath after 1971 when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman chose the bard's patriotic song-lyric, "Amaar Shonar Bangla" ("My Bengal



আমার সোনার বাংলা, আমি তোমায় ভালোবাসি।
চিরদিন তোমার আকাশ, তোমার বাতাস, আমার প্রাণে বাজায় বাঁশি ॥
ও মা, ফাগুনে তোর আমের বনে দ্বাণে পাগল করে,
মরি হায়, হায় রে—
ও মা, অঘানে তোর ভরা ক্ষেতে আমি কী দেখেছি মধুর হাসি ॥
কী শোভা, কী ছায়া গো, কী মেহ, কী মায়া গো—
কী আঁচল বিছায়েছে বটের মূল, নদীর কুলে কুলে ।
মা, তোর সুখের বাণী আমার কানে লাগে সুধার মতো,
মরি হায়, হায় রে—
মা, তোর বদনখানি মলিন হলে, ও মা, আমি নয়নজলে ভাসি ॥
তোমার এই খেলাঘরে শিশুকাল কাটিলে রে,
তোমার ধূলামাটি অঙ্গে মাথি ধন জীবনের মানি ।
তুই দিন ফুরালে সঞ্জ্ঞাকালে কী দীপ জ্বালিস ঘরে,
মরি হায়, হায় রে—
তখন খেলাধুলা সকল ফেলে, ও মা, তোমার কোলে ছুটে আসি ॥
ধেনু-চরা তোমার মাঠে, পারে যাবার খেয়াঘাটে,
সারা দিন পাখি-ভাঙ্কা ছায়া-চাকা তোমার পল্লীবাটে,
তোমার ধানে-ভরা আঙ্গিনাতে জীবনের দিন কাটে,
মরি হায়, হায় রে—
ও মা, আমার যে ভাই তার সবাই, ও মা, তোমার রাখাল তোমার চাষি ॥
ও মা, তোর চরণেতে দিলেম এই মাথা পেতে—
দে গো তোর পায়ের ধূল, সে যে আমার মাথার মানিক হবে ।
ও মা গবিবের ধন যা আজ জাঁট দিব চৰণজল

had been presented by historians he had read; he would never castigate a religion, race or class at the expense of another one. Khan also reveals how Rabindranath once had excised stanzas of a poem and dropped another one from his selection of poems to avoid hurting Muslim sensibilities. Making use of the available statistics, Khan stresses that while Rabindranath focused

abandoned Bengali nationalists after the excesses they had committed at the latter stages of the movement against the partition of Bengal, the *bhadrolok* turned on him for being an internationalist, supposedly anti-Hindu, fickle, and, of course, for winning fame overseas!

Subsequent chapters of Akbar Ali Khan's book deal with other controversies swirling around

reformist landlord in every sense of the term and one who had even spent his Nobel Prize money for the upliftment of his tenants, and a man critical of existing feudal structures, it did not occur to Rabindranath to give up his claim to the land he had inherited or reduce/annul fines on defaulting farmers or ones unable to pay rents. Another is that though inclined to see women become