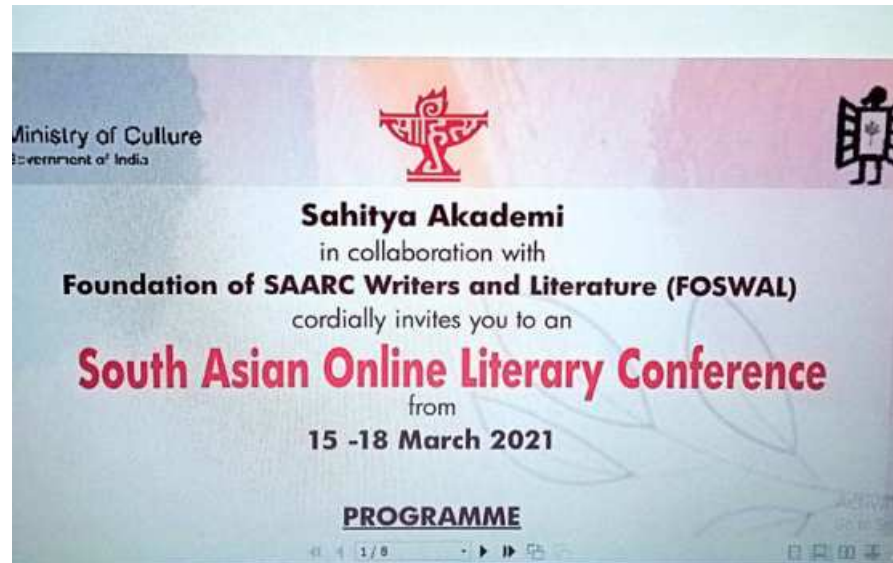


Writers and Scholars from Bangladesh at the South Asian Literary Conference, 2021

STAR LITERATURE TEAM

The Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL) is the "only SAARC Apex body" that works for nurturing and strengthening the literary and cultural interactions among the eight SAARC countries, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives and Afghanistan. FOSWAL started working on its mission of cultural bonding in 1987 and over the years has organized literature and culture related programs in the shape of seminars and conferences. In April 2020, FOSWAL organized the First Ever SAARC Writers Conference. Since then they have been making arrangements for such programmes almost every year.

Because of the pandemic, this year FOSWAL went for an online conference in collaboration with the Sahitya Akademi. The 4-day long programme titled, "South Asian Online Literary Conference" took place between 15-18 March, 2021. A central theme of the conference was Sufism, Buddhism, Jainism, Bhakti and Sikhism and the inaugural session held presentations and discussion on these four lines of thought. Dr. Ajeet Cour, President, FOSWAL and Prof. Chandrashekhar Kambar, President Sahitya Akademi were present among other dignitaries in the inaugural session. Dr. K. Sreenivasarao, Secretary, Sahitya Akademi, gave the welcome speech and Dr. Gopalkrishna Gandhi, a noted politician and grandson of Mahatma Gandhi was the Guest of Honour and



poetry. He also spoke on his work in one of the interview sessions.

A highlight of the 4-day programme for Bangladesh was an interview session of the writer and scholar Prof. Syed Manzoorul Islam by Prof. Kaiser Haq. They discussed Syed Manzoorul Islam's writing style with a special focus on his most recent novel *Absurd Nights*, which was translated from Bengali by ULAB's Library of Bangladesh Series in 2020. The session, like all other interview sessions, was for 15 minutes and many viewers felt that it ended too soon.

Prof. Kaiser Haq chaired a poetry session and spoke of poetry envisioning a better world. He read out from his own work. In another session, he was interviewed by Rifat Munim, writer, translator and editor.

Prof. Fakrul Alam was interviewed by the writer and scholar Dr. Hasan Al Zayed. He addressed his long engagement with translation and how his academic and personal life were

influenced by it.

Prof. Niaz Zaman chaired a session of papers and fiction reading. She also read out from her fiction piece "Monster's Mother."

Prof. Shamsad Mortuza, recited from his collection of poetry entitled *Barkode* in a discussion session and was later appraised by the Indian scholar Subir Dhar.

Among the other presenters from Bangladesh, there were Girish Goirik, Dr. Tapan Bagchi, Milu Shams, Dr. Ashraf Jewel, Rokeya Islam, Shyamsunder Sikder, Golam Kibria Pinu, Meeha Guha, Asad Mannan, Dr. Marzia Lipi, Jackie Kabir, Shafinur Shafin, Nur Quamrun Nahar and Dr. Sohana Manzoor.

The four day program was fascinating as it brought together writers from across the SAARC countries. And even though the time constraint often posed problems, it indeed set a milestone in reaching out to the literary world during these difficult times.

POETRY

Let's walk together, you and I



TASNEEM HOSSAIN

The world grows dim and dimmer with feeble eyes.
Youth turns into a broken wheelchair;
Let's walk through the desert together, you and I.

The wheel of life rolls and turns, time flies past by.
Medicines pile up high, hair grows grayer.
The world grows dim and dimmer with feeble eyes.

Once full of laughter and merriment, now distant ties;
Mornings are hazy with too much time to spare.
Let's walk through the desert together, you and I.

Afternoons are bleak, no sun shines in the skies.
No melody of birds' singing, trees look bare.
The world grows dim and dimmer with feeble eyes.

Muffled voices amid soft sound of gasping cries;
Let's be each other's forever to care.
Let's walk through the desert together, you and I.

Evenings come with stories told anti clockwise.
Sleepless nights abound, aplenty in prayers.
The world grows dim and dimmer with feeble eyes.
Let's walk through the desert together, you and I.

Tasneem Hossain is a multilingual poet, columnist, op ed columnist and training consultant. She is the director of Continuing Education Centre, Bangladesh.

Unrest

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

And then it rained flowers,
then it rained flowers
emptying the trees.

Star studded lay
the grass, the ground.
The distant roll of thunder,
lost in traffic sounds,

voiced the last notes of
Nature's protest.

Mitali Chakravarty is a writer and editor of Borderless Journal.



Like previous years, this year too, a number of writers and scholars from Bangladesh presented and participated in different capacities at the South Asian Literary Conference. Mohammad Nurul Huda, the award winning poet, chaired a poetry session and also read out from his poetry. He also spoke on his work in one of the interview sessions.

narrated moving stories about the life and beliefs of his late grandfather. Dr. Ajeet Cour was kind enough to chair and attend different sessions of the program through all four days. All the sessions of the conference went live on youtube.

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REVIEWS

BASHABI FRASER'S Critical Lives: Rabindranath Tagore

Bashabi Fraser. ISBN: 978 1 78914 149 8. London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2019

REVIEWED BY SOMDATTA MANDAL

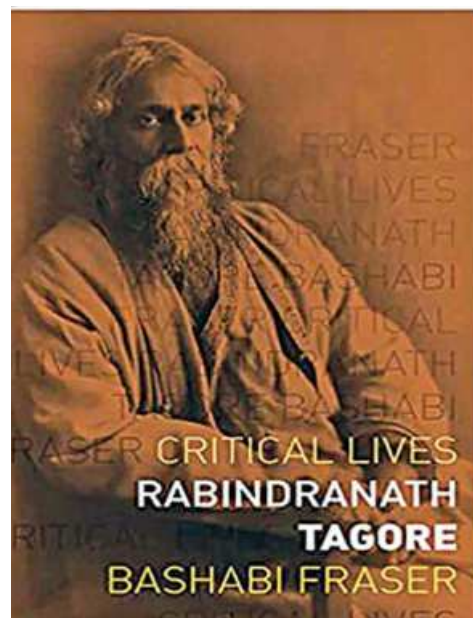
Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) needs no introduction for us. As a polymath, he was the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1913. We are aware that Rabindranath at the same time was much more than a writer. Through his poems, novels, short stories, poetic songs, dance-dramas and paintings, he transformed Bengali literature and Indian art. He was instrumental in bringing Indian culture to the West, and like his contemporary and close friend Mahatma Gandhi, strove to create a less divided society through mutual respect and understanding. Umpteen numbers of volumes have been written on different perspectives of Tagore and his works, but irrespective of special areas of study, when someone wants to read his complete critical biography in English now, he or she faces a great lacuna.

There is hardly a single volume that can be recommended to give us an authentic critical biography within a reasonable number of pages. It is true that Krishna Kripalani's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* has become dated, Nityapriya Ghosh's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Pictorial Biography* is rather sketchy, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*, Uma Dasgupta's *My Life in My Words*, Debarati Bandyopadhyay's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Life of Intimacy with Nature* or Rekha Sigi's *Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (in the Diamond Pocket Books series) do give us biographical details of the Poet, but no single volume is all-inclusive with most relevant details narrated objectively and mentioning his entire life and times. So, the average reader in the West remains with the misconceived notion that Tagore was a poet and philosopher, the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize, and that he made several trips to different countries around the world and

delivered lectures in order to raise funds for his experimental school and university back home in Santiniketan, India. And that is all.

It is here that one needs to acknowledge the significant contribution of the present book under review. As part of a series entitled "Critical Lives" that presents the work of leading cultural figures of the modern period all over the world, *Rabindranath Tagore* by Bashabi Fraser stands as the only non-westerner in the long list of artists, writers and philosophers that have been published till date. Written within the framework of twelve chapters, this critical and biographical study reassesses this Renaissance man who embodies the modern consciousness of India, engaged as he was in nation building and contributing to the narrative of a nation. Tagore's life and work are inseparable, so an analytical reappraisal of the familial, socio-political and cultural background provides a prism through which one can understand Tagore as a writer, artist and pragmatist. The fact that he draws

The private/public dichotomy in Tagore's choices, attitudes and responses to events and people epitomizes his ambivalence and the diverse responses to the poet's person and work in his lifetime and after. Even when he wrote "Crisis in Civilization" in 1941 as a subject of a subject nation, he did not lose his faith in humanity.



on his Indian past, uses the Upanishadic tenets, weighs the contingency of the current times and is eclectic in the way he values and imbibes Western values and technological and scientific development shows how he provided within himself an infusion that embodies progress.

The first chapter "The Tagores of Jorasanko" highlights the family background of the Tagores beginning from the establishment of the family house in Jorasanko by Nilmoni Kushari in 1784 and is seen in the perspective of changing times. With his grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore, his father Debendranath Tagore, the men and women of this family rode on the high tide of change and reform that propelled India into the modern era. The second chapter focuses how Rabindranath

grew up in that teeming household as the fourteenth child till it was the time for his English interlude in 1878. After narrating about his days at Shelidah in the land of the Padma, the fifth chapter focuses on the establishment of the school in 1901 at Santiniketan, the abode of peace. The method of rote learning which prevailed at the time was replaced here by creative and innovative education. Tagore believed that his institution could contribute to freeing the minds of his people through a liberal and holistic education and through rural regeneration.

The writing of *Gitanjali*, the winning of the Nobel Prize in 1913, the renunciation of Knighthood, his establishment of Visva-Bharati university as a cultural learning centre promoting cooperation and coordination between the East and the West with its motto *yatra visham bhavati ekanidam* (where the world meets in one nest), his trips to various European and American cities, his trip to Japan where he delivered his views on Nationalism, his interactions with Mahatma Gandhi regarding the political turmoil in the country, all find adequate mention in the remaining chapters. Apart from mentioning Tagore's introduction of new forms and genres in literature, the last two chapters also discuss his modernity and his legacy at home and in the world. The private/public dichotomy in Tagore's choices, attitudes and responses to events and people epitomizes his ambivalence and the diverse responses to the poet's person and work in his lifetime and after. Even when he wrote "Crisis in Civilization" in 1941 as a subject of a subject nation, he did not lose his faith in humanity.

Fraser concludes the biography by stating that in a world of rising conflict, alarming friction and widening fissures, Tagore's

syncretism remains a lasting legacy. He sought a positive outcome of the East-West encounter and exchange, so that the 'universal man' could meet and interact through a transnational dialogue. This syncretic culture imbues the vast oeuvre of his work; it has propelled his activism and lives in his pragmatic projects today. His conviction that truth, love and compassion can nurture an amicable future between nations for a sustainable world makes Tagore a man for all ages.

Bashabi Fraser is an academic, poet and the co-founder and Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScOTs) in Edinburgh. Recently she was awarded the CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire), one of the highest civilian honours of the UK by the Queen in recognition of her services to education and culture in Scotland. So, this critical biography of the Poet could not have come from someone more competent than her, especially because it was not only written with the western readership in mind but it filled up the long-standing lacunae of reading a complete, compact, yet comprehensive biography of Rabindranath Tagore in the twenty-first century. Tagore's liberal humanism and modernity make him relevant today and his place in world literature can be endorsed by a close study of his life, times and work. The difficulty of separating the grain from the chaff has been overcome with such finesse that reading this just over two-hundred pages biography is indeed commendable. The numerous black and white photographs provided by the Rabindra Bhavan archives add to the attraction of this volume.

Somdattha Mandal is Former Professor of English, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India.