

If Tagore were here to see...



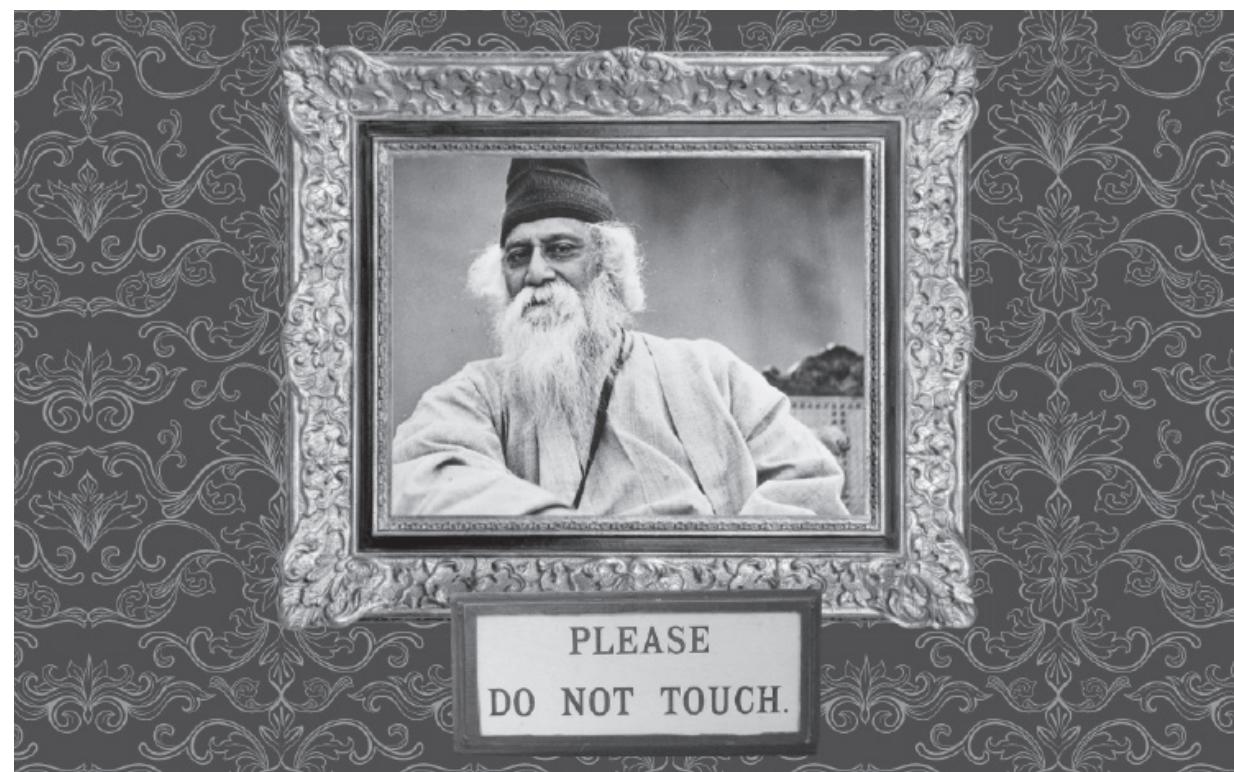
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RIFAT MUNIM

EVERY time there is a furore over an issue that relates to Rabindranath Tagore, I try to imagine: What would the biggest writer of the Bangla language think if he were here to see how he is caught up in debates that have more to do with the animosities between opposing cultural forces than his writing or music? Let's imagine a play in which Tagore has come back to the real world as a spirit, to observe how his writing is being received and studied in the 21st century. A rekindling of interest in his work, accompanied by quality translation and research, is likely to reassure him that his creations are still relevant and perhaps will always be. But how would he react to the situation here in Bangladesh? Would he be outraged at how often he is embroiled in mud-slinging, through which some people advance their own political agendas?

The latest occasion with a flurry of incidents was stirred up by Ashraful Alom Saeed. Also known as Hero Alom, he rendered an iconic Tagore song and uploaded it on YouTube, which set off a social media warfare, leading the Detective Branch of police to pick him up for interrogation on July 27 on the grounds that we are still struggling to understand. Not that police really need strong grounds to detain and interrogate singers or actors any more. The memories of how film director Anonno Mamun and actor Shaheen Mridha, Baul singer Rita Dewan, and actor Pori Moni were arrested are still fresh in our minds. They were targeted for reasons we could at least explain, no matter how flimsy those reasons were. But why target Hero Alom?

Alom's detention was the kind of moral policing that many thought would never occur in Bangladesh. We'd encountered another kind of moral policing during the Ekushey Book Fair in 2019 and 2020, when police teams were deployed to monitor stalls and check if any book was hurting religious sentiments. It was Hefazat-e-Islam – a Qawmi madrasa-based Islamist organisation whose influence over policies is becoming stronger by the day – that put pressure on the government to monitor books at the fair. Writers, publishers and activists vehemently opposed the decision to send police teams to the fair, calling such acts of policing a threat to our fundamental right to freedom of expression and thought.



VISUAL: TEENI AND TUNI

If the book fair's moral policing was a threat to freedom of thought, how are we supposed to look at Alom's interrogation, during which he was asked demeaning questions about his skin colour and look? Worse still, he was released after he signed a bond declaring that he wouldn't render songs composed by Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam.

The religious impetus for moral policing is alarming, but equally alarming is the cultural impetus behind Alom's interrogation, which was provided by a social media explosion engineered by Tagore brigades. The Facebook ruckus has put Alom at the receiving end of a campaign through which he was, and still is, trolled mercilessly. The trolls have not gone unchallenged though. The counter-currents challenging the trolls include literary and cultural activists, journalists, and even Tagore fans, but they also include those from the anti-Tagore brigades who are known for their communally fuelled attacks on Tagore.

This is not the first time a singer has been brutally berated due to their rendition of Tagore songs. Rock singer Maqsood rendered a Tagore song more than two decades back. If my memory is serving me right, I believe by then he'd left the

popular band Feedback and formed his own band, Dhaka, with which he embarked on a new journey of blending rock elements with Baul music. His performance, which was accompanied by electric guitars and drums, angered Tagore aficionados so much that the entertainment pages of many Bangla newspapers carried angry responses for weeks. The

better job. When they get the right opportunity, they make it big, like Momtaz, who was discovered by Hanif Sanket. There also are many local, folk and Baul singers who attach no importance to national platforms and are happy being where they are. They follow musical conventions, many of which are way richer than the modern or postmodern trends

of underprivileged people.

"I am not educated, I have no quality to speak of, I'm not a singer, I'm not an actor – are all these my crimes? I try my best and I will keep trying for my audience."

Nothing can explain the fundamental principles of freedom of expression better than Alom's emotionally charged Facebook post. By the same token, every Tagore fan has a right to express their opinion on Alom's performance. But if those responses are filled with hatred and if they assume a tone that goads the police on to harass him, then it starts smacking of a form of bigotry that we associate either with jingoism or religious fundamentalism. As a Tagore fan myself, I am certain that this is not what Tagore deserves. Tagore is our biggest writer not because of the size of his oeuvre; rather, he attained this position by virtue of his powerful writing and the sheer range of his thoughts, which do not have any space for bigotry. To put Tagore on an ideal pedestal, seeking to imbue his work with a sanctity that does not warrant any criticism of his work, can never open up new doors for illuminating studies of his work. Such an approach only strengthens the anti-Tagore brigades who seem ever poised to jump in with both feet and start levelling unfounded accusations at Tagore.

Idealising Tagore also creates a lot of confusion, encouraging wrong interpretations of Tagore's work, feeding the claim that Tagore's writing celebrates the middle-class sensibilities that the ruling clique uses to govern the masses. Nothing can be more prejudiced than this interpretation. If it applies to Tagore, it also applies, more effectively, to the songs written by Nazrul, DL Roy, Atul Prasad, and Rajanikant Sen.

There is no denying the power of Nazrul's poems and songs. He has left numerous critics enamoured of his poetry and songs, just like Tagore has. Among Nazrul's critics are not only Serajul Islam Chowdhury and Jatin Sarker – both of them Marxists

– but also modern scholars like Abdul Mannan Syed and Rafiqul Islam. But why does BNP, one of Bangladesh's main political parties, find an avatar in Nazrul? BNP never issues a press release on Tagore's birth or death anniversary but it almost regularly, if not religiously, organises events to celebrate Nazrul's birth anniversary. Nazrul is also loved by activists of Jamaat-e-Islami, Hefazat and Khelafat Majlis, among other Islamist parties and organisations, just like Tagore is loved and appropriated by many Hindutva activists in West Bengal, India. Are we to believe that BNP – the party that holds on to Nazrul – is devoid of people with middle-class sensibilities? Are we to believe that the BNP's ruling clique does not use middle-class ethos to govern the masses? In BNP's case, religion is the only trump card, one might quip. If middle-class sensibilities are replaced by religion, what we get is a bleaker picture, especially since Nazrul's writing is absolutely non-communal in spirit.

It is not easy to understand why one writer is appropriated by a political party or a section of a class but when they are, it does not mean a one-to-one correspondence between that party or class and the writer in question.

Getting back to the initial thread of Tagore's fictional appearance in a play, when faced with the circus around Hero Alom rendering one of his songs, is it possible that Tagore would say: Both the brigades across the literary spectrum should go to hell? Is it possible that he'd look at the whole thing from an entirely fresh angle, that he'd feel happy to see his songs cross the class divide and reach Alom? Well, it all depends on the playwright's vision and understanding of Tagore.

As I understand it, Tagore as a writer is so great that he does not require a brigade to protect the worth of his writing. Also, to stand up for Alom's right to render Tagore songs does not stand in contradiction to being a Tagore fan.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	1	41	Cover all bases	20	Traffic snarl	21	Fire-fighting tool	22	Parrot or puppy	24	Spike of film	25	Go astray	26	Sinking signal	30	Civil libertarian's concern	31	Implored	33	Untruth	34	Debate side	35	Nip's partner	36	Test type	37	Idle on film	38	Prayer ender	39	Frank Herbert classic	40	Flag feature	41	Invite	42	Keep	43	Brunch dish	44	Goony	45	Ship of 1492	46	Ooze	47	Femur's upper end	48	Goose egg	49	Poet's concern	50	Floor squares	51	School org.	52	Musician's job	53	TV spots	54	pro	55	Tears down	56	upper end	57	Musician's job	58	TV spots	59	pro	60	Tears down	61	upper end	62	Musician's job	63	TV spots	64	pro	65	Tears down	66	upper end	67	Musician's job	68	TV spots	69	pro	70	Tears down	71	upper end	72	Musician's job	73	TV spots	74	pro	75	Tears down	76	upper end	77	Musician's job	78	TV spots	79	pro	80	Tears down	81	upper end	82	Musician's job	83	TV spots	84	pro	85	Tears down	86	upper end	87	Musician's job	88	TV spots	89	pro	90	Tears down	91	upper end	92	Musician's job	93	TV spots	94	pro	95	Tears down	96	upper end	97	Musician's job	98	TV spots	99	pro	100	Tears down	101	upper end	102	Musician's job	103	TV spots	104	pro	105	Tears down	106	upper end	107	Musician's job	108	TV spots	109	pro	110	Tears down	111	upper end	112	Musician's job	113	TV spots	114	pro	115	Tears down	116	upper end	117	Musician's job	118	TV spots	119	pro	120	Tears down	121	upper end	122	Musician's job	123	TV spots	124	pro	125	Tears down	126	upper end	127	Musician's job	128	TV spots	129	pro	130	Tears down	131	upper end	132	Musician's job	133	TV spots	134	pro	135	Tears down	136	upper end	137	Musician's job	138	TV spots	139	pro	140	Tears down	141	upper end	142	Musician's job	143	TV spots	144	pro	145	Tears down	146	upper end	147	Musician's job	148	TV spots	149	pro	150	Tears down	151	upper end	152	Musician's job	153	TV spots	154	pro	155	Tears down	156	upper end	157	Musician's job	158	TV spots	159	pro	160	Tears down	161	upper end	162	Musician's job	163	TV spots	164	pro	165	Tears down	166	upper end	167	Musician's job	168	TV spots	169	pro	170	Tears down	171	upper end	172	Musician's job	173	TV spots	174	pro	175	Tears down	176	upper end	177	Musician's job	178	TV spots	179	pro	180	Tears down	181	upper end	182	Musician's job	183	TV spots	184	pro	185	Tears down	186	upper end	187	Musician's job	188	TV spots	189	pro	190	Tears down	191	upper end	192	Musician's job	193	TV spots	194	pro	195	Tears down	196	upper end	197	Musician's job	198	TV spots	199	pro	200	Tears down	201	upper end	202	Musician's job	203	TV spots	204	pro	205	Tears down	206	upper end	207	Musician's job	208	TV spots	209	pro	210	Tears down	211	upper end	212	Musician's job	213	TV spots	214	pro	215	Tears down	216	upper end	217	Musician's job	218	TV spots	219	pro	220	Tears down	221	upper end	222	Musician's job	223	TV spots	224	pro	225	Tears down	226	upper end	227	Musician's job	228	TV spots	229	pro	230	Tears down	231	upper end	232	Musician's job	233	TV spots	234	pro	235	Tears down	236	upper end	237	Musician's job	238	TV spots	239	pro	240	Tears down	241	upper end	242	Musician's job	243	TV spots	244	pro	245	Tears down	246	upper end	247	Musician's job	248	TV spots	249	pro	250	Tears down	251	upper end	252	Musician's job	253	TV spots	254	pro	255	Tears down	256	upper end	257	Musician's job	258	TV spots	259	pro	260	Tears down	261	upper end	262	Musician's job	263	TV spots	264	pro	265	Tears down	266	upper end	267	Musician's job	268	TV spots	269	pro	270	Tears down	271	upper end	272	Musician's job	273	TV spots	274	pro	275	Tears down	276	upper end	277	Musician's job	278	TV spots	279	pro	280	Tears down	281	upper end	282	Musician's job	283	TV spots	284	pro	285	Tears down	286	upper end	287	Musician's job	288	TV spots	289	pro	290	Tears down	291	upper end	292	Musician's job	293	TV spots	294	pro	295	Tears down	296	upper end	297	Musician's job	298	TV spots	299	pro	300	Tears down	301	upper end	302	Musician's job	303	TV spots	304	pro	305	Tears down	306	upper end	307	Musician's job	308	TV spots	309	pro	310	Tears down	311	upper end	312	Musician's job	313	TV spots	314	pro	315	Tears down	316	upper end	317	Musician's job	318	TV spots	319	pro	320	Tears down	321	upper end	322	Musician's job	323	TV spots	324	pro	325	Tears down	326	upper end	327	Musician's job	328	TV spots	329	pro	330	Tears down	331	upper end	332	Musician's job	333	TV spots	334	pro	335	Tears down	336	upper end	337	Musician's job	338	TV spots	339	pro	340	Tears down	341	upper end	342	Musician's job	343	TV spots	344	pro	345	Tears down	346	upper end	347	Musician's job	348	TV spots	349	pro	350	Tears down	351	upper end	352	Musician's job	353</