

RABINDRA JAYANTI SPECIAL

# A DEEPER ABSENCE:

## Beyond the rituals of Rabindranath

DOWEL BISWAS

As we celebrate Rabindranath Tagore's 165th birth anniversary today, he returns in fragments in the country—as lines on posters, songs on stage and television, recreated songs, a garlanded photograph in institutional ritual. Tagore's familiarity is unequivocal, as if he had blended with the soil, air and spirit of Bengal. At the same time, turning the man's achievements into our own is somewhat misleading. It produces the illusion of presence while concealing a deeper absence. What is inherited is Tagore as memory, not Tagore as thought.

It is easier to preserve the grand aesthetics of Tagore than confront the



VISUAL: DOWEL BISWAS

difficult one. Rabindra Sangeet survives in carefully rehearsed cadence, quotations circulate endlessly online, institutions commemorate him with ritual precision. Yet much of what Tagore wrote resists comfort and consensus. In *Nationalism* (1917), he called nationalism "a cruel epidemic of evil" and described the nation as "the organization of politics and commerce whose purpose is power and prosperity." The words remain startling because Tagore himself would later become inseparable from national identity in South Asia.

*Jana Gana Mana* and *Amar Shonar Bangla* were not written as national anthems. They became

is striking because it rejects purity in favour of human connection. Elsewhere in the same novel, Tagore observes: "When a fortress is besieged from all sides, there is nothing narrow-minded about guarding it with one's life." Between those two ideas lies Tagore's lifelong tension—between identity as protection and identity as enclosure.

Even his most familiar lines are often stripped of their intellectual demand. "Chitto jetha bhoysshunyo, uchcho jetha shir" — "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high" — survives as a ceremonial aspiration across South Asia. But the poem continues: "Gyan

jetha mukto" — "Where knowledge is free." The line asks not merely for pride, but for intellectual freedom, for a society free from fear, hierarchy and inherited mental enclosure. The quotation survives more comfortably than its implications.

The same flattening shapes the reception of his educational philosophy. Through Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan, Tagore attempted to imagine learning beyond colonial rigidity and mechanical discipline. "The highest education," he wrote, "is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence." Yet the systems he resisted—rote memorisation, examination obsession, intellectual conformity—continue to dominate much of South Asian education.

Tagore's fiction also complicates the softened image now commonly circulated. The women of *Streer Patra*,

impenetrable." Contemporary culture, however, increasingly prefers the smaller wisdom. His lines circulate online detached from essays, speeches and arguments, transformed into consumable inspiration. He fits social media more easily than sustained reading.

He anticipated this erosion long before the digital age. In *Nationalism*, Tagore warned against societies intoxicated by speed, urgency and mechanical efficiency. "There are ideals which do not play hide-and-seek with our life," he wrote. "They slowly grow from seed to flower, from flower to fruit." The sentence feels almost oppositional to the accelerated logic of contemporary culture, where immediacy is rewarded and contemplation steadily disappears.

Even *Ekla Cholo Re* is frequently misunderstood. "Jodi tor daak shune keu na ashe, tobe ekla cholo re" — "If no one responds to your call, then walk alone" — now circulates as motivational shorthand. But the song speaks less of heroic individualism than ethical loneliness: the burden of remaining morally awake when collective courage collapses.

Tagore's later writings grew darker as he watched fascism, militarisation and imperial violence reshape the world. In *Sabhyatar Sankat* (Crisis in Civilization), he wrote: "Manusher opor bishwas harano paap" — "It is a sin to lose faith in humanity." Today the line is quoted sentimentally. In context, it emerged from exhaustion, grief and civilisational anxiety. It was not comfort. It was resistance.

Perhaps this explains why Tagore survives so powerfully and yet so partially. What remains visible are fragments: songs detached from philosophy, poetic lines separated from political argument, ritual replacing engagement. Tagore is quoted more than read, performed more than debated, commemorated more than interrogated.

And yet the persistence itself reveals something important. The anxieties within his work remain unresolved: nationalism and humanity, identity and freedom, speed and contemplation, conformity and conscience. The "safe" Tagore survives comfortably in cultural ritual. The more difficult Tagore—the one suspicious of organised power, moral uniformity and collective vanity—still waits beneath the surface of reverence.



# NEWS

## UK slaps sanctions on Bangladeshi travel

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According to the UK government, some sanctioned networks lured migrants seeking better opportunities before forcing or pressuring them into military service or work in Russian weapons factories.

British authorities highlighted Russia's "Alabuga Start" programme, linked to a UK-sanctioned entity, which reportedly recruits foreign workers for drone manufacturing.

The UK said Russia has sharply increased drone attacks on Ukraine in recent months, causing civilian casualties and damage to critical infrastructure.

British officials noted that Russia launched more than 200 drones per day into Ukraine during March 2026, the highest monthly level recorded so far, and warned that April figures could surpass that number.

The sanctions aim to disrupt supply chains supporting Russia's drone operations, including companies and businessmen providing key components and technical support from third countries.

UK Sanctions Minister Stephen Doughty said, "The practice of exploiting vulnerable people to prop up Russia's failing and illegal war in Ukraine is barbaric."

"These sanctions expose and disrupt the operations of those trafficking migrants as cannon fodder and feeding Putin's drone factories with illicit components to target innocent civilians and vital infrastructure," he said.

Doughty added, "The UK continues to lead international efforts to disrupt Russia's war machine, ramping up pressure on its economy and confronting its hybrid threats. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine in defence of European security and our shared values."

The sanctions also target individuals and entities based outside Russia, including in Thailand, accused of supplying drone components and other military-related goods to Russia.

Among those sanctioned is Pavel Nikitin, whose company develops the VT 40 drone, a low-cost attack

drone widely used by Russian forces in Ukraine.

The UK also sanctioned three individuals linked to the Russian state for allegedly recruiting foreign nationals to fight in Ukraine on behalf of Russia.

One of them, Polina Alexandrovna Azarnykh, is accused of helping recruit and transport people from countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Morocco, Syria and Yemen, through Russia into Ukraine.

According to the UK, many of these recruits were deployed to frontline combat positions with little training and under harsh conditions.

The British government said it would continue using sanctions to counter Russia's military activities and what it described as "hybrid threats", while maintaining support for Ukraine.

Officials said this marks the first use of the GIMTiPS regime to tackle human trafficking and the use of migration as a tool to destabilise other countries.

## Seven-day holiday

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toilets for women and men at suitable places along roads and highways.

The draft policy, prepared on the initiative of the Local Government Division, aims to ensure hygienic, standard, and user-friendly public toilet facilities across the country.

It gives special importance to toilet facilities for women, children, persons with disabilities, elderly people, and marginalised communities.

It says an effective management model and funding system must be ensured to keep public toilets functional and sustainable in the long term.

The draft also calls for proper monitoring and evaluation of its implementation, and adds that it should be updated when necessary.

It also makes septic tanks mandatory for storing public toilet waste, which must not be allowed to flow into rivers, canals, beels or other water bodies, as this could pollute water.

The health ministry will take steps to raise public awareness about toilet use and hygiene rules.

The draft also says ministries and divisions must prepare time-bound action plans to implement the policy.

## Three BNP polls pledges

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42.5 lakh Farmers' Card. Each beneficiary would receive a yearly payment of Tk 2,500.

As many as 16,515 victims of the July uprising would also get allowances next fiscal year.

The families of 846 July martyrs would receive Tk 20,000 every month as honorariums, while 15,669 victims would get Tk 10,000 to Tk 20,000 every month based on three categories of injury.

Allocation will also be given for monthly honorariums and festival allowances to religious leaders of different faiths, one of the election pledges of the BNP to promote religious and social harmony.

The programme will have 255,666 beneficiaries next fiscal year, including imams, muezins, khadems, priests, monks and caretakers of temples, churches and

monasteries.

Imams would receive Tk 5,000, muezins Tk 3,000 and khadems Tk 2,000. Similar stipends would be given to priests, monks, and caretakers of temples, churches, and monasteries.

The scheme for old-age persons and widows will get 1 lakh additional beneficiaries, taking the tally to 62 lakh.

Currently, the social security budget covers 95 programmes, of which 39 are identified as pro-poor, benefiting nearly 8 crore people. About Tk 117,000 crore has been allocated for social net programmes this fiscal year.

Development partners, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have advised preparing the safety net budget in a more structured manner.

## Delhi seeks Dhaka's help

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with Bangladesh, and several of them have been pending for over five years..." Jaiswal said.

He further added, "We expect Bangladesh to expedite nationality verification so that the repatriation of illegal immigrants can take place smoothly."

The MEA spokesperson noted that the repatriation of "illegal" Bangladeshi immigrants would require cooperation from Dhaka.

The development comes just

three days after the BJP registered a landslide victory in the West Bengal Assembly elections, winning 207 seats in the 294-member House.

The issue of illegal infiltration was among the BJP's key poll planks in Bengal. The saffron party had vowed to stop infiltration by ensuring fencing along the Bangladesh border in West Bengal.

The party had also promised to identify illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators in the state and deport them to Bangladesh.

## 9-yr-old boy dies

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by one Faisal Mia. There, Sabuj Mia, 34, a rickshaw puller, allegedly pumped compressed air through the child's rectum using a tyre inflator as a "prank", said Ramim's father, Ripon.

He added that the child soon fell critically ill as his abdomen swelled severely. Hearing his screams, locals rescued him and rushed him to Narsingdi District Hospital.

After primary treatment, doctors referred the child to Dhaka for advanced care. He later died around 5:15pm while undergoing treatment at a private hospital in the capital.

Ripon demanded exemplary punishment for those who killed his son.

Md Rakib Askari, duty doctor at the emergency department of Narsingdi District Hospital, said excessive air pressure likely ruptured parts of Ramim's intestine, causing internal bleeding, severe abdominal pain, and breathing complications.

Following an autopsy, the child's body was taken to his family's village home in Narsingdi, where he was buried yesterday afternoon.

Meanwhile, the family filed a written complaint in the evening against Faisal Mia, Sabuj Mia, and four to five unnamed others, Ripon said.

Confirming the matter, OC Shahed said legal action would be taken as per the complaint and that operations were already underway to arrest those involved.

## Tagore's 165th birth anniv today

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international acclaim.

Tagore's literary corpus is vast, encompassing short stories like *Kabuliwala* and *Postmaster*, novels such as *Gora*, *Chokher Bali*, and *Shesher Kobita*, and plays including *Raktakarabi* and *Dak Ghar*.

As a composer, Tagore created over 2,000 songs — collectively known as *Rabindra Sangeet* — which continue to shape Bangla cultural and musical identity.

Tagore's contributions extend beyond literature. He composed the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh and founded Visva-Bharati University.

## Most entering secondary school

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identify and address students' learning gaps at the start of secondary school.

The Learning Enhancement Strategy (LES) intervention was piloted in 24 secondary schools across five divisions, representing diverse geographic contexts.

The pilot schools were already being followed longitudinally from 2023 to 2025 as part of the trial.

Baseline assessments of Grade 6 students — the entry level of secondary education in Bangladesh — conducted in early 2024 and early 2025 for the LES confirmed findings from national assessments showing that students entering secondary school are performing well below the competency levels expected after completing primary education.

The assessments in the 24 pilot schools found that 91 percent of students were unable to answer even half of the Grade 5 mathematics questions correctly, while 65 percent failed to do so in Bangla. The study

said these severe foundational skill gaps limit students' ability to access grade-level learning.

Speaking at the unveiling, Primary and Mass Education Minister ANM Ehsanul Hoque Milon expressed frustration over students' competency levels despite massive investments in primary education.

"We all know the problems. The real question is how we are solving them," said Milon, who also serves as education minister, stressing that the responsibility lies not only with teachers but also with policymakers, field officials, and the education administration.

He said the government is prioritising education with record investments.

The Fifth Primary Education Development Programme involves nearly Tk 51,000 crore, while the previous programme cost around Tk 32,000 crore. "After spending so much money, who will answer for where we stand today?" he asked.

Emphasising the need to ensure a joyful learning environment for

children, he said, "The government wants to advance education under the concept of 'learning with happiness'."

Prime Minister's Adviser on Education Mahdi Amin stressed that the system must move beyond certificate-based learning to focus on skills, values, and real-life applicability. "The government aims to implement education policies based on research and stakeholder input."

Amin also underscored the importance of moving away from rote learning towards participatory and creative methods, adding that the government would work to reduce rural-urban disparities in this regard.

UNICEF Representative in Bangladesh Stanley Gwavuya said improving education does not depend solely on policy formulation.

"Its true success lies in effective implementation. Student-centred teaching, practical teacher training, parental trust, and curricula aligned with real-life needs can significantly improve learning outcomes."