

Celebrating Tagore in Delhi

Fakrul Alam¹
University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Our flight to Delhi had been delayed by a few hours. As a result, when we – three academics from the University of Dhaka – arrived at Delhi’s India International Centre at quarter past five on the 27th of March, 2009, for “Utsav” (the four day festival celebrating Rabindranath Tagore in the twenty-first century), we had missed the inaugural event, “Upasana,” a rendering of a Sanskrit hymn set to music by Tagore himself. However, we had still managed to get the tail end of the second part of the inaugural session. This was the part dedicated to Tagore’s devotional songs – “Music Under the Trees” as the Utsav brochure put it – sung soulfully by Laisa Ahmed Lisa. The ambience – Gandhi-King Plaza – was perfect for the works of the poet-composer for whom nature was sacred and the source of all inspiration. The lush green lawn named after the two twentieth-century apostles of non-violence next to the entrance driveway of the Centre seemed to have soaked Lisa’s solemnly sweet rendering of Tagore’s soothing religious songs imperceptibly in the late evening sun. Even though we were in time for only two of the songs she had chosen for the occasion, listening to them we could see that the setting, the singers and the large crowd that had gathered for the opening events had melded perfectly and knew that we were in for a unique treat in the next few days.

The next programme was scheduled for six o’clock and so we had half an hour to freshen up in our rooms and then explore the Centre. Built in 1962, the India International Centre is a testament to the liberal humanist and visionary aspects of two of the founding fathers of modern India, the visionary institution-builder Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the sagacious Vice-President of the period, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. Conceived as a place – according to its Founder-President Dr. C.D. Deshmukh – where “various currents of intellectual, political and economic thought would move freely,” the Centre sits serenely in the heart of south Delhi, almost as if it is an indivisible part of the

¹ Fakrul Alam is Professor of English at the University of Dhaka and also Honorary Adviser, Department of English, East West University, Bangladesh. He has been a Fulbright Scholar and a Visiting Associate Professor at Clemson University, USA, and has also been Visiting Professor at Jadavpur University, India. He is the author of *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English* (Dhaka: writer’s ink, 2007); *South Asian Writers in English* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006); *Jibananada Das: Selected Poems* (Dhaka: UPL, 1999); *Bharati Mukherjee* (Boston: Twayne’s Contemporary United States Authors, 1996) and *Daniel Defoe: Colonial Propagandist* (Dhaka: University of Dhaka Publications, 1989).

tranquil and beautiful Lodhi Gardens that is adjacent to it. A quick tour of the grounds revealed how ideal a site it was going to be for Utsav, filled as it is, with outdoor and indoor auditoriums, conference rooms, gallery space, gardens, courtyards, pools, superb residential and dining facilities, all laid out in a manner that is pleasing as well as practical.

But half an hour wasn't enough to discover the true extent of the Centre's beauty and resources – that would take much longer – for we drifted with the large crowd that had assembled to the venue of the next event, the Fountain Lawns. It was time for the formal inauguration of Utsav. Sunil Gangopadhyay, truly a giant among Bengali men and women of letters and President of the Sahitya Akademi, declared the event formally open with a brief but idiosyncratic speech. The next two events – a session of Rabindra Sangeet sung by the famous Bangladeshi singer Iffat Ara Dewan and interpretations of Rabindra Sangeet in Odissi and Kathak choreographed by the celebrated Indian artist Madhavi Mudgal – were designed not only to offer a delightful evening of music and dance for the audience but also to highlight the unique idea from which the Utsav grew: this was going to be an Indo-Bangladesh venture from beginning to end, centring exclusively on the man who bridges the two countries as no other person is able to – Rabindranath Tagore.

Iffat Ara's rendering of Tagore's songs was in her inimitable style and it was good to see her close to her best here in Delhi. She was relaxed and her choice of songs – mostly about spring – seemed just perfect for the situation. As she sang in the amphitheatre-like sylvan setting a cuckoo bird kept cuckooing away, prompting her to note how unique an experience it was to compete with such a singer. By the time she finished it was completely dark and we were in for another treat, this time a visual as well as an aural one. Madhavi Mudgal choreography made Tagore's songs of the six seasons into a spectacle of exquisite beauty. Indeed, by the time the evening's performance was over, we knew that we had three such enchanting evenings in store for us the next three days.

The next day, Friday, March 28, however, was dedicated almost entirely to a Tagore seminar, which was, in effect, an attempt to revalue his intellectual achievement. Kaiser Haq and I spoke in the first session, he on Tagore as a thinker, and I on his English prose. With characteristic erudition Kaiser put Tagore's philosophy in its context while I tried to make the point that in the thousands of pages he had written in English this indefatigable genius was able to again and again write impressively on a wide variety of subjects and in all kind of genres. The second session began with Syed Manzoorul Islam's astute assay into psychobiography and aesthetics as he attempted to link Tagore's passage from the letters written in Shelidah to the paintings to surreptitious desire. The next speaker of the session, the Canadian scholar Kathy O'Connell spoke expertly on Tagore's views on spiritual culture and the importance given

to the academic study of religion at Santiniketan, underscoring the poet's lifelong cultivation of the sacred and commitment to the life of the spirit. This session concluded with the distinguished Indian translator and academic Radha Chakravarty's intricate but absorbing analysis of gender and modernity in Tagore's novel. Lubna Marium began the concluding session by commenting perceptively about Tagore's concept of creative unity as it related to his art, drawing on her wide knowledge of Tagore's aesthetics and Indian poetics. Uma Dasgupta of Visva-Bharati spoke knowledgeably about Tagore's interest in scientific agriculture and rural reform and his bid to blend theory and practice through Sriniketan. To round off the day-long seminar dedicated to Tagore the thinker, writer and builder of institutions, Sandip Basu Sarbadhikari and Kumkum Bhattacharya of Santiniketan spoke feelingly as well as knowledgeably about Santiniketan's progress under Tagore and its present-day situation, underscoring the idealism underlying his work but not ignoring the gaps that have been opening between his vision and achievement since its creation and especially after his death.

We had just enough time between the academic sessions of the day and the evening sessions of music and dance to see the exhibit of digital prints of Tagore's paintings in one of the conference rooms of the Centre. Looking at them, one was bound not only to wonder at their beauty and his endless creativity but also at the many-sided nature of his genius. What made the exhibition particularly memorable was the exquisite quality of the prints and the selection which showed Tagore the painter at his distinctive best. We also had enough time to take a peek at the exhibition of archival photographs of Tagore's visit to Hungary in 1926 kept on view outside the conference room displaying the paintings, reminding us of course of his internationalist dimension but also of the adulation he had received almost everywhere he went in Europe during his lifetime. We also had time to look at the exhibition of Tagore books where leading publishers such as Oxford UP, Penguin, Rupa and the publishing division of Viswa-Bharati participated.

This evening's programmes began with a rendering of Tagore's love songs. Once again the first event – presentations of Tagore's love songs by Alpana and Indira Bandhopadhyay of Santiniketan and Aditi Mohsin and Bulbul Islam of Bangladesh – took place in the spring flowers-clad garden of the Gandhi-King Plaza while the second event – a staging of Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada* co-performed by Shadhana of Dhaka and Bikalpa of Delhi – took place amidst the verdant setting of the Fountain Lawns amphitheatre. The songs evoked the tender and romantic side of Tagore and reminded us of the passion and intensity with which he wove his songs; the dance drama too was a testament to Tagore's ability to articulate the complex emotions generated in us by love. But this interpretation of *Chitrangada* was also made memorable by the feminist slant given to the episode he had taken from the *Mahabharata* to

illustrate the frailties of first impressions and the commitment necessary to arrive at a love that is going to be lasting.

The evening was far from over, for this was going to be a night when the Utsav would reach one of its climaxes with a Bengali feast hosted for us by the Director of the India International Centre in which all participants were feted. But the Centre is also an exclusive Club where the members – mostly diplomats, intellectuals, jurists and activists – meet regularly and the sumptuous Bengali feast was for those of them who had paid up for the occasion too. Although there are three chefs for the three dining centres of the Centre, the chef for this grand feast prepared for over a thousand people was our very own Shawkat Osman, connoisseur of food and fine things. Shawkat made the Bangladeshi contingent happy and proud with delicious dishes such as *shorse mangsbo*, *bhuna kibichuri* and smoked *hilsa*, perfectly suited for this celebration of Bengal's greatest artist. It occurred to me as I feasted on the gourmet food and drinks served and let my spirits soar that a major lacuna in my Tagore scholarship was his food habits!

The next morning's event looked promising – a workshop on Rabindra Sangeet conducted by Rezwana Chowdhury Banya in Sanskriti, at a cultural centre in the outskirts of the city. This was the only event of Utsav to be staged outside the Centre – but we had planned to do our shopping that day and could only express our regret later when we were told by fellow participants who had gone that we had missed something special. We also missed the events scheduled for the afternoon – a discussion-recital of Tagore's songs transcribed and translated by the Frenchman Alain Danielou and lectures on Tagore's reception in the Spanish-speaking world – and this too was unfortunate, for the Tagore aficionado knows that any attempt to encompass him must take note of the phenomenon he had become in the world outside India from the time he had read his translations of the *Gitanjali* in London in 1912 till his death in 1941.

But we were glad not to miss the concluding event of the day, Tagore's dance-drama *Chandalika* as staged by Saptak, a group based in Santiniketan devoted like our own Sadhana to representing his works for our time and keeping them as vibrant and vivid for us now as they were in his lifetime. Most Tagore lovers would agree that *Chandalika* is among his best creations in the genre and this performance brought out clearly not only the music and wit and energy of the piece but also the humanism implicit in the story of an untouchable girl's encounter with a compassionate monk and the transformation it brings to her life.

And so we had come to Sunday, the 30th of March, the final day of Utsav. The morning's event consisted of readings from English translations of Tagore's poems by William Raddice and Sudeep Sen. Raddice, without doubt the most famous of contemporary Tagore translators, chose to read his versions of a few of Tagore's poems and songs dramatically (at times almost

melodramatically!). By contrast Sen read from translations of a few of the last poems done collaboratively by the American poet Wendy Barker and one of Tagore's descendants Saranindranath Tagore. The translations were done in a manner that gains power because it is understated. The audience that had gathered for the event in the main indoor auditorium of the Centre was next entertained by sonorous recitations of Tagore's poems in Bengali by Bhashkar Bandhopadhyay from Dhaka and Avereer Chaurey of Delhi. Their readings mingled with delicate renditions of Rabindra Sangeet by the singers of Saptak and Sadhana and before we knew it three hours had past melodiously and pleasantly.

The final evening's menu consisted of Dol Utsav, comprising of Tagore songs and dances celebrating spring. The first event began in the Gandhi-King Plaza but ended in a procession of singers and dancers that led the enthralled crowd for the last time to the Fountain Lawns for what had been conceived as a "Grand Chorus and Concert" presented once again collaboratively by artists of the three groups from Delhi, Santiniketan and Dhaka that had been performing in the festival from its start.

But the best was yet to be: the grand finale of Utsav was to be Rezwana Chowdhury Banya's three hour concert. She began singing immediately after Professor M.G.K. Mennon, the distinguished Indian scientist who is also President of the India International Centre, gave his thoughtful valedictory address stressing Tagore's continuing relevance to the twenty-first century. Banya, unquestionably *the* diva of Rabindra Sangeet in our time, with a huge following in the two Bengals, began with a devotional number and then went on for almost ninety minutes singing a wide variety of songs of her own choice, revealing in the process the range of Tagore's song-lyrics and their incomparable melodic qualities. On all previous occasions the Fountain Lawns amphitheatre had filled up with hundreds and hundreds of people but for her the crowd had swelled to well over a thousand. Halfway through her performance she began to take requests from the audience. It was amazing to see how effortlessly Banya was able to respond to the many requests; her repertoire of Rabindra Sangeet and sensitive renderings made the concluding hours of Utsav memorable.

All good things of course must end but it was wonderful to have Utsav conclude on such a high note. For four days we had been thoroughly immersed in the world of Tagore. What a fitting tribute this was to this myriad-minded genius, truly a renaissance figure if ever there was one. He had devoted his life to the arts, humanity and the life of the spirit. In everything he did the principle of beauty ruled and pettiness had no place. How appropriate it was then that this fierce opponent of nationalism and believer in the religion of man could have inspired artists and scholars from all over the world to gather in Delhi's India International Centre for a tribute worthy of him. How grateful we all

were to the organisers – the Centre, Sadhana, and the Indo-Bangladesh Cultural Initiative – the many sponsors and the individuals – Lubna Marium, Radha Chakravarty and Premola Ghosh – who had worked so hard to make the Utsav continuously interesting and rewarding for all who were there. How wonderful to celebrate Tagore in the manner we had seen it done for four days and savour him in the Utsav mode!