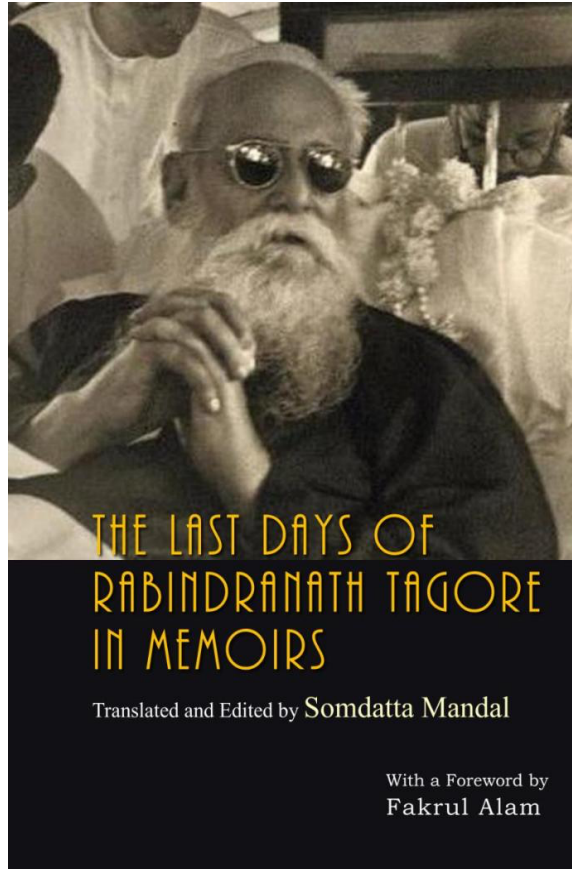


Somdatta Mandal, trans. & ed. *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*. Bolpur: Birutjatio, 2021. 432 pp. ISBN 978-81-949426-1-0.



At the time when the first Asian Nobel Laureate, the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore passed away in his ancestral home at Jorashanko in Kolkata on 7 August 1941, he was India's most famous writer, a celebrity loved, adored, and even worshipped by millions of his compatriots. An unruly mob of passionate but inconsolable fans invaded Thakurbari, the Tagore mansion, in a desperate bid to touch the cold, still body of the poet who, for many, epitomises the soul of India. The grief was overwhelming, for *rabi* (sun), as he was called metaphorically, had set. However, his chaotic last rites were totally opposite to the peaceful exit the poet had himself drawn out.

Tagore was in poor health in the last few years of his life. He went from Santiniketan to Darjeeling's mountainous Kalimpong to his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi on 19 September 1940. The poet fell seriously ill on 26 September

and was brought to Kolkata where he remained bed-ridden for about a month. He was taken to his beloved Santiniketan on 18 November and for the next eight months he remained extremely ill although he continued to write with his failing health. He was suffering from prostate gland complications, and despite the advice of his age-old friend and renowned personal physician Nilratan Sarker (1861-1943) and the poet's own reservations, the surgery was conducted at Jorashanko on 30 July 1941 on the insistence of another famous doctor Bidhan Chandra Roy (1882-1962), who would later become West Bengal's Chief Minister.

The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs (hereafter *Last Days*) records the eventful, moving final months of the poet which includes the day when he breathed his last and the grief expressed by his relatives and aficionados. Selectively chosen, translated, and edited by Somdatta Mandal, the brilliantly conceived and beautifully crafted memoirs provide “glimpses of the great man's dying days [as well as] his heroic but very human responses to the ebbing away of his life” (ii). The book, “juxtaposed in a collage-like composition” (iii), “hovers along a fine line between biography, autobiography and perhaps a bit of hagiography... to create a rich chiaroscuro of effects” (Malhotra). The main section comprises six personal narratives around Tagore's last days by five female caregivers. These memorialists include his daughter-in-law Pratima Thakur, poet Rani Chanda, poet and writer Maitreyi Devi, Nirmalkumarai Mahalanobis, the poet's “Rani,” and Amita Thakur, the poet's granddaughter-in-law brought to Santiniketan by Tagore at the age of eight after her father's death. Mandal's appendices include selections from Buddhadeva Bose's *Shob Peyechir Deshe* (1941) (*The Land Where I Found It All* [2018]) as well as translation of Kumar Jayantanath Roy's *Visvakobir Mahanirbaan* (The Great Nirvana of the World Poet). Also included are excerpts from the poet's biographer and noted writer Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's *Rabindrajiboni* (Biography of Rabindranath) and extracts from Nityapriya Ghosh's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Pictorial Biography*. In addition, it contains short, informative bio-note of authors (415-21), a useful index (427-32) apart from Mandal's insightful Introduction (xi-xxix) preceded by Fakrul Alam's perceptive Foreword titled “As He Lay Dying” (i-x).

As Mandal puts it, “[M]emoirs, unlike biography, usually narrate incidents that have left a lasting impression in the narrator's mind and not according to chronology” (xxii). Overlapping of time and incidents further reinforce the importance of these events for narrators. What immediately draws a discerning reader to these narratives by Tagore's women caregivers is perhaps a distinctive female voice strongly contrasted with the male accounts. Barring, perhaps, Pratima Devi's short, cryptic *Nirbaan*, narratives by four other women memorialists are more personal and intimate than those written by men. The female gaze employed by Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis aka Rani to weave her

travelogues – *Kobir Shonge Dakshinatay* (With the Poet in the South [1956]) and *Kobir Shonge Europey* (With the Poet in Europe [1969]) which Mandal translated and edited under the title of *'Kobi' & 'Rani': Memoirs & Correspondences of Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis and Rabindranath Tagore* (2020) – is what possibly seamlessly connects the travelogues and the memoirs together. For instance, here is the passionate resentment and frustration of Amita Thakur, “whose whole life was centred on Rabindranath” (Mandal xiii), at the disrespect the poet’s lifeless body was exposed to: “It was the height of chaos and that saintly body received tremendous disrespect and humiliation” (387). Besides, the poem titled “22nd of Shravan” Amita Thakur wrote twenty years later to commemorate the poet’s death reveals how tormented and sad the likes of her were at the poet’s departure. It ruminates on the insanity of the unruly mob which tore apart Tagore’s locks of hair and beard (390).

Such intense feeling characterises Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis’s memoir as well. Mahalanobis’ detailed memoir written in the form of diary covers the last days of Tagore’s life. Her entry for 30 July 1941, the day the fatal surgery took place, quotes the poet who said: “The operation has hurt me very much. I was suffering a lot but I forced myself to lie down with my mouth and eyes shut just to prevent myself from screaming” (346). Mahalanobis’s account of the poet’s great departure is passionately moving:

The poet was lying down with his head towards the east, and I was sitting on a stool near his feet with my back resting against the wall. I kept looking at his face and caressed his feet. The sky was gradually becoming clear. Much before this time, he would always order someone or the other to make him sit up with the pillows propped behind his back. Today there was no such request to make him face the east. (357)

Women caregivers’ graphic descriptions demonstrate how close they were to the poet and what his death meant to them. Poet and author Maitreyi Devi remembers the nights she spent near his sick bed in *Swarger Kachakachi* (Near Heaven) published in 1943:

Many times I sat next to his bed and placed one hand on his flawless, yet comatose body which was on the verge of death. I closed my eyes and moved to another world trying to think of everything he had taught us all these days. Without impediments, the spirit of this great man sailed over our sea of love. O almighty god, let my cry not reach that place where the mind cannot reach or from where words come back. (147-48)

By contrast, the last period of the poet’s life and his death do not get much notice in male narratives, including his biographies. Considered to be most authentic and detailed, even Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay’s four-volume *Rabindrajibon*’s description of the last days is “rather brief” (Mandal 408). It is apparently devoid of intimacy and personal attachment – the

benchmark features of women narratives. Similarly, in Nityapriya Ghosh's biography, the poet's great departure features almost like a newspaper report without personal involvement. Renowned poet and editor Buddhadeva Bose's account of the poet's last days merits significance but it too is somewhat lacking in emotional engagement.

The hard cover book neatly produced on quality paper by Birujatio has however occasional editorial lapses. For example, Kumar Jayantanath Roy's work is spelt differently in the list of contents (*Visvakobir Mahanirbaan*) and footnote 1 on page 403 (*Bismakobir Mahanirbaan*). The titles of both the article and the poem by Amita Thakur have been italicised. While Mandal's bio-note for Maitreyi Devi sets her death in the year of 1990, different organisations' websites including that of Cluj Centre for Indian Studies, UBB, Romania place it in 1989. One expects an editorial intervention in this regard.

Rabindranath Tagore's last days as reflected in the writings of female caregivers in fact recreate the last period of the poet's life and his departure. Mandal's well-annotated translation rather effortlessly captures the female gaze in the accounts, and this makes it a rewarding read. *Last Days* is an invaluable work in Tagore scholarship, translation, and cultural studies.

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