

REVISITING THE ROOTS

POTPURRI

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Jorasanko

Bengal's enduring cradle of culture,
the stately mansion of the Tagore family

CHAIRMAN'S NOTE



Harshavardhan Neotia
Chairman, Ambuja Neotia

Built way back in 1785 by Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, Jorasanko Thakur Bari is the most prominent landmark in Bengal's edifying history. A visit here gives us a peek into the lives of the Tagores – a family of several talented men and women who dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jorasanko is not only famous because our country's most celebrated poet laureate, Rabindranath Tagore was born here in 1861 and it is here where he breathed his last in 1941. But also because several members of his clan were a cornucopia of talent. Leaders in art, music, theatre, poetry, politics and religion, they were a reflection of the grandeur of their home. In its cavernous depths, now converted into a museum, the erstwhile Tagore family lived and loved and challenged age-old dogmas. Every visit to this place is worthwhile. And as we stand in awe on the premises, we get a glimpse of their chequered history.

Jorasanko was the cradle of the Bengal Renaissance. Many rebels who repeatedly sought to jolt a somnolent society into alertness were residents of this mansion. The faint blush of the resurgent sky over this stately home was laden with new ideas which slowly turned to fire. Only to reduce the conservative notions to cinders and set free the collective spirit of an entire generation that worked tirelessly for the cause of women's education, the freedom of our country and the crushing of superstitious dogmas. This issue of *Potpurri* unravels the lives of several Tagore icons who contributed in seating Bengal on a special pedestal that espoused Rabindranath's famous dictum, 'Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...'

Enjoy the issue!

BACKSTAGE

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(FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION ONLY)

Potpourri is traditionally a mixture of dried petals and spices often placed in beautiful bowls to perfume a room. When the fragrance spreads, it encompasses, most magically, a medley of emotions. We have given this name our special twist and believe that the pages of Potpurri will bring for our readers interesting and diverse reading material with aplomb.

EDITOR'S NOTE



Jayabrato Chatterjee
Managing Editor

Where do I begin to unravel the threads that link the present with an unpredictable past? Where do I find that uncharted map peopled by a crisscross of events that give the Tagores a special place in my family's history? Their legacy on Bengal's culture is without doubt unchallenged through the indistinct veil of centuries. But I'm talking about a more personal link – vulnerable and achingly human – a chiaroscuro of emotions.

Why did Prince Dwarkanath Tagore's wife refuse to cohabit with him once she discovered that he had consumed meat and dined with the *firinghees*? Why did Satyendranath Tagore, despite fierce resistance from his father, set his wife, Jnanadanandini, alone with their children on a voyage to England, far from Jorasanko's tentacles? Why was the schizophrenic Birendranath, Rabindranath's fourth elder brother, never given proper medical attention but allowed to torture his wife, Prafullamayee, in sudden fits of violence? Why did the Maharshi do his best to hush up Kadambari's suicide? What compelled Swarnakumari, Debendranath's daughter, sitting in the lap of luxury, to write about the plight of women in Bengal? What pushed her daughter, the free-spirited Sarala, to fight for India's freedom? So many lives that defied the *status quo*! So many triumphs and heartbreaks that Jorasanko witnessed!

I was blessed to closely know several members of the Tagores and be nurtured by Rathindranath, my foster father. The last ten years of his life in Dehradun and the first ten years of mine were gloriously woven in a bond of love. And when he passed away, through my tears, I still remember with inordinate pride putting the torch to his funeral pyre at the age of eleven.

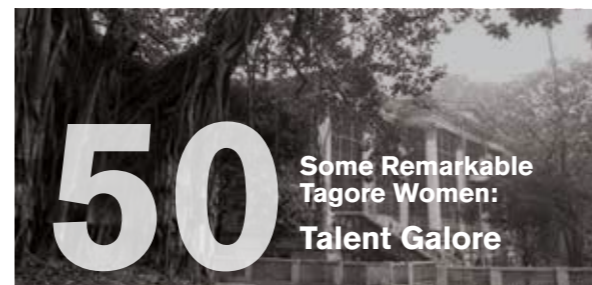
This issue of *Potpurri* certainly links me to a tenuous past that occupies a special place in my heart.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jayabrato Chatterjee". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

CONTENTS

“ *In every conceivable manner, the family is
a link to our past, a bridge to our future* ”

Alex Haley



'Calcutta is by far the richest city in India... It is possibly the richest city anywhere between Rome and Tokyo in terms of the culture and wealth that is accumulated and represented here'

Geoffrey Moorhouse





A glimpse of the first floor Jorasanko veranda

Magical Mansion Of The Tagores: Oh Jorasanko!

'My ancestors came floating to Calcutta upon the earliest tides of fluctuating fortunes of the East India Company. The unconventional code of life for our family has been a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British... Something of the past still lingered in Jorasanko.'

Rabindranath Tagore



The imposing grandeur of Jorasanko, home to generations of the Tagore family

The glorious mansion known as Jorasanko that has stood the test of time in north Calcutta's crowded Chitpurisonofthemostbeautifulheritagebuildings. The birthplace of the poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore. This is where he spent his childhood and several landmarks of his later years. And this is where he breathed his last. Jorasanko Thakur Bari was also the residence of Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore, founders of the Bengal School of Art.

Furthermore, several women of the household broke away from *purdah* to establish their own identities and sought equality in a male-dominated society. **“ The history of the Tagores is as interesting as the history of this famous residence. Their original surname was ‘Kushari’ and they belonged to a rare breed of Pirali Brahmins ”**

The history of the Tagores is as interesting as the history of this famous residence. Their original surname was ‘Kushari’ and they belonged to a rare breed of Pirali Brahmins. The Thakur or Tagore family of Calcutta, of which Dwarkanath, Rabindranath's grandfather was the jewel in the crown, traced its roots to Jagannath Kushari of Pithabhog. With the passing of the years, the Tagores amassed



Shadow and light, like life, at the Jorasanko Thakur Bari

great wealth as the first Indian stevedores and contractors of a new city, linking their fortunes to the rising power of the East India Company.

Aruna Chakravarti explains, 'Abandoning their humble dwelling in Gobindapur, they built a magnificent mansion in the fashionable Pathuriaghata area of Calcutta. But power and wealth brought sibling rivalry in its wake. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a family rift took place. Two brothers, Darpanarayan and Neelmoni, decided to part ways. The properties and family deities got divided and, one stormy night, Neelmoni walked out of the mansion of Pathuriaghata, with one lakh rupees and the Lakshmi and Shalagramshila (stone idol of Vishnu), which had fallen in his share. Buying land in the Jorasanko area of Calcutta, he built a fine mansion. And over the years the two branches of the family came to be known as the Pathuriaghata



Part of Jorasanko's inner courtyard

Tagores and the Jorasanko Tagores.' Neelmoni's grandson, Dwarkanath, rose to dizzying heights as a business magnate but harboured no animosity for his Pathuriaghata cousins. Bestowed with the title of 'Prince' by the British, he expanded the Jorasanko mansion on land donated by the famous Sett family of Burrabazaar. Jorasanko derives its name from the two Shankar or Shiva temples, called Jora Shankar, which can be found in the vicinity. There is also another folklore that claims it came from two bamboo (jora) or wooden bridges that spanned a stream nearby.

Dwarkanath had five sons. But when the eldest boy, Debendranath, converted to the Brahmo faith, he decided to do away with the daily worship of the ancestral deities. Jogmaya, wife of Girindranath, Dwarkanath's third son, made a request that

this charge be given to her as her family had not converted. Her request was granted and she, with her two daughters and two sons, shifted to Dwarkanath's *baithak-khana* residence while Debendranath's family continued to reside at No. 6 Jorasanko. Thus it came to pass that the Brahmo side of the family were known as No. 6 and the Hindu clan was known as No. 5. Though the relations between the menfolk were always cordial, the movement of the women was restricted and this severance of communication with Jogmaya deeply hurt Debendranath's children who loved their aunt.

“Dwarkanath had five sons. But when the eldest boy, Debendranath, converted to the Brahmo faith, he decided to do away with the daily worship of the ancestral deities”



Windows on the first floor of Jorasanko that harbour secret memories of a checkered past

A pair of theatres, both named Jorasanko Natyashala, was also established on the premises in the 1800s. The first only lasted for a single play, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which was staged on 3 May 1854. The second playhouse, established in the home of Ganendranath Tagore in 1865, mounted the first significant play, *Krishnakumari*, written by Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Playwright Jyotirindranath Tagore, the poet's elder brother, acted in the production. When the theatre was first established, female roles were played by men, although this practice gradually died out.

Finding a dearth of Bengali-language plays to stage, Ganendranath held a contest to promote Bengali playwrights. He offered a prize of 200 rupees, a large sum in those days, to the winner, and paid for the printing of 1000 copies. *Nabanatak* by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna won the first prize.



Rabindranath and Indira in a theatre production of Valmiki Pratibha

The women of the Tagore family were later coaxed by Rabindranath to take part in his plays and dance dramas. Many years later, several students of Santiniketan also performed at Jorasanko and Gandhiji came to see one of the operas, along with several other important members of the Congress party and well-known writers and poets.

Today, Jorasanko Thakur Bari has been restored and turned into a museum where one can find several historical nuggets about the Tagore family, including their contribution to the Bengal Renaissance and Brahmo Samaj. Of note are 700 paintings exhibited here, along with a self-composed invite to Tagore's wedding and a splendid collection of photographs of several family members. Divided into three galleries, the museum also houses various books, manuscripts and antiques.

Jorasanko Thakur Bari lies in close proximity to the Rabindra Bharati University that is noted for its prestigious education programme. In 1959, the Government of West Bengal planned to establish this University as a memorial to Rabindranath Tagore. This was achieved during the birth centenary of the poet when the Rabindra Bharati University was founded on May 8, 1961 under Rabindra Bharati Act for better learning and culture, particularly in music, dance and drama. The Rabindra Bharati Museum was established the following year. The University was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, on Tagore's birth centenary on 8th May 1962.

The Maharshi Bhavan, named after the poet's father is also housed within the complex. A plaque outside the complex reads, 'Rabindranath was born and breathed his last here.'

The room where Rabindranath Tagore was born is open to visitors, while cultural programmes are often held at the assembly hall and the central courtyard. Visitors flock to the mansion on days like Tagore's birthday and his death anniversary to pay their respects. But how many are aware of several other members of the Tagore family? Those who encouraged the poet to find his muse and glory? Those who were also men and women of exceptional talent? And those who still give life and breath to the stone and mortar that hide countless heartaches and memories of a family renowned all over the world? *



Dwarkanath Tagore: Bengal's First Medici

'Dwarkanath's deepest religious convictions were Vaisnavite... in his religious behaviour he was governed largely by a sense of propriety. Much of what he did was done with an eye towards the reaction of the European community, for he craved for their approval just as his orthodox kinsmen looked for approval to the Hindu caste leaders.'

Blair B King, Partner In Empire



Long before Rabindranath earned the epithet 'Gurudev' or the 'Great Master' for his innumerable works of poetry, prose and drama, three decades before his birth another Tagore was already creating history. Dwarkanath, Rabindranath's grandfather, was famously compared to the Italian original and referred to as the first 'Medici' of Calcutta. In nineteenth century Paris, he was the elusive Prince of *Inde* and popularly thought of as the embodiment of Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. His wife banished him from his home. And his world-famous poet and litterateur grandson allegedly destroyed all his writings, journals, personal letters and business correspondences – every records related to him that were available in the family archives and never ever wrote or spoke about him in his entire life!

Indeed, Dwarkanath Tagore was a man before his times, often misunderstood – a rare entrepreneur whose interests spanned coal, tea and jute, sugar refining and opium, newspapers and shipping, banking and construction. In 1828, he was the first Indian to become the director of a bank and in 1834, he and his partners started the first Indo-British trading agency, Carr, Tagore and Company. Dwarkanath dreamt of bringing England's industrial revolution to Hooghly's shoreline. A Renaissance icon, an industrialist so prosperous that he earned the epithet 'Prince', though strictly speaking in an India full of kingdoms and pedigreed royalty, he was merely a wealthy land-owner. But unlike so many other landlords, Tagore went into business and made it a roaring success.

Born in 1794 - when Lord Cornwallis, the man who lost America to George Washington, was sent to govern India - Dwarkanath had to fight several battles from a young age to be accepted by the British who later came to treat him as one of their own. Initially educated in a school on Chitpur Road run by an Anglo-Indian teacher, Mr Sherbourne, till the age of sixteen, he was soon married in the Hindu tradition in 1811. Legend holds that invited



Dwarkanath Tagore, the unchallenged Prince of Jorasanko

to a musical soiree full of princes decked in their jewels in honour of Queen Victoria, Dwarkanath chose to wear merely the finest white muslin with not an ornament in sight. But on his feet, the *nagra* shoes had a pair of diamonds as large as marbles, attached to the front portions of the footwear. He knew that he would have to remove his shoes outside the hall as was custom, and did so when he entered, leaving the diamonds with the caretakers in utter nonchalance!

On 12 December 1807, Ramlochan died, leaving all his property to his adopted son Dwarkanath, who was then a minor. To look after his adopted father's zamindari, Dwarkanath left school in 1810 at the age of sixteen and apprenticed himself under a renowned barrister in Calcutta, Robert Cutlar Fergusson, shuttling between Calcutta and his estates at Behrampore and Cuttack. Dwarkanath had the trust and ear of the



Dwarkanath's ships sailed the high seas to negotiate businesses across the world



The seat of power: Head Office of East India Company on Leadenhall Street, London

East India Company bigwigs headquartered in Leadenhall Street, London. He was invited to play Whist - the popular card game at the Buckingham Palace, and dined with the Queen Mother in private. On first name terms with most of the English nobles and, especially, their wives, he was 'Dwarky' to them.

Imperial Calcutta's population was never very large. The number of British residents fluctuated between 3,500 and 4,000 in the decades between the 1820s and 1840s. However, they desired to have in Calcutta all the amenities available back home - newspapers, banks, taverns, hotels, theatres, good roads, river infrastructures, police and justice systems. The private British traders wanted to have independent banks. They wanted newspapers to update their knowledge on the happenings back home and give vent to their grievances to their rulers via the media. And

“ Dwarkanath could have remained a native baboo like many contemporary businessmen. Instead, he decided to shape the institutions that the British longed for ”

of course, they aspired for their own kind of theatre, as in London's Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

Dwarkanath could have remained a native *baboo* like many contemporary businessmen. Instead, he decided to shape the institutions that the British longed for. In 1829, he was the prime mover in forming the Union Bank, the first private commercial bank unattached to any British business houses in India. The bank extended credit not just for exports of indigo, cotton, opium and silk, but also for new ventures

like running steamboats. By the 1830s, he had equity or other financial stakes in most of the newspapers of Bengal.

Dwarkanath was also the leading investor in Chowringhee Theatre in Calcutta - the earliest of the proscenium theatres in the country and India's very own Adelphi in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was alleged that he was even romantically linked with its leading lady, a talented British actress - an event that had huge detrimental consequences on his marriage. Because of his liberal lifestyle and eating habits, his wife, the pious Digambari Devi, out of clear conscience refused to cohabit with him at Jorasanko.

The feisty woman even startled pundits of her times by asking them if her decision was not in keeping with laws that Hindu wives needed to follow. Dwarakanath had given in to *fringhee* privileges and would often get his *gora* guests home to spend time over drinks and offer flesh and fowl at the dining table. Despite being in *pardah*, Digambari was absolutely against this culture. She called a conclave of Brahmin pundits to define for her the rules of dharma. They advised her to stay on her husband's side but if he touched her, for whatever reason, she



The horrifying act of Sati abolished in 1829

would have to undergo rituals including taking a bath with seven pots of *Gangajal*. Digambari remained resolute and died of pneumonia even as Dwarkanath built a pleasure house for himself in Belgachia - a lavish mansion where he indulged in a life of pleasure. But Dwarkanath was far from being just a soul-less capitalist and an exasperating husband. With Raja Ram Mohan Roy, he was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj, the new community of breakaway Hindus fighting against the worst Hindu superstitions and rituals by turning the faith towards its core monotheistic roots. Though Dwarkanath did not convert, one of the biggest battles he fought with Ram Mohan was against Sati, the horrifying ritual of women committing suicide by burning themselves on the pyre of their dead husbands. William Bentinck, the Governor General of India, enlisted their help to gather indigenous support for abolition of this obnoxious practice in 1829 and make it a criminal offence. The banning of Sati and infanticide, the introduction of vaccination and the law to legalise remarriages of Hindu widows were some of the reforms Prince Dwarkanath Tagore championed. His



William Bentinck, Governor General of India

association with the progressive movements paid rich dividends and allowed him easy access to the corridors of power.

“ With Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dwarkanath was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj and one of the biggest battles he fought was against Sati, the horrifying ritual of women burning themselves on the pyre of their dead husbands ”

Dwarkanath Tagore died 'at the peak of his fortune' at the age of fifty-one on the evening of 1 August 1846 at the St George's Hotel in London during a tremendous thunderstorm with hail the size of walnuts. He was buried at the Kensal Green cemetery in North London. And his hearse was drawn by a royal carriage specially sent by Queen Victoria for her friend's last journey. In his obituary, *The London Mail* of 7 August wrote: 'Descended from the highest Brahmin caste of India, his family can prove a long and undoubted pedigree. But it is not on account of this nobility that we now review his life but on far better grounds. However gifted, his claims rest on a higher pedestal - he was the benefactor of his country... They testified to his merits in the encouragement of every public and private undertaking likely to benefit India.' *



Raja Ram Mohan Roy



The Belgian glass prayer hall in Santiniketan was built by Debendranath Tagore in 1863

Debendranath: Apostle Of God

'I went and sat underneath the Chhatim trees and according to the teaching of the saints, began meditating on the Spirit of God dwelling within the soul. My mind was flooded with emotion; my eyes were filled with tears. All at once I saw the Omnipotent all around me and was overwhelmed.'

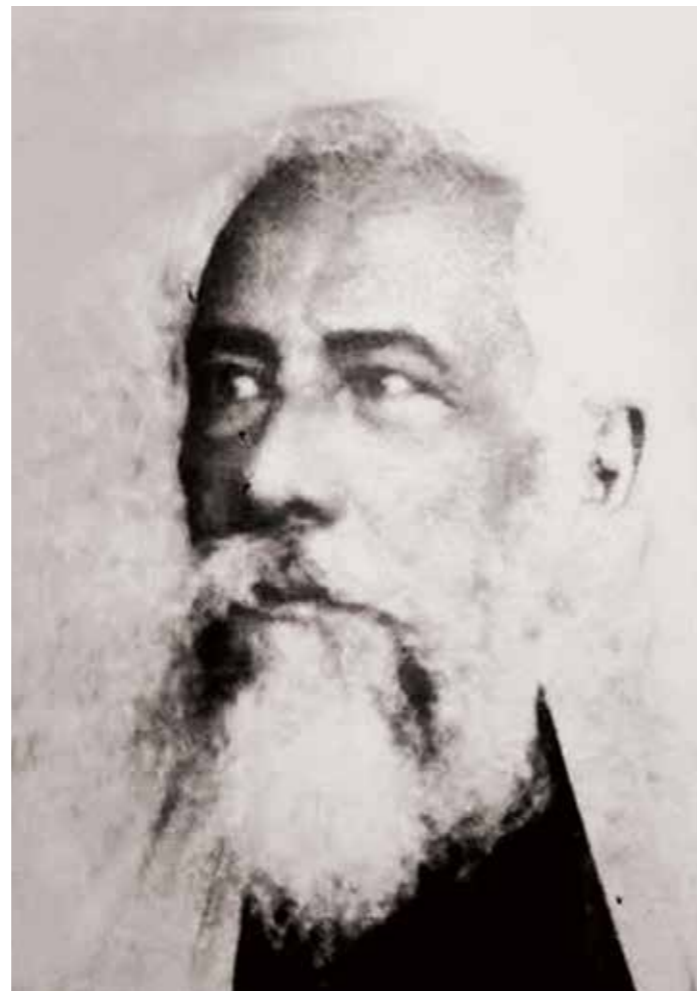
Debendranath Tagore



Caught between a father with a lavish lifestyle and a son the world remembers today as India's first Nobel Laureate, Debendranath's life and contribution to the formation of the Brahmo Samaj is almost forgotten, lost in the annals of history, but for a handful of ardent admirers. The eldest son of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, often referred to as the 'Indian Croesus,' Debendranath was born on 15 May 1817 in Jorasanko in the lap of luxury. Yet providence led him to turn his back upon all pleasures of youth at an early age. Debendranath began his formal education at the age of nine, learning Sanskrit, Persian, English and Western philosophy. Much of his initial tutoring was at home, from 1823 to 1825. Seeking admission

to the Anglo-Hindu College in 1827 – an educational institution established by Raja Ram Mohan Roy – Debendranath finally began looking after his father's properties and businesses, along with cultivating his interest in philosophy and religion. By the time he was eighteen, he had developed a deep sense of detachment while continuing with his dealings with worldly affairs and carrying forward his father's legacy. When Dwarkanath died in debt in 1846, Debendranath had delegated most of the business dealings to their office staff. It took him years to clear his father's enormous arrears but he paid back every penny while choosing to spend much of his time, when he was not working, dwelling upon spiritual truth in the Himalayas, which became a lifelong pursuit.

The final blow came with the death of his beloved grandmother. 'I was as if no longer the same man. A strong aversion to wealth arose within me. The coarse bamboo-mat on which I sat seemed to be my fitting



Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, founder of the Brahmo Samaj with Raja Ram Mohan Roy



The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj prayer hall in North Calcutta



Debendranath Tagore



Sarada Devi, Debendranath's wife

seat; carpets and costly spreadings seemed hateful. In my mind was awakened a joy unfelt before,' he wrote years later.

One fateful night, silently observing the stars on the bank of Ganges beside his grandmother's death bed as she prepared for her last journey or *anterjali jaatra*, Debendranath was filled with awe and wonder; the thought dawned on him that the grand universe unfolding before his eyes could not have arisen from any finite being. Soon after, in a state of utter misery, one afternoon he noticed a stray leaf of a book fly past him. Scripted in Sanskrit, he realised that it was a page from the *Upanishads*. Ram Chandra Vidyabagish, a learned pundit, explained the meaning of the *shloka* – the deeply esoteric opening verse of the *Ishaponishad* which said, 'God is immanent in all things, in whatsoever lives and moves in the universe. Enjoy therefore without being attached; covet not wealth belonging to the others.' From that day his course of life changed and he became largely otherworldly, losing

interest in mundane affairs and starting to explore the mysteries of God. Along with the awakening of the soul, he was also greatly influenced by Raja Ram Mohan Roy who had begun a movement through meetings of Bengalis in Calcutta in 1828. This group came to be known as the Brahma Sabha. In 1831, Roy visited England as a reforming ambassador and died there in 1833. He was buried in Bristol and his funeral sermon was conducted by Lant Carpenter, a Unitarian minister.

In October 1839, along with his friends, Debendranath gave birth to the Tattwaranjini Sabha which was later renamed Tattwabodhini Sabha. The object was to propagate the wisdom of the *Upanishads* and promote religious enquiry without bias. Within two years the Sabha attracted five hundred members from all walks of life – the affluent and the humble – and became the largest and most influential cultural organisation of Bengal that lasted till 1854. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was, for a while, the secretary of this

Sabha. It also had a printing press and Debendranath started publishing the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*. This magazine grew into the principal organ of the Samaj for propagating its views. Published in five different languages from five different centres – in Bengali from Calcutta, in Tamil and English from Madras and in Hindi and Urdu from Bareilly – it opened up a new world of spiritual inquiry that encouraged readers to look beyond the pale of conservative boundaries in order to seek God.

Again, taking motivation from Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Brahma Sabha, in 1848 Debendranath founded the Brahma Samaj that propagated a new religion and ardently attempted to free conservative Hinduism's attitude to caste and creed along with idol worship. Brahma Dharma, a reformist religion, was critical of the Bengal Resistance of the nineteenth century. It relied heavily upon readings of the *Upanishads*, of which Debendranath became a master. The reformist approach, including

the renunciation of the caste system and idol worship, made Brahma Dharma one of the most influential religions of the time. Debendranath framed a covenant for the adoption of the Brahma church and introduced a regular form of ecclesiastical service, including thanksgiving, praise and prayer. Having framed this covenant, twenty of his young associates joined him on 21 December 1843, converting Brahma Samaj into a spiritual fraternity. This day is still commemorated by holding the annual Poush Mela at Santiniketan.

“ Debendranath framed a covenant for the adoption of the Brahma church and introduced a regular form of ecclesiastical service, including thanksgiving, praise and prayer ”

Attracted to his younger fellow reformer, Keshab Chunder Sen, who joined him in 1857, Debendranath became his close mentor and, together, they spoke out vehemently against Sati and many similar ills in conservative society. Debendranath and Sen attempted to raise the Indian literacy rate, and to bring education within the reach of all. Unlike Sen who drifted towards Christianity, Tagore remained more conservative. The philosophical break between



তত্ত্ববোধিনী পত্রিকা

“এক বা একমিতময় আলীগ্রাহং কিকনাপৌরবিনঃ সর্গমতমং । কলেব বিদ্যাঃ আনন্দবৎ শিবঃ স্বভবত্রিবরমকমেবাবিভীষৎ
সম্বন্ধাপি সর্গনিহন্তু সর্গোৎপদঃ সর্গবিৎ সর্গশক্তিবৃক্ষণঃ পুংসপতিবমিতি । একগা ঠনোবোপালেনরা
পারিত্রিকবৈবিকক স্বভবমিতি । জন্ম পীড়িতনা পিতৃকাথাসাধনক শুভপালনমেব” ।

সম্পাদক—

শ্রীক্ষিতীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর ও ডাক্তার শ্রীবনওয়ারিলাল চৌধুরী ডি, এম্‌সি

সহঃ সম্পাদক—শ্রীক্ষেমেন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর বি, এম্‌সি।



Mausoleum of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in Arno's Vale Cemetery, Bristol, England

the two men eventually resulted in a schism within the Brahma Samaj in 1866 when the Navavidhan Brahma Samaj was born. In 1870, Sen visited Britain and met with Mary Carpenter, the daughter of Lant Carpenter. Together they founded the National Indian Association, an organisation designed to promote social reform in India and provide a meeting place for Indians and British people in England. Sen returned to India and further generated a major rift in the reforming society of the Brahma Samaj when he married his fourteen-year-old daughter to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, violating the Brahma Marriage Act. However, the Brahma Samaj in its various guises continued to flourish in India, particularly in Bengal.

Debendranath kept himself aloof from all the brouhaha. He retired to the hills of Simla in 1856 and occupied himself with prayer and meditation, studying closely the works Kant, Fichte and Victor Cousin as well as numerous writings of Hindu theologians and the Persian poet, Hafiz. However, failing to find a middle path between radical rationalism

“ As he aged, Debendranath became more reclusive, withdrawing from the bustle of the religion he had founded, and seeking a more peaceful environment ”

and fanatical Brahmin conservatism, Tagore finally retired from public life, although he continued to instruct a small band of his loyal followers. As he aged, Debendranath became more reclusive, withdrawing from the bustle of the religion he had founded, and seeking a more peaceful environment.

In 1863 he established a retreat in rural Bengal – Santiniketan or the Abode of Peace – later made famous by his poet son Rabindranath, whose educational centre there grew into an international university.

The history of Santiniketan goes back to the 1860s, when Debendranath was struck by the stark beauty of Birbhum while travelling past the red laterite soil. He got off the train and walking through the village fields, enchanted by the magnificence of

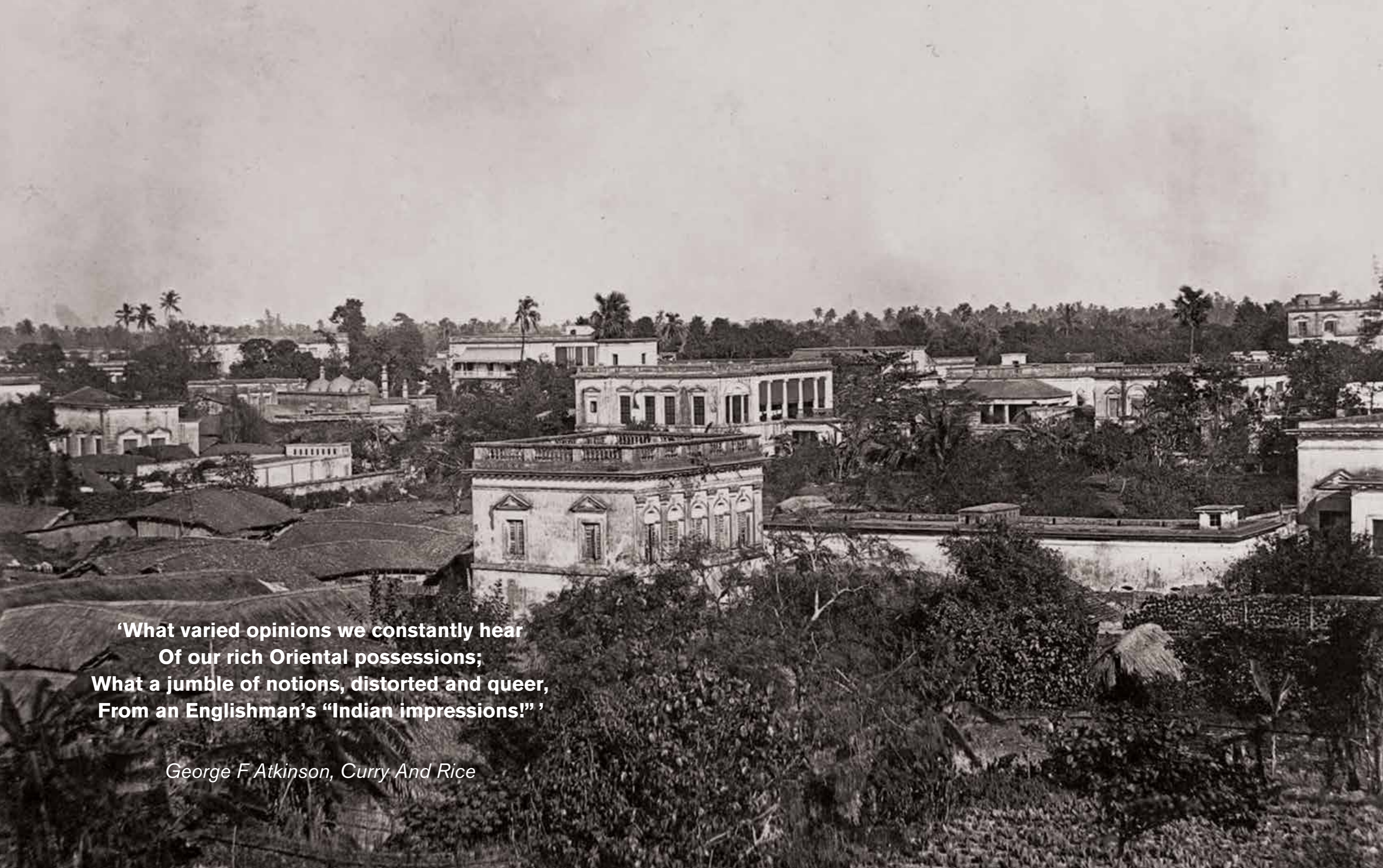
two luxuriantly canopied Chhatim trees offering shade in that barren terrain. This seemed an idyllic haven for meditating. So he bought a large tract of land along with the two Chhatim trees and built a beautiful prayer hall made from coloured glass. Trees were planted all around to bring about the look of ancient ashrams established in the heart of forests by saints. In keeping with the spirit of the location, he named the retreat Santiniketan.

‘I went and sat underneath the Chhatim trees,’ he wrote of his first vision, ‘and according to the teaching of the saints, began meditating on the Spirit of God dwelling within the soul. My mind was flooded with emotion; my eyes were filled with tears. All at once I saw the Omnipotent all around me and was overwhelmed.’

Over the course of his life, Debendranath had fifteen children with his wife, Sarada Devi. Little is known about Sarada, who died in 1875. She is mentioned, along with their children, only once in Debendranath’s autobiography, and that too in passing. His first love was always his God, his Brahma. Until his death on 19 January 1905 Debendranath Tagore bore the title ‘Maharishi’ or the ‘Great Sage.’ *



Keshab Chunder Sen, the Brahma rebel



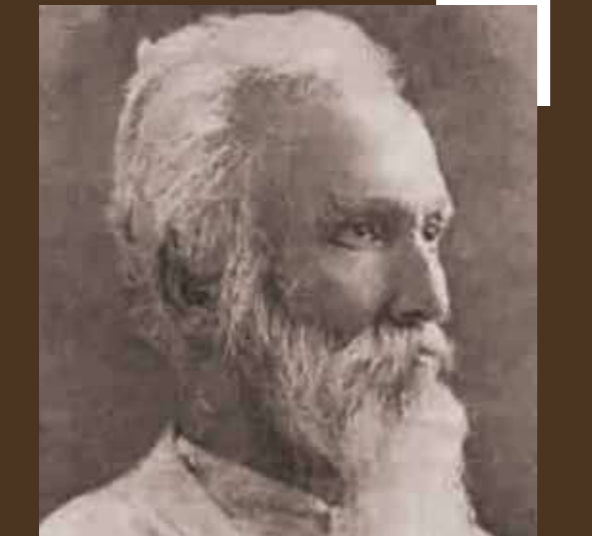
**'What varied opinions we constantly hear
Of our rich Oriental possessions;
What a jumble of notions, distorted and queer,
From an Englishman's "Indian impressions!"'**

George F Atkinson, Curry And Rice

Dwijendranath: The Many- talented Sage

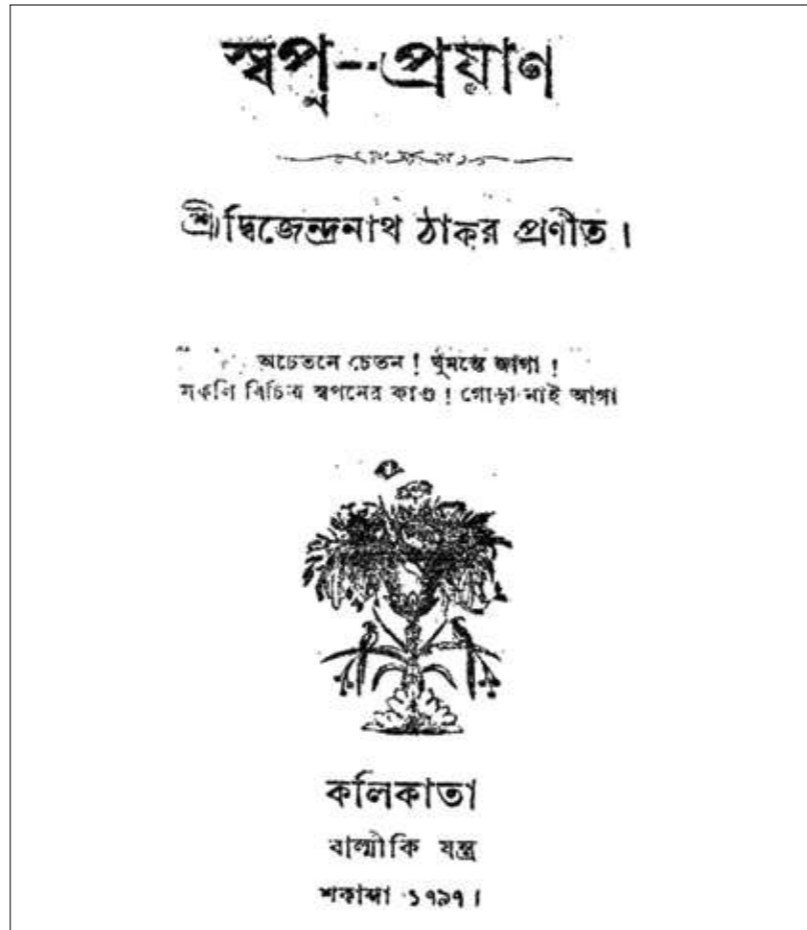
'Once a visitor to Jorasanko, passing the door of Dwijendranath's room in the company of Rabindranath, expressed a desire to meet his eldest brother. With a look of mock horror Rabindranath said, 'If Boro Dada gets hold of you now, you will be done for!'

From Rabindranath Tagore; *The Myriad-minded Man* by Krishna Dutta & Andrew Robinson



A quintessential Bengali Renaissance man who, among other things, was a poet, composer, painter, mathematician and philosopher. Dwijendranath Tagore was born on 11 March 1840, twenty-one years before his brother Rabindranath. Sarada Devi and the Maharshi's eldest child, his early education was mainly with tutors at home in Jorasanko. Later, he was a student at St Paul's School and Hindu College, now Presidency University.

A distinguished thinker and writer of philosophic prose, he was also a prolific bard. His first contribution to Bengali literature was a translation of Kalidas' *Meghdoot Kavya* written



The cover of Dwijendranath's second notable book of poetry, *Swapnaprayan*



Rabindranath with his Boro Dada, Dwijendranath

“ According to Rabindranath, his ‘Boro Dada’ was a very messy man! Torn manuscripts of his dreamy poems were scattered all over the numerous rooms of Jorasanko Thakur Bari ”

in classical Sanskrit where Dwijendranath used two different Bengali rhyming styles. The book was published in 1860, a year before the birth of his youngest brother, Rabindranath. His second notable book of poetry, *Swapnaprayan*, published in 1875, described the travelogue of a young man. The text revealed his amazing control over the application of different rhythms. The book is of undeniable historical value and a guide to Bengali poetry of that era.

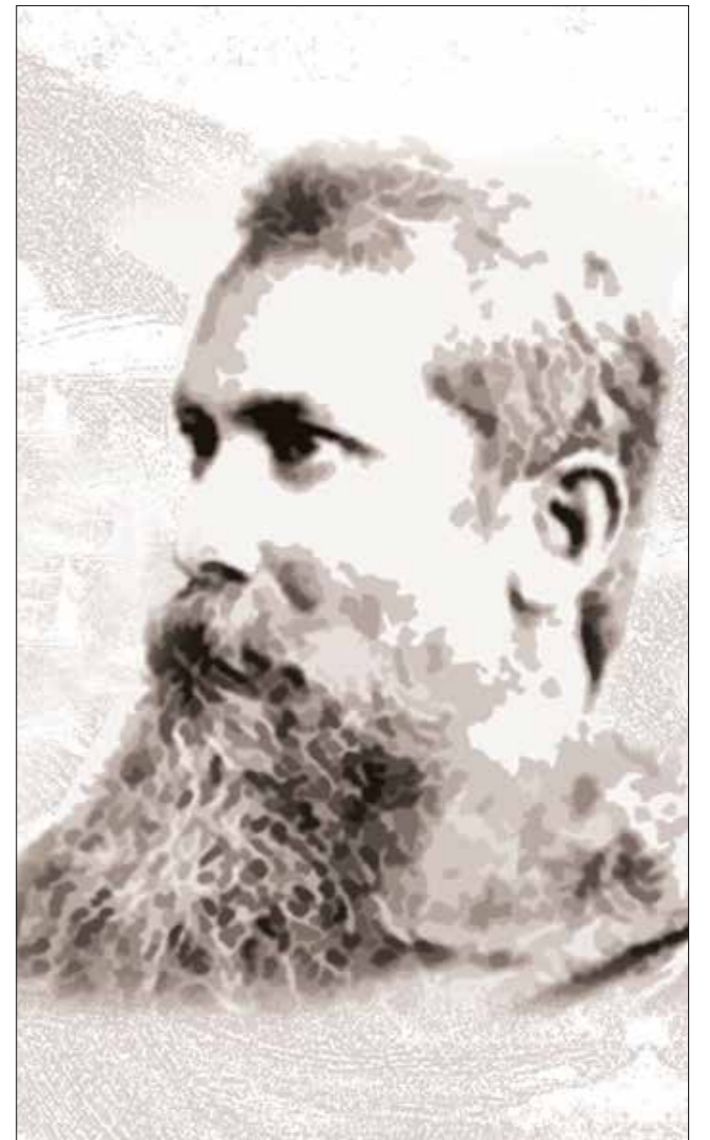
When Dwijendranath Tagore started writing poetry, Michael Madhusudan Dutt was at the pinnacle of his success. And though every poet of Bengal at that time was inspired by Madhusudan, Dwijendranath was above this influence. Rather, it was Madhusudan who welcomed Dwijendranath as the poet of the future.

It was during Dwijendranath's lifetime that Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath's 'strong writing set Bengali literature to the peak of its glory.' Dwijendranath's experiments in poetic composition, ingenious and daring, left a deep impress on the poetic development of his brother, Rabindranath. But despite being a highly talented poet, according to Rabindranath, his 'Boro Dada' was a very messy man! Torn manuscripts of his dreamy poems were scattered all over the numerous rooms of Jorasanko Thakur Bari. Had they been collected and published, Rabindranath mourns, they would have made an invaluable contribution to the history of modern Bengali poetry. For his outstanding contribution to Bengali literature, Dwijendranath was elected President of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad for three consecutive years from 1897 to 1900.

Credited for writing and composing several patriotic songs and devotional hymns, known as Brahma Sangeet, Dwijendranath introduced the formal musical notations for Bengali melodies known as *swaralipi*. He was correspondingly a pioneer in many spheres

of far-reaching importance. Having invented the shorthand in Bengali, Dwijendranath went on to write a manual on it in verse! He also penned a book on geometry in which the 12th axiom was replaced by new ones. His writings on Boxometry or the science of paper folding – ‘an elaborate affair of manufacturing receptacles of an endless variety with paper folded in accordance with set codes and formulae, very much in the nature of Euclidean principles’ – have over time fascinated scholars of mathematics.

As secretary of the Adi Brahma Samaj from 1866 to 1871, philosophy became the centre of Dwijendranath's interests. His mind was always other-worldly but now it turned to studying various philosophical manuscripts, including the



Dwijendranath introduced the formal musical notations for Bengali melodies



Dwijendranath's home in Santiniketan

Bhagavad Gita in great depth. He travelled to Dhaka with his father, Debendranath, during the inaugural phase of the Dhaka Brahmo Samaj.

Dwijendranath remained closely associated with the Hindu Mela and even composed the song, 'Malin mukhachandrama Bharat tomari...' ('Downcast is your visage O Bharat...') for one of its sessions. He edited

“ Dwijendranath, accustomed to a simple life, was a man of poetry, spirituality and a keen student of life... He spent the last twenty years of his life in Santiniketan in the company of nature ”

the magazine, *Bharati*, for seven years although it was mainly run by his brother Jyotirindranath and some differences cropped up between the siblings. However, his keen impress was felt on the *Tattwabodhini*

Patrika that he edited for twenty-five long years and gave it a deep spiritual flavour. The famous Bengali weekly, *Hitabadi*, owed its name and according to its first editor, Krishna Kamal Bhattacharya, its very conception, to Dwijendranath.

Among his grandsons, Dipendranath's son Dinendranath Tagore (1882-1935) was a prominent musician. Known to students in Santiniketan as 'Din-da', he could pick up any melody once he heard

the song. Although Rabindranath's melodies were self-composed, he had trouble memorizing them or creating their notation. Dinendranath used to do this for him and is acknowledged as one of the leading composers of Rabindra Sangeet.

Dwijendranath, accustomed to a simple life, was a man of poetry, spirituality and a keen student of life. Two of Dwijendranath's nine children died soon after birth. His wife, Sarbasundari Devi, also died in 1878 and Dwijendranath spent the rest of his days as a widower, passing the last twenty years of his life in Santiniketan in the company of nature.

On his return from South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi and Charles Freer Andrews visited Santiniketan and met Dwijendranath. With his spiritual sensibility he had hailed Gandhi as the deliverer of our nation, long before the rest of his countrymen, including Rabindranath, had recognised the Mahatma in him. Dwijendranath Tagore died in Santiniketan on 19 January 1926 – a man of many talents, enriching Bengal's intellectual and creative landscape with a remarkable rarity at the height of the British Raj. *



Younger brother Jyotirindranath's pencil sketch of Boro Dada



A typical village road in Birbhum that inspired Rabindranath to write, 'Graam chhaara oi raanga maatir path amaar monn bholaaye re...' ('The dusty mud trail beyond the village steals my heart...')



'It is as if the people who inhabit the streets, inspired by some mysterious wisdom, realise that the true history of Calcutta has always been written in the invisible tales of its spirits and unspoken ghosts'

Carlos Ruiz Zafón

Satyendranath: India's First Civil Servant

'Nothing gave Satyendranath greater pleasure than to see social restrictions for women and barriers like purdah being broken down.'

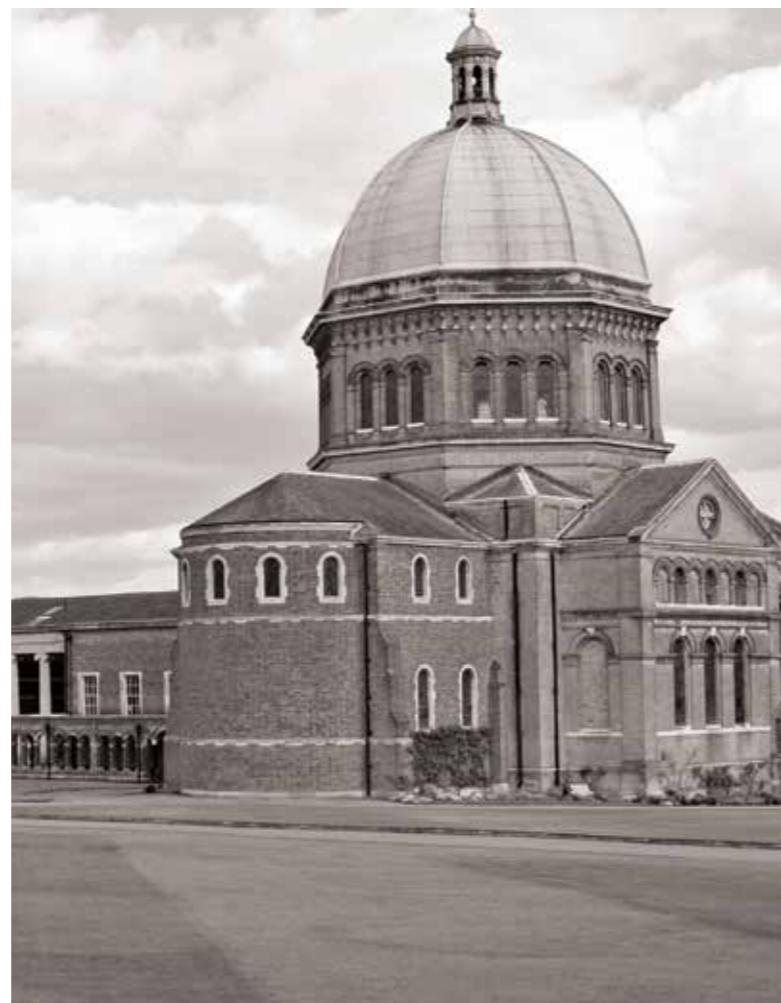
Indira Devi Chaudhurani



Unlike his elder brother, Dwijendranath, Satyendranath Tagore was a more gregarious personality, practical and open to ideas from the West but a strict patriot and son of the East. Born on 1 June 1842 at the family home in Jorasanko, he was initially tutored in Bengali, English and Sanskrit at home before passing the Entrance Examination in the First Division from Hindu School and then seeking admission in Presidency College for his under-graduation. While still in college, he became associated with the Brahma Samaj and in 1861 joined hands with Keshab Chunder Sen

to propagate the Brahma religion in Krishnanagar. A bright student since childhood, he was India's first Civil Servant. But his achievements were not limited merely to the civil services. He was also a reputed poet, composer, writer, social reformer and linguist. Elected President of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in 1900-01, he translated Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Geetarahasya* into Bengali along with Kalidas's *Meghaduta* and wrote several literary works, including nine Bengali and three English books that earned him great fame. He also composed quite a few Brahma and patriotic songs and for some time edited the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*.

Satyendranath founded the Hindu Mela at Belgachia in Calcutta in 1867 with the aim of arousing the spirit of patriotism in the hearts of the masses. His patriotic song, 'Miley sabey Bharat santaan, ektaaney gaaho gaan...' ('Unite, India's children, sing in unison...') rendered at the second session of the Hindu Mela was profusely praised. He also presided over the tenth session of the Bengal provincial conference held at Natore in 1897 and in 1906 was ordained



Satyendranath completed his training at Haileybury College in London and came back to India in 1864



A portrait of the civil servant, Satyendranath

acharya of Adi Brahma Samaj along with his elder brother Dwijendranath. However, the most prominent work of his life was his tireless effort to uplift women in society – to support them to adjust to a more liberal lifestyle. He worked tirelessly to eradicate the *purdah* system from society and initiated the change from his own family, becoming in the process an inspiration for all.

In 1859, at the age of seventeen, Satyendranath was married to Jnanadanandini, a village girl from East Bengal born to Abhaycharan Mukhopadhyay and Nistarini Devi of Narendrapur village in Jessore – very fair but woefully thin, uneducated and barely eight years old. When she finally came to her husband's home in a *paalki*, sleepy and tired and dressed like a doll in her jewels and wedding finery, her mother-in-law, Sarada Devi, couldn't help scolding the female match-maker and exclaiming disparagingly at the bride's scrawny appearance. Yet, over the years, Jnanadanandini transformed into a

“ A bright student since childhood, Satyendranath was India's first Civil Servant. But his achievements were not limited merely to the civil services. He was also a reputed poet, composer, writer, social reformer and linguist ”

lady of great sophistication, completely at home with Indian and western mores, and a pillar of strength to her husband, working hand in hand with him for women's cause. With her husband's support, she gave up the veil at home and was the first Indian woman to enter the Government House at the invitation of the viceroy. Satyen and Jnanadanandini had two children – Surendranath and Indira Devi Chaudhurani. But she never forgot her mother-in-law's initial taunts and often defied her instructions in later years.

This was the time when the British ruled over India, often ruthlessly, and the first stirrings of agitation and restlessness that would later build up to the Independence Movement had begun. Since the seventeenth century, the East India Company had set foot here to initially trade and eventually rule the land. It was now their government and everything was under their control. For many years, Indians were not allowed to work in top positions in any administrative capacity. Then, in 1832, for the first time the *Gora* rulers allowed locals to be selected to Munsif and Sadar Amin positions. Thereafter, they also started appointing them as Deputy Magistrates or Collectors. But it was not until the 1860s that Indians were allowed to sit for the civil services exam.

With the revolt of 1857, there were changes in the various systems of British rule. What was initially called the Imperial Civil Service came to be later renamed as Indian Civil Service. Entries were allowed only through a competitive exam. Finally, in 1861, the Indian Civil Services Act was introduced, permitting 'natives' to compete. However, it wasn't easy for Indians. Participants had to go to London to appear in the exam; the syllabus was vast and included Greek and Latin. The maximum age limit was twenty-three years, which was later reduced to nineteen years.

After the Indian Civil Services Act was passed, young Satyen, along with his friend Monomohun



Satyendranath and his wife Jnanadanandini



Mary Carpenter, social reformer and activist



Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a poet and playwright

Ghose, decided to attempt taking this tough exam. Satyendranath asked for Jnanadanandini to join him in England. However, his father did not consent. Around this time, Jnanadanandini's brother-in-law, Hemendranath Tagore, took charge of her education. She was also tutored briefly by the famous Brahmo educationist, Ayodhyanath Pakrashi.

With a heavy heart Satyendranath Tagore and Monomohun Ghose sailed to London on an arduous journey, prepared for the test, and gave the papers. Ghose couldn't crack the exam, but Satyen got selected in 1863. While in England, he came in touch with Mary Carpenter, the social reformer and activist, whose father, Lant Carpenter, had been a friend of Raja Rammohun Roy in Bristol. He also became acquainted with Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who was living in London at that time. Satyen completed his training at Haileybury College and came back to India in 1864. For 'having crossed the seven seas of *Kaala Paani*', Satyendranath was never completely forgiven by his mother, Sarada Devi, and his relationship with her became more and more strained as the years went by.

Upon Satyendranath's return from England in 1864 as the first Indian member of the Civil Service,

“ While in England, Satyendranath came in touch with Mary Carpenter, the social reformer and activist, whose father, Lant Carpenter, had been a friend of Raja Rammohun Roy in Bristol. He also became acquainted with Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who was living in London ”

Jnanadanandini went to live with her husband in Bombay and then in Ahmedabad where Satyen began his career as a civil servant in 1865 as assistant magistrate and collector. Here, at their beautiful home on the banks of the Sabarmati, on a holiday, his youngest brother, Rabindranath, wrote his famous short story, *Kshudhita Pashaan* translated into English as *The Hungry Stones*, a Gothic tale of unrequited love, replete with the ghost of a dancing girl with tinkling dancing bells wandering around by night and searching for her lover at a deserted palace!

From Ahmedabad, Satyen kept travelling to different parts of India and in the process, learned several languages. Having spent a major part of his professional career in western India, he finally retired as Sessions Judge of Satara district in 1896. Returning to Calcutta, he lived with his wife and children for a while on Park Street and then moved to his garden home in Ballygunge, which became a meeting place for the city's intellectuals and political bigwigs.

Satyendranath Tagore died on 9 January 1923 in Calcutta. *

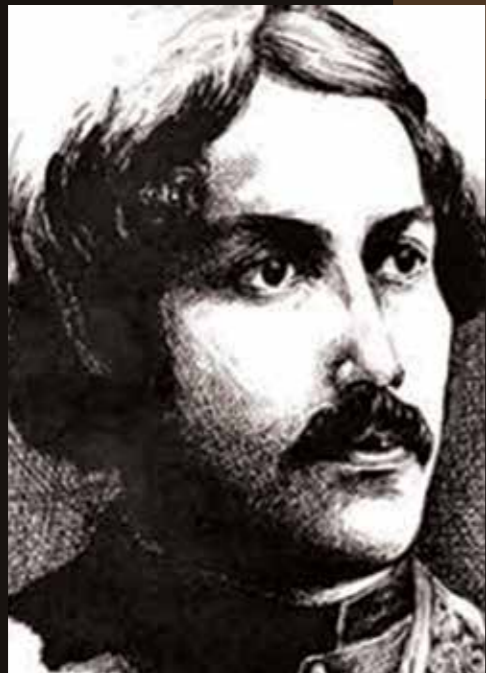
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Hemendranath & Jyotirindranath: Rabi's Other Brothers

'Looking back at my childhood I feel the thought that recurred most often was that I was surrounded by the aura of my brothers and a great sense of mystery.'

Rabindranath Tagore



sister, Prafullamayee, also became a Tagore bride. Both the sisters were musically gifted. But unfortunately, Prafullamayee, married to the next brother, **Birendranath**, led a sad existence as her husband, despite his excellence in mathematics, degenerated into a psychopath.

Hemendranath was well-known as a strict disciplinarian entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the education of his younger brothers, in addition to being administrator for the large family estates. Much like his siblings, he had wide interests in various fields and can be regarded as a polymath and 'the scientist of the family'. He attended Calcutta Medical College (established by his grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore) and wrote articles on physical science which he planned to compile and edit into a textbook for school students. If his premature death had not prevented him from completing the project, this would have been the first science textbook in Bengali.

From 1867 Hemendranath began conducting his very first experiments in radio waves and electromagnetic propagations. Between 1872-73 he wrote several articles on the results of his researches and in 1874 compiled the first scholarly Asian work on physics entitled *Prakritik Vijnaner Sthulamarma* which was updated in 1878-79. Since the knowledge contained was potentially explosive, its circulation was restricted only to members

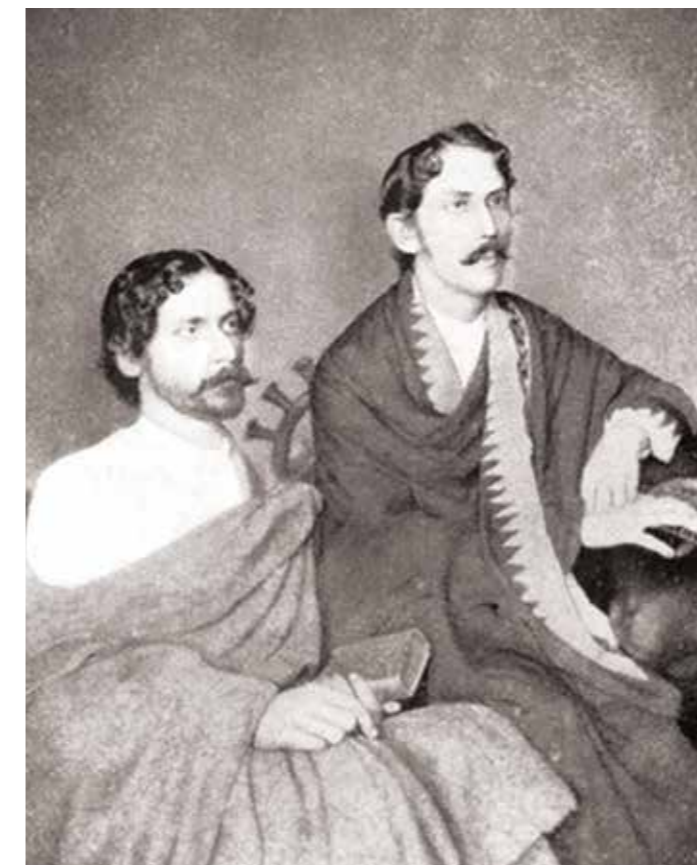
of Adi Brahma Samaj. Later, all works of Hemendranath and his grandfather, Dwarkanath, in the records of Adi Brahma Samaj were destroyed. Hemendranath, described as being a 'renowned wrestler,' was



A rare photograph of Hemendranath Tagore

known for his extraordinary physical strength and prowess in wrestling contests. His expertise in martial arts like judo and ninjitsu were also applauded. Exceptionally modern for the times, he insisted on formal education for all his children and put them not only through school but trained them in music, art and European languages such as French and German. His daughters were as highly educated as his sons. He actively sought out eligible grooms from different provinces of India for his daughters and married them off in places as far flung as Uttar Pradesh and Assam. A staunch modernist, he instituted various financial trusts for the womenfolk of the Tagore family, especially his sisters, and was responsible for settling the Santiniketan estate near Bolpur, which later evolved into Visva Bharati. A practical and scientific humanist, he was deeply loved by the peasants of his estates in Bengal. Hemendranath died at the age of forty in 1884.

Jyotirindranath Tagore, the fifth talented son of Debendranath, was a playwright, musician, editor and painter of no mean feat, inspired by the



Rabindranath (left) with brother Jyotirindranath (right): a complex relationship

nationalist spirit of those times. He played a major role in the flowering of Rabindranath's genius but unfortunately, over the years, there grew a silent distance between the two brothers, the cause often being insinuated by Rabindranath's infatuation for Kadambari, Jyotirindra's wife.

Born on 4 May 1849 in Jorasanko, Jyotirindranath also ran businesses in jute, indigo and steamers, though he was not always successful in his commercial ventures. Attracted towards the theatre from his student days, he formed a home theatre group and staged plays. One of his cousins, Ganendranath, had already established the Jorasanko Natyashala in 1865. The first play to be staged by Jyotirindranath was *Krishnakumari* by Michael Madhusudan Dutt where he enacted the role of Ahalyadevi, a brave queen. His early success developed in him a determination to be an efficacious playwright. He took lessons in music from Bishnupada Chakravarty and blossomed into an expert pianist and violinist. The resonance of music in Jorasanko Thakur Bari was largely Jyotirindranath's gift to his family.

His literary career began with the penning of dramas and farces. His plays were written in the backdrop of Indian history, while nationalism lay at the heart of all his works. In his farces, he satirized different social evils. Along with writing many original dramas, he also translated several Sanskrit, French and English plays into Bengali. He made young Rabindranath aware of musical compositions, poetic metre and musical notes. Twenty songs of Rabindranath's dance drama, *Mayar Khela*, were based on tunes composed by Jyotirindranath. As an avid portrait artist, he worked almost exclusively on pencil and paper. Apart from members of the Tagore family, he drew most of his visitors in Calcutta. In 1914, twenty-five of his exquisite portraits were printed by Sir Emery Walker of London by the collotype method. The album carried a sensitive Foreword by William Rothenstein.

The untimely death of his wife, Kadambari, saw Jyotirindranath finally settle down in Ranchi in his home Shantidham on Morabadi Hills where he breathed his last on 4 March 1925, a forgotten Tagore eclipsed by the fame of his younger sibling. *

Jnanadanandini: Cry Freedom!

'I cannot recollect now which city after which city we were transferred to after Bombay. But I know that we were in Poona the year before my eldest son Surendranath was born. When he grew up, he himself would joke that he was two things which the Englishmen could not tolerate – Bengali Babu and Poona Brahmin!'

Jnanadanandini Devi



Two of Debendranath's daughters-in-law, Jnanadanandini and Kadambari, left an indelible mark on several family members of the Jorasanko Thakur Bari.

Jnanadanandini, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, is now reckoned as a pioneering social reformer, influencing the earliest phase of women's empowerment in nineteenth century Bengal. But her life was not always a bed of roses. Born in a remote village in Jessore and married off at the age of eight to Satyendranath Tagore, a college student, who later became the first native member of the Indian Civil Service in 1864, at the time of her nuptials, young Jnanada was illiterate and too young to understand the

significance of wedlock and its responsibilities. On the contrary, her husband believed in romance and personal choice and took it upon himself to educate his child bride and set her free from social restrictions.

Bengal those days was plagued by extreme conservatism, regression and misogynistic attitude towards women. Women were not allowed to step out of their homes, mingle with men except for their husbands and close relatives. And they were explicitly taught to obey their spouses and be a focal point of their desires. They had little or no access to education.

Sadly, gender discrimination was not only prevalent in India; it continues to exist across the world even now.

Jnanadanandini's marriage was followed by a life of confinement and strict *abarodh* or *pardah*, imposed upon all Tagore women and their sisters in every corner of Bengal. Though Jnanadanandini's husband openly opposed the *pardah* and advocated women's rights in several of his writings, it was difficult to take on the immediate family – especially his father whose word was the unwritten law in the corridors of Jorasanko.

Unhappy with his wife's restricted condition, Satyendranath took Jnanadanandini along when he received his first posting as an Assistant Collector and Magistrate in the Bombay Presidency. This move proved to be a turning point in his wife's life and transformed her into a woman of reckoning.

When Jnanadanandini moved to Bombay, her life changed altogether. It was challenging yet exhilarating to be amongst people who thought very differently from the conservative Tagores. Wherever she went with her husband, she confronted new ideas which opened her mind to broadminded thoughts. Most importantly, she realized that there is life beyond the four walls of her Jorasanko home and women could play a

much more significant role in society than just producing children and looking after the kitchen.

While in Bombay, Jnanadanandini socialized with the European circle of Satyendranath's colleagues and friends and started to adapt to English customs. This shift required her to dress appropriately, for which the traditional Bengali style of wearing the sari without a proper blouse became too unwieldy. Since she was the wife of a senior bureaucrat, she became the first lady to wear an Oriental dress – a Mughal style kurta and voluminous pants – when she was out with her husband. Interestingly, she also changed the way a sari was draped.

During a tour of Gujarat with her husband, Jnanadanandini improvised upon the sari worn by Parsi women. She created her own style of draping the *aanchal* over the left shoulder – as opposed to the Parsi style – so that the right hand remained free for courtesies. Later, on her return to Calcutta, she even advertised in the monthly magazine, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, offering to train other women to



Jnanadanandini's famous sari drape in the Brahmi style that took Bengal by storm

“**Jnanadanandini Devi set sail for England, the first woman to travel alone with her children at a time when crossing the seas by Indian women was unheard of. Her fortitude created a social sensation**”

wear the sari in her novel style. The technique soon became popular among the Brahmo women of the city, developing the eponym 'Brahmika Sari.' Soon Jnanadanandini began sharing her ideas on education and liberation with fellow women of the Tagore family. And thus the impregnable walls of the Jorasanko mansion began to crumble, much to the horror of her mother-in-law, Sarada Devi, as the rebellion started by Jnanada in her private hearth spread like wildfire across different corners of Bengal.

While in Calcutta, Jnanadanandini broke all rules of conservative society by attending a Christmas party thrown by the Viceroy, Lord Lawrence, in 1866. Prasanna Coomar Tagore of Pathuriaghata, who was also among the invitees, was deeply outraged by Jnanadanandini's boldness and left the viceregal palace in shock. Her father-in-law, Debendranath Tagore, did not take kindly to her independent spirit either. This caused much discord in the Tagore household. But Jnanadanandini would not bend. She finally left Jorasanko in 1868 to live in a mansion on Park Street.

In yet another undaunted act of courage, Jnanadanandini appointed a Muslim woman as a wet nurse for her children. In those days it was common for affluent Hindu families to leave their newborns to the care of a wet nurse or governess – always of a Hindu caste. However, Jnanadanandini resented leaving her children in the custody of servants, often against the wishes of her own husband, making evident the emotional contours of a nuclear family that were already beginning to evolve in her mind.

In 1877 Jnanadanandini Devi set sail for England, the first woman to travel alone with her children at a time when crossing the seas by Indian women was unheard of. Her fortitude created a social sensation. In England, she moved into a house in the seaside town of Brighton,

Sussex. Satyendranath joined her with the onset of his furlough in October 1878, along with his younger brother Rabindranath Tagore.

Jnanadanandini's initial year in England was marked by grief with the birth of a stillborn child and the demise of her youngest son. She arranged for Rabindranath to be buried beside Dwarakanath Tagore's grave at Kensal Green Cemetery in London. However, she and her surviving children, Surendranath and Indira, soon developed an intimate friendship with young Rabi. Indira eventually became his lifelong confidante.

On completing his furlough, Satyendranath took up a post in Surat while his wife returned to Calcutta with her children. Much to the amusement of some elders, Jnanadanandini introduced a breakfast and tea club in Jorasanko, where she had her own quarters done up like her home in England, and encouraged her relatives to engage in free-flowing conversations.

Years later, her niece, Sarala, wrote in her memoirs, 'My aunt Jnanada brought with her from Britain a new custom called 'Birthday'. We had never heard of this strange celebration before. In fact most of us did not even know when we were born! Once, after returning from Suren's birthday party, I distinctly remember the frenzy among the Jorasanko children – and not just the children – of finding out when they were born. Some liberal members of our family, of course, promptly took to the idea as did the Brahmo Samaj. And lo and behold, before long the whole country was celebrating their birthdays!'

In addition to Bengali and English, Jnanadanandini learnt French, Gujarati and Marathi. She took an active role in Rabindranath's marriage and mentored Mrinalini, Rabindranath's young bride. She assisted Rabi with the performance of his plays, often encouraging other women of the household to participate. After performing herself on stage in Jorasanko, she went on to act publicly at another family property. This invited a lot of criticism but helped other women to step out of their confines.

Jnanadanandini Devi's literary initiative for children in the form of a literary magazine in Bengali named *Balak*

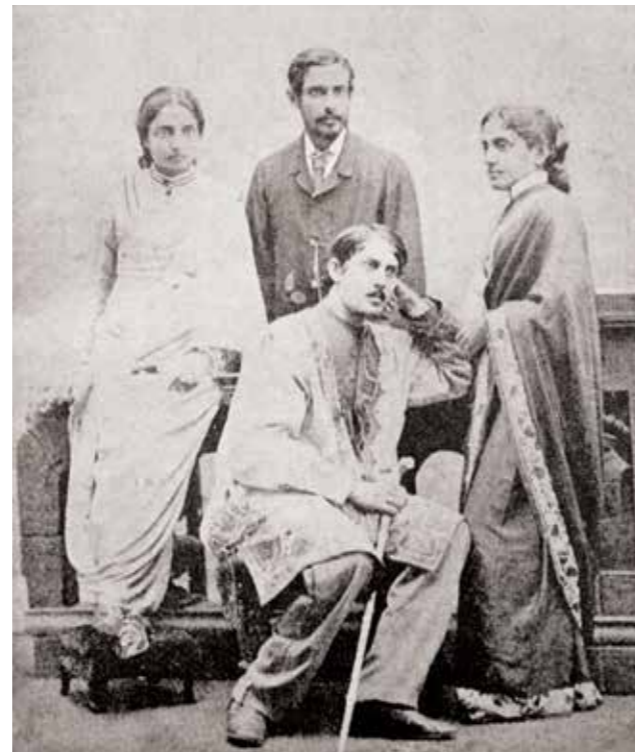
was a big success. She also wrote numerous articles for various magazines and newspapers published from Calcutta, mostly centred on nationalism, freedom and patriotism. Through her articles, she urged women to unite against the British and take part in the freedom movement. In this respect, she followed the footsteps of her sister-in-law, Swarnakumari Devi, who was the first female writer to gain prominence in Bengal.

“ In addition to Bengali and English, Jnanadanandini learnt French, Gujarati and Marathi. She took an active role in Rabindranath's marriage and mentored Mrinalini, Rabindranath's young bride ”

Jnanadanandini wrote two plays for children – *Takdumadum* and *Saat Bhai Champa* – both of which were highly appreciated in erudite circles. But despite

her many literary achievements, she did not write an autobiography. Only a couple of years before her death she was persuaded to pen a set of memoirs that were later published as *Smritikatha O Puratani*.

Jnanadanandini Devi breathed her last in her palatial Ballygunge Estate on 1 October 1941. *



Jnanadanandini, Satyendranath and Kadambari with a seated Jyotirindranath



Jnanadanandini and Satyendranath's daughter, the beautiful Indira

Kadambari: Unending Love

'I seem to have loved you in numberless forms,
numberless times, in life after life, in age after age forever.'

Rabindranath Tagore



on her delicate brown hands... I circled around her at a safe distance, but I did not dare to go near. She was enthroned at the centre of affection and I was only a neglected, insignificant child.'

Fortunately for the lad, the new bride, whom he addressed as *notun bouthan* (new sister-in-law), was assigned the duty of looking after him. Every morning saw Kadambari freshly bathed and ready to set herself to any task she may be called upon to perform. She cooked delicious meals for her young brother-in-law when he returned from school and Subhankari, a member of the household, declared to the world at large that their *natun bouma* (new bride) was Goddess Lakshmi incarnate. And she looked like one too, with her wet hair hanging down her back and the red border of her sari, drawn over her head.

The Tagores believed in coaching their daughters-in-law. Jyotirindranath made adequate arrangements for his wife's education at home where teachers came to oversee Kadambari's tutelage. Hemendranath also took classes with the Tagore brides and unmarried girls in Bengali and Sanskrit. She also learnt horse riding from her liberal husband. Every evening the couple would ride out to the Maidan and her 'daredevilry' left Calcutta's high society horrified!

As the years passed by, Rabindranath and his *bouthan* metamorphosed from children to adulthood. Because Kadambari remained childless even after many years of wedlock, she shied away from her women relatives to escape their misogynistic barbs. Her bold spirit brushed off all negativity that surrounded her. A diehard romantic, her imaginative mind reached out to

“ Kadambari was only nine when she entered the Tagore household as a child bride. Rabindranath was seven at the time and soon grew to admire her and become her playmate. In her, young Rabi also found an ardent literary companion ”

her creative brother-in-law, in whose company she felt the happiest.

During sultry summer afternoons, while Jyotirindranath would be busy at the office handling administration and management of the family estates, Rabindranath would read aloud his poetry to Kadambari. At other times they would peruse serialised versions of Bankim Chandra's novels in the popular journal, *Bangadarshan*. He disclosed how Kadambari often teased him about his works but also persuaded him to read to her, while he 'shared the benefits of my sister-in-law's hand fan,' electricity being nonexistent even in the affluent households those days. About his poems, Tagore said that he wrote several verses sitting next to her, and the memory of those affectionate moments would never die.

A sensitive soul, Kadambari developed a literary sensibility, which enabled her to appraise Rabindranath's verses. She was his best friend and harshest critic, perpetually urging him to bring forth his best. No wonder the youthful bard considered her his muse. At nineteen, the infatuated poet dedicated his famous lyrics, '*Tomarei koriachhi jibaner dhrubo-taara*' ('*Thou art the guiding beacon of my life*') to her, exalting her for being his source of undying inspiration. He even nicknamed Kadambari after Hecate, the Greek goddess of night, moon and magic.

But ironically, Kadambari's narrative spoke of difficulties that many women faced during the time. She yearned for validation from her husband, both emotional and physical, which she probably did not receive. With his plays being staged commercially, there were even rumours about Jyotirindra's clandestine affair with Binodini Dasi, a popular stage actress who had risen in her career from Calcutta's dubious red-light district.

Kadambari's misgivings exposed the insecurities of a young girl trying to overcome the maddening oppression of the *antarmahal* and *pardah*. A significant portion of her initial years at Jorasanko was spent trying to woo her husband and get his attention.

“ Because Kadambari remained childless even after many years of wedlock, she shied away from her women relatives to escape their misogynistic barbs. A diehard romantic, she reached out to her creative brother-in-law, in whose company she felt the happiest ”

Gauging Jyotirindra's aesthetic nature, she adorned the room with fragrant flowers, the terrace with aromatic shrubs and ferns, and the bed with embroidered covers and sheets. But Jyotirindra, though always affable, remained largely indifferent. As Aruna Chakravarti writes in her novel, *Jorasanko*: 'Kadambari saw, and the realisation cut her to the heart, that he never sought her out himself. He came to her only when she sent for him, spoke to her easily but briefly, then departed with promises of giving her more time in future. And he did not seem to miss her at all during his long absences from Calcutta.'

Alone and loveless, Kadambari was known to fall prey to



Kadambari Devi, Rabindranath's muse

frequent bouts of depression. Her loneliness somehow matched Rabindranath's and they found in each other a literary, philosophical, and on occasion, an emotional partner. Often looked upon with suspicious eyes, their relationship grew out of the mutual isolation they experienced within the sprawling walls of Jorasanko.

When he was seventeen, Rabi had a brief stint in England; however he maintained regular correspondence with Kadambari. Later, he got some of the letters published. Though they were brilliant literary pieces, yet their emotional contents left his family scandalised. They soon decided to get him married. Kadambari was staunchly opposed to the marriage but being a misfit in a patriarchal home, she could do nothing. She was shunted aside, though she did go reluctantly with Jnanadanandini all the way to Jessore to see the bride. Accordingly, on 9 December 1883, twenty-two year-old Rabindranath married eleven year-old Bhavatarini, whom he later named Mrinalini. The event proved highly traumatic for Kadambari. All

along, the childless, lonely and neglected wife had found solace in Rabi's company. He had been a much-needed ray of hope in her dark and lonely life. The idea of widening distances between them was unbearable to her. In about four months and ten days after Rabindranath's wedding, she took her life through an opium overdose.

“ Her loneliness somehow matched Rabindranath's and they found in each other a literary, philosophical, and on occasion, an emotional partner. Their relationship grew out of the mutual isolation they experienced within the sprawling walls of Jorasanko ”

Her death was hushed up by Debendranath as he wanted no scandal to mire the reputation of Jorasanko. But Rabi was left extremely distraught and heartbroken. Years later, he wrote, 'With her death, it felt as though the earth had moved away from under my feet and the light had gone out from the sky. My world felt empty and my

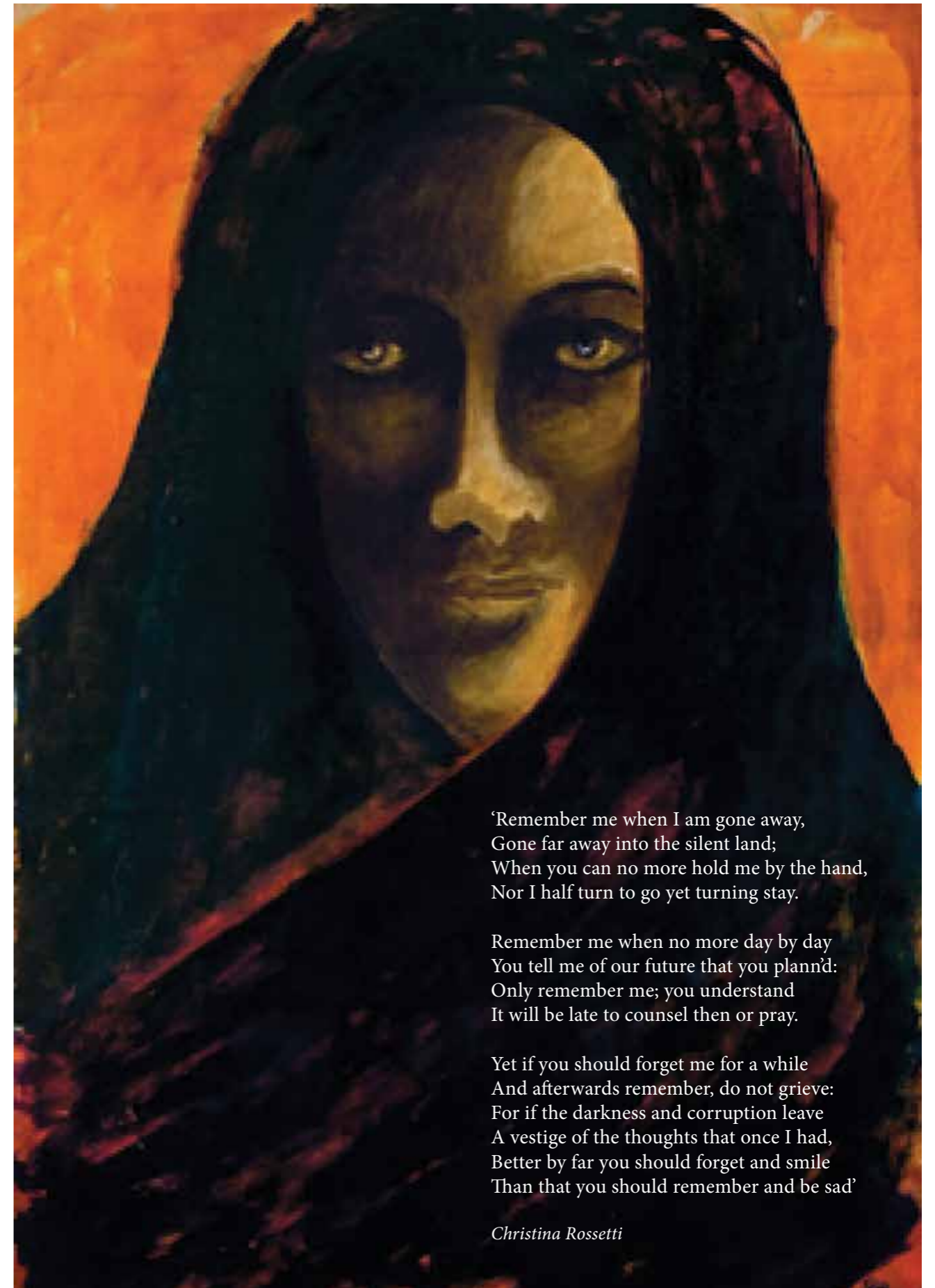
life dull. I never imagined I would ever get over the delusion of this void. But that tremendous pain set me free for the very first time. I realized gradually that life must be seen through the window of death in order to reach the truth.' *



Rabindranath in his youth, when he wrote poems for Kadambari



The woefully young Mrinalini and Rabindranath after their wedding

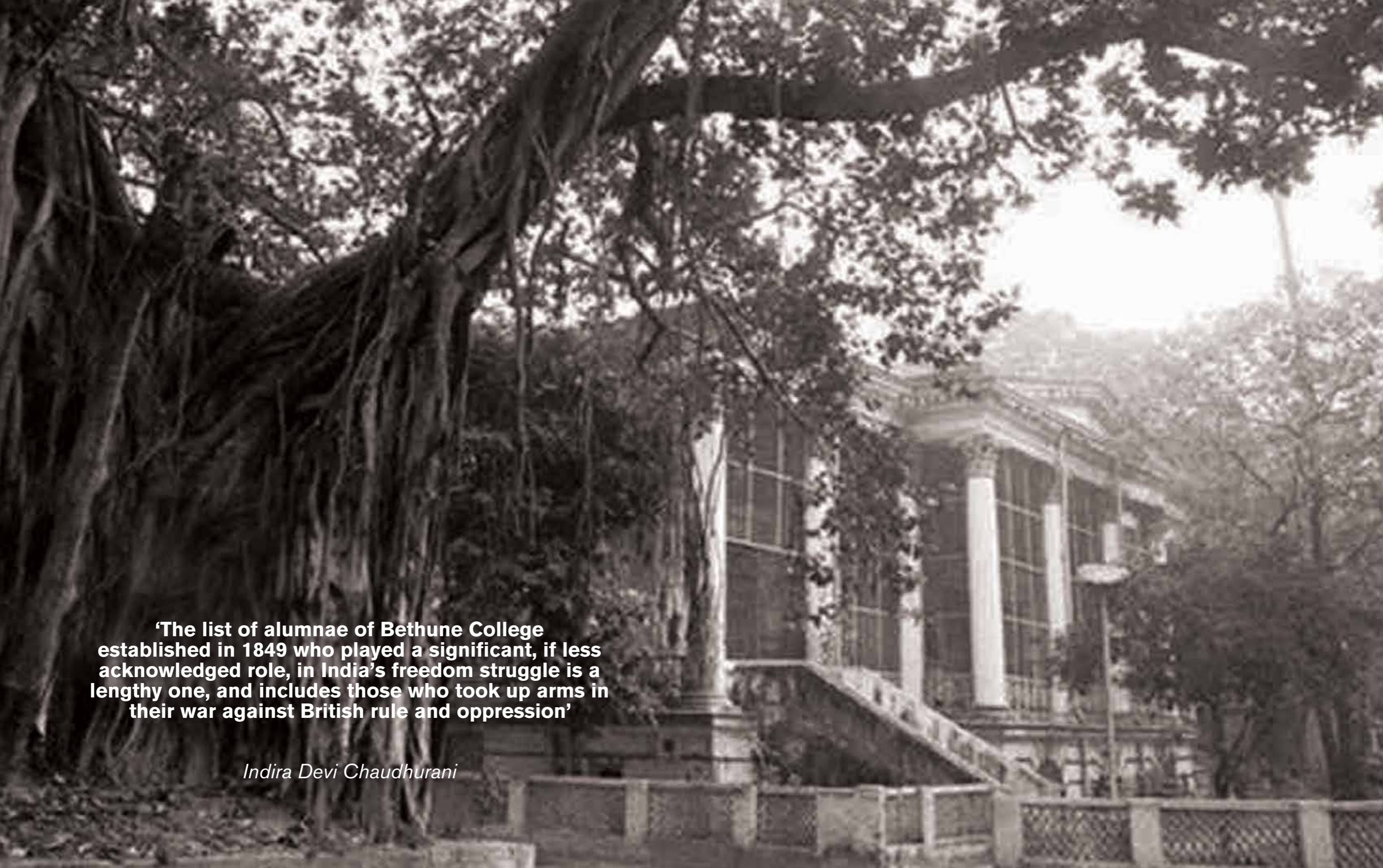


'Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.

Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you planned:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.

Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad'

Christina Rossetti



'The list of alumnae of Bethune College established in 1849 who played a significant, if less acknowledged role, in India's freedom struggle is a lengthy one, and includes those who took up arms in their war against British rule and oppression'

Indira Devi Chaudhurani

Some Remarkable Tagore Women: Talent Galore

In 1856, the Government took charge of the Hindu Female School, and later renamed it as Bethune School. The Managing Committee of the school was formed in due course, with Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar as the Secretary. Bethune School owes its origin to John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune (1801-1851).



Several women who remained part of the family home in Jorasanko were enormously talented and outspoken.

For instance, **Saudamini Devi**, Debendranath's eldest daughter, was one of the earliest students of Bethune School, set up exclusively for girls in 1849 despite tremendous opposition. The first two students were Kundamala and Bhuvanmala, daughters of Madanmohan Tarkalankar, who was ostracized for taking such a bold step. Debendranath Tagore, outraged, soon followed suit and admitted his eldest daughter to the educational institution along with her cousin Kumudini in 1851 to pave the way for other Bengali girls. But a problem arose when the police mistook Saudamini for a stolen English child – so fair was her complexion – and came to rescue her! However, the problem was soon resolved.

Originally called Hindu Female School, the name was later changed by the founder, John Drinkwater Bethune, one of India's greatest well-wishers. After school, Saudamini soon took charge of her large household and became a gifted writer. She translated Hafiz, wrote a treatise on her

father, and penned several songs for the Brahmo Samaj, carrying out her father's wishes with deep devotion. About her days in Bethune School, Saudamini wrote in her memoirs, 'When the Bethune School for girls was first established in Calcutta it was difficult to get students. So I was sent there along with my cousin sister. Shri Haradev Chatterjee, who was devoted to my father, also admitted his two daughters. Thus the institution started to grow.'

Swarnakumari, the fourth amongst the daughters of Debendranath Tagore, born in 1855, was the first successful woman writer of Bengali literature. Also an accomplished poet, novelist, musician and social worker, she was instrumental in helping an environment of education pervade Jorasanko. Swarnakumari recalled how in her early days the English governess employed for the girls at home would write something on a slate, which they then had to copy. Later, a better teacher, Ajodhyanath Pakrashi, became a rare male outsider in the women's quarters.

Married to Janakinath Ghosal, a strong-willed young man belonging to a zamindar family of Nadia district, Swarnakumari was encouraged by him to carry on with her literary pursuits. He was a theosophist and actively associated with the Indian National Congress from its



Swarnakumari was the first successful woman writer of Bengali literature

earliest days. Swarnakumari soon became a leading force behind the creation of the Ladies' Theosophical Society branch at Calcutta, of which she was the Secretary. Her first novel, *Deepnirban*, was published in 1876. Thereafter, she wrote extensively – novels, plays, poems and scientific essays. Two of her later novels and fourteen short stories along with a play were translated into English by Christina Albert. *Phooler Mala*, translated as *The Fatal Garland*, was published in *The Modern Review*. Rabindranath, however, had a poor opinion of the translation. She also started *Sakhi Samiti* with the assistance of several other members of the Tagore family. The objective of the society was to assist helpless orphans and widows. Once she became the editor and writer for the monthly literary journal, *Bharati*, for over thirty years, she garnered much appreciation and popularity.

Around 1889 Swarnakumari, along with other significant women like Kadambini Ganguly, Pandita Ramabai and Ramabai Ranade, participated in the Indian National Congress's annual sessions. This was a big step for women in politics in the country. Her further achievements include getting awarded with the Jagattarini Gold Medal by the University of Calcutta in 1927. Yet another feather to her cap was added in 1929, when she was elected as President of the Bangiya Sahitya Sammelan.

Mrinalini Devi, Rabindranath's wife, was mother to their five children. Almost immediately after her marriage, Jnanadanandini Devi admitted her to Loreto School to learn how to read and write in English under the supervision of Irish nuns. After studying at the convent for one year, Rabindranath appointed Pandit Herambachandra Bidyaratna, a home tutor, to teach her Sanskrit and scriptures. His elder brother Birendranath's son, Balendranath, taught her English and Bengali literature. Mark Twain soon became her favourite author.

A strong influence on her husband, Mrinalini sold her jewellery to fund Rabindranath's school in Santiniketan. She also translated the entire *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata* and all the verses of the *Katha Upanishad*. Furthermore, she participated in plays and operas written by her husband and mounted in Jorasanko. In the first

ever dramatization of *Raja O Rani*, she acted in the role of Narayani. Unfortunately, she became seriously ill when she was only twenty-eight years old and doctors failed to diagnose the disease. She died on the night of 23 November 1902, leaving her family bereft and in utter grief.

“**Saudamini Devi, Debendranath's eldest daughter, was one of the earliest students of Bethune School, set up exclusively for girls in 1849 despite tremendous opposition**”

Jnanadanandini Devi's daughter, **Indira**, was brought up in a Western atmosphere but had great love for the Bengali language. She was proficient in French and played the piano, having spent her childhood in Brighton in England. Soon she and her brother Surendranath became very close

to their uncle Rabindranath who joined them a year later, and the brother-sister duo were said to have been the poet's favourites among his nephews and nieces. Rabindranath's letters to Indira were later published as *Chinnapatra*. Once back from England, her early education in



Mrinalini sold her jewellery to fund Rabindranath's school in Santiniketan

India was at Auckland House in Simla and Loreto Convent in Calcutta. Many of Tagore's short stories have been translated into English by her.

In 1892, Indira graduated from Calcutta University with a First Class Honours in French and translated into Bengali the masterpieces of John Ruskin and important compositions of French literature. Indira was a strong proponent of women's issues and authored a number of works on the position of women in India. Her early interest in music helped her earn a diploma from the Trinity College of Music. She is noted to have scored the music for almost two hundred of Tagore's songs.

In later life, Indira Devi was instrumental in the establishment of Sangit Bhavana at Visva-Bharati and served as the chancellor of the University. Another niece of Rabindranath's, **Sushama** (Hemendranath's daughter), broke out of the confines of music and culinary arts to tread the path of women's empowerment. As she wrote later, 'Until our women become literate – for cultured

they already are – and become economically and socially independent, India's bad luck will not leave her.' Sushama, a virtuoso musician, a poet and a philosopher in her own right studied at the Diocesan School. At sixteen, she, as an overseas student at Trinity College, Cambridge, had just been placed First in the highly competitive piano examination when she received news that she was to be married in the arranged tradition of the time to a lawyer named Jogendranath Mukherjee.

While her nature rebelled against the wedding as she wanted to travel the world

and promote women's empowerment, she relented to her mother's begging. It turned out to be an amicable partnership; Jogendranath was very supportive and respectful of Sushama's independent spirit and lofty ambitions. In later life Sushama held the Ramakrishna Mission and its monks in deep reverence, having made initial contact with them in Chicago when she was travelling in America. In fact, her eldest son joined the monastic order.

“ In 1892, Indira graduated from Calcutta University with a First Class Honours in French and translated into Bengali the masterpieces of John Ruskin and important compositions of French literature. Indira was a strong proponent of women's issues and authored a number of works on the position of women in India ”

Pragnasundari Devi, her middle sister – cookbook author and magazine editor (her *Amish ONiramish Ahar* was a 'significant' early cookbook in the Bengali language) – was married to the most famous Assam author, Lakshminath Bezbaroa.

Sushama's youngest sister, **Sudakshina**, is hardly known in Bengal as she was married to Pandit Jwalaprasad Pande, a zamindar of Hardoi district in Uttar Pradesh at an early age. Jwalaprasad took great pains to teach his wife the details of property management and she also learnt to ride and wield a gun. After her husband's demise, she took full charge of his estate as uncrowned queen and negotiated tricky deals in flawless English with the local British officials.

So impressed were they with her administrative skills and charm that they wanted to confer the title of 'maharani' on her – not once but thrice! Every time Sudakshina declined but finally accepted the Kaiser-e-Hind medal, not as a zamindar but for her tireless social service.

Another niece of Rabindranath, **Protiva**, his elder brother Hemendranath's eldest daughter, opened up music and dramatics to women by preparing musical notations for Brahma Sangeet and Hindustani classical music.

“ Irabati, Saudamini's elder daughter, and her sister Indumati, though born in Jorasanko and educated in Bethune School, nursed little contact with their childhood home later as they were given away in marriage to men who had hardly any links with Calcutta. Indumati's granddaughter – her daughter Leela's child – the beautiful Devika Rani, a famous actress, helmed Bombay Talkies ”

Irabati, Saudamini's elder daughter, and her sister **Indumati**, though born in Jorasanko and educated in Bethune School, nursed little contact with their childhood home later as they were given away in marriage to men who had hardly any links with Calcutta. Indumati's granddaughter – her daughter Leela's child – the beautiful **Devika Rani** was a famous actress who helmed Bombay Talkies with her husband Himangshu Roy and broke

several taboos by joining the film industry.

Hironmoyee and Sarala, the two talented daughters of Swarnakumari, despite being Ghosal girls, spent several of their childhood days in Jorasanko. Hironmoyee was a true helpmate and companion to



Indira and her brother Surendranath became very close to their uncle Rabindranath in England



Sushama (Hemendranath's daughter) tread the path of women's empowerment



Hironmoyee and Sarala, the two talented daughters of Swarnakumari

her mother and very involved with her publications. She became a member of the Ladies' Theosophical Society but her real achievement lay in social service and her activities centered on *Bidhaba Shilpasram* in Baranagar, meant for the shelter of widows.



The beautiful Devika Rani, famous actress, who helmed Bombay Talkies with her husband



Pragnasundari Devi was married to the famous Assam author, Lakshminath Bezbaroa

A fiery nationalist and founder of the first women's organisation in India in 1910 – the Bharat Stree Mahamandal – **Sarala** broke several norms to free women from their societal fetters. One of the primary goals of the organisation was to promote education for women – woefully inadequate at that time. It opened several offices in Lahore (then part of undivided India), Allahabad, Delhi, Karachi, Amritsar, Hyderabad, Kanpur, Bankura, Hazaribagh, Midnapur and Calcutta to improve the situation.

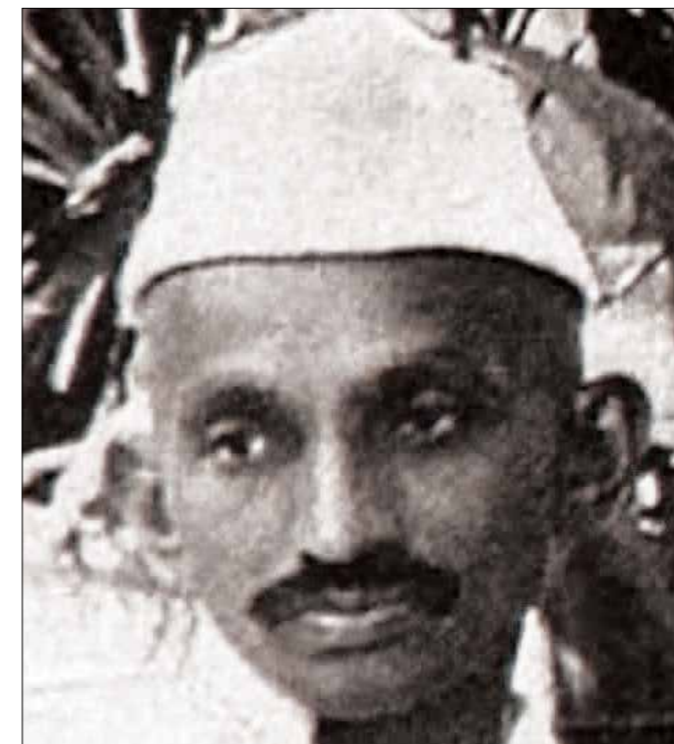
Upon completing her education, Sarala went to Mysore State and joined the Maharani Girls' School as a teacher. During the 1890s she took up the editorship of *Bharati* and wrote extensive articles for various journals. Swami Vivekanand in letters to her appreciated her patriotism, 'liberal mind' and knowledge of the Vedanta. Sister Nivedita later suggested she undertake a lecture tour of England and America with Swamiji to inspire people there to adopt Indian spirituality. While she made no such tour, Sarala worked tirelessly within Bengal to promote militant nationalism. She set up and encouraged others to set up youth clubs to develop physical prowess and mental strength. In effect, she laid the foundations for the revolutionary movement which emerged in the early twentieth century. She extended solidarity, material and financial support to secret societies such as *Anushilan Samiti* in Dhaka, *Suhrid Samiti* in Mymensingh and several others in Calcutta. In 1905, under family pressure, she married Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhuri – a lawyer, journalist, nationalist leader and follower of the Arya Samaj, the Hindu reform movement founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. After her marriage, Sarala moved to Punjab where she helped her husband edit the nationalist Urdu weekly, *Hindusthan*.

In 1919-20, when India was pushed to a tipping point by the twin horrors of the Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Gandhiji came in contact with Sarala Devi and her husband. After Rambhuj was arrested and jailed for his involvement in the non-cooperation movement, Mahatma Gandhi visited her home in Lahore as a guest. And thus in early 1920, 47-year-old Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and 50-year-old Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi pledged to write each other at least one letter per day.

The intensity of their correspondence and friendship lasted barely one year. During this time a few hundred epistles passed between them, for although there were gaps in letter-writing, as when they were together in the same place, there were also days



Sarala broke several norms to free women from their societal fetters

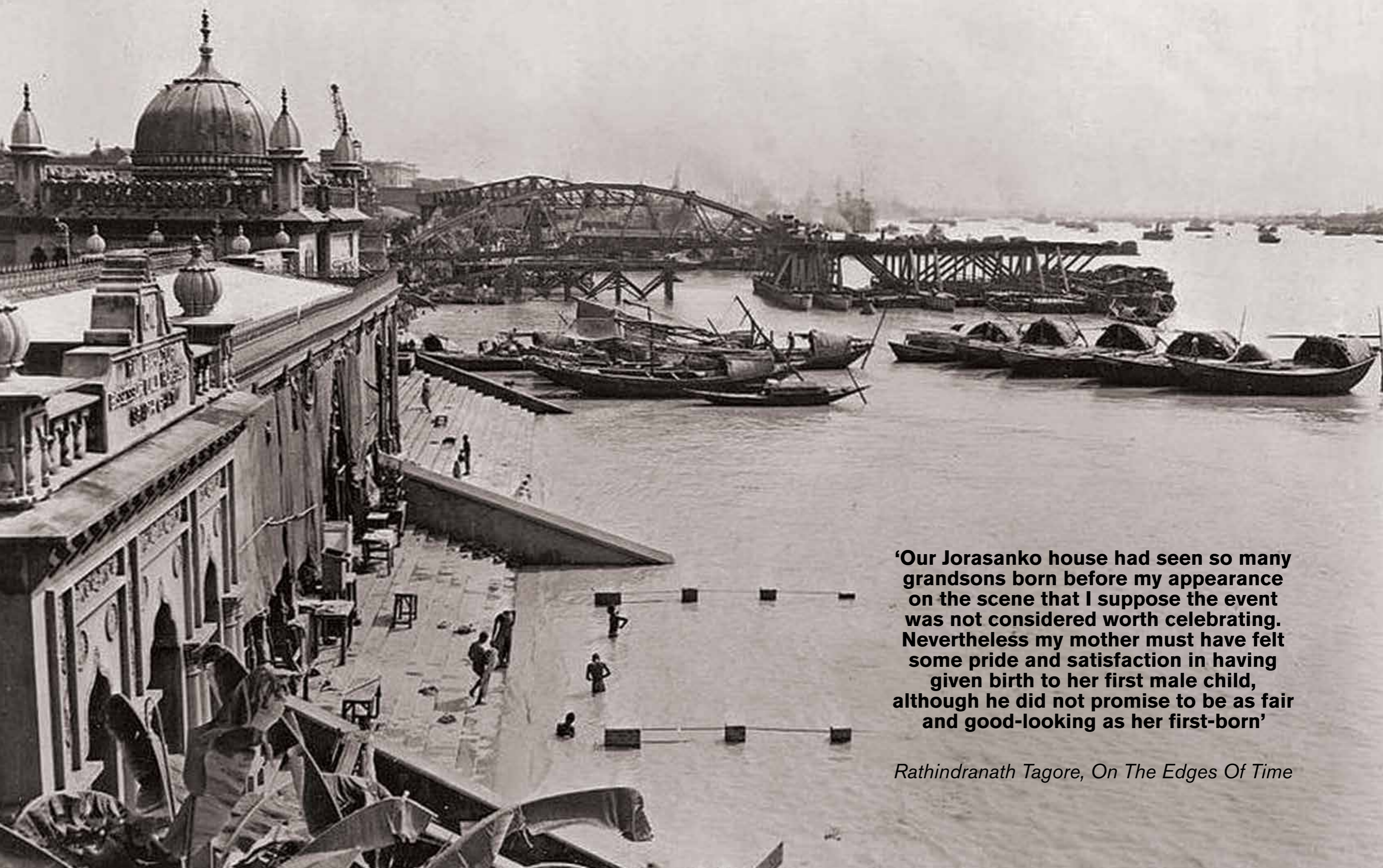


Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Saraladevi's most ardent admirer

when more than one missive was exchanged. On 13 May 1920, for instance, Gandhiji mentions that he had sent Sarala Devi twenty-five letters in sixteen days – the bar for mutual devotion was clearly set very high! It was a complex relationship, if short-lived, and to understand it, one has to be acquainted with the free-spirited Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. She was in her time a well-known leader – a fierce nationalist and *avant garde* feminist, credited with setting the stage for the revolutionary movement in Bengal on passionate fire. So the chemistry was strong but it was bound to fizzle out. However, soon after the three met, Sarala and Rambhuj entrusted Gandhi with the care of their 12-year-old son, Dipak, who moved to Sabarmati Ashram to live with the Mahatma. Years later, Dipak married Radha, Gandhiji's granddaughter. While in South Africa, Gandhiji had asked his brother, Khushaldas, to give him both his sons, Maganlal and Chhaganlal, to assist him in his work at the Phoenix Farm. Known to be the first disciple of Gandhi, Maganlal, Radha's father, was more than mere family. And young Radha, growing up in the Mahatma's shadow, also became his disciple.

After her husband's death in 1923, Sarala Devi returned to Calcutta and resumed editing responsibilities for *Bharati* from 1924 to 1926. She established a girls' school, Siksha Sadan, in Calcutta in 1930 and finally retired from public life in 1935, turning to religion and accepting Bijoy Krishna Goswami, a Gaudiya Vaishnava, as her spiritual teacher. She died on 18 August 1945 in Calcutta, remaining a believer of the Swadeshi movement till the very end.

Indeed, the Tagore women of Jorasanko, educated and exposed to independent thought, carved a niche for themselves and set an example for others who were waiting in the wings to come out of their narrow confines and watch a new India emerge where women would learn to protest against any injustice or man-made shackles. To quote Rabindranath: 'I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self.' *



‘Our Jorasanko house had seen so many grandsons born before my appearance on the scene that I suppose the event was not considered worth celebrating. Nevertheless my mother must have felt some pride and satisfaction in having given birth to her first male child, although he did not promise to be as fair and good-looking as her first-born’

Rathindranath Tagore, On The Edges Of Time

Gagan, Aban & Rathi: Precious Memories

'Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.'

To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee



Born to Gunendranath Tagore and Saudamini Devi in Jorasanko, in the Hindu wing of the mansion, **Gaganendranath (1867-1938)** was the eldest son of Gunendranath, grandson of Girindranath Tagore and a great-grandson of Prince Dwarkanath. Along with his younger brother, Abanindranath, he was a pioneer of the Bengal School of Art, a nephew of the poet, Rabindranath, and paternal great-grandfather of actress Sharmila Tagore.

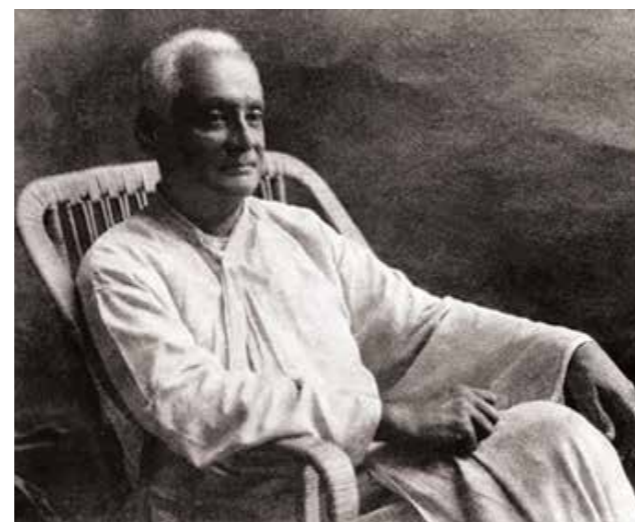
Young Gagan lost his father at the age of fourteen and thus his formal education came to an abrupt halt. He had, instead, to bear the burden of the zamindari and shoulder several social responsibilities as head of the family. He had great love for Indian and western literature and built up a huge library in his own home. Yet, unable to have formal schooling, Gaganendra was, like his more famous nephew, Rabindranath, a self-taught man.

Initially trained under the water-colourist, Harinarayan Bandopadhyay, in 1907, along with Abanindranath, he founded the Indian Society of Oriental Art which later

published the influential journal, *Rupam*. Between 1906 and 1910, the artist studied and assimilated Japanese brush techniques as demonstrated by his illustrations for Rabindranath's autobiography, *Jeevansmriti*. With the passing years, he went on to develop his own approach in his now celebrated *Chaitanya and Pilgrim* series of paintings. Gaganendranath eventually abandoned the revivalism of the Bengal School and took to caricature. *The Modern Review* published many of his cartoons in 1917. From 1917 onwards, his satirical lithographs appeared in a series of books, including *Play of Opposites*, *Realm of the Absurd* and *Reform Screams*.

There was a change in the painter's life after 1920 when he assimilated various forms of French art. His main contribution consisted of the exposure of light and shade. The introduction of geometric figures featured in the second stage of his artistic experiments. Towards 1930, there was a clear indication in his paintings of the expression of feelings symbolic of death and supernatural objects.

Gaganendranath, a harbinger of modern art, had the privilege of his paintings being exhibited and highly praised in Paris, London, Hamburg, Berlin and some cities of America from 1914 to 1927. But he was not merely a painter; his originality in designing furniture in the ethnic tradition and the decoration of the house cannot be ignored. Imbued by the Swadeshi Movement,



Gaganendranath Tagore, artist par excellence

he discarded the luxurious western flower vases and Victorian furniture from the paternal Jorasanko mansion accumulated during three generations and, instead, contributed greatly to the re-introduction of homemade artifacts, endeavoring to make the cottage industry of Bengal popular. In 1916 he became one of the secretaries of the Bengal Home Industries Association, established through the patronage of Lord Carmichael, the then governor of Bengal.

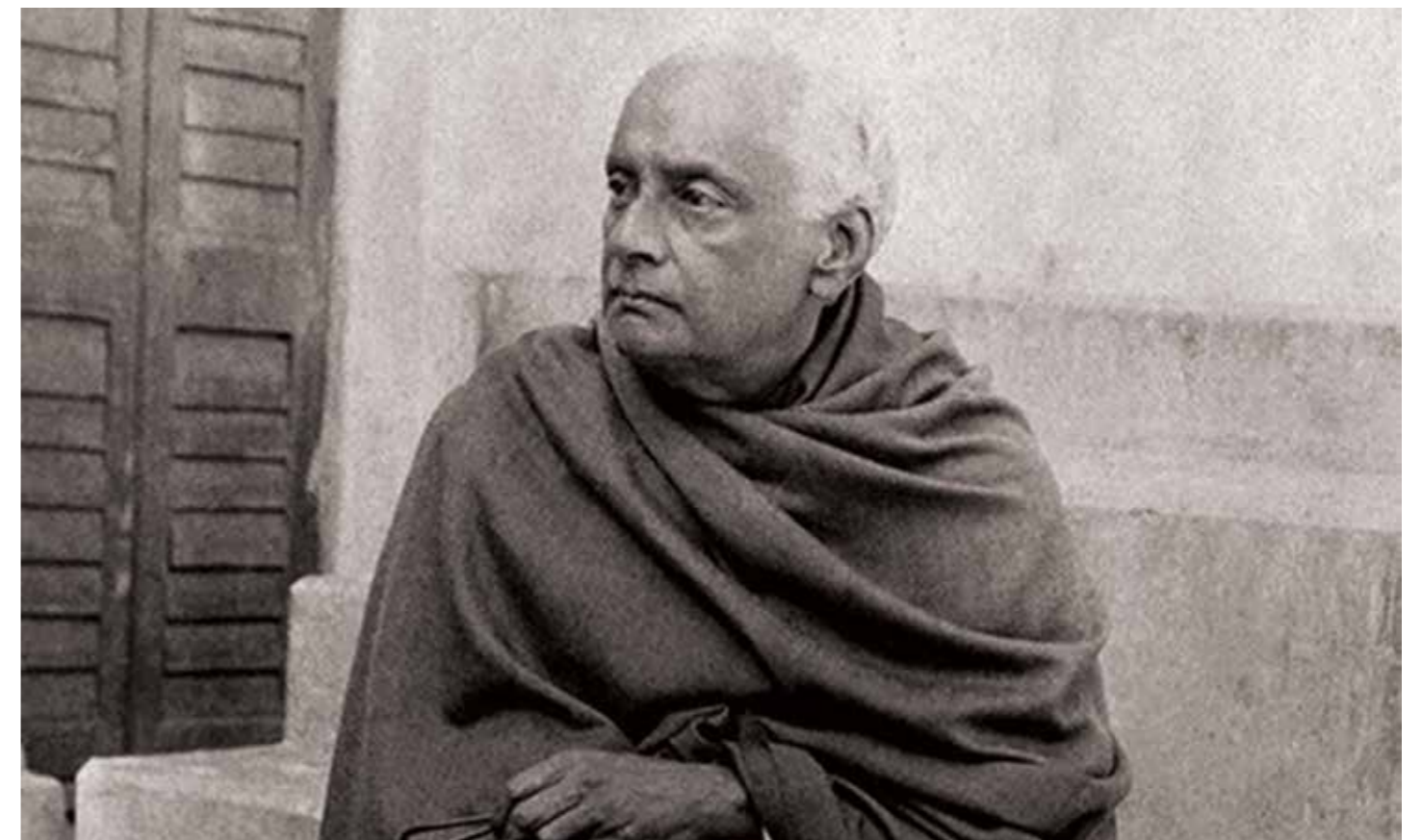
An excellent actor, Gaganendranath staged *Falguni*, a play by Rabindranath, in Jorasanko in 1916, playing the lead role of the king. Annie Besant, invited to be part of the audience, praised him profusely for his ability as an actor. He also successfully acted as the Emperor, Vijayaditya, in the play *Rinsodh* and as Baikuntha in *Baikunther Khata*. His knack for stage decoration and set designing was novel as he tried bringing about more sophisticated changes in the dress of menfolk from mundane *dhoti-panjabi* and designed for the first time the Tibetan Baku, a fancy overcoat that Rabindranath wore with great aplomb in his

later years. Gaganendranath also wrote *Bhodar Bahadur* in the manner of Lewis Carroll for children in 1926, which was published thirty years after his death.

“ An excellent actor, Gaganendranath staged Falguni, a play by Rabindranath, in Jorasanko in 1916, playing the lead role of the king ”

His younger brother Abanindranath and sister, Sunayani Devi, were also artists of great reckoning.

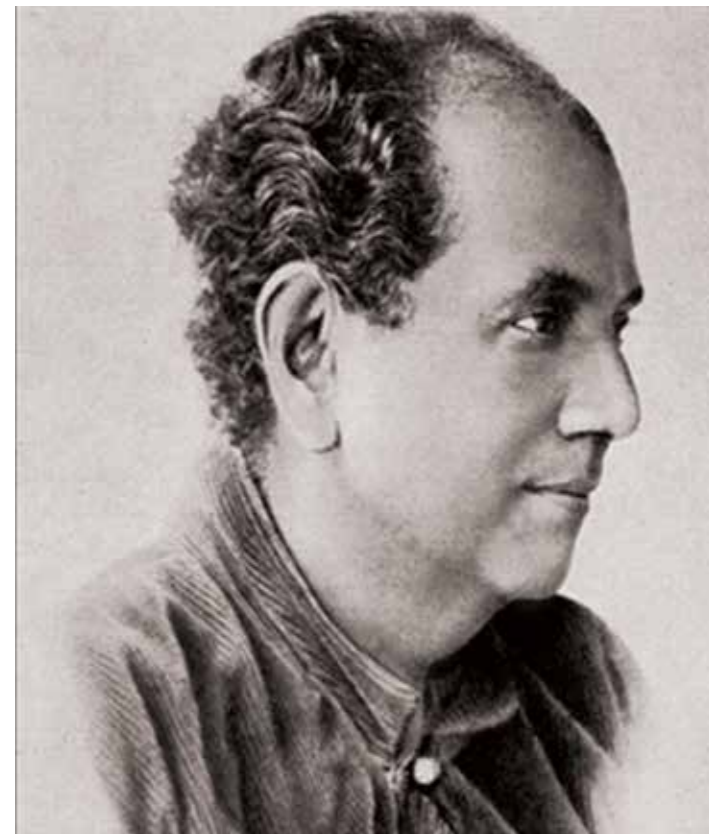
Abanindranath (1871-1951), Gaganendranath's younger sibling, was not only influenced by his brother but also gathered considerable artistic heritage through his uncle, Rabindranath. A Jorasanko boy, in his late teens young Aban was sent to Calcutta's Sanskrit College where he learned to paint with great expression and technical skill. This experience convinced him that his future was as an artist. He remained a student at the Sanskrit College for nine years, then moved to spend eighteen months at St Xavier's College, where he studied English.



An excellent actor, Gaganendranath staged Falguni, a play by Rabindranath, in Jorasanko

In 1890, Abanindranath attended the Calcutta School of Art, where he learnt to use pastels from O Ghilardi and the art of oil painting from C Palmer, European painters who taught in that institution. Around this time, several of his drawings were published in the magazine, *Sadhana*, and also as illustrations of his uncle, Rabindranath Tagore's literary works. By 1897, he had taken further lessons from Ernest Binfield Havell, vice-principal of the Government School of Art, studying in the traditional European academic manner and learning the full range of techniques, but with a particular interest in water-colour. It was during this period that he developed his interest in Mughal art, producing a number of works based on the life of Krishna in a Mughal-influenced style.

After meeting Havell, Abanindranath worked with him to revitalize and redefine teaching art to a host of younger students. His closest pupils included Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar, Sarada Ukil, Manishi Dey, Mukul Dey, K Venkatappa and Ranada Ukil.



Abanindranath Tagore, creator of the Bengal School of Art

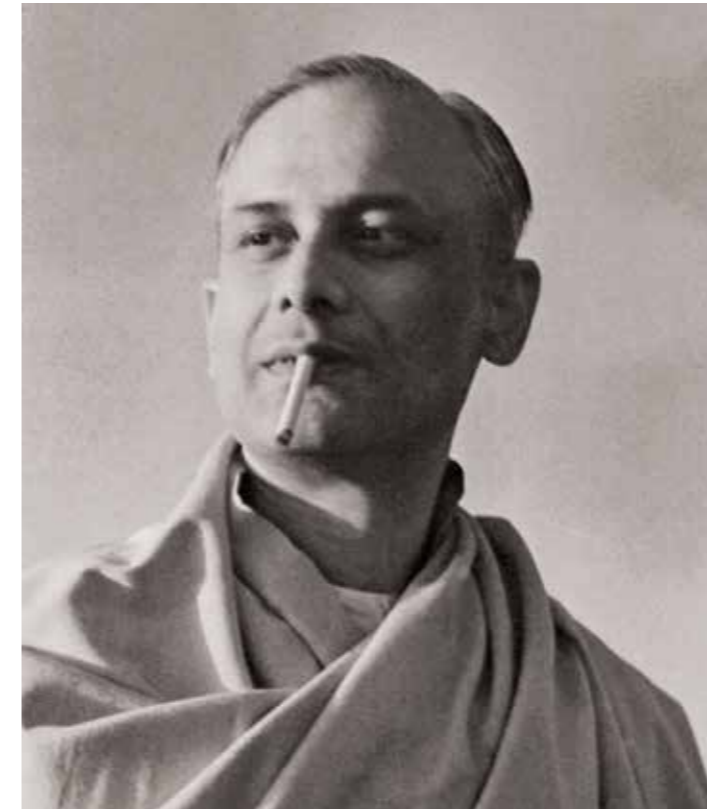
“ In his later works, Aban started integrating Chinese and Japanese calligraphic traditions into his personal style ”

Abanindranath also maintained an intimate friendship with the London-based artist, author and eventual president of London's Royal College of Art, William Rothenstein through out his life. This was the time when Rabindranath was in England, living in Rothenstein's London home, which led to his meeting several British authors and intellectuals and the subsequent publication of the English-language version of *Gitanjali* that won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

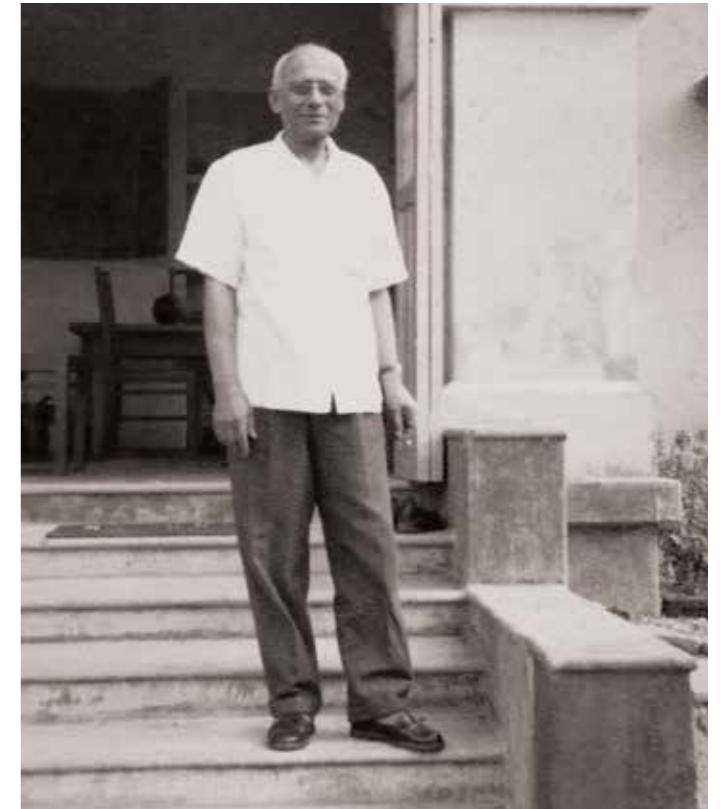
In his later works, Aban started integrating Chinese and Japanese calligraphic traditions into his personal style. He believed that Western art was 'materialistic' in character, and that India needed to 'return to its own traditions to recover its spiritual values.' Despite its Indocentric nationalism, this view was already commonplace within British art of the time, stemming from the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites. Aban's work also shows the influence of Whistler's aestheticism. Partly for this reason, many British arts administrators were sympathetic to such ideas, especially as Hindu



Abanindranath was also a prolific writer in Bengali of children's literature



The multifaceted Rathindranath, the poet's eldest son



Rathindranath in his home, Mitali, in Dehradun

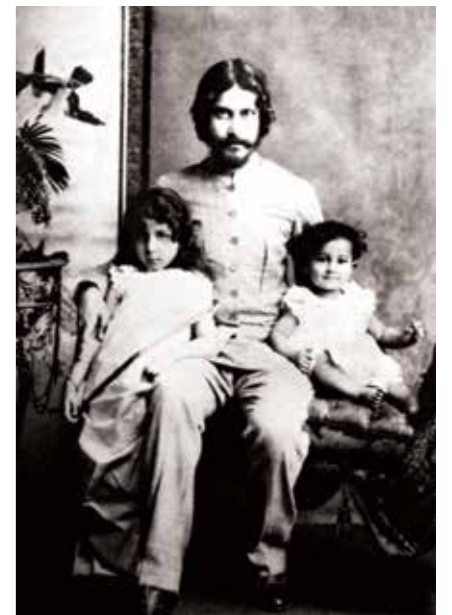
philosophy was becoming increasingly influential in the West, following the spread of the Theosophy movement kick-started by Madam Blavatsky and taken forward to its full bloom by Annie Besant. Tagore believed that Indian traditions could be adapted to express these new values, and to promote a progressive national culture. His finest achievement was the *Arabian Nights* series which was painted in 1930. In these paintings, he uses the *Arabian Nights* stories as a means of looking at colonial Calcutta and picturing its emergent cosmopolitanism.

Abanindranath initially created the Indian Society of Oriental Art and later went on to establish the Bengal School of Art. He was also regarded as a proficient writer. Most of his literary works were meant for children. Some of his books like *Budo-Angla*, *Naalok*, *Khirer Putul* and *Raajkahini* are the best examples of Bengali children's literature, much appreciated even today.

A favourite cousin and friend of Gagan and Aban, **Rathindranath (1888-1961)**, the only surviving son of the world-famous poet, Rabindranath, was also an artist and a man of exceptional talent. Initially, his

father educated Rathindranath with the help of tutors at home in Jorasanko. Then, in 1901, when he started a school in Santiniketan, Rathi was not only one of the first five boys of the Brahmacharya Ashram, but also one of the reasons for its existence and the most representative product of Rabindranath's educational ideal.

In 1902, Rathindranath's mother, Mrinalini, died; only nine months later his sister Rani and in 1907 his little brother Sami passed away. Heartbroken, some of the teachers at Santiniketan helped Rathi to prepare for his higher studies. His father wanted to send Rathi to a different country to



Baby Rathi, sister Bela and father Rabi

study a technical subject, as he hoped that he would then teach it at Visva-Bharati. Therefore, after his matriculation, Rathi was sent to Illinois in the USA to study Agricultural Science. Once he received his Bachelor's Degree, he travelled to Europe, stopping in London and then briefly studying at Goettingen University, Germany, before finally returning home.

In 1910, Rathindranath, aged twenty-one, was married to Pratima (Gagan and Aban's niece and daughter of their sister, Binayani) who was only sixteen. Pratima had been married before, when she was eleven years old, but her husband, Nilanath Chattopadhyay, had died two months later. This was the first time in Bengal that a widow was re-married within the same family.

After the wedding, Rabindranath took the newly-weds to Santiniketan and then to the family estates in Shelidah to make Rathi the new zamindar. Here, Rathi tried to demonstrate the innovative farming techniques he had learnt in America to the local peasants and introduce methods of self-government. But then, before he could begin work in earnest, he was called back by his father and spent the next four decades of his life serving Santiniketan and Visva Bharati helping implement Rabindranath's plans.

The building of some of the administrative office blocks and hostels, the setting up of the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan with his close friend, Leonard Elmhirst, and colleagues Santosh Chandra Mazumdar, Gour Gopal Ghosh, Kalimohan Ghosh

and Kim Taro Kasahara, the laying out of the Uttarayan garden and the planting of several historic trees inside the ashram was meticulously supervised by Rathindranath. At different times he was a teacher and an administrator



Rathi in Mussoorie, with Nirmal, Mira and their infant son

and made an enormous contribution to developing the Rabindranath Tagore Memorial and Archives. Once Visva Bharati was formally established, Rathindranath initially served as a faculty-member and subsequently as its Chairman. In later years, especially after his father's death in 1941, he found this job to be unfulfilling. When Visva-Bharati finally became a Central University in 1951, most hesitantly he did become its first Vice-chancellor but disliked the change as it added what he regarded as unnecessary bureaucracy. When allegations of financial irregularities were levelled against him by a small coterie of rivals, he was reluctant to even attend the court hearings as he found the allegations utterly foolish. This irked the *acharya* (chancellor) of the university, Jawaharlal Nehru, who was also the Prime Minister of India at the time. Eventually, the charges brought against Rathindranath could not be proven in the court of law.

Yet, constantly hounded by the authorities and abandoned by his wife and family, Rathindranath found great comfort in his friendship with Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee, a reputed professor at Visva Bharati, and his wife, Mira, who was thirty-one years younger than Rathi. Around this period, the relationship between Rathindranath and Pratima had become so strained that they stayed in separate homes. Deeply humiliated for his fondness for Mira, he finally resigned from his post and left with her and her infant son for Dehradun, where he spent the next decade of his life in Mitali, a beautiful home he built in the shadow of the Himalayas, in the warmth of his companion and foster son, nursed back to health and with some semblance of family life that brought him great joy before his death in 1961.

All his life Rathindranath was a loyal and dedicated son, fulfilling his father's wishes and implementing his ideas to the best of his ability. Agriculturist, carpenter, architect, writer, painter, teacher of genetics and able administrator, Rathindranath Tagore's life is a true celebration of all that his father represented. In 2013, Visva-Bharati University set up a museum in his memory. Guha-Ghar, which was built by Rathindranath Tagore and served as his residence at Santiniketan, today houses the museum in his memory. *

“ If you cry because the sun has gone out of your life, your tears will prevent you from seeing the stars ”

Rabindranath Tagore



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“ As British power and commerce grew and what became the rich and prosperous city of Calcutta, the commercial metropolis of new India, so the fortunes of the Tagore family grew with it, owning vast estates in the country and huge mansions in the city ”

Krishna Kripalani

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