

Title of the Book: *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*

Translated and Edited by Somdatta Mandal, Birutjatiyo Sahityo Sammiloni, 2021, xxix+432pp., Rs 810.00, ISBN: 978-81-949426-1-0.

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To common people, who have known Rabindranath Tagore only through his creative works, it is unusual for them to imagine the agony of his last days. In their eyes, he is ‘biswakobi’ (“world-poet”) or ‘kobiguru’ (“the poet-mentor”), a quasi-divine figure whose songs, poems and prose impeccably manifest an indomitable spirit of life force. Many readers and scholars are aware of the tragic incidents that wrecked his personal life such as the untimely deaths of his wife and three children, but, most of them may not have any idea about how he endured his ailments. It was only his family members and close associates who could witness from proximity the gradual erosion of his health in the last few years of his life. The present volume, comprising selections from five memoirs in English translation, unfolds a first-hand account of the resilience the poet put up against morbidity through the eyes of five women—Pratima Thakur, Rani Chanda, Maitreyi Devi, Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis and Amita Thakur.

Pratima Thakur was Rabindranath’s daughter-in-law, wife of his elder son Rathindranath Tagore. Amita Thakur, was his granddaughter-in-law. After her father’s death, an eight-year-old Amita was brought to Santiniketan by Tagore. Since then, she stayed there and grew up under the shade of his affection. Her reminiscences show that her “whole life was centered on Rabindranath” (xiii). Rani Chanda, wife of Tagore’s personal secretary Anil Kumar Chanda, took notes of Tagore’s words in her diary. Her works such as *Alapchari Rabindranath* and *Gurudev* represent her recordings. Maitreyi Devi, author of *Mongpu-te Rabindranath* and *Swarger Kachakachi*, is a well-known Bengali writer. She lived in Mongpu in North Bengal with her husband. Tagore stayed in her house several times when he visited North Bengal. Nirmalkumari Mahalanobis, also known as Rani, was the wife of Prasantachandra Mahalanobis, the famous statistician who set up the Indian Statistical Institute in Kolkata. He was also the Secretary of Visva-Bharati for many years. Tagore and the Mahalanobis couple travelled together to Europe and South India. Their travels are represented in Nirmalkumari’s travelogues such as *Kobir Shonge Europey* and *Kobir Shonge Dakshinattey*. This volume includes her memoir *Baishe Shravan* or “22nd of Shravan,” named after the death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore.

The terminal phase of his deteriorating health—the urgent surgery at home in Jorashanko, the post-operative complications and gradually his succumbing to those — certainly, has been documented by male writers and biographers. Somdatta Mandal mentions some of them in the Appendices: Buddhadeva Bose (“The Last Days of Rabindranath: Record of a Visit to Santiniketan”), Kumar Sri Jayantanath Ray (“The Great Nirvana of the World Poet”), Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay (“Rabindrajiboni”) and Nityapriya Ghosh (“Rabindranath Tagore: A Pictorial Biography”). However, their representations of the incident are limited to factual descriptions. Mandal remarks, “This incident is narrated in different biographies and memoirs, but interestingly enough, all the established biographers mention the last phase of the poet’s life very briefly and cursorily. On the other hand, though subjective, the memoirs of the five women...fill up that gap” (xii). Their narratives smack of emotional attachments and highlight female responses to crises and pain. The affective aspects which are ignored in biographies of the male writers come alive in the reminiscences of these women.

The five women belonged to different age groups but all of them shared special bonding with Tagore. Their memoirs consist of long narratives, letters and diary entries. The testimonies presented by them excavate a lesser-known chapter of Tagore’s life and personality, which hitherto remained buried under the glorious records of his public activities and achievements. Details of the poet’s family life such as how he travelled from one hill station to another in the Himalayas for his daughter Renuka’s recovery from tuberculosis and how his heart was full of anxieties for Meera, his youngest daughter whose marriage failed, throw light on Tagore’s character as a father. Other unknown facts that also come up in these memoirs are: how, under his mentorship, Rani Chanda’s writing skills flourished; his nephew, the great painter Abanindranath Tagore, whom Tagore addressed as “Aban,” was full of interesting stories; the poet insisted Rani Chanda to record those stories; he drank coffee in the morning, etc. Ironically, his last collection of poems that came out in May 1941 was titled *Janmadiney* (“Birthday Poems”). Pratima Thakur, the author of *Nirban*, observes that perhaps he had the premonition of his impending death, which he expressed in one of the “Birthday Poems”:

When the birthday and the day of death both come face to face,

I see in that union

Between the sunrise and the sunset

An exchange of the glances of that exhausted day—

A beautiful end and tribute to a bright glory (35).

Tagore's death on 7th of August, 1941, which is the 22nd day of Shravan, the month of rains in the Bengali calendar, was a national news. The public reaction to this incident—an unmanageable crowd flocking around the dead body of Tagore, a large procession accompanying him in his funeral journey — as represented in Satyajit Ray's 1961 documentary film *Rabindranath Tagore* shows the impact of the death of a great man on his countrymen. Mandal quotes Ray's voiceover against this scene as a fitting epigraph to the volume:

On the 7th August 1941, in the city of Calcutta, a man died. His mortal remains perished. But he left behind him a heritage which no fire could consume. It is a heritage of words and music and poetry, of ideas and of ideals which has the power to move us, to inspire us today, in the days to come. We, who owe him so much, salute his memory.

The selections of memoirs in the present volume shows that Tagore's greatness lies not only in his poetic feats. His iconoclastic vision in the field of education and his outreach activities as a nationalist with cosmopolitan outlook established him as the man of the world. His aura as a public figure is as resplendent as his name 'Robi' meaning the sun. His death, as Amita Thakur notes in her reminiscences "The Last Journey of Rabindranath" was the setting of the "human sun" (378). *The Last Days of Tagore in Memoirs* is not a bland description of a sick man's travel towards death, rather, it is a cinematographic frame of his sunset years.

During the last two years of his life, illness confined him to four walls of the domestic fold. The responsibility of taking care of the sick poet at home was vested with the women, who volunteered to serve him out of unending love and unsurmountable regards. He was so fond of them that he often addressed them by various names: he called Rani Chanda "Dwitiya;" Maitreyi Devi "Mangpei" and "Mitra" and Pratima Thakur "Mamoni." As mentioned in Maitreyi Devi's memoir *Swarger Kachhakachhi*, he called his granddaughter Nandita aka Buri by different adorable names such as "apple of grandpa's eye," "short girl with an umbrella," "sparrow" and more such epithets (160). These women were well-educated and modern. Most of them had Brahmo upbringing. Their memoirs add a special dimension to the representation of Tagore's 'last days' because they played the role of *sevika* ("nurse"). At the same time, they were his long-time companions with whom he uninhibitedly discussed his literary creations and shared his thoughts. The five women interacted with one another either through letters or in person when they met in Santiniketan and Jorashanko. Also, they had a rapport with other members of the Tagore family. They were also familiar with many important personalities of

the time, who were friends of the Tagores. In this respect, the perspectives of these women as represented in their selected works have enormous importance for studying the inner circles of Tagore's life history.

They looked after him at home and also during his travels. He loved the food cooked by Amita Thakur. With her perceptiveness she had realised that the aged poet disliked oily and spicy food. So, she used minimum ingredients. In her recollection titled "Rabindranath Tagore in my Memory," which is a selection from the preface of her book *Jorashankor Thakurbarir Procholito Ranna* ("The Traditional Cooking of the Tagore Household at Jorashanko"), she observes, "I hardly knew how to cook, but since I devoted my entire mind and heart into cooking, probably it turned out to be good and he liked what I cooked" (374). Nothing was more gratifying to the young girl than to see her *dadamoshai* (grandfather) sipping the full bowl of vegetables or mutton soup she prepared specially for him.

The selections of the memoirs in this volume show that all five of the *sevikas* were sincere and dedicated though they did not have the formal nursing training. This lack of training, sometimes, turned out to be a serious issue. This is evident in Maitreyi Devi's recollection of the incident of accompanying the unconscious Tagore from Kalimpong to Kolkata in September, 1940. Being an amateur nurse, she did not know that false teeth should be removed from the mouth of an unconscious person. She had taken it out from the poet's mouth and had placed it back after cleaning it. On reaching Kolkata, she was rebuked by Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy for this mistake. Unlike Rani Chanda, Nirmalkumari and Amita Thakur, it was not possible for Maitreyi Devi to visit the poet frequently or to stay with him for a long time in Santiniketan and Kolkata. However, there was regular correspondence between them through letters. When Tagore was seriously ill, he wrote letters through his deputy and put his signature with a trembling hand. At that time, Maitreyi Devi wrote few letters to him to save Tagore and the deputies from taking the pain to respond. Although she did not say that to him, he could understand it and was overjoyed to receive her gift, a box of oranges from Mongpu.

Pratima Thakur mentions that though both men and women felt blessed to serve him, "he liked more to be served by women than men" (23). He dedicated his poetry volumes such as "Rogshajyaye" ("In the Sick Bed") and "Arogya" ("Healing") to his two female caregivers — Nandita Kripalani and Amita Thakur. Defending his partiality towards women, he would say, "Women belong to the mother's race; serving others suit them" (23). It is obvious from Pratima Devi's recollection that Tagore sought the warmth of maternal affection from his female

caregivers and he believed firmly that this warmth was innate in them. To him, the childless Nirmalkumari was his 'Head Nurse.' He addressed her as his 'Last Friend,' who he believed would not leave him in any adverse situation. To the sick man, the presence of women was a reminder of umbilical bonding between the mother and the child. As recorded by Rani Chanda, his philosophical musings in a state of trance shows that in spite of achieving limitless success and fame, old age and its ailments hit him with an ordinary's man's agony. Loss of physical strength and the disillusionments with close relationships increased his feeling of helplessness. He yearned for the consolation ingrained in maternal affection. Chanda recalls an incident that speaks of Tagore's unfathomable faith in the feminine power of caregiving:

One day he wrote the poem "Nari" (Woman) ...and gave it to me with his name signed below. He told me, "Though I am addressing it to you, I am also writing it for all the women in the world. Patients are like gods for all of you. When a woman takes such responsibility upon herself, the world gives her the duty to serve and rear it. In that respect, women are universal. The world's power of rearing is inherent within you too."
(85)

Tagore had great reservation in accepting someone's service, the five women had won his confidence and trust. This not only made them proud but also jealous of one another for each one of them thought that Tagore liked her more than the rest. Their reminiscences reveal that he had a deep understanding of human nature, and it was his respect, adoration and empathy for women that drew him close to their hearts. In this context, Rani Chanda's diary entry on 25th October, 1940, is worth referring: That day when Tagore was taking rest, the women of the household were chatting among themselves on the issue of women being stigmatised as jealous. While some of them protested against such a stereotyped view and a few argued that men are more jealous than women, Tagore observed gravely, "No, women are jealous, men are treacherous" (56). The witty remark not only ended the argument but also emphasised his ingenuity in contesting gender stereotypes.

Though Maitreyi Devi had once arranged for a trained nurse so that Amita Thakur could get some relief, the nurse fell ill before she could meet her patient. Maitreyi Devi considered this a big loss for the nurse because by serving Tagore she could have gained a lifetime experience. Tagore had consented to her recruitment, though earlier he complained against his son for frequently changing the nurses. During those days, he often wept like a child for *trivial things*. The emotional change in his temperament surprised Maitreyi Devi because it was the

same man who had overcome his son's death with stoic calmness. Pratima Thakur, who addressed Tagore as *Babamoshai*, narrates a "trivial" episode, which unlike the previous one, is a piece of happy memory. It represents the homely old man in a jolly mood as he shares with his loving *Bouma* (daughter-in-law) the glimpses of his conjugal life describing to her how he often guided her mother-in-law (his wife Mrinalini Devi) in culinary matters. In her Introduction to the volume, Mandal observes that while the scholars and the established biographers brushed aside these "trivial things," representation of these through female gaze have a special appeal to the readers. The trivial things they mentioned in their memoirs not only present the domestic nitty-gritty that concerned the poet as a family-man but also unfold the different shades of Tagore's mood in his last days—puerile, fun-loving, pensive and anxious.

The quick deterioration of Tagore's health, which was apparent in symptoms such as swollen feet, numbness of fingers and frequent rise in body temperature, could not droop down his jovial spirit. He often cracked jokes with the servants. He could lighten the gloominess of a sick man's room with his remarkable sense of humour. One such episode is his interaction with his elder sister Barnakumari Devi in Rani Chanda's memoir *Gurudev*. When Barnakumari Devi came to visit her bedridden brother and rebuked him for running around carelessly, Tagore replied that from then onwards he would go everywhere sitting (79). As quoted on the book blurb, he confessed to his associates that he was more afraid of undergoing complicated medical treatments than facing death. Like a baffled commoner, he sought cure in various streams of medical science—allopathy, homeopathy and ayurvedic. Renowned physicians such as Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy and Dr. Nilratan Sarkar supervised his medical treatment. He was very anxious about the surgery and enquired several times of Dr. Jyotiprakash Sarkar, nephew of Dr. Nilratan Sarkar, if the surgery would hurt too much.

Tagore had his own way of seeking spiritual help during crises. Instead of asking for deliverance, he prayed to the Almighty for courage to withstand pain. A couple of days before the surgery, which was done on 30th July, 1941, he had asked his *sevika* Rani Chanda to recite the poem '*Bipade more raksha karo.*' Mandal has provided the readers with its English translation:

To protect me from danger

Is not what I am praying for—

But that I should not be fearful when in danger (93).

In the last years of his life, Tagore suffered in body as well as in mind. While the pain of his body was caused by disease and old age, the pain of his mind was caused by the sufferings of the poor and the indifference of the British government to them. On the one hand, rapid developments were taking place in the fields of science and technology, on the other hand, human values were disappearing. The atrocities of the Second World War shocked him and compelled him to write the essay “Crisis in Civilization.” In *Baishe Shraavan*, Nirmalkumari narrates his disillusionment with contemporary political movements. He withdrew himself from the Swadeshi movement when he discovered that to some leaders their personal interests were more important than public welfare. Instead of losing himself in that selfish crowd, he affirmed, “I am a poet and my greatest work must be to dedicate myself in drawing the attention of the people towards differentiating between what is right and what is wrong. When the dignity of character is diminished, my duty is to point out what true glory is. The greatest job is to raise consciousness, to be able to respond to the call of truth” (245). Till the last day of his life, pursuit of truth was his supreme priority. According to Nirmalkumari, only a person like Tagore had the mettle to withstand social criticism and walk alone as a mark of protest against shams and factionalism. This, she describes, is well-reflected in his song, “*jodi tor dak shune keu na ashe, tabe ekla chalo re*” (“If no one comes forward at your beckoning, keep on moving alone”) (245).

The Last Days of Tagore in Memoirs is unique for its thematic concept. It represents the man of the world as a homely person who played several roles in the private sphere — a caring father, a loving father-in-law, an engaging uncle, an obedient brother, a true friend, a strict mentor and a doting grandfather. In this respect, the translation of the selections from the memoirs is indeed a great addition to the oeuvre of Tagore history and should interest scholars who cannot access these in the original Bengali version. The personal history presented in the selections will receive a distinct dimension if these are analysed through the critical prisms of Memory Studies and Affect theory. The simplicity of the language definitely is an advantage for the layman readers. Mandal’s translation of select poems of Tagore not only enhances the beauty of the narratives but also reveals her finesse in translating both prose and poetry. The two black and white photographs on the cover page of the book deserve attention and applause. The last photograph of the poet taken while he was alive is foregrounded on the faded background of a funeral ceremony suggesting his last journey to the realm of immortality. Interestingly, both the images reiterate the theme of “last days” in the life of the great poet.

Reference:

Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*, trans. and ed. Somdatta Mandal (Bolpur: Birutjatio Sahitya Sammilani, 2021).

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