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Balcony





Balcony

A literary magazine with an International reach

Editor

Jill Charles

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Editor

Jill Charles, IL, USA

Chief Editor

Ranjita Chattopadhyay, IL, USA

Design and Art Layout

Kajal & Subrata, Kolkata, India

Photo Credit

Tirthankar Banerjee
Perth, Western Australia

**Front, Back Cover &
Inside Front Cover**



His interest in photography started in student days. Much later the long nights in the dark-room were replaced by hours behind the computer and focus shifted from Black & White to Colour. He likes to show the images as they are and does not approve of computer gimmickry.

Tirthankar is an engineer, specializing in Renewable Energy.

Saumen Chattopadhyay
IL, USA

**Back Inside Cover &
Title Page**



Saumen is an avid outdoor enthusiast and enjoys hiking, trekking, and photography. He also takes part in recitation, drama, mind science. Saumen is an entrepreneur in the field of investment research and portfolio management. He lives in Chicago.

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Editorial



Explore the beauty and challenges of daily life, art, nature and faith in this issue of *Balcony*. Subir Chatterjee's *Eulogy to Ray, hundred years on....* explores Satyajit Ray's great film legacy. Ranajit Mitra's *Sunset* shares a tender moment as vast as the sea. *I'm from here now* by Balarka Banerjee reveals the nature of home and belonging.

Chicago librarian Daniel Weinberg speaks up for freedom in *Knock at Your Door*. Suparna Chatterjee recalls the devotion, traditions and recipes of Durga Puja. In *Presence of Rabindranath Tagore in Bangladesh*, Bhajendra Barman discusses how the folk songs and rivers of Bangladesh influenced Tagore and how he contributed to his Bangladesh home with a national anthem, technology to support farmers and by founding schools such as Vishva Bharati University.

Join Tanima Basu for a relaxing *Evening Date with Nature*. Aindrila Gupta shares the personal and worldwide impact of Satyajit Ray's realistic and expressive films in *Roton Amar Roton*.

With many themes, *Balcony* again offers you new views on the world. Thank you for reading with us.

Ms. Jill Charles

English Editor – Balcony

jillcharles77@gmail.com

<http://www.batayan.org/>

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Suparna Chatterjee

Living Nostalgia, Celebrating Home Coming of Goddess Durga

Having lived over half a century, the magic key that unlocks all those rusty locks, allowing the jammed doors to be inched open slowly, letting a handful of fresh air ease into the dark, musty, long-lost space coming alive, yet again, is none other than, 'Adjustment.'

Living through the day and night over a week which eventually rolls into a month, folding into an entire year, then, from a meagre count of one, blooming into many years, we gradually step away from our belief in Absolute. Through our experience of living, we learn to accept and acknowledge the many shades of grey that arise naturally from the assorted colours crossing our travelled paths. In my life's discourse, I am moving away gradually from all such linear beliefs that were once firmly established in my early foundation years, and in an ongoing adjustment I seem to be gaining a growing pleasure as I let down all pre-existing barriers inherited from my growing up days and in learning to embrace the fading moments of present, getting older.

Looking back at the early days of life abroad, I resented every nonaligned religious celebration, especially when it included the biggest festival from our Bengali calendar year, Durga Puja, to an extent when I refused to participate, causing much grief and agony to my husband who pines for the company of friends (old and new), including all the festivity associated with the celebration of Durga Puja. It is also a nostalgic feeling, reminding him about his family puja that they once celebrated and remains associated with many anecdotes, familiar voices, sounds of the big drum, Dhak, waking him from his lazy boyhood mornings. Over a steaming pot of home-brewed Darjeeling tea, accompanied by Marie biscuit, he has lovingly recounted these stories in our abroad life on multiple occasions, with a renewed enthusiasm that never surprises me. Stories of his near and dear ones who are now long gone, a memory he recollects with a passionate artistry, memory that remains etched in unfaded colours, and he recounts with his eyes wide open, and a faraway look in him that says, he may well be here with me in our shared Now, but he's taking a voluntary stroll through the lived days in his favourite city of Kolkata and chooses to remain lost in the simple pleasures of growing up in the winding alleyways of North Kolkata.

Durga Puja, quintessential to Bengalis, is undoubtedly the biggest festival, blending in culture with religion, practised norms with living art, stitched clothes that hung loosely around our frames allowing room for growing up paired with new shoes that would unashamedly leave scarring blisters on our heels yet never stopped the essentials of pandal hopping. It meant getting sick after the large amount of street food consumption from a simple Beguni, oil dripping diced eggplant (brinjal) dipped in gram-flour batter, to thoroughly fried noodles called Chow-mein that remains an essential part of the Indo-Chinese cuisine, to greasy egg roll wrapped in grainy papers, filling your mouth with thinly sliced up red onions thoroughly soaked in chilli sauce and tamarind water filled spicy phuchka that invariably broke down ruining the top rather than bursting dutifully in your mouth. Puja meant an accidental brushing of unknown hands, childhood crush, permitted late nights, early eager rising to offer fresh flowers as Pushpanjali, and praying sincerely to the deity so luckily exam grades would inflate and not capture a gap in studying, the list fondly grows longer. Yet, after settling abroad, all that I am left with is a bag full of childhood emotions and an everyday adjustment with several anomalies of our Non-Resident Indian (NRI) celebration. Here in Perth, on the western skirts of Australia, like other NRIs, we re-create the magic of home, and we cook our favourite dishes including khichuri, beguni, mixed veg curry, pulao, luchi, tea with singara, along with non-veg item as goat curry, to remind us all that food remains our jewel in the crown associated with this celebratory event in our Bengali life. We may well be adjusting and re-adjusting the event timeline to fit it in within the convenience of a weekend, yet all our effort continues as we mimic all that we once associated with this special occasion.

The celebration happens over the weekend with a note of joy yet, over the years, what continues to plague Bengali Perthites are a regimented sweet distribution to ensure that it runs seamlessly throughout the two-day festivity. While most of these sweets are made from freshly made cottage cheese that is painstakingly rubbed into the neat dough to make the much-coveted sponge-like rosgollas dipped in sugar syrup, 100% homemade by enthusiastic individuals, also in the mix remains some rather looked down upon, purchased sweets of khoya, as an item of convenience from new Indian sweet shops that are rather recent add-ons to our familiar Perth corners. While the khoya sweets are undesirable on the first day of the celebration, yet often becomes the most sought after on the last day of the event, as we become doubtful, concerned about the health of the homemade sweets that responds unknowingly to the laws of decay enforced by Nature and may turn-off by then! The other known fact about the feast that continues to allow our home kitchen to be in a permanent state of rest is a shared wide range of opinions about the food that we are served. As generous amount of items get heaped on our disposable plates by the known faces of our community, wagging tongue begins a journey on its taste, at times it hits all those superlative degrees contained in our appreciating part of the brain, but can also scathingly judge instances of an honest mistake around balancing of palate with salt, sweet and heat that aimed to hit the right note but missed it by an inch or quarter of a mile. Listed as part of the observation is a growing awareness of health and sanity, even a known face looks unfamiliar with their disposable plastic cap, gloves, and apron, however, ensures that the food served is safe to eat.

In our adjustment with life abroad and to swing along to the wild blowing of conch shells, piercing tongue rolling sound of Jokar, and drumming of Dhak, this is also a time when the stowed away gold jewelry gets a moment to shine in the broad daylight from their routine resting place, remaining as safe custodian behind the secured steel doors of a bank locker. With a thumping excitement, all wedding jewelry along with the added ones from special occasions gets carefully picked, to match the mood of the event and to the weave of the sari. In past, the game of coordination was much easier, jewelry matched to a choice of clothing items with accessories as shoes and bags, but with time, this task has become far more challenging, the entire family gets to display a coordinated look. Covid nurtured mutant virus may well have restricted our frequent national and international travel, online shopping, has made the game of coordination easier. Sari design gets further enhanced by the Nakshi Kantha embroidery on husband's Punjabi or dhoti adorned with a chequered look. Children are not left far behind; they make a bold statement with their coordinated colours and pieces of jewellery that remain on their family display list. Strangely, none of the Puja celebrations remains complete unless an amusing discussion commences on the trend and design of a woman's blouse.

While *Sananda*, the popular Bengali magazine comparable to *Women's Weekly* remains high on the list, is followed closely by *Anondolok*, a Bengali counterpart to *Filmfare*, dictating the look and feel to the essential top that needs to be worn when draping a sari. With the passage of time, it seems, the designer's look has retained its focus on a minimalist approach to the use of fabric for building this top or blouse, resulting in structural misalignments, one may conclude. While some slice the fabric constituting the back into rows of strings to expose the routinely covered skin out in the open to begin Puja gossip, some opt for a symmetrical scantiness all-around, manifested in its narrow straps holding the back and front pieces together. A wide-open back with decorative pieces hanging from colourful strings as a tie reminding one of the doorknobs continues to be in fashion while the traditional look of frills added to tight three-quarter sleeves stubbornly remains with the rest. Fashion, unavoidable, is criticized the first time our eyes meet and then gets adopted as part of everyday living, hence, while every Durga Puja brings along a new story to be wildly shared, it soon settles down over time as mundane, until the next.

Life remains a long ongoing journey of adjustment, shifting from a young palate savouring fried and spicy dishes as the ultimate treat to the enjoyment of a bland and steamed dish of now, allowing time for a slowing down metabolism to work at its own pace with an acceptance of age. The eternal daughter, Uma's homecoming from her husband's abode in Kailash to her parents', continues to be celebrated across the globe

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as a moment of joy with an on-going adjustment of the event's occurrence within the folds of convenience and suitability. I seem much happier in watching the opulence and extravaganza of Kolkata's puja pandal from a distance, in the comfort and ease of my NRI living room. I am left amazed by the artistic excellence, appreciating the range of themes adopted and the meticulous planning of the mega event over months, the craftsmanship on display, feeling hungry at the sight of displayed sweets and food, listening to celeb chat shows that keep churning out Puja reminiscing, and I feel secured in the faraway foreign land, aligning my routine, adjusting to the norms of Home, and losing count on time while walking down the memory lane.

Happy Durga Puja to every one of you.



Suparna is a Senior IT project manager in the public sector. Amid tight schedules, her dream of becoming an author thrives, driven by a passion for storytelling. Her narratives echo the migrant's grief, seasoned with lived experiences and the joy of travel. Balancing work with the enchantment of motherhood, Suparna finds laughter, love, and a craving for precious time with her family.

Subir Chatterjee

Eulogy to Ray, hundred years on ...

Into a haze of smoke, I walk in,
An early morning's sun it was then.
Old age I expected to sight
As he sat still with his mighty height.

Reading and absorbing words in silence
Like learning and praying,
Both wrapped in soft day light.

He looks up curious,
'Tis some little girl' tapping his chamber's floor,
He must have thought,
And distinctly I remember this and nothing more.

Each year I grew, borrowing wisdom from Life
Plainly felt, I've seen God in flesh
And those dreaming eyes,
Like flickering candle-light
Casting shadows long on the floor,
Will remain clasped to my mind
For ever and ever more.

My tongue remained stuck in the jaw
Once I read, you're no more.

I didn't talk to you, but I prayed to recover you,
I never could tell if my prayers were not true
Or if it was destiny that could only spare you.

Relish in Grand Prix to Oscar, nine days left to birthday
Yet you became another of death's prey.

As a film-maestro you took leave
While empty remains stage,
Thousand tear-soaked eyes lament
The heartbreak, you underwent.

Every time I close my eyes
Behind high-piled books I see you,
Sitting immobilised, reading, and you soliloquise
Night's starry face, fairy power's win and magic,
All wrapped in the hands of chance's way
For movies acclaimed both in home today and far away.

On their knees, world pay homage to you
As you've won people's heart,
Like Holy Grail, love is offered
And the chalice filled to every part.

The train that went
Through the village of Nischindipur
Took the creator away,
Yet, hundred years on
Good film making, you still represent,
One and the only one!



সুবীর রঞ্জন চট্টোপাধ্যায় — কর্মসূত্রে Accountant, অস্ট্রেলিয়ার Perth শহরে ৩০ বছরের বাস। বাংলা সাহিত্য তার প্রাণ। বাংলা সাহিত্যের প্রতি প্রগাঢ় টান এবং ভালবাসা। এছাড়া নাটক, গান শোনা ও কবিতা পড়ে অবসর কাটান। একজন আদ্যপ্রান্ত রোমান্টিক মানুষ, আড্ডা মারতে ভালবাসেন।

Tanima Basu

An Evening Date With Nature

Each evening, just as the day begins to soften, I step outside for my quiet date with nature.

The world is never truly silent here. From the oak tree near our home, birds sing their morning and evening songs as if they are keeping time for the neighborhood. A blue jay flashes past me, bright blue and white against the gray sky, searching for his mate among the branches. I once learned that his feathers are not truly blue from pigment. The melanin in them is brown, but a special spongy layer of keratin and tiny air pockets scatters the light, creating that brilliant blue. Nature, I think, is the greatest artist and also the cleverest magician.

Farther away, a woodpecker rests after a long day of labor. His red head and neck glow like a small flame, his black back and white belly neat and bold against the tree trunk. Earlier, his drumming filled the winter air: rapid, rhythmic, and loud. On gloomy days, I welcome that sound. It feels like company.

Then comes the cardinal. Whenever I post a photo of one, my friend says, “Angels are visiting you.” Perhaps that is why I wait for northern cardinals with such hope. Their red feathers brighten the coldest winter day, and their clear whistled songs seem to carry warmth. I love knowing that the male cardinal's famous red color comes from his diet. How amazing that what he eats becomes the beauty we admire.

One summer afternoon, while I was watering plants in the backyard, we noticed something black moving slowly across the ground. Curious, we approached and saw a mid-sized turtle. Her shell was muddy, and her head looked dry from the heat. I quickly grabbed a bowl of water, but by the time I returned, she had already traveled farther than I expected. Within half an hour, I lost track of her completely. Her deliberate pace seemed like wisdom, conserving energy for a long life.

In winter, when snow covers the field, one plant always catches my eye: winterberry. Its bright red berries shine against the white landscape like tiny lanterns. Small



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birds gather there and eat all day, as if enjoying a winter picnic. After a few hours, they lift into the sky and fly away, heading south from the north, following a map written in their wings.

When summer returns, wildflowers fill the land white, yellow, blue, and lavender. They seem to smile when I walk by after a long working day. Bees hum from blossom to blossom. Butterflies float like painted thoughts. Hummingbirds visit our backyard, quick and shining.

We inherited a magnolia tree, and every early spring it gives us purple blooms. Sometimes snow falls gently on the petals, and the sight is almost too beautiful to describe. I learned that magnolia petals are edible, and that purple magnolias symbolize royalty, dignity, spirituality, and good fortune.

But this place belongs not only to flowers and birds. We live in the territory of deer, coyotes, rattlesnakes, and turkeys. Each morning, deer gather in our backyard to munch the grass. Sometimes they sit together in the sun as if they, too, are enjoying a peaceful family morning. When we speak, they lift their heads and listen. We look into each other's eyes for a moment, human and wild creature, neighbor and neighbor.

Here, nature does not visit us.

We live inside it.

And each evening, when the birds sing again and the light fades behind the trees, I feel grateful for this quiet agreement: we all share the same land, the same air, the same seasons. Side by side, we live in peace.



Tanima Basu is a senior Statistician at the University of Michigan. Her mind is always crunching numbers but a stream of Art runs deep inside that she inherited from her artist dad.

Jill Charles

Her Best Lesson

Unexpected flowers
Cherry blossoms on her desk.

Each weeknight
She chose pencil skirts and school shoes
Ready to be called in
To teach anywhere.

She learned with her students
Over microscopes, world maps
Half-notes on the piano
She smiled and positively listened.

In love with another teacher,
She married and migrated
Over blue Kootenai Mountains
To British Columbia
Where white dogwood blooms.
Together they reached a castle
By Bled and the blue Slovenian lake
Lived volumes of history, adventure, children's books.

They planted a garden:
Tiger lilies and snap peas
Peaches and raspberries
Kept sweet in jars
Bright as garnet and topaz.
Her soprano and his baritone
Sang out in St. Anthony's choir.

More voices joined in
A daughter, two sons
Two at the blackboard, one in the clinic
Seven grandchildren
She cheered on the hockey rink and dance floor
They cheer her too.

My godmother teaches us
In each note of *Ave Maria*
Every moonbeam tulip
In the White Garden
Sharing family stories
Her best lesson
Love never ends.



Jill Charles lives in Crystal Lake, Illinois with her husband, stepson and mother-in-law, and works in a non-profit office. Jill is co-editor of *Balcony* literary magazine. Read her jazz age novel, *Marlene's Piano*, available from Booklocker.com.

Balarka Banerjee

I'm from here now

I'm from here now.
This is where I'm from.
I wasn't born here
I will probably die here
And if I don't
I'm from here now.
It's true, no matter how much
You go around,
You'll only ever have
The one home town
But the meaning
Of that place
Will change
Over years
From people
To bricks
To rubble
To dust
To memories.
And memories are a place
You can visit
But never live in.
So I'm from here now.
Maybe I've been here forever
Or just a little while
But living can't be measured
In units of time
And neither can a life.



Balarka Banerjee is a Molecular Biologist by profession and an executive in a Biotech company in Sydney. Besides science his other passions are Drama — writing, acting, directing — Poetry and Art. He likes good cinema and music. He is a foodie and a good cook. No wonder he enjoys writing about his experiences and interests.

Ranajit Mitra

Sunset

Walking past the crowd
Laughter and chatter
People in the water
People on the sand
Singing with the band

Now it's just you and me
Walking hand in hand
On the white sand

Watching the setting sun
A ball of fire
Way beyond where
The white waves tire
In the dark blue mire

You and me
Heart in heart
Arm in arm
I'm drowning in your eyes
In that dark deep calm

You and me
Walking together
Not the seven steps
But something even better
Alas soon it will be dark
And you'll be lost forever

I must lay down
For I tire
Eternity beckons
So, I must retire

Tapan Jyoti Mitra

The Blank Canvas

The blank canvas remains for you.
For so long, you have not written any poem.
In the closed room, the bird with broken wings,
has crashed on the ground trying to fly out.
Near that death, stand long sighs and outcry of grief.

The man from the city of remembrance, saw you last time
in a wintry evening, your eyes filled with tears.

A pale day falls when your golden pen has stopped writing.

Only thinking of you, the artist has erased all the paintings
of the canvas, only thinking of you.

And today the sad earth bereft of any poem or paintings.

Knock at Your Door

- Poets of infinity, poets of the future.



Lakshmi Kanchi

Kalpavriksha

You set fire
to my childhood tree.
I wake up in fiery sweat,
still dreaming.

The banyan speaks in
a quiet voice.
Through the rustle
and susurrant of leaves,
the heave and song
of birds nestled in its hair.
Through the etchings
on its bark
where insects crawl
and take shelter.
Through roots
that pulse rhythms
into the landscape.

I become shadow,
and drip into the ground,
seep into the space
where the hum
between earth, tree,
and sky rings true.

The expanse is mild
and welcoming. Here language
upon language, word
upon wordsoothe,
speak in mother tongue.

I dig deep with shadow
fingers and reach
the place where
threads intertwine.

Meet where rivers
of language upon language,
word upon wordrepeat,
ripple, and reconcile.

I hear whispers that reach out
into dense tomorrows,
and images flutter on my eyelids.

In a ritual, women walk around
the banyan that bears the girth
of the universe. They wrap its
trunk with a cotton thread, red,
yellow. The banyan whose roots
are Brahma, the branches Shiva,
and the bark Vishnu.

This banyan is shaped
like a room. Root after root
is slatted from tree to earth.
The trunk has eaten into old
fence, wire and wood.
The roots have broken through
concrete paths.
The banyan has windows.
The banyan has a door
that overlooks the cosmos.

In this visitation, as
in a room full of mirrors,
many banyans repeat far
far into the horizon.
As the eternal banyan,
grounded,
finds me a path
of truth
past the door's open lips.

Heartfelt thanks to Auntie Vanessa Corunna for opening my ears to deeper listening, and for the generosity of her guidance.



Lakshmi Kanchi is an emerging Indian-Australian poet on a mission – to make poetry accessible. Her writing anatomises the complex linkages between language, culture, and perception. Author of “Lakesong”, a debut collection, Lakshmi won the 2023 Ros Spencer Poetry Prize and the 2021 Pocketry Prize, and was the Inaugural Poet-in-Residence at The Wetlands Centre Cockburn (2022-23).

Aindrila Gupta

Mundane Monologue

It's a one way street, created by the planners
Based on the structural manners
And what is that ?
Is it the muscles or the look or the false pride
Or is it the crisis of a narrow mind?
I really don't know – how to peel..
The societal norm of a one way street...

The shoes cannot contain the muscle anymore
It wondered how it grew from the core
It had not seen this side of time
And the change revolted the Mime!
The thought remained to be – of a one way
Street.
Based on the structural manners – you see!

The Mime revolted through daily performances
Where boredom birthed creativity
Here, resilience is the subject and resonance is the cord
Why am I the object when I am at a ford?

Oh!! It's a one way street, created by the planners – Based on the structural manners
And what is that ?
Is it the muscles or the look or the false pride
Or is it the crisis of a narrow mind?
I really don't know – how to peel..
The societal norm of a one way street...

Let it be! Let it be!
Let the artist perform and the stage be set
A day will come when the light will shine
From the cracks of a ford that won't whine!



Aindrila Gupta resides in Highland Park, IL. She is passionate about reading, has honed her culinary skills, and enjoys creative writing. Professionally, she works as an auditor and is a strong advocate for humanity.

Sanjucta Guha Neogi (Ghosh)

The Graph of Continuity

Through whims and caprices,
Through highs and lows,
Through thick and thin,
We look at life
And watch it glow,
Giving hope a chance to flow.

We choose to rise
And see below
Sometimes the depth is shallow,
Sometimes the fall is low.

Life is a graph of continuity,
A line drawn through complexity and sensitivity,
Moving through every high and low,
Never knowing where it will go.

For every rise, there is a descent,
For every moment, a different extent.
But the journey keeps moving,
Abiding, abetting rarely abolishing

And perhaps that is life:
Not always about staying high,
But about staying connected
Adapted and Reconstructed.

Aindrila Gupta

Roton Aamar Roton

When I was seven, I spent a Sunday afternoon watching *Postmaster* by the creative geniuses of Satyajit Ray. Ratan's character lingered with me long after the movie ended. I felt a deep connection to her, experiencing the story through her perspective. Specially, the scene where she quietly wipes her tears bidding her favorite person a farewell. Ratan remembered the postmaster's tender affection to her saying "Ratan aamar Ratan tomai kori jatan, toomee aamar moner Moton" which means 'Ratan, my dear Ratan, I care for you and you are just as I imagined.'"

"Teen Kanya" (i.e Three Girls) was directed by Satyajit Ray In 1961, based on a collection of three short stories by Rabindranath Tagore namely Monihar, Postmaster and Samapti. My journey with Satyajit Ray started with this movie. I was greatly enthralled with a character named "Ratan" from the short film *Postmaster*.

Satyajit Ray inherited the cultural and intellectual heritage from his father Sukumar Ray and grandfather Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury. Both of them are considered to be illustrious emperors of their subjects. They excelled and executed with curious creativity and powerful message for the society, a fine blending between written and visual imagination was introduced. Most of their poems, illustrations were for the children.

Both of them realized early on that children are the future of tomorrow emphasizes on the vision and foresight of Sukumar Ray and Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury. They understood that investing in the education, imagination, and creativity of children would help shape a better society. By focusing their literary and artistic works on young audiences, they aimed to inspire curiosity, values, and innovation in the next generation. Their contributions in children's literature and illustration were not just for entertainment, but were meant to nurture young minds, instill moral lessons, and encourage creative thinking, ensuring that the children of their time would grow up to become thoughtful, intelligent, and responsible adults who would contribute positively to the world.

Such kind of upbringing helped Ray's cinematic approach towards worldview of cinema and its presentation to the international audiences. Societal norms, then political environment, economic conditions, human psychology, religious dogmatism have greatly influenced and inspired Ray. As a result, he directed movies such as *Mahanagar*, *Devi*, *Paras Pathar*, *Jalsa ghar*, *Nayak*, *Ganshstru*, *Agantuk* among others. Satyajit Ray's influence on world cinema is profound, particularly through his *Apu* trilogy, comprising "*Pather Panchali*," "*Aparajito*," and "*Apur Sansar*." These films not only garnered international acclaim for their poignant storytelling and authentic depiction of rural Bengal but also introduced a new cinematic language that emphasized realism and humanism. Ray's ability to capture the subtle nuances of everyday life made his work universally relatable and emotionally resonant, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers.

Ray's unique directorial style was marked by meticulous attention to detail, where every shot was carefully composed as if it were a standalone piece of art. He often opted for natural lighting, non-professional actors, and on-location shooting, especially evident in "*Pather Panchali*." This approach brought an unprecedented authenticity to his films, allowing audiences to immerse themselves fully in the world he portrayed. Though his early casting choices were unconventional and did not immediately attract widespread attention, they ultimately contributed to the raw and genuine quality that became his signature.

His innovative methods and thematic depth earned him a devoted fanbase, both in India and abroad, who admired and revered his cinematic vision. Ray's contemporaries such as Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, and Tapan Sinha recognized his trailblazing contributions. Rather than attempting to compete with him

directly, they often drew inspiration from his work, adopting elements of his storytelling techniques and philosophical outlook. Each of these filmmakers developed their own distinctive voices, addressing diverse themes and catering to specific audiences, yet the ideological influence of Ray's cinema is evident in the broader evolution of Indian and world filmmaking.

Satyajit Ray's exposure to international cinema played a pivotal role in shaping his artistic vision and approach to filmmaking. During his visit to London in 1950 with his wife Bijoya Ray, Ray watched Vittorio De Sica's landmark film "Bicycle Thieves." The film's stark realism and emotional depth left a profound impression on Ray, inspiring him to embrace a similar style of storytelling that captured the nuances of ordinary life. De Sica's portrayal of post-war Italian society, marked by economic hardship and compassionate humanity, resonated deeply with Ray and motivated him to bring authentic Indian stories to the screen.

This experience was instrumental in Ray's decision to embark on his own directorial journey, culminating in the creation of the iconic Apu trilogy "Pather Panchali," "Aparajito," and "Apu Sansar." These films are celebrated for their sincere depiction of rural Bengal, human emotions, and the struggles of everyday people. Despite the artistic merit of the project, Ray faced considerable challenges in securing funding for "Pather Panchali." It was only when the West Bengal government stepped in to support the production that Ray's vision came to life.

In various interviews with renowned journalists such as Chidananda Dasgupta and James Blue, Ray often reflected on the versatility of the human mind and the importance of depicting psychological complexity in cinema. He emphasized that his inspiration stemmed not only from global cinematic influences but also from his keen observation of human behavior and societal dynamics. This dedication to realism and psychological depth became hallmarks of Ray's filmmaking, setting him apart as a visionary director who bridged cultural boundaries and redefined the language of cinema.

Till today, as a global citizen of cinema, I find immense joy in exploring the works of many gifted directors from around the world. Yet, Satyajit Ray continues to hold a unique and irreplaceable place in my heart. His films are more than just cinematic experiences they are profound messages, especially for the younger generation. Through his authentic depictions of the social, political, and economic realities of his time, Ray offered insight and guidance, encouraging viewers to think deeply about the world around them.

Even now, there's a special comfort in revisiting "Teen Kanya" with a cup of tea and a plate of shingara, savoring the stories and the emotions they evoke. Just like many of you reading this, I cherish these moments. Ray's artistry transcends eras and cultures, and his films continue to resonate, teaching us, moving us, and bringing us together one viewing at a time.

Bhajendra N. Barman

Presence of Rabindranath Tagore in Bangladesh

This overview examines why Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who was the *Nobel Laureate in Literature* in 1913, is greatly admired and revered in Bangladesh. It provides, primarily, a description of places where he lived, what he did there, how he experienced and enjoyed the beauty of the countryside, and how he and Bangladesh benefited from his living there. Some major initiatives to memorialize him by preserving buildings and places where he lived and worked are also discussed.

Rabindranath Tagore's song, “*Aamar Sonar Bangla*”, written in 1905 has been the national anthem of Bangladesh since its independence in 1971. He wrote this during the first partition of Bengal expressing his feelings about how beloved and beautiful a place Bengal was, what he saw there, how she was dear to his heart and mind, and how he would feel if she was scarred.

National anthem of Bangladesh in Bengali

আমার সোনার বাংলা, আমি তোমায় ভালোবাসি ।
চিরদিন তোমার আকাশ, তোমার বাতাস, আমার
প্রাণে বাজায় বাঁশি ।।
ও মা, ফাগুনে ভোর আমার বনে ঘ্রাণে পাগল করে,
মরি হায়, হায় রে ...
ও মা, অঘ্রানে তোর ভরা ক্ষেতে আমি কী দেখেছি মধুর হাসি ।।
কী শোভা, কী ছায়া গো, কী স্নেহ, কী মায়া গো ...
মা, তোর মুখের বাণী আমার কানে লাগে সুধার মতো,
মরি হায়, হায় রে ...
মা, তোর বদনখানি মলিন হলে, ও মা, আমি নয়নজলে ভাসি ।।

Obviously, Rabindranath Tagore composed the above song after living in a beautiful rural part of Bengal where he could witness six seasons, experienced her natural beauty, and met with and observed keenly the social life of common people. He spent part of his early life, almost full time (from 1889 to 1901), in Bangladesh, specially, in the districts of Kushtia, Pabna and Rajshahi as he was sent there to supervise estates (*Zamindari*) belonging to the Tagore family. He received a power of attorney from his father Maharishi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) on 8 August 1896 to oversee all their estates in East Bengal. Under his *Zamindari*, common people received sympathetic attention and because of his disciplined approach, these estates had positive balance sheets and people were found happy.

As a background, Prince Dwarakanath Tagore (1794-1846) inherited two estates in Jessore and Pabna of East Bengal after the death of Ramlochan Thakur (his uncle) on 12 December 1807. He also purchased two additional estates from East Bengal and one estate from Cuttack, Orissa between 1830 and 1834. His son, Debendranath Tagore inherited all these estates after his death on 1 August 1846.

We note that Rabindranath Tagore opposed the division of Bengal that took place on 16 October 1905. For this, initially, he had very little public support. He was mindful of that and for feeling friendless, he wrote a popular song, a portion of which is given below. Ultimately, this partition ended on 12 December 1911 because of its opposition from different corners.

In Bengali :

যদি তোর ডাক শুনে কেউ না আসে তবে একলা চলো রে ।
একলা চলো, একলা চলো, একলা চলো, একলা চলো রে ।।
যদি কেউ কথা না কয়, ওরে ওরে ও অভাগা,
যদি সবাই থাকে মুখ ফিরায়ে সবাই করে ভয় ...
তবে পরান খুলে
ও তুই মুখ ফুটে তোর মনের কথা একলা বলো রে । ...

As means of transportation, Rabindranath Tagore had to board on his personal house-boat (*Bajra*), Padma or a steamer. In the dry season, he traveled in a palanquin. All the places he lived were on the banks of major rivers. As one can find from his regular correspondences (*Glimpses of Bengal by Rabindranath Tagore, 1921* and *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* by K. Dutta and A. Robinson, 1997), he traveled primarily by boat to and from these places, and frequently, from these places to Calcutta (Kolkata). Examples of such travels with dates (found in his correspondences) are shown below. However, these may not be construed as a comprehensive list of all of his travels within the year mentioned on the left-hand side.

- 1892 4 Jan at Shelidah - 2 May at Bolpur- 21 Jun at Goalunda- 22 Jun at Shelidah-25 Jun at Shahzadpur- 20 Aug at Shelidah-18 Nov at Boalia (Rajshahi)- 2 Dec at Natore-9 Dec at Shelidah.
- 1993 2 Feb at Balja-10 Feb at Cuttack (Orissa)-8 May at Shelidah-7 July at Shahzadpur-13 Aug at Patisar.
- 1994 19 Feb at Patisar-24 Jun at Shelidah-5 Sep at Shahzadpur-20 Sep at Dighapatiya- 22 Sep at Boalia- 5 Oct at Calcutta- 19 Oct at Bolpur- 7 Dec at Shelidah.

Shelidah (Shelaidaha), Kushtia

Shelidah is located in Kumarkhali Upazilla of Kushtia, and it is about 15 kilometers away from Kushtia district-town, which is located on the opposite side of Madhumati river. This estate belonged to Dwarakanath Tagore. It has a *Kuthibari* (country house) built by him. Rabindranath Tagore visited Shelidah on 25 November 1889. He might have visited there with his elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849-1925) in 1876 also. He used the Kuthibari as his primary residence from 1891. After receiving the power of attorney in 1896 to oversee all the estates in East Bengal, he brought his wife and children there in 1898. The family lived there until 1901 when he decided to move to Shantiniketan. His last visit to this place was in 1922.

At Shelidah (also at Shahzadpur in Pabna and Patisar in Naogaon) Rabindranath Tagore composed the literary masterpieces such as *Noukadubi* (The Boat-Wreck), *Sonar Tori* (The Golden Boat), *Chitra*, *Chaitali*, *Bishorjon* (The Sacrifice), *Chhinnapatra* and about sixty short stories including *Postmaster* and *Panchabhoot-er Diary*. He wrote most of the poems in *Naibedya* (Offerings), *Kheya*, and many songs in *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings) and *Geetimalya* (Garland of Songs) at Shelidah. He also translated some of his books in English there. It was Shelidah in 1912, where he started translating *Gitanjali* into English that earned him the Nobel Prize in literature on 10 December 1913. The justification for this award included "*because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West*".

A number of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories and poems were extraordinary in describing social injustice, the pain and sorrows of common people who might have been his subjects under the feudal Zamindari system. Examples of these include (a) "*Shasti*", meaning punishment, is a short story about a family with two brothers having their lives in dire poverty. They had an unintentional murder and faced a court system where one brother at the advice of villagers saved the life of his sibling by forcing his innocent

young wife to confess to committing the crime; (b) “*Dui Bigha Jomi*” - a poem on the story of a poor farmer whose meager parcel of farmland with house was taken away by his Zamindar. Rabindranath Tagore's keen observations and sympathetic tone that were reflected in many of his writings made him a person of humanity and a warrior against social injustice. Obviously, this humanitarian chord of his writings originated from his living among the common people as well as seeing rampant exploitations, indecency, oppression and cruelty from fellow Zamindars.

Rabindranath Tagore was profoundly influenced by several *Baul* and folk singers living close to Shelidah. They used folk musical instruments and sang songs dealing with day-to-day problems, spirituality, humanism, social harmony and peace. Even with little or no education, they composed hundreds of popular songs. These singers included Lalon Fakir (1774-1890) and Gagan Harkara (1845-1910).

The only available portrait of Lalon Fakir was sketched by Jyotirindranath Tagore in 1889. Lalon Fakir's *Akhra* (assembly place) was at Cheuriya, about 2 kilometers from Kushtia railway station. It was under Shelidah Zamindari. Rabindranath Tagore was so impressed with Lalon Fakir that he collected 258 of his songs and filled two notebooks. His song “*Aamar praaner maanus achhe praane...*” followed the tune of Lalon Fakir's song “*Milan hobe koto dine...*”. Gagan Chandra Dam was a postman at Shelidah post office who delivered to and collected mails from Rabindranath Tagore during his stay at Shelidah. People used to call him “*Harkara*” a Bengali term meaning postman. Rabindranath Tagore composed “*Aamar Sonar Bangla*” after the tune of Gagan Harkara's song “*Ami Kothay Pabo Tare*”. Rabindranath Tagore managed to publish a good number of Lalon Fakir and Gagan Harkara songs in the *Probashi* magazine of Calcutta.



Figure 1. Shelidah Kuthibari

Rabindranath Tagore developed and advanced his idea on innovative research in agriculture and rural development and eventually, attempted to implement these in all of his estates. When world was advancing with science and technology, his vision was reflected in his words, “*Science has given man immense power. The golden age will return when it is used in the service of humanity.*” To alleviate the suffering of people in the countryside, especially that of poor farmers, he thought of initiating a self-reliant village economy through promoting local initiatives, leadership and self-governance through cooperative systems.

When Tagore estates in East Bengal were divided in 1921, Shelidah estate went to his brother Satyendranath Tagore (1942-1923). It was a borrower from a Bank and eventually, it was repossessed by the

Bank. It was then auctioned off to the Zamindar of Bhagyakul (Munshiganj), Roy family. The house was part of Roy Estate until the Zamindari system was abolished under the East Pakistan State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950. There was an initiative to preserve the house in 1958. It has now become a visitors' destination.

Shahzadpur, Sirajganj

When Rabindranath Tagore was 29, he came to Shahzadpur, which was then in Pabna district, to supervise his family estate as its Zamindar. He lived there on and off from 1890 to 1895. This location is close to Ichhamati and Atrai Rivers. Currently, Rabindra *Kachhari Bari* (Courthouse/ office) at Shahzadpur is preserved as Rabindra Memorial Museum. This museum houses rare photographs, furniture and metal pots. The Rabindra Auditorium, accommodating 500 seats was built there in 1999.



Figure 2. Rabindra Memorial Museum at Shahzadpur

Shahzadpur is now the location of *Rabindra University*, launched as the 35th public university of Bangladesh in 2015. According to Rabindra University's declarations, it will receive financial support from both Bangladesh and India. It will offer academic programs for undergraduate and post-graduate courses and research facilities on Rabindranath Tagore's life, philosophy, literature, music, global culture, arts, dance, fine arts, plays, social sciences, agriculture, business administration, law, physical sciences, engineering, technology and some more subjects. Professor Bishwajit Ghosh of the Department of Bengali, University of Dhaka was appointed as the first Vice Chancellor. Students were admitted for the 2017-2018 session and their classes started on 17 April 2017.

Patisar, Naogaon

The *Kachhari* (office complex) of the Tagore family's estate of Kaligram Pargana was located at Patisar, Rajshahi. This estate was purchased in 1830. It is now in the Naogaon district. It is on the bank of Nagor river, at 12 kilometers south-east of Atrai railway station and 26 kilometers from Naogaon.

Rabindranath Tagore first came to Patisar in January 1891. There, the main mansion is a two-story building, called *Kuthibari*. He established a primary school and a High English School, now called Rathindranath High School, named after his son, Rathindranath Tagore (1888-1961). He also founded a charitable dispensary and Patisar Krishi Bank. At Patisar, he established a co-operative society for the development of agriculture, handloom, and pottery. A pond near the Kachhari is now called *Rabindrasagar*.

In 1921, when the Zamindari was divided among brothers, Patisar became part of Rabindranath Tagore's share. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize, the residents of Patisar felicitated him with an address of honor in 1913. On the request of his tenants, Tagore visited Patisar in 1937 for the last time.

On the occasions of Tagore's birth and death anniversaries, discussion meetings and cultural functions are held at Patisar.



Figure 3. Patisar Kachhari

Tagore's Father in law's house at Dakshin Dihi, Khulna

Rabindranath Tagore was married to Mrinalini Devi (1883-1902, previously known as Bhabatarini on 9 December 1883. She died prematurely on 23 November 1902 at the age of 28. She was memorialized through the restoration of her birth home at Dakshin Dihi village in Khulna. This also serves as the Rabindra Center. There are statues of Rabindranath Tagore and Mrinalini Devi in front of the house, and a stage named Mrinalini Mancha was built under a big tree. This Rabindra complex is used by the local people to organize fairs and to celebrate his birth anniversary.



Figure 4. Old house and restored house

Visits at the University of Dhaka

The University of Dhaka (Dacca) was opened on 1 July 1921. In 1926, the University of Dhaka invited Rabindranath Tagore to attend a conference called “*The Meaning of Art*”. He was in Dhaka between 7 February and 14 February 1926. He was honored by numerous organizations. He attended receptions that included at Northbrook Hall (*Lalkuthi*), Coronation park on the bank of Buriganga River, Curzon Hall, Salimullah Muslim Hall, Jagannath Hall, Eden Girls School and Intermediate College. He was also invited by the Teachers Association, Students Association, Dipali (an organization for women) and Sahitya Parishad. He had a dinner reception at Curzon Hall organized by then Vice Chancellor, Professor George Harry Langley. The University of Dhaka invited Rabindranath Tagore again in 1936 and he was awarded the D. Lit. degree. At that time, the university had its first Vice Chancellor of Bengali descent, Sir Ahmad Fazlur Rahman.

One interesting note is that Rabindranath Tagore promised and sent a song, “Basantika” written on 13 Falgun 1332 (26 February 1926) to Jagannath Hall students for publishing it in their magazine “*Basanti*”.

Basantika in Bengali

এই কথাটি মনে রেখো, তোমাদের এই হাসিখেলায়
আমি যে গান গেয়েছিলাম জীর্ণ পাতা ঝরার বেলায় ॥
শুকনো ঘাসে শূন্য বনে আপন-মনে
অনাদরে অবহেলায়
আমি যে গান গেয়েছিলাম জীর্ণ পাতা ঝরার বেলায় ॥
দিনের পথিক মনে রেখো, আমি চলেছিলাম রাতে
সন্ধ্যাপ্রদীপ নিয়ে হাতে ।
যখন আমায় ও পার থেকে গেল ডেকে
ভেসেছিলাম ভাঙা ভেলায়
আমি যে গান গেয়েছিলাম জীর্ণ পাতা ঝরার বেলায় ॥

At Rajshahi:

Rabindranath Tagore was invited to one of the literary functions of the Rajshahi Association.

He read his paper entitled “*Sikshar Herfer*” (Restructuring of Education System) on 12 November 1892. We note that Rajshahi Association was established in 1872 as an organization for the education and welfare of the people. It was founded by Raja Pramathanath Roy Bahadur of Dighapatiya, Rajshahi.

In Rajshahi city, the Tagore family had a house on the bank of Padma River. Recently, Rabindranath and Nazrul murals were erected near this house.

Other places in Bangladesh visited by Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore can certainly be considered as a well-travelled personality of his generation. On 14 February 1873, at age eleven, he accompanied his father to tour India for several months visiting father's estates, and places including Amritsar in Punjab where they stayed for a month. This trip helped him to be self-disciplined, independent and appreciative of nature. Tagore visited more than 30 countries belonging to five continents.

To our knowledge, exhaustive travel details of Rabindranath Tagore within Bangladesh are not available. However, one may expect that he traveled many parts of the country. He was found to plan each of his trips for multiple locations. For an example, his trip to Dhaka in February 1926 was combined with his visits to several other places. From Dhaka, on 15 February 1926 he went to Mymensingh by train and visited Ananda Mohan

College, Vidyamoyee Girls High School and other institutions. He went to nearby places such as Muktagachha and Atharobari. From there he traveled to Comilla on 19 February and stayed there until 26 February. He also visited Narayanganj on 8 February 1926, right after his arrival at Dhaka.



Figure 5. Murals of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976)

Tagore's Settlement at Shantiniketan

Despite being the Zamindar of East Bengal estates, Rabindranath Tagore left Shelidah with his family for Shantiniketan in 1901. A piece of land at Bhubandanga, later named Shantiniketan, was purchased in 1863 by Maharishi Debendranath Tagore. He founded an Ashram (Temple) to promote Brahma philosophy. Later, Rabindranath Tagore himself founded the Brahma Vidyalaya school. In 1901 he established an open-air school. Besides contributing to various areas of literature and traveling around the world, he devoted his next forty years to further development of Shantiniketan. On 22 December 1918, the foundation stone was laid for *Vishva Bharati University*. On 22 December 1921, this university was inaugurated. Initially, Vishva Bharati University had three Departments: Fine Arts, Music and Indology (history and cultures, languages, and literatures of India). This happened just eight years after he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913.

As mentioned earlier, many Rabindranath Tagore's writings in the 1890s were on humanity and social injustice in rural Bengal. When he was at Shantiniketan, he was found to adopt universal thoughts and philosophy that were applicable to the whole world. These are reflected in his poems, short stories, dramas, novels, essays, speeches, personal letters or actions related to host of topics such as agricultural reform, education, environment, governance, human rights, mankind, nationalism vs. imperialism, nature, religions, society, spirituality and world peace.

Conclusions

Rabindranath Tagore had a very productive period when he lived in East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh. Even after settling at Shantiniketan, he visited there frequently. His love for East Bengal never faded. A Chinese Rabindra scholar, Professor Dong Yu Chen told an audience at the *2017 International Literary Conference* held in Dhaka, that Rabindranath Tagore considered Bangladesh as his motherland and for this reason, he composed the song “Amar Sonar Bangla”. People in Bangladesh reciprocate this by paying tribute to Rabindranath Tagore by celebrating his life, singing his songs, reading his contributions, remembering him fondly, and calling him *Kobiguru* and/or *Gurudev*.

Rabindranath Tagore's claim on East Bengal as his motherland was fully justified. His ancestral connection to Jessore in Bangladesh is well known. Although partition of Bengal took place on 16 October 1905, it was rescinded on 12 December 1911 to quell a serious political turmoil. He opposed the partition of Bengal all along. Because he died earlier (in 1941), he did not see the second partition in 1947 when Bengal became parts of two countries. In fact, he is a great son of both Bangladesh and India for which he composed national anthems. His Noble Prize in literature in 1913 gave him great prominence in the whole world, and with this he also made all of us very proud.

Acknowledgement

This article is based on various documents published in newspapers and Wikipedia, and on books such as “*Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man*, 1995” and “*Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, 1997” by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson; “*Glimpses of Bengal*” by Rabindranath Tagore, 1921. *Rabindra Rachanabali* available through internet was also consulted.

V Rajesh Mohan Rao

Beyond the Pandal: The Living Spirit of Durga Puja

Festivals are not only about rituals. They are also about people, memories, food, family gatherings and the feeling of belonging to a place. In India, few festivals express this combination as beautifully as Durga Puja in Bengal. Even for someone living far away from Kolkata, the festival carries a strong cultural presence through its images, music, stories, food and the participation of entire communities.

Coming from Kerala, I have always felt that festivals connect people in ways that ordinary days sometimes cannot. Kerala has its own rich traditions of Navaratri, temple celebrations and family gatherings. In my own Konkani background, festivals are closely connected with temples, food, relatives and memories of earlier generations. When I think about Bengal's Durga Puja, I see many similarities in this emotional connection, although the customs and atmosphere are different.

Kolkata's Durga Puja is famous for its magnificent pandals, artistic idols and large public celebrations. But behind the impressive decorations is something more important—the participation of ordinary people. Families, neighbourhoods, artists, craftsmen, volunteers, shopkeepers, children and elderly people all become part of the celebration. The festival creates a temporary community where people meet, talk, eat together and share memories.

This community feeling reminds me of celebrations in Kerala and in Konkani families. During Navaratri, temples become centres of gathering. In Kerala, Saraswati Puja, Ayudha Puja and Vijayadashami have their own special significance. Children are introduced to learning and books, musical instruments and tools are respectfully kept for worship, and families come together. In Konkani households too, festivals have traditionally been occasions when relatives visit one another, prepare special dishes and remember family customs.

Food is another important connection between festivals and culture. Bengal's Durga Puja is inseparable from bhog, sweets and the many foods associated with the festive season. Food is not merely something to eat during a festival; it carries memories of home and childhood. In Kerala and Konkani homes, too, festive food has a special place. Daalito, ghesi, val, ambat, bibhya upkari and godshe are among the dishes that remind many Konkani families of their heritage. Kerala's sadya, payasam, appam, idli, dosa and other traditional foods tell similar stories about the region's culture.

The interesting thing is that these traditions have survived despite migration and social change. Konkani-speaking families are found across Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and other parts of India. Their temples and community institutions have helped preserve language, food and customs. The same larger idea can be seen in Bengal, where Durga Puja has remained deeply connected with neighbourhood life even as Kolkata has become a modern metropolis.

Another feature that interests me about Durga Puja is the importance given to art. The making of the idol, the design of the pandal, lighting and decoration involve the creativity of many people. The festival becomes a large public exhibition of artistic imagination. Tradition and modern design often appear together.

This combination of tradition and modernity is something every Indian community is experiencing today. Younger generations live with smartphones, social media and a rapidly changing lifestyle. At the same time, they continue to return to temples, homes and community celebrations during important festivals. They may celebrate differently from their grandparents, but the desire to remain connected with their roots has not disappeared.

This is especially meaningful to me because family memories have always been an important part of my

understanding of culture. Older people often tell us that wherever we live, we should live well with others, cooperate with people and show kindness. Such simple advice may sound ordinary, but it represents an important part of India's traditional social life.

Durga Puja also demonstrates how a festival can become part of the identity of a city. Kolkata is not simply a place where Durga Puja takes place. During the festival, the city itself seems to become part of the celebration. Streets, neighbourhoods, public spaces and homes acquire a festive character. People who may not meet during ordinary days find reasons to come together.

For someone from Kerala, this offers an interesting way of understanding Bengal. India is not a collection of completely separate cultures. Our traditions often have different names, rituals and foods, but underneath them are familiar ideas family, devotion, hospitality, art, community and respect for elders.

The story becomes even more interesting when we look at the wider Indian tradition of Navaratri. In Karnataka, Mysuru is known for its grand Dasara celebrations. In Goa, temples and traditional communities observe their own festivals and rituals. In Kerala, Navaratri is closely associated with learning, music and Vijayadashami. In Bengal, Durga Puja takes a particularly spectacular public form.

These differences should not divide us. They make Indian culture richer.

Perhaps that is why Durga Puja has such a strong appeal even beyond Bengal. It is at once religious and cultural, traditional and modern, local and widely recognised. Its greatest strength is not simply the size of the pandals or the beauty of the idols. It is the ability to bring people together.

For me, the most meaningful festival is always the one that leaves something behind after the decorations are removed. A festival should leave memories, relationships and a renewed respect for one's culture. Durga Puja seems to achieve this in a special way.

From the temples and family homes of Kerala and Goa to the neighbourhood celebrations of Bengal, India's festivals tell a common story in many different languages. They remind us where we came from, introduce traditions to the next generation and create moments in which people can simply be together.

Beyond the lights, music, idols and pandals, this human connection is perhaps the real spirit of Durga Puja.

And that spirit belongs not only to Bengal. It belongs to India.

V. Rajesh Mohan Rao is a higher secondary school teacher teaching commerce subjects and Member of Konkani language working committee Keralam President of Dharmadam Chandrakala Mohan Rao cultural forum which serves the community.

Gautam Bandyopadhyay

An Old Time Campus Story: The Curious Case of Shantanu's Dinner Invitation

Shantanu was different from the rest of us. While we were a ragtag bunch of financially strapped graduate students on temporary student visas, Shantanu arrived in the U.S. with a coveted green card – a golden ticket for permanent residency. Among a dozen or so twenty-something Bengali students at a large California campus in the early '70s, the green card made him unique, and to him, maybe even a little superior.

New to the community, Shantanu often hung out with us students. He had an engineering degree from Jadavpur University and had taken advantage of the recently liberalized U.S. immigration policy for skilled professionals. Along with his green card, he brought a well-paying job at a local consulting firm and a latemodel Toyota sedan – which, in our eyes, practically made him a royalty.

To be fair, he carried himself like royalty. He never missed a chance to tell us about his wealthy, progressive family in Kolkata, his Park Street club life, his rotating roster of girlfriends, and his exotic family vacations. For us – middle-class Bengalis raised in conservative homes, Shantanu's tales were like something out of a Bollywood film. So naturally, we did what any self-respecting group of students would do – we encouraged him to tell more, while secretly laughing at his desperate attempts to impress us.

So, when Shantanu invited Amit and me over to his apartment for drinks and dinner, we were surprised, and curious. We couldn't pass up a chance to witness the extravagant lifestyle he talked so much about.

His apartment wasn't far from campus, and it definitely outclassed ours. He lived all by himself – not like us, crammed two-to-a-room in a 2-bedroom flat with old handme-down furniture collected from university storage. His place had real furniture, a brand-new 15-inch *color* TV, and shiny kitchen gadgets we hadn't seen outside of Sears catalogs.

As we stood there, admiring his setup with a healthy dose of envy, we noticed a stack of glossy Indian film magazines perfectly fanned out on his coffee table. I picked one up and began flipping through.

"I get them airmailed every week," Shantanu said with a smug smile.

In 1971, finding any Indian magazine in the U.S. was like spotting a unicorn. To get them *weekly*, and *airmailed*, was indeed impressive – though, to me, it sounded like an extravagant waste of money. Neither Amit nor I dared ask the cost. We weren't about to hand him another opportunity to make us feel broke.

Then came the main act – dinner and drinks.

He proudly showed us the Italian dish baking in the oven – something fancy and layered. On the way back to the living room, he picked up a bottle of Russian vodka from his well-organized bar. That alone set him apart. Most of us didn't drink, and back home, we hadn't even seen alcohol in our families.

Since arriving in the U.S., I had dipped a toe into the beer and wine world, but vodka? That was uncharted territory. Amit and I squinted at the label – 40% alcohol. Our eyebrows went up.

With the flair of a bartender in a Bond movie, Shantanu poured three shots. He raised his glass – "Cheers to good health!" – and downed the entire shot in one dramatic gulp.

We followed with a cautious sip. It tasted awful. Like industrial cleaner with a kick. I couldn't understand how Shantanu managed to gulp that stuff.

"You have to learn how to drink the real stuff like whiskey and vodka. Beer and wine are for weak hearts!" he declared with a loud laugh, as he downed his second shot. His face twisted slightly as the liquid burned its way down. He added, "Some people – women usually – mix juice with vodka. But I like it raw."

Clearly, this was his idea of masculinity.

Then came shot number three. No pause. No chaser. Just another big gulp. At this point, Amit and I looked at each other, wide-eyed. Was this dinner or a live experiment in alcohol tolerance?

Within 30 minutes of our arrival, Shantanu had downed four vodka shots. His speech slurred, and soon he collapsed onto his sofa, completely knocked out.

We were stunned. Neither of us had dealt with a situation like this before. Was he just drunk? Was this dangerous? We checked his pulse – it felt steady. He seemed peacefully asleep or passed out.

Meanwhile, the delicious aroma from the oven reminded us that we were still hungry. Walking out to find a restaurant didn't make sense – not with our near-empty wallets, and not when we had been invited for dinner.

Amit, always the kitchen expert, identified the dish as lasagna. We raided Shantanu's kitchen and found some bread and soft drinks to go with it. To our surprise, we ended up having a pretty good meal – awkward company notwithstanding.

An hour later, with Shantanu still in dreamland, we cleaned up, dumped the untouched vodka shots, and quietly let ourselves out. As we stepped into the night, Amit asked, “Should we have called an ambulance?”

“Maybe,” I replied. “But he looked like he was just sleeping. It would have felt stupid if he was just drunk.”

We were still unsure when we went to bed.

The next morning, Shantanu called. His voice was sheepish. “I'm really sorry about last night. That's never happened before. I usually know my limits.” He repeated his apology several times before nervously asking, “Did you guys at least eat something?”

We assured him we had a great meal – which was technically true. But that night marked a turning point. He never invited us again. And interestingly, he also stopped telling his grand stories about his fancy life in Kolkata.

Looking back, I often wondered; was Shantanu really someone with a drinking problem? Or was it a clumsy attempt to impress us with his version of American style socializing?

Truth is, back in those days, there were no guidebooks or YouTube channels for young immigrants trying to navigate cultural transitions. People like Shantanu with extra money in pocket had to figure it out on their own – often by trial, error, and a few too many vodka shots.

Thankfully, today's young immigrants are better informed, better prepared, and less likely to measure masculinity by alcohol proof.



Dr. Gautam Bandyopadhyay is a retired technology and innovation management professional with more than forty years of industrial experience in multinational corporations. Writing is his retirement-hobby. His hope is that someday his American-born children and grandchildren would be interested to read his writings to understand a little bit of their father/grandfather who arrived in USA as an engineering Ph.D. student in University of California, Berkeley, fifty years ago.

Gautam Bandyopadhyay

A Childhood Memory – Parenting 1950s style

Since the early 1980s, a cascade of new technologies – personal computers, the World Wide Web, mobile phones, smartphones, and social media - has quietly transformed the job of raising children forever. To say that parenting in the twenty-first century is more complex than it was in the 1950s, when I grew up, is something of an understatement. Today's parents must navigate a hypercompetitive world shaped by digital overload, social media pressures, cyberbullying, and constant connectivity – all of which can take a toll on attention spans and mental health. Even “safety” has expanded from watching the neighborhood to monitoring the internet.

Our five grandchildren, ages six to eleven, belong to this new reality, growing up in three different dual-career households with busy professional parents. Their parents juggle the delicate balance between giving freedom and maintaining supervision in a fast-changing, technology-driven world, while also trying to define what “success” and “happiness” should mean for their children.

For our grandchildren and their friends, a typical day can feel like a carefully orchestrated marathon: math enrichment before school; violin, viola, piano, or dance afterward; robotics or karate in the evening; and perhaps a quick review of French or Spanish vocabulary before bedtime. Free time does exist technically, but mostly on weekends, squeezed into narrow gaps between soccer, basketball, gymnastics, or swim practice, followed by chess club or even AI camp. Somewhere in that tightly packed schedule, birthday parties and social lives are expected to bloom.

Even vacations are planned with near-military precision, with every hour accounted for – presumably to ensure that relaxation time is not wasted.

In contrast, the 1950s – when I was growing up in a small-town middle-class family in India – offered a far simpler script. Roles were clearly defined – my father (whom we called Babuji) was the breadwinner, and my mother (Ma) managed the household and raised the children. Our parents emphasized family values and community life, guided by well-established social norms. Extracurricular activities meant unstructured play – mostly outdoors and often unsupervised and occasionally involving arguments and minor scuffles that were considered part of building character. As for concepts like emotional well-being, they were rarely discussed; had they been, they might have raised more than a few puzzled looks around the dinner table.

Modern parents firmly believe that hardship builds character, and so did our parents. However, unlike today - in the 1950s – our sole measure of success was school grades. They largely determined whether we could get into a good college and secure a promising career. Extracurricular activities were nice to have, but only after meeting academic expectations.

Unfortunately, as a young boy, schoolwork and good grades were not a priority for me. I was far more interested in spending my days outdoors with friends. My time was filled with wandering, flying kites, spinning tops, playing marbles, and engaging in endless games of soccer and cricket. I would return home exhausted and ravenous, demanding dinner by 6:00 PM – an unheard-of hour in Bengali households, where dinner was typically served around 9 or 10 PM. Ma found my demands exasperating but often gave in, bending the family routine just for me.

This early dinner for me, however, created a new problem. Evenings before dinner were meant for study, and Ma was responsible for helping me and my sisters with our schoolwork. But after hours of play followed by a full meal, I could barely keep my eyes open. In desperation, my poor Ma resorted to an old Indian remedy

- putting mustard oil in my eyes to keep me awake. Unfortunately, the trick didn't work very well. Worse still, I did not change my habits. I remained indifferent to schoolwork until I was about eleven years old and in eighth grade.

Despite my lackadaisical attitude, I managed to stay around average in class. This troubled Ma deeply because she knew I wasn't even trying. She was softspoken and rarely raised her voice, even when upset. Discipline did not come easily to her, and I often treated her attempts to punish me as a joke.

I remember Babuji returning home from work and spending evenings sipping tea with my uncle and visitors who frequently dropped by, while we the children studied inside. But I was the perennial troublemaker and often fall asleep. Some evenings, Ma would get tired trying to make me focus on my work with little success, she would turn to Babuji for help. Usually, he would listen and offer a mild warning – “Don't do it again” – which did little to improve matters.

However, everything changed one day after my eighth-grade final exams, when Ma complained in desperation to Babuji about my lack of effort and pleaded for serious help before it would be too late.

This time, Babuji realized the extent of the problem and intervened with a very unusual action plan.

That evening, Babuji called me into his room. He sat in his favorite easy chair, my report card in hand. My mother sat beside him; both looked unusually serious. I knew I was in trouble – more than usual. In a calm but firm voice, Babuji said, “Tomorrow I will speak to your school principal and request that you repeat this class. You scored only 56% (a passing score in India) in math. That means you have learned only half of what you should have. You need another year to make up for it.”

I stared at him, trying to gauge if he was serious. Surely, he couldn't mean it. I hadn't failed – I just hadn't done well. But the thought of repeating the year and facing my friends' ridicule filled me with dread. It would be a complete disaster.

I pleaded, “Please don't do this. I promise I will work harder and do better next time.” But my words had no effect. He seemed resolute. My mother, taken aback by his reaction, began to soften. “Maybe he will improve next time,” she said hesitantly. But my father replied firmly, “No. We must fix this problem now.”

The next morning, Babuji took me to school and presented his idea to my math teacher. He explained that I had started school young and that repeating the year might help both my academics and maturity. My teacher listened – and then burst into laughter. “Are you serious?” he said. “This is certainly a unique proposal! Usually, parents come asking for their children to be promoted despite failing grades. I've never heard of someone asking to hold their child back.”

Then, turning serious, he added, “Please don't do this. He is a bright boy. I believe he will do well.” Looking at me with a smile, he asked, “What do you think of your father's idea? Will you work harder next time?”

By then, I was exhausted from fear and on the verge of tears. I nodded and said in a trembling voice, “Yes, I promise.”

I don't know what my parents expected when Ma complained and Babuji devised this extraordinary plan. But I know now that it was a turning point in my life. My attitude toward studies changed dramatically. I began to develop discipline and even enjoyment in my schoolwork. From that day on, no one had to push me to do better. Starting in ninth grade, I consistently became one of the top performers in my class – I never again wanted to fall behind.

Thirty years later, as we sat in our home in Naperville, Illinois, reminiscing about that long-ago incident, my father gave full credit to my mother – who had passed away two years earlier – for her timely intervention. With quiet conviction, he said, “Nobody knows children better than their mother – they are the ones who build character.”

Balcony

In the twenty-first century, however, the dynamics have changed. In modern families, both parents are actively involved in every aspect of household life, including raising children. At the same time, children face an overwhelming array of choices - some enriching, others distracting or even harmful. Staying connected, understanding a child's mind, and guiding them toward their full potential has become far more challenging for parents today.

“Parenting is the most difficult project you will ever undertake,” I often tell my children.



