

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## A Voice that Still Reverberates

by Rahat Fahmida

Abbasuddin's was a hauntingly original voice. His motivating tune said of the gentle air and rain, made flowers of spring blossom and birds sing. They stirred men to make religious pilgrimages in grateful thanks to God. The Daily Star remembers the great singer whose birth anniversary falls on October 27, 1991.



With family — wife Lutfunnesa, sons Mustafa Kamal and Mustafa Zaman Abbasi, daughter Ferdousi and (extreme right) poet Ismail Hossain Shiraji.

ABOUT 69 years back a daring young boy hurried his way to Calcutta from Balarampur. This was a village about 12 miles away from a Southern town of Bengal — Kuch Bihar. His intentions were not to hunt for a job, as was common with most. But it was to record his songs. He knew nothing about playing any musical instruments, nor did he have any formal training in music itself. Even then he had the courage and confidence to go in for his own records. And he was not wrong at all. The Gramophone company knew his worth after his first record, which captivated the people as soon as it was introduced in the market. And the name of Abbasuddin Ahmed was all around. In his first record he had two modern Bengali songs: "Kon behir nayan jole," and

"Saran pare O Ga priya." Abbasuddin's name at this time, i.e. around 1923-24 was like the coming of a new spring. It was a hauntingly original voice. The lines he sang spoke of the rain that stirred and awakened the earth. The coming of spring is an occasion for joy and gratitude that men's lives are part of the cycle of nature. His motivating tune said of the gentle air and rain made flowers of spring blossom and birds sing, and they stirred men to make religious pilgrimages in grateful thanks to God. The quality of his voice helped one to hear the more clearly buoyant joyfulness of Bengali villagers.

Talking to Ferdousi Rahman, the great singer's only daughter, on the occasion of his 90th birthday, she said, "I had music all around me from my very childhood. But it was never imposed on me or any of my two brothers, Mostafa Kamal, and Mostafa Zaman Abbasi. He was an ideal father. As long as he was alive he was my best friend." Looking into her father's history she went on to talk about the artist's childhood. She smiled as she said, "I had two grandmothers, that is, Boro Dadi and Chhoto Dadi. I really can not give much details about my Boro Dadi's children. But my father was the eldest son of my Chhoto Dadi, who had five other sons and a daughter just older to my father." His father, late Zafar Ali Ahmed, was a noted lawyer

and zaminder of Balarampur, Kuch Bihar, and his aims regarding the young, brilliant Abbasuddin were far from being in music. He wanted his son to be a lawyer, and later expected that he would at least take up a job in police service. But young Abbasuddin had a different motive. He popularised the world of folk songs not only in the villages, but among the city dwellers, too. The art of his voice was like magic, which built a bridge between the village and urban people in no time.

Ferdousi further added that Abbasuddin wanted the Muslim community to realise that singing and music is not 'haram'. In this, he wanted Kazi Nazrul Islam's help in early 1930s, as he asked, "Kazi Da, why don't you write some 'hamd' and 'naat' in Bengali?" His approach was accepted by our national poet. And within a very short time the brilliant music composer had his first record of 'hamd' and 'naat', which contained the following two:

*Abbasuddin wanted the Muslim community to realise that music was not 'haram.' In this, he sought Kazi Nazrul Islam's help in the early 1930s.*

"Ramzaner aye rojar sheishe elo khusrud." and "Islam Oye sauda loye, elo nobin saudagar."

After an initial controversy, people started responding. They were convinced that music was an acceptable art, and through it one could appreciate God and nature, and thank Him in a similar manner.

Abbasuddin put before us the words that writers of the

past actually wrote. He was not only an investigator of words and their changes of form, nor was he only an investigator of manuscripts and printed materials. He was sometimes a philosopher, for he was constantly meeting ideas and constantly discovering how great minds had gone about the very difficult business of thinking — thinking about love, about nature, about youth and age, even about thought itself. And sometimes the student of literature is concerned with religion, with the deepest and strongest beliefs that men have held.

We listen to one of his songs and there before us is an arrangement of words. We only hear the song and its music — not live people, not solid buildings or towering mountains or the endlessly moving sea — only tune mingled with simple, meaningful verses. And yet as we hear him on our turn-table or cassette player we can sometimes be so moved that no one, not the historian, not the philosopher

or the psychologist, not even theologian, can explain all that we feel happening to us. We enter a mysterious world that is both near to us and remote from us. It is a world in which we sometimes find our own concerns — our own hopes and fears, loves and hatreds. It is a world sometimes so remote from our concerns that we forget about them, and return to them to find that they look different. The world of Abbasuddin's music is both mysteriously near and mysteriously remote, and no one word can sum up what happens to us when we enter it.

What is so inexhaustibly wonderful about his music is its power to awaken in people the awareness of life that they did not know they had. When they understand his work it was like they discovered powers of judgment and insight in themselves that they had not known they possessed. They became aware of ranges of experience that they share, conveyed to them in their own language.

People could not and still cannot resist what deepens their sense of these values, any more than they can resist the deepening and widening of meaning that comes to the words they know best as they grow in wisdom and experience. It comes perhaps most often when they hear someone use familiar words in a distinctive and individual way: in the sound of an individual voice they may hear and still go on hearing fresh meanings that revive and strengthen the values we live by.

We begin to hear an original voice. It reaches us only through words and lyrics and somewhat uncertainly, as if it were muffled in layers of time. But it is a voice of a particular person of a close friend in the next room.

It is, of course, not a voice that says things we can predict, as we predict that our friend in the next room is starting to tell his favourite story. We know that story. We know too — or can guess from our friend's tone — just what kind of audience he is telling it to. After all, we know his style. We know that this voice raised itself above the murmur and babble of hundreds and thousands of voices in the background. We may not

## A SENSE OF POSITIVE IDENTITY

by Waheedul Haque

BENGLI Muslims' was for many years not a meaningful term as it had no entity of any kind. Only a long-enduring and almost universal discrimination against whoever was a Bengali and called his or her God Allah or Khoda, pursued them into a pen of a loose category. That discrimination was ever so often accompanied by insulting derision igniting in the victim's mind a rage that only simmered and had no way to manifest itself. It is said that in the thirties of this century the Mohammedan Sporting Club, the daily Azad and Abbasuddin Ahmed infused in those a sense of positive identity and a power of belonging to big collective whole, taking away in a big measure from the state of helplessness of the Bengali Muslims. While both Mohammedan Sporting and the Azad very openly and effectively pondered to a divisive and negative brand of mass psychosis called communalism and was in due course rejected by society within forty years of its all-pervasive sway over the Bengali nation's mind — only Abbasuddin's work lived and gained in value.

Why did it do so happen? Because all of Abbasuddin's life's work was true work of art and art only adds to life rather than detracting from it in any way — and adds man to man, generation to generation and society to society. Still it is an irony that it was only because his musical output was high art

— throughout the Pakistani colonial times of cultural aridisation, he was hardly remembered and his work promoted to reach contemporary attention. In the twenty years of independence, the situation hasn't changed in any significant manner. There should have been a spate of long play discs and audio cassettes of his songs in the commercial market and government should have seen to it that his numbers were available also on CD. None of that has happened and there is no sign that things would any day move in that direction at all? Why? It is by things like this that the true artistic temper of a people of a historical time can be measured. And there is no doubt that we live in a very unflattering time — in terms of art. By all standards K. Mullik was a greater singer than Abbasuddin. But who remember him now? Abbasuddin's greatness lay in groundbreaking and Mullik was only a great performer. Abbasuddin introduced three new genres of Bengali on the gramophone disc — most popular and effective way to propagate music.

The East Bengal folk, mainly the Bhatiali form of the Dhaka-Faridpur region, the northern folk form of Bhawaila and the Islamic songs of Nazrul Islam. And in all three he excelled and each of his discs sold by tens of thousands. He is credited to have insisted that his songs be put on the 'Twin'



Abbasuddin Ahmed (1901-1959).

yellow-label discs of the cheaper variety so that the broad masses of the villages could have access to them. And they indeed have had it in an enviable good measure. As of Bengal, irrespective of religious affiliations and class distinctions or urban or rural settings, literally floated on the sonorous crooning music of the young man from Cooch Behar.

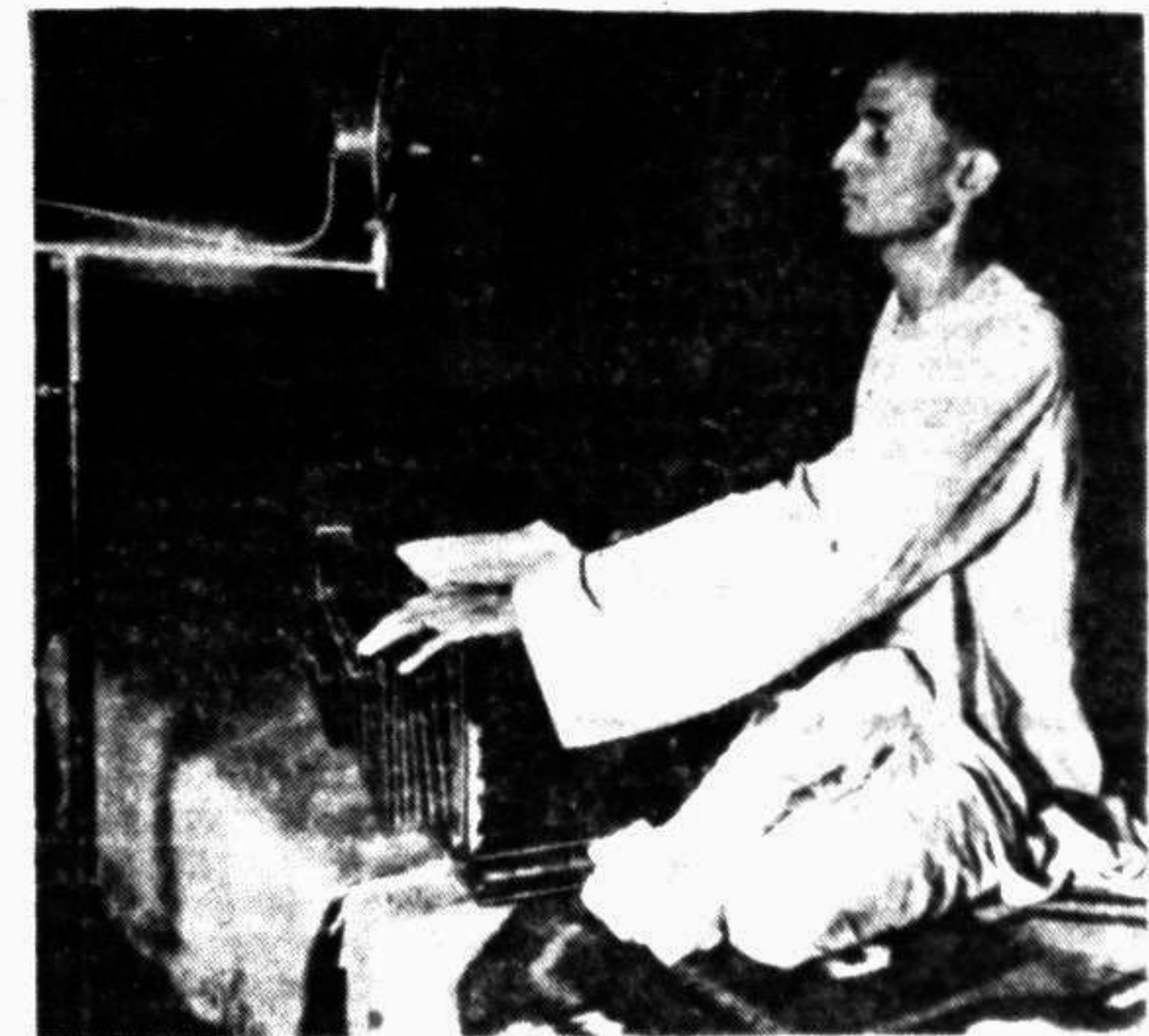
If his Islamic songs touched the soul of the Bengali Muslim and gave him a sense of culture and cultural distinction, his Bhatiali and Bhawaila — at time classics each them were — for the first time — and till today in the most effective way — brought the rural pastoral tunes to the drawing rooms of the sophisticated advanced classes of professionals and other literati.

The great man's great legacy of art waits to be truly discovered anew and established in society in an appropriate manner — for the benefit of the society itself.

Abul Kasem Mullik could not sing for the disc in his own name. Abbasuddin was the first Bengali singer to do that with a Muslim Arabic name and forcefully cut across the barrier built by commercial prejudice.

There was an indication of his art the like of which will be rare to find in the history of music.

*What is so inexhaustibly wonderful about his music is its power to awaken in people the awareness of life that they did not know they had.*



On stage rendering a song at an early age.

know at once the location of that background. A familiar voice whose pleasure keeps us listening for more. We feel that someone is expressing a view of experience that is individual and fresh. He composed and collected because he had to, no one was so thoughtful in this field before him. We love to hear him because we cannot resist the pleasure of hearing an individual voice even at this time.

## Escape from Terror

by Kaiser Zaman

### A First Person Account of the Civil War in Somalia

the Somalis considered themselves to be one nation because they spoke the same language, believed in the same religion and belonged to the same racial stock, they had an extremely strong sense of clan. The clannishness of the Somalis turned out to be more destructive to national unity than tribalism or ethnicity in other countries in the world. The major clans — the Issaqs in the north, the Hawyees in the central region and the Darods in the South — are subdivided into numerous sub-clans. The complexity of relationships and rivalries among the clans is mind-boggling.

The regime of Siad Barre was a benevolent dictatorship in the beginning, but soon turned to megalomania and visions of grandeur. Barre claimed Ethiopian Ogaden and northeastern Kenya as part of greater Somalia. Unhappiness with lack of Soviet support in his futile war with Ethiopia led him to renounce the East Bloc in favour of the West. But the West had begun to lose interest in hot little wars conducted by Third World dictators bent on increasing personal power while weakening the country. The new reality put an end to Barre's foreign adventurism and he turned his attention on his own people —

with devastating consequences. In the mid-1980's the northern Somalis, chafing under the harsh rule of Barre,

views with bullets. Although Barre belonged to the Marehan sub-clan of the Darods, other Darods also felt alienated, and

with the United Nations in repatriating hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians who, after spending a decade in dead-end



Rebels enter Mogadishu before launching an attack.

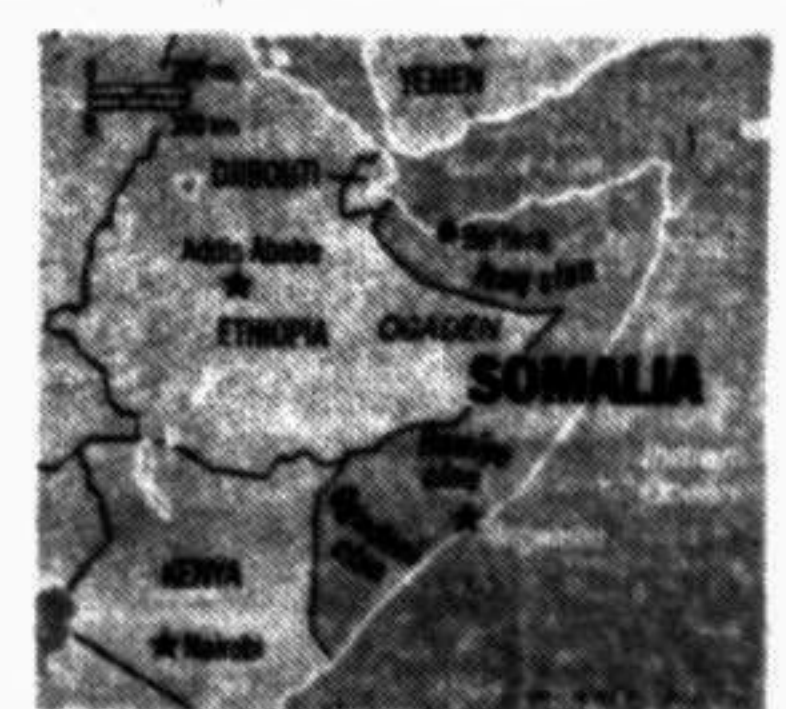
rebels against him. The retaliation was ruthless, which only strengthened the resolve of the rebels and inspired other groups to challenge him. In the absence of ballots, the dissidents of Somalia did what dissidents do everywhere — they began to express their

at least tacitly supported the growing opposition to nearly twenty years of power. As the 1980's were coming to a close, the Somali destiny hurtled toward self-destruction.

I arrived in Mogadishu in late September 1990 to work

**Throughout history, Somalia was one nation but never one country. It was not until the decolonization in Africa when the Somali people in British and Italian territories were brought together into one country, first administered by the United Nations and only from 1960 by the Somalis themselves.**

refugee camps, had finally chosen to return to their own country which too was strife torn. Only a few days before, the American Ambassador to Somalia was picnicking on the beach with friends when armed men attacked the party. Its only significance was that it



incident, we fervently hoped that perhaps the violence had peaked, a hope inevitably shattered by the next incident. Despite all the dangers and frustrations, we expatriates liked the challenge of living in Somalia and were bravely holding off the day of reckoning.

That day finally came in early December when one of my colleagues who was returning home in the evening, saw a group of men armed with automatic rifles trying to enter his house. A few days earlier, yet another UN vehicle was hijacked at gunpoint and a Finnish expert was shot in the head. Luckily, the wound was superficial and the man was evacuated to Nairobi for treatment. By then, the security meetings of the international organizations had become a daily feature and we spent hours making contingency plans for evacuation, still hoping that it would not be necessary. In the first week of December, it became clear that the time had come to evacuate the non-essential personnel and all dependants. The American ambassador came to the same conclusion for his staff and other Americans in the country. We were a little concerned that the decision would not sit well

with the Government and we could be subjected to harassment, but we had no choice. On 7 December, the US ambassador announced the decision to his staff. Almost simultaneously, the heads of the UN agencies called staff meetings in their respective offices to make similar announcements. It was like the proverbial other shoe falling — it was an inescapable decision. The international staff gave a collective sigh of relief, the Somali staff just sighed. In our office, a handful of international staff, including myself, were to remain. Although a few others, including my wife, would have preferred to stay, it was not the time to cling on to optimism.

As news of the US and UN decisions to evacuate their non-essential staff and families spread, the offices of the few airlines which served Mogadishu were besieged by expatriates and well-to-do Somalis. We worked feverishly to get bookings on the commercial flights and get as many of our staff and families out as swiftly as possible. People hurriedly packed their household goods but had no time to put them in storage or ship them out. It was sad to see colleagues leaving all their belongings behind and giving last-minute instructions to their maids and watchmen. No one knew if the evacuation would be for only a few days or forever. The moving companies, such as they were, were in great demand and the price of even used cardboard cartons skyrocketed.

My wife was scheduled to fly out on 12 December. On the 9th, I came home from the office in the evening and was