

## Face to Face

## Bannya: Wandering Through Dimensions

When the wind blows through the leaves, it brings the sound of music to **Rezwana Chowdhury Bannya's** senses. And for Bannya, music is Rabindra Sangeet, the world is Shantiniketan

"MUSIC is the rustling of leaves; music is the breaking of waves; music is the whistling of the wind and music is Rabindra Sangeet. At least, that was what it was like when we were children." These are the words of Rezwana Chowdhury Bannya. Or perhaps, The Bannya. This is the person responsible for making even the youngsters sit down and listen to the songs of Tagore. The works of Tagore were previously associated with maturity. But the feelings Bannya evokes from the songs know no boundaries.

Bannya's affair with Rabindra Sangeet dates back to when she was a little girl, when she lost no opportunity to listen to records in her father's antique gramophone. Seeing her interest, her uncle who was a singer taught her a few songs, and that was when she realised that her attraction towards music was more than a hobby. When all her friends went out to

play, she found herself struggling with the harmonium (not being able to reach the bellow), but adamant all the same.

Her family was supportive of her interest in music, although they never imagined that she would take it so seriously. She faced no obstacles from them. She felt the boundary in herself. "I didn't know many songs. So when people asked me to sing I had to repeat the same songs all the time. It was so embarrassing!

"I never thought that I would go up on stage one day, or sing on television for that matter. I never thought I sang well...I don't think so now either. These things never entered my mind. What I knew was that I loved to sing. When I listened to Pankaj Mallick sing, I used to think, 'Oh, how I wish I could sing like him!' But, I thought that would always be an unfulfilled dream. At that time, Shantiniketan was my fantasy world. All I could ever think of was to go

there, to sing. I used to read a lot. A short story in *Desh* magazine influenced me too. The heroine was a student in Shantiniketan. The simplicity of life, the way they lived, the musical soirees intrigued me and I craved to be a part of it all.

Bishi's book on Shantiniketan also played a role in this 'craziness'!

"I was never a strong willed

By Navine Murshid

girl...I often suffered from indecision. But this was one decision which I took firmly...and I have no regrets. At that time it was difficult to get admitted to Dhaka University's Economics department. Yet, I got a chance. My family was a middle class educated family and they expected me to go for higher studies and ultimately go out and work. My decision to go to Shantiniketan was not wel-

come. 'Are you crazy?...you'll leave the opportunity of studying economics to learn songs?' cried my exasperated father. I told my father that this opportunity would never come again, and so, to let me go. 'After I come back, I'll return to the academics and finish what I started.' My father wouldn't buy it. Yet, I was adamant. I don't know from where this determination came. Even I was surprised by my strong will! But I had to go, come what and what not!...and yes, Shantiniketan turned out to be everything I've ever dreamt of and much more!

"Now I realize that this was first step towards taking Rabindra Sangeet as my career. After years of training and practicing, it finally dawned upon me that I could sing! I came back to Dhaka in 1981. I had no expectations from the people here. I was laid back. After all, I came back to complete my studies! But what I received was almost overwhelming. The love, admiration and re-

spect I received from the music lovers cannot be described by words. It was beautiful..."

The wheel had started to roll then...there was no stopping. Life had just begun to turn exciting and hectic. All of a sudden, the lime-light was on her and she had to prove to all concerned that she could sing. The period when adrenal secretion was the most. She succeeded, of course, with flying colours. And the rest, as they say, is history!

So, how did this affect her family life? "Actually, it is very difficult to maintain a family and a career at the same time. If you sing, you cannot have a proper family. I admit, I don't have an ideal family. The cook is cooking, laying food on the table, we are eating. My two beautiful children are growing up practically by themselves! Each day flows into another, with life getting busier and busier. My husband's love and support keeps me going. Here I have to say that I have a wonderful family. Without their support I



couldn't have made it so far," she trailed off, suddenly lost.

What are her other interests? Does any other form of art interest her? To this she said that although she is very fond of paintings, she could never hold a brush in her hands and draw something that can be identified. Her desire to formulate pictures had led her to take up embroidery work in her free times.

It has been a while since I've done that. In fact, I was just telling Priyadarshini, my daughter, that I will sit down with it today," she said. Coming back to the singing world, what is the future of Rabindra Sangeet? "I would say that the future holds a lot of gifted singers. Not only students from my music school, there are many outside who are potential singers. But here I have to mention that most of those who learn to sing, learn because they are either pressurized by their parents or because they want to make a name for themselves by singing on TV or on stage. There are very few who actually understand what they are singing; very few who enjoy the songs from their hearts. I am often invited to judge performances at different places and there, I've often noticed this lack of practice and *rewoz*. Then again, the youngsters these days are very busy with the innumerable things they must do. I would say that relatively, my students are better off, because they come to classes regularly and I scold them when they don't practice. There are students who are very serious and would like to take this up as their career. I am very hopeful about my students. I want to give them the opportunity I had. I want to be to them

what Mohor-di (Kanika Banerjee) was to me.

Apart from the songs of Rabindranath, Nazrul, Atul Prasad, D.L. Roy and Rajnikant (the *Pancha giti kobol*), there are band music, film songs and other modern songs as opposed to Baul songs. Bannya can identify herself with the Bauls of Bengal. "These are the songs of the simple, ordinary people of the village. Yet, the lyrics and the music holds so much depth, so much feeling that they can hardly be called illiterates. I would say that these are the real learned ones. Their songs speak of experience, of their lives, their laughter, their tears...it is very moving.

And they sing so beautifully..." she marveled. About band music and film songs she hardly knows anything. She cannot recall the last time she went to a cinema-gallery to watch a movie. Yet, on it she could comment by seeing her surroundings. "Today we see that when a student of class 7 or 8 can save Tk 2500, the first thing he does is buy a guitar, gather up some of his friends and start up a band. Previously, when a group started a band, they had the basic background of singing, for example a classical base. Let's take the band of Souls for example. Twenty years ago (and even today) their songs were melodious and their lyrics were not bad either. That was because they had a certain level of singing and academic background, not only to sing, but to compose music and write the lyrics. Today, rhythm is the life of any band group. I understand what makes the youth turn to such music. Basically, people aged between 15 to 25,

are the ones who listen to these songs. This is the time when they are bubbling with energy and they find out that they can express themselves through the rhythm and beat. But as they grow mature, they turn to a more subdued or softened form of music.

"Many take the influence of the band music to be negative. While it's true that the concept of band music is completely western, we still have nothing to worry about. The world cannot go in one direction and we in another. This is all part of the trend and we should be glad that we can keep up with the ever expanding international music world! These things will come and go. These transitions will take place. And we will still hold onto our culture and heritage. While these trends sway to and fro, the songs of Rabindranath, Nazrul will remain rooted to where they were. Their works are here to stay, forever. Even 'death shall have no dominion', she ended quoting Dylan Thomas.

Any regrets? "A single turning point determined my life for me and that was my decision to go to Shantiniketan. And in that I have no regrets. Life is too short to have any regrets. One should make the best of whatever she has. That way life has more meaning, more value and more appreciation. Life is what we make of it. Whatever happens is because we choose it to be so. Life is often difficult, as it is, why make it more complicated? So, dear readers, my advice to you would be to live life to the fullest and be able to see the brighter aspects of life."

And with these words, the interview came to an end.



Bannya with son: Mixing music with family

## When I Was a Teenager...

## IN CONVERSATION WITH SYED JAHANGIR

MENACE of the bearded maulana was getting on their nerves.

Back in the early 1940s, people of Tetulia village in Tala thana of Khulna district were haunted by a phantom artist. Often, people found the nice and clean clay walls of their thatched or tin-roofed homes scarred by graffiti. The graffiti became like a signature of the phantom artist because it was the same image drawn with charcoal everytime: the portrait

By Sabir Mustafa

of a bearded maulana, done with a handful of scratches. Little did the enraged masses of Tetulia realise that the phantom graffiti artist, later identified as the son of Syed Moazzam Hashemi, would grow up to be one of the country's foremost painters.

Today, when one comes across works by Syed Jahangir, there is an immediate jarring effect on the senses. The effect is not produced by any bizarre subject like a bearded maulana or outlandish composition, but the brightness of the colours and boisterous movement of the lines. Elements of inquisitiveness are matched by a mechanical fascination for forms that make up the whole.

These elements did not dawn on Jahangir like a bolt from the blue, and the bearded maulana

on the clay walls of Tetulia was but one step in the evolution of a child's mind from a yawning void into a reservoir of searching questions expressed through lines and colour.

"Our village was fairly close to Calcutta, about eight hours journey by a small steamer to Jhikargacha in Jessore and then train to Shilaidah station", Jahangir recalls as he settles down to a trip down memory lane, back to his childhood days in the leafy village which is now in the district of Satkhira.

"This steamer used to intrigue me a lot. The river Kapotakhka was about two kilometers from our village, and we used to hear the steamer's whistle at crack of dawn every day. And everyday, I would run to the river bank to marvel at the steamer, watch people embark and wait until the boat trailing smoke disappeared around the bend of the river".

Jahangir still remembers that the steamer was owned by the IGRSN Group, a British maritime company. The river on which it plied flowed past the home of poet Michael Modhusudhan Dutta in Keshabpur of Jessore.

The workings of the machine left a deep imprint on the young Jahangir's mind, and this would bring him some bonus. In course of time, he became one of his village's better

known bicycle mechanics, though he never took that up as a profession (wisely). But it helped in an unexpected way.

Jahangir once saw a portrait of his illustrious uncle Jalaluddin Hashemi, then deputy speaker of the Bengal Assembly, painted by Probodh Dutta. The portrait was so life-like that he thought it must have been the work of a magician. The conviction was growing in him that art was magic and artists were magicians. It was not long before he had a chance to acquaint himself with the magician himself.

"One day a man came to the village and wanted someone to repair his bicycle. When I learnt that the man was Probodh Dutta, I became determined to offer my services. Dutta did not think much of me, but I was elated to meet the magician", Jahangir recalls.

It was in fact at primary school that the magic of art revealed itself to the young Jahangir. He had watched with astonishment as the teacher drew the portrait of a man with few sweeps of a piece of chalk on a black slate. For the young Jahangir, this was magic. Inside, the mischievous part of the brain was already conjuring up the image of a bearded maulana, almost to ready to become Tetulia's first encounter with graffiti.

But Tetulia remembers Ja-

hangir as more than just a graffiti artist. When he returned from scholarship in the USA in 1958, his old school headmaster Ganendra Nath Chakravorty arranged a reception for the prodigal son. Even in mischief, the element of creative talent was recognised and the boy remained close to the community's hearts.

Growing up in the village had charms that can never be equalled in the concrete jungles of the urban environment, even though it was in Dhaka that those varied boyhood experiences and influences were transformed into works of art. In the boy Jahangir, even the mischievous was a form of artist expression. Like going to the jatra on winter nights and creeping back home early in the morning to avoid his father's chagrin.

"In those days, jatra didn't have any females. All female characters were played by men, but my father took a very dim view of his young boy's fascination for all-night jatras. But my mother always supported me", Jahangir says.

The mother had good reasons to nurture the artist in Jahangir. The young boy often volunteered to help his mother stitch and embroider quilts, which was another avenue through which Jahangir continued his journey towards the magical world of fine arts.

The village environment in those days helped the artist in Jahangir while keeping any influences of his politician uncle at bay, even though politics in the days when the artist was a teenager was light years away from what it is today. Tetulia village before the partition of India was dominated by Hindu families who were well-educated and highly enlightened. The boys from

those families were mostly interested in sports, music and reading. Words like 'masant' and 'chandabaz' were as alien to the teenage Jahangir and his friends at the Tala B Dey High English School as they are common to the vocabulary of teenagers today.

"One of my fascinations was to watch the construction of the Durga idol before the puja, and follow its path right down to its immersion in the river", Jahangir says. "But listening to the music of the flute and watching the wind blow across paddy fields shaped the future of my art. The two produce such extraordinary rhythm, it is mystifying and intoxicating".

The fascination with drawing grew and grew, until the teenager found himself in the company of Zaimul Abedin and Quamrul Hassan at the Dhaka Art College. His closeness to elder brother poet and journalist Sikander Abu Zafar, did the rest.

Even though his father was largely opposed to the idea of Jahangir going to the art college, Zafar managed to break the family resistance. When Jahangir arrived at Dhaka to take up the brush, he was reaching the end of his teenage, but close to a momentous event in national history.

"We were holding the 2nd Dhaka Group Art Exhibition on Feb 21, 1952. Quamrul Hassan was supervising us, but we were all tensed up because of the looming confrontation between students of Dhaka University and police. Around 2.30pm that day, Murtaza Bashir came running to the exhibition hall, his white shirt soaked in blood, and told us about the police shooting. A student standing next to him had been hit by a bullet and blood sprayed all



Jahangir: Boyhood steeped in culture

over his shirt", Jahangir says. The following year Bashir painted a series of sketches for a special memorial journal edited by Hassan Hafizur Rahman. To this day, those sketches by Bashir remain probably the most powerful expression of a people's defiance of repression and desire for

freedom. For Jahangir, the gulf that separates the teenagers of his boyhood and those of today could not have been wider. There is no more yearning for the kind of idealism that Feb 21 symbolised, no desire to reach for the higher intellectual plane. The rat race is consum-

ing all, where the pursuit of money is the primary driving force, even at the cost of social harmony and personal enlightenment.

"The teenagers of today are certainly not using their otherwise unquestionable talent and merits in the proper way", laments Syed Jahangir.