

Face to Face

# The Custodian of Rabindrasangeet

Kalim Sharafi is the grand old man of Rabindrasangeet. His is one of the monumental voices endowed with clean gayaki and precise diction which have laid the foundations of Bangladeshi garana of gayaki and inspired generations of singers in this part of the world to comprehend and communicate the true spirit of Tagore unadulterated. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

**Q:** How do you look at the recent trends in Rabindra Sangeet, particularly the experimentation done by the likes of Pijush Kanti Sarkar?

**A:** I don't know much about this experimentation but what I can tell you is how Tagore himself presented his song and what he wrote in his book *Sangeet Chinta* about how it should be rendered.

Tagore has developed his own Swaralipi. But you can't really put suggestion for gayaki in Swaralipi. Learning Rabindra Sangeet or for that matter any brand of music of the subcontinent is *gurumukhi* that is it depends wholly on what the *ustad* is teaching his pupil. What I feel imperative in presenting Rabindra Sangeet is a fair understanding of his writing. It's only through comprehending his creation that a clean gayaki can be developed. For this *Sangeet Chinta* is a core book to follow.

**Q:** What was exactly the dispute between Debabrata and the Biswabharati?

**A:** The argument or dis-

agreement was on Debabrata's use of western music in Tagore song which the so-called guardians at Biswabharati couldn't accept.

**Q:** What do you feel about it and by extension do you think there should be individual interpretations in presenting Tagore song?

**A:** Yes. Of course. What Debabrata was trying to do was to capture the mood and the essence of the song. If one song is put into western tune, Debabrata tried to sing it in that way and recapture its western essence and even, you know, he sang Tagore's compositions in English and in French. Tagore himself hasn't put any embargo on the use of western musical instruments.

**Q:** You were with the legendary theatre group 'Bahurupi', tell us something about it.

**A:** We were once staging Tagore's celebrated play *Raktakarabi* or *Red Oleander* with Sambhu Mitra as its director. He decided that the character Bishu in the play should wear

trousers instead of *dhoti*. And that created an uproar. He then secretary of Biswabharati, the traditional bastion to uphold the sanctity of Rabindranath, vehemently opposed it. Debabrata stuck to his argument that Tagore has not given any specific description about Bishu's garment. And the context of the drama indicates that trousers can be worn. Finally they gave up and *Raktakarabi* was staged with Bishu wearing trousers.

**Q:** What is your impression about the present generation of Tagore singers?

**A:** Well, I don't see anything wrong in the present trend. Still it hasn't begun to rot. But I don't know what will happen in future. Respect for the composer and his creation is a must without it the essence of a song is supposed to suffer at the hand of its singer. For example the song *Aamii Takhana Chhilemo Magana Gahana Ghumero Ghore*... it is in Baul or mystic tune but the message in it demands a slower treatment than the faster Baul beat. Singing Tagore song

is an intellectual exercise as well.

**Q:** Who was your model in Rabindra Sangeet when you started?

**A:** Frankly speaking I had no model as such. I used to pick up what by *guru* was teaching me and tried to perfect that.

**Q:** Who was your guru?

**A:** Subha Guha Takurata. But it was actually Shambhu Mitra who injected in me the true understanding of Tagore song. My contact with him was highly rewarding in every sense.

He used to say to us that be it song or theatre production if you can't convey what is being said in them there is no point of rendering them. That was the eye opener for me. My background in theatre and particularly association with Bahurupi and its life force legendary Shambhu Mitra inspired me to seek for clear diction and clean gayaki free from the elitist and nasalized presentation.

**Q:** When you choose a new song for rendition what do you



do with it? Do you try to find out the historical context of its composition or what?

**A:** Yes. You have to know why and when a particular composition is done, then you have to comprehend the song.

Tagore song is not only ends in its tune only, the message is equally important. So an understanding of the song is vital in communicating the essence of Rabindra Sangeet. For example if a song is about

*Swadeshi* movement you have to know the social context of that time to capture the mood of the composition. I remember Debabrata saying, "If you want to sing Rabindra Sangeet, don't render it without an

understanding of its meaning."

**Q:** Is it one way traffic or two way?

**A:** Two way definitely. Your interpretation and what Tagore has to say in a song together make a rendition better.

## When I was a Teenager

**M**OVING about from one country to another, first when her father opted for Pakistan, and later when his career in the Foreign Service took him abroad, could have evoked a sense of insecurity in the mind of the young Salma Sobhan. But, engulfed within the love and safety of her family, she never felt out of place.

The second child but eldest of three sisters, little Salma owed her intellectual development to her mother, Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah. The mother was her idol, her inspiration and the one who taught her to respect all religions. It was her family's influence, which shaped Salma's commitment to secularism.

"I grew up in a surrounding where humanity was accorded the highest value. For example, my mother was in the Muslim League, but she had many friends in the Congress. Love and human values were above politics. I grew up knowing that no one was above the other."

"My paternal grandfather was a very religious man and people often claimed that he was dogmatic in his views. However, when my uncles married women of different religions, he accepted that. Not because he did not care but because of the respect and love for his sons. He was hurt by my decision, but he never let my

aunts feel like outsiders. He gave them the respect they deserved as humans and as his daughters-in-law", she said while talking to the Daily Star at her Gulshan residence.

"My father came from the United Provinces and my mother's family settled in Bengal from Iraq and Iran. So my mother tongue was Urdu. Neither of my parents spoke Bengali very well, but we were very much in touch with the wonders of Bengal. My brother and sister were inclined towards music, and my sister was into painting, although I admit, I had a good ear for nothing!" she laughed.

She was born in London. When she was two, her family moved to New Delhi and then to Karachi. They went to Canada when she was fourteen and at sixteen, they went off to England. Therefore, this not only meant facing different cultures, but also attending different schools. So, how did she fit in?

"At all the schools I attended, the students, as well as the teachers were very friendly and warm. I had some very good friends and my teachers usually liked me. I was a good student but I was always afraid of becoming a teacher's pet, because I wanted to be liked by my friends. I regretted later that I didn't interact more with my teachers, because I could have

flourished a lot more academically."

"In my school in England, however, the head mistress was rather narrow-minded and I couldn't relate to her attitudes. But my mother stood firm on her principles and the headmistress came to respect this. My mother always kept in touch with her, and all my other teachers, no matter in which country they lived."

What were the things which she enjoyed doing and what gave her most pleasure?

"What I really liked to do was read, but I had extremely bad eyesight, so I was discouraged from reading. Perhaps, that is why the prospect was so attractive. My mother always told me to 'save my eyesight for

future use", and so read out to me whatever I wanted. For this, at a young age I had to read light books. Unlike others, I was scolded for reading books, rather than for not reading!"

"However, when I entered my teens, it was like the time had come to use the power of my eyes. I went into heavy reading - I read the classics and was rather pompous about it! It was then that I utilized my time and did some quality reading, which I thought I could never do. Fortunately, my eyesight improved and stabilized. Then, I found myself drifting back to lighter subjects. I was very fond of poetry, history and gardening, but favourite reading was detective stories."

"Conversation, or *adda*, was

another thing I thoroughly enjoyed. My parents had an enormous circle of interesting people as friends, and they often sat together discussing matters. These I was very fond of, more so, because I was allowed to participate in the conversations and my voice was heard. I think this has allowed me to look at life with an open mind."

"I loved sports especially swimming and athletics. And I always wanted to be a boy. I don't know why, but I thought they always had a better deal biologically. I was a tomboy in my youth. There was hardly anything feminine about me! Perhaps, it was because of this that my parents did not mind boys coming over to play or

talk. Nevertheless, they would constantly tell me not to get romantically involved with anyone. That was not really a problem because I never really inspired any romantic feelings in anyone!"

"Later, in England, I often grumbled because my parents would not let me go out on dates or to the dances. I had friends who would lie and then go, but I could not do that. I could not break the trust they placed upon me. I could not lie to them. This even exasperated me, but I simply could not do that. Another reason I accepted this 'injustice' was because they really believed in this. It was not that they were putting up a façade to 'protect me' but something they thought was abso-

lutely right," she said.

So, what inspired her to take up law? Did she see herself in this position when she was young?

"My uncle Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy who was a lawyer was someone I admired a lot. My father's youngest brother was the second youngest Muslim ever to become a High Court Judge. He later became the Chief Justice of India. The aura of power he evoked mesmerized me."

"Maybe all this did influence me to take up law, I do not know. But my mother used to joke, 'You'll be a lawyer one day' because I argued so much. Then I thought, why not? My mother actually wanted me to be a doctor. But her joke really made me ponder over my area of study. No matter what the subject, I knew I would take up a profession. This was probably because my mother was so dynamic. She always thought that it was important for a woman to take up a career. And I was my mother's daughter."

"I often thought I would be a writer. In fact, I would still prefer to be one! I also thought I would get into literature or history. I guess fate had something else in mind!"

What is the major difference between the time when she was young and today?

"Today people are more insecure - political instability di-

rectly affects people personally. When I was growing up, I always felt safe and secure. My children did not have that. Previously, people fought for "causes", like cultural identity and religious identity. Such things brought people closer, united. In our system, we have to know how to be democratic."

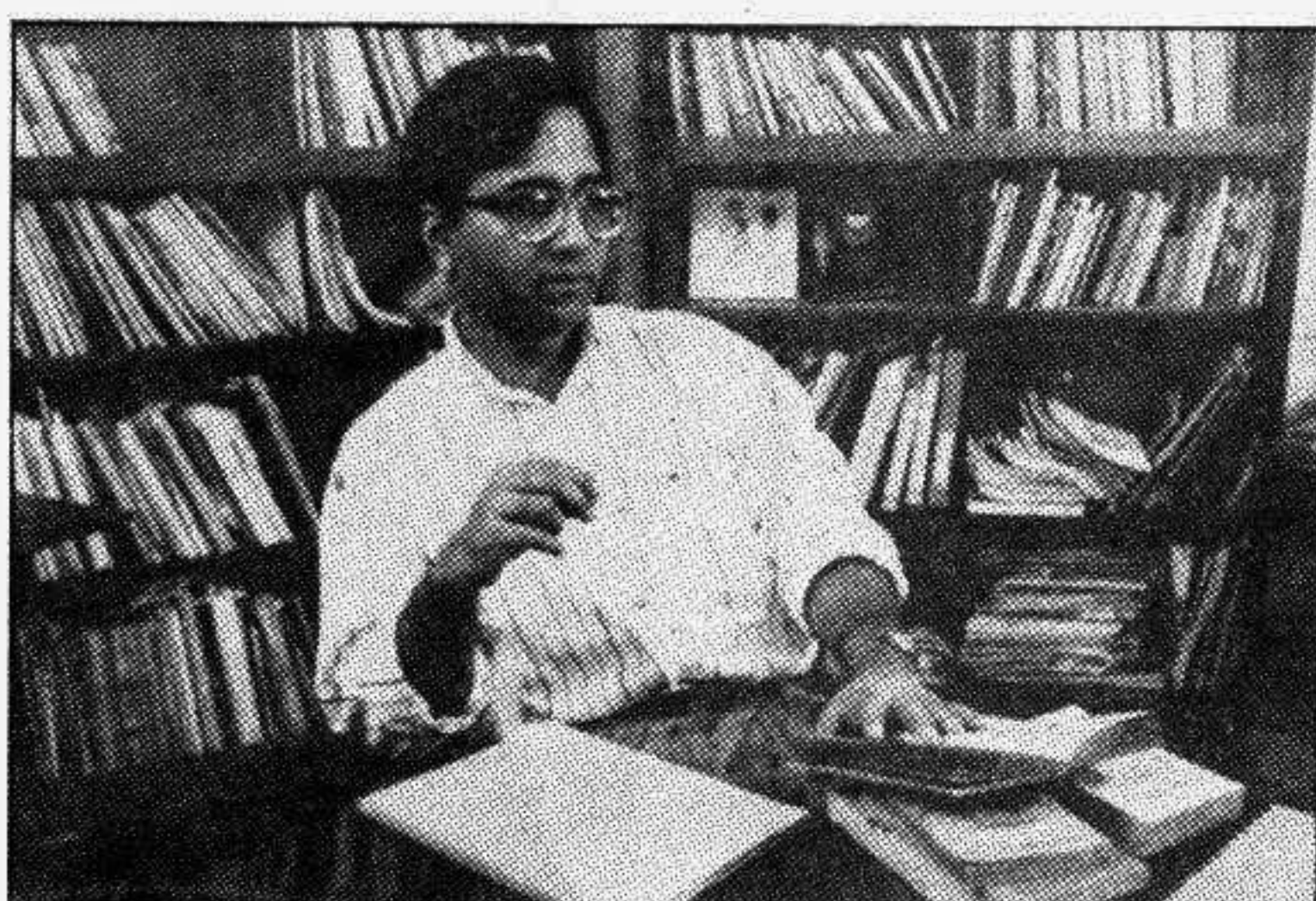
We have to stop using the word 'democracy' as it suits us. Politically, we are at the 'adolescent' stage. Education is the nutrition required 'to grow up'. However, I am worried about the education system here, especially the growth of the *madrasas*, which force-feed information into people or worse discourage a child's creative and analytical abilities," she sighed. Today is not better than yesterday, it seems.

Any advice to the present generation?

"All I would say is that if there is anything you want to do, do it now. Don't wait for some favorable time to do it because that favorable time may never come. One day you will see that you can't do that any longer or you don't have the energy and spirit to do so. There is no 'good time' for doing something, do it when you want to. Trust me this is from experience!" she said, laughing, "although my sons will say I didn't give them that liberty," she ended.

## "Soul Search"

Fakrul Alam  
Essayist and critic



"I am not afraid of death per se, but I dread the thought of a slow, lingering, wasting away kind of death."

**Q:** What gives you the greatest pleasure?

**A:** No one thing, really. Lately, it was translating Jibanananda Das's poems - I enjoyed working on the translations immensely. But in general, contemplating works of art, teaching a favourite text like Melville's *Moby-Dick*, being with dear ones, playing tennis, and traveling give me great pleasure.

**Q:** Do you have any recurring nightmares?

**A:** I sleep well, and rarely dream or have nightmares. And on the few occasions that I did have nightmares, I seem to have forgotten them on waking up!

**Q:** What do you dislike most about yourself?

**A:** As I grow older, I seem to have less and less time to read for pleasure. That I am incapable of devoting more time to keeping up with recent fiction, poetry, and

criticism bothers me a lot at the moment.

**Q:** What is your greatest fear?

**A:** That Bangladesh might someday relive the terrors of 1971. That I will live in a country which will drift so far away from the ideals of secularism and democracy on which it was founded that we might end up again in a totalitarian, paranoid, xenophobic, and intolerant state.

**Q:** What has been the greatest mistake in your life?

**A:** Perhaps the fact that after I received my PhD, I took an option which meant that I would have to drift further and further away from research because of a disabling work environment.

**Q:** What makes you cry?

**A:** Insensitivity. When I detect it in people who are dear to me or when I realize

that I am guilty of it myself.

**Q:** Who is your role model?

**A:** I have had many. When I was young it was an American missionary who taught us in St. Joseph's school and made us revere him for his combination of learning, love, and discipline. Later, my boro mama who showed that you could lead the life of the mind while being in a position of power Professor Sirajul Islam Chowdhury of our department because of his total commitment to teaching and writing. At the moment, Edward Said, the Palestinian-American whose life and works I find inspirational. He is the exemplary intellectual to me because of his originality, scholarship, commitment to his people, courage, and refusal to take easy options.

**Q:** How important is

money to you?

**A:** I wish I could say that it isn't at all important to me, but it is, for I find myself scrambling for it all the time. Certainly, the pay that I get on the one hand, and my desire to be able to buy the latest books and records and to travel on the other, make money an important thing for me!

**Q:** What is more important to you, your personal or professional life?

**A:** I would like to think that from morning to afternoon, when I am totally occupied with my teaching duties, my professional life is most important to me, but from the time I return home from the university in the afternoon there can be no question that it is my personal life that alone matters.

**Q:** Are you afraid of death?

**A:** I am not afraid of death per se, but I dread the thought of a slow, lingering, wasting away kind of death.

**Q:** Which book has influenced your life most?

**A:** Intellectually, it must be Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which I read just as I was beginning to think of a topic and a methodology for my doctoral work.

**Q:** If you were given a chance to start life all over again, what would you want to be?

**A:** A novelist, someone like Garcia Marquez!

**Q:** What worries you most as we are standing at the threshold of the 21st century?

**A:** Lack of leadership in Bangladesh - leaders who can think long term, can act tough, rise above party or family ties, install discipline, and teach us what it is

to have integrity.

**Q:** If you have to sum up the philosophy of your life in three sentences, what will that be?

**A:** I feel like quoting from Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography*: "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: The longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the sufferings of mankind!" But my three sentences are as follows: It is important to have self-respect and to attain dignity. However, one mustn't let one's ego get in the way at all. Nevertheless, it is important for us to be good and lead the good life in the here-and-now and postpone everything for some dimly-perceived world or an end intuited by others!"

Interviewed by Ziaul Karim