

Face to Face

# Ahmad Rafique: A Classicist

At 70, Ahmed Rafique is our grand old man of literature. Incessantly prolific, Rafique has over 50 publications in poetry and essays to his account. He was one of the organisers of the great language movement of 1952 which sowed the seeds of a dream of a separate geographical entity, based on language and culture. In a colourful career, Rafique edited a number of literary and science journals. He has founded the *Rabindra Charcha Kendra* (Tagore Research Centre) to discover Tagore and draw inspiration from him in this era of cultural decadence. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

**Q:** What really inspired you to set up Tagore research centre?

**A:** Rabindranath Tagore is an outstanding personality in the field of Bengali literature. His genius actually bloomed in almost every sphere of creativity including painting. If you think of cultural heritage in terms of literature, then obviously without Tagore we cannot think of going on with literary efforts. To understand the literary heritage and to cultivate that, I personally felt, it is very important to take up Tagore, particularly because in Bangladesh, when it comes to the cultivation of Tagore rather than blind worship we did very little. That's why I thought Tagore research centre should be an important institution to start with.

**Q:** Do you think that Tagore is still relevant for us with all his romanticism and dream for classical India and particularly when we are approaching the new millennium century?

**A:** I think this is an important question. There has always been controversy regarding Tagore during his lifetime and also after his death. But, fortunately, for us Tagore has survived all controversies. Cultivation of Tagore is more important now as we are passing through a decadent time. Studying Tagore will definitely enlighten us in many aspects of literature. His writings are still very much relevant and have a lot to offer. There is another important aspect why we should read Tagore. I personally feel that contemporary Bengali poetry has lost its track and moving towards a blind alley. There Tagore can serve at least as an incentive. Tagore's poetry has been branded as mystique and romantic. But we tend to forget the wealth of his poems that are close encoun-

ters of his time and reality. And in no way his writings are removed from people and from the soil. On the contrary, our poetry is now moving towards an airy nothingness. The cultivation of Tagore can still make us interested in our people and our soil.

**Q:** You have just said that poetry now has embarked on a degenerative line. Does that mean, what has been written during the post-Tagorian era is also degenerative?

**A:** No, I don't mean that. In the thirties obviously the major poets tried to come out of the influence of Tagore. And they did come out. While in the forties, the left movement invaded poetry bringing with it new cadence and tenor. After the partition in 1947, the poetry of two Bengal began taking up a definite shape and a separate identity. But I don't say that all the attempts were mingled with decadence. What I would like to point out that even now if we cultivate Tagore we will be able to derive positive inspiration that can help us build a healthy tradition in poetry.

**Q:** So many activities are going on regarding Tagore: books and journals are being published regularly plus there is a well-equipped institution, Biswabharati, to conduct research on Tagore. On top of everything, is there a need for a study centre like Rabindra Charcha Kendra?

**A:** Well, no doubt Biswabharati is the premier institution but criticism is there about their forgetting and also losing Tagorian tradition. Talking about Biswabharati is, I think, quite irrelevant to our discussion. What pains me is that after partition a good number of institutions on Nazrul have been set up here but not a single one on Tagore. From

this you can very well understand mind-set of a section of intelligentsia who guides the government's cultural thinking. This was also one of the reasons why I decided that there should be one institution to do research on Tagore. And even if we want to discard him we have to do a lot of research. There is no alternative to a research centre. This centre is not to worship Tagore. There is enough of it already. We want to evaluate his writing and that is also on a realistic basis. The rationale behind the creation of the centre is to establish Tagore's relevance in our time when degeneration speaks louder than anything else.

**Q:** You are a poet yourself. Could you please tell us about the definitive character of poetry in Bangladesh and how it is different from what is being written in West Bengal?

**A:** Within a couple of years of partition, poetry in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, began to change and take a local character away from the literary stream of West Bengal. As you know, from the fifties we have fought for national rights beginning with the language movement in 1952, poetry was continuously feed by these events and that in turn have given our poetry a very different flavour from that of West Bengal. Tradition as TS Eliot has rightly pointed out, "is the pastness of the past, it is the pastness of the present." There is necessity of cultivation of tradition in the field of culture and particularly in the field of literature. The essence of a tradition usually permeates through time. But the question is how much we can utilise it.

**Q:** We now talk a lot about fundamentalism and fundamentalists. There are now hot words. Do you think

that fundamentalists deserve that much of an attention?

**A:** If you think of literature or even the cultural ambience, then I should say fundamentalism has failed to exert any influence. Fundamentalism only exists in political arena. I don't think that fundamentalism has anything to do with literature.

**Q:** We have seen in the past that something — a journal or a book — was banned on the pretext that it would hurt the sentiment of the Muslim. The recent victim of government's procrastination is a recent issue of weekly *Desh* which contained a fiction by Taslima Nasreen.

**A:** I feel that every writer has the liberty to express his or her opinion. The ban should be considered as high-handedness on the part of the administration. It is up to the readers to take or reject a literary creation. Government should leave it up to the readers. If something goes against the religious sentiment of the country or whatever, it is the readers who will reject it or stand against it. I don't think it is the right thing to ban any work of creativity.

**Q:** When Awami League assumed power after 21 years of absence expectations were high, no doubt. How do you evaluate the performance of Awami League government?

**A:** Awami League has, to be very frank, frustrated us. Except one or two things like CHT Peace Accord, AL is an utter disappointment. Compared to other principle political parties, we still expect something good from them.

**Q:** We have a strange educational system in place. Three systems run parallel: Madrassah, Bengali and English.

**A:** I'm not an educationist, but as a conscious citizen of

the country I feel this should not go like this. I personally feel Madrassah education system should be abolished.

If that cannot be done at least this should be merged with the mainstream. Another thing which is not really discussed, I feel that Bengali should be the medium of instruction starting from the lower level to the highest level including education of science and technology. It is not at all impossible. If you look around you will see, particularly in Japan, China and Vietnam, they have used their mother-tongue as a medium of instruction whether it is in literature, general education or technical education. And there had never been a problem with it. As you know Chinese is a very difficult and pictorial language compared to that Bengali is a quite developed language. If we trace back to the language movement of 1952 there were definitive points and programmes about not only Bengali should be the state language of East Pakistan but Bengali should be the medium of instruction. Even our constitution of 1972 categorically says Bengali should be the medium of instruction. But unfortunately that has not been materialised. We have English and Bengali medium schools through which we have divided our children into two specific groups and thereby we are dividing the nation also. This is very undesirable. I have written many a time in newspaper columns and in essays that Bangladesh is a monolingual society. If we want to honour that then Bengali should be the medium of instruction.

**Q:** In this age of Internet is there a getting away from English?

**A:** I understand your point that is why I have cited the



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example of China. Not only China there are other countries of the world where without learning their national language you won't be able to move even. No one will understand you. I don't say that English should be banned. My point is Bengali should be language of instruction in all sphere of education. But there should be arrangement for learning other languages and particularly English. Those who are interested can learn any language they want. But if you want to develop yourself

as a nation there is no alternative to national language.

**Q:** It's said poetry is in the blood of the Bangalis. But over the past five years or so poetry readership has gone down dramatically. Even the major poets do not sell well now. What do you think has gone wrong in our society?

**A:** We are moving through a time of decadence. It is seen in the history of literature that decadent poetry never attracts either the new generation or the older genera-

tion. If you look at the poetry of pre-independent Bangladesh you will see how popular they were among the readers. The major reason was national aspirations which poetry contained. After the independence the dreams of a prosperous society got shattered. And basically there is nothing to hope for. The present trend of poetry is to follow the western modernism or post-modernism without thinking of the local reality and by doing so poetry has moved away from people.

## When I was a Teenager

### IN CONVERSATION WITH RATHINDRANATH ROY

by Sonia Kristy

**R**ATHINDRANATH Roy is one of the country's few folk artists who have directed their efforts throughout their lives towards upholding our cultural past. Music runs in his blood. His father, Haralal Roy, was an MBBS doctor but quit the profession for a career in music. He embraced the life of a *bhaola* (folk music) composer, lyricist and artist. Rathindranath, who is the deputy general manager of the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation, an identity his innumerable fans are not even aware of, has inherited the passion for music from his father. Haralal initiated a cultural ambience in an otherwise business-oriented *jotdar* (tenure holder under a zamindar) family. "My father did his MBBS from Bogra Medical School as there were no medical colleges as such. Although he studied medicine, it is music that attracted him from his childhood. He was the first child in the family and, therefore, got all the care in the world from his father and his three uncles. In his village lived a yogi (people of a mixed caste) named Cheru Yogi who sang while selling cement made of abalone. My father was his disciple, so to speak. He would follow him throughout the village. When the yogi was done for the day, my father used to bribe him with rice he had stolen from their barn to teach the songs he sang and give him *dotara* (musical instrument) lesson. This Cheru Yogi was my

father's mentor." Later, even when he started his career as a doctor, love for music was very much there in Haralal. He eagerly waited for a break and he didn't have to wait too long. A famous movie actor of the time, Tulshi Das Lahiri was a close acquaintance. Lahiri was a lawyer who gave up practising law and went to Calcutta for a career in movie. So when this Lahiri planned to make a movie named *Dukhir Iman* in the Rangpur dialect, he needed a dialogue director who would teach the Calcutta artists the dialect. Haralal was his first choice. He went straight to Nilphamari and told Haralal what he had in mind, explaining that by practising medicine he might become established but no one would recognise the artist inside him. But if Haralal comes to Calcutta with him, he would have the chance to get in touch with famous artists of the time, explore the world of creativity and one day become established as an artist. This was enough to tempt Haralal. He left for Calcutta in 1945, became a dialogue director, helped Shishir Bhaaduri, Choto Kanu, Baro Kanu become conversant with the dialect and also brought out a gramophone record. "But after the partition and the riot my grandfather sent him a message that even though the subcontinent was divided, they belonged to East Pakistan. Even though things were a little complicated, it was his



Rathindranath Roy (R Standing in the 2nd row) the picture was taken sometime between 1966-67

"Every year our school used to hold prize-giving ceremony and we organised grand functions, musical programmes, drama like Tipu Sultan, Sirajuddowla and so on. Actor Asaduzzaman Noor was two years my senior and we organised these programmes together. And there was this drill teacher, Khokon da who was the pioneer of all these programmes."

country and he wouldn't leave his country no matter what. And as his eldest son my father too had to come back otherwise my grandfather would disown and disinherit him. So my father returned in 1949. However, he didn't resume medical practice but started working at the then Dhaka Betar. "So from my childhood, I saw my father singing, per-

forming in different functions and programmes. His folk numbers used to attract me most. During those days, night came early in the village. We used to go to bed finishing our study and supper within eight o'clock. And then my father started practising in the *uthan* (courtyard). His deep resonant voice, his mysterious appearance in the soft light

of the oil lamp kept me awake. Every night I used to peep through the fence spellbound till his late night concert was over. And the next day when he was in his siesta, I would steal his songbook that he kept in his cash box, ran breathlessly for half a mile in the scorching heat and sing aloud the songs he had practised the night before. My father had

no idea of my mischievous acts for I used to return the songbook to the right place before he woke up. I was then only eleven or twelve." Not only his father but his mother Binabati Roy also wrote poems and composed folk songs. Her schooling never went beyond the primary barrier. She still takes great interest in folk culture.

Thus the seed of music was sown in Rathin, and his five brothers and sisters in their early lives. His elder sister Swapna Roy is also a notable folk singer. After completing primary schooling in Subarnakuli School, Rathin set out for Nilphamari town for higher studies and got himself admitted in Nilphamari High School

"But I got pretty nervous to see such a huge school and felt almost like a fish out of water as I had come from rural environment. Therefore, even though I had completed class five, I took re-admission to the same class, figuring out that it would be easier to handle as I had already learnt everything of class five. My parents, especially my father, had no objection because he was liberal in the true sense of the term and believed in individual liberty." On the first Ramadan vacation, when Rathin came home, he found that his father was getting ready to go to Dhaka with a music troupe to take part in the East Pakistan Folk Festival organised by Dhaka Betar.

Rathin figured out that it was a great chance to visit Dhaka and told his father that he too wanted to go. "Father didn't pay much attention and in a Rangpur dialect asked me why did I want to go. I replied without hesitation that I also wanted to take part in the festival. Father didn't know that I used to sing so he took it quite lightly and asked for a performance and when I had given one he became really impressed, more than that, surprised. Then I revealed how I used to steal his songbook and practised all his numbers. My father was amused and included me and my *choto kaka* (youngest uncle), who played *mondira* (a musical instrument), in the band. And, for the first time, I took part in a function without any kind of preparation. The programme was not an ordinary one for it was aired live on the radio. I sensed that I had performed well for the then Regional Director of Dhaka Betar, Shamsul Huda Choudhury, the former speaker of parliament, in the midst of the programme, ordered to bring me forward so that the audience could see me properly. I was only eleven years old and became overwhelmed. This is the most memorable incident of my life." Rathin enjoyed a true cultural atmosphere in Nilphamari. Almost every week there used to be a music festival. "Every year our school used to hold prize-giving ceremony and we organised

grand functions, musical programmes, drama like Tipu Sultan, Sirajuddowla and so on. Actor Asaduzzaman Noor was two years my senior and we organised these programmes together. And there was this drill teacher, Khokon da who was the pioneer of all these programmes." Rathindranath Roy savours the memories of his teenage days. When he went home on vacation, his friends almost always accompanied him. The local crematory was their meeting place. There they planned mischievous operations like stealing fruits from others' trees, catching fish and so on. Once they even stole a neighbour's goat and had a real feast, something he still repents. Everything was fun: kite-flying, playing with marble and latin, *dariabandha*, *hadu-du*, going to *Baruni Mela* where the nagardola (merry-go-round) was their main attraction; sneaking out of the house at midnight to see *Ja-ta*; offering *arati* in *Shyama puja*, and the list could go on and on. "They would also participate in constructive activities like repairing schoolhouses and others. "We knew how to had a good time and also to do something productive. And respect for our teachers and elders were there in all of us, a quality that I rarely find in present generation. Above all, we adored our heritage, our culture and what is our own because these are the roots of a nation and without roots, no nation can last long."