

Face to Face

Sanjida Khatun: In Her World of Rabindra Sangeet

by Navine Murshid

"I was not able to participate in the agitation of February 21, but on February 22, when there was an assembly where women were protesting, I went there with my mother. As far as I remember it took place at a ground opposite Kamrunnessa School at Abhoy Das lane. Most probably it was the ground within Prof. Khan Sarwar Murshid's father's house. My mother went there to guard me. Begum Sufia Kamal was there, Doulatunnessa Khatun was there, and Noorjahan Murshid was there. But no one could muster up the courage to preside over the meeting. You see, it was the first bloodshed we have seen.

SANJIDA Khatun needs no introduction. A pioneer in the field of Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore Song), she is one of the founder members of *Chhayanaaut*, a leading cultural institution in the country. She feels that the socio-cultural environment that prevailed during that time was very different from what it is today. It was the period of British rule. She has seen Hindus and Muslims in each other's company. Being a Muslim, she has seen her elder sisters go off to play 'Holi', a Hindu festival of colour.

"I am still amazed at how my mother maintained the whole family with 150 taka per month, which was my father's earning from his teaching profession at Dhaka University," she said while talking to the Daily Star at her Shegunbagicha residence.

That was also the period of anti-British revolution. However, Sanjida Khatun could not participate in that as much as she would have wanted to, because there were restrictions on the home front.

Although she sang Nazrul, modern and folk songs, Sanjida Khatun became especially interested in Rabindra Sangeet while studying Bengali at the university. She liked Tagore's poetry so much that she felt that his songs were actually songs to be sung. His melody, rhythm and lyrics were her inspiration to pursue her fascination for Rabindra Sangeet.

One of the major events in her life is the language movement of 1952. "I was not able to participate in the agitation of February 21, but on February 22, when there was an assembly where women were protesting, I went there with my mother. As far as I remember it took place at a ground opposite Kamrunnessa School at Abhoy Das lane.

Most probably it was the ground within Prof. Khan Sarwar Murshid's father's house. My mother went there to guard me. Begum Sufia Kamal was there, Doulatunnessa Khatun was there, and Noorjahan Murshid was there. But no one could muster up the courage to preside over the meeting. You see, it was the first bloodshed we have seen. The firing the day before had made us very frightened. In the midst of it all, they placed my mother on the chairperson's seat. She was extremely terrified and wore a pale expression. The next day the newspaper read that she had conducted the meeting. This is a significant event in my life because that day I made my first public speech. I was saddened at that time because Begum Shamsun Nahar Mahmuda was not present with us. She had said those who spread around leaflets which read 'We want Nurul Amin's blood', can never be anyone's mother or sister. Hence, she said she would not participate in such agitation. I was hurt by her words. At that assembly I stood up and said why couldn't we say something like that against those who had caused the bloodshed. I also added that those who said we could not do this, did not do us justice. That was the day I gained courage to open my mouth."

Her fight against ban on Rabindra Sangeet came much later. She was a college teacher then. The Pakistani government could never get to like Rabindra Sangeet. There was an unofficial, unwritten resistance to Tagore songs. Tagore songs were only heard when played on guitar. Otherwise, there was no existence of it. In 1961, Rabindranath Tagore's 100th birth anniversary was being celebrated all around the world. At that time, Professor Mozaffar Haider Chowdhury sent her a letter inviting her to attend a meeting on the occasion and asking her why, when the whole world was celebrating, they were not. And thus took place the celebrations.

It was also in 1961 that a group of concerned citizens joined hands and established *Chhayanaaut*. This was incorporated to create a platform in order to protest against the anti-Tagore regime. The aim was to enhance the Bengali culture, to prevent distortion of Bengali manners and stand against anti-Bengali forces. Sanjida Khatun, being a government official, could not be part of it in paper and pen, but she was present in every meeting and activity. Wahidul Haque was one of the founder members as well. With him, she went to all the places and joined in all the agitation programmes.

She recalls an incident at the time of celebrating Tagore's 100th birth anniversary. She was a play-back singer in one of Tagore's plays. While singing, she put a handkerchief in her mouth in order to disguise her voice. It was then that she realised that if they were not able to establish the rights of the Bengali nation, they would soon become extinct in terms of culture and nationalism. At that time, they realised that the greatest truth was that they were Bengali.

After the death of their friend, Ahmedur Rahman, they had brought out a book in his memory. One of Khatun's writings titled *Bangla Amar* (My Bengal) was there in the book, where she raised questions such as why they could not call their homeland Bangladesh; why they had to call it East Pakistan; why the name of East Bengal had been changed. There she said that we should not disown what we have. What is ours will remain ours. Even if others practised what we are doing, that does not mean we have to let go of our rights. These words also the essence of *Chhayanaaut*. Ahmedur Rahman was also one of its founding members. Speaking about the present state of Rabindra Sangeet, Sanjida Khatun, sadly talked about a recent television programme. "Someone sang a Tagore song in a band show on July

4, after the News in Bangla. The song was *Na chahiley jaarey paowa jay, je agiley ashey hatey...* With the song three girls swung their bodies around in an indecent movement, ridiculed the song and throughout the song, the melody and even the lyrics of Rabindranath could not be found. This is a beautiful song and they have distorted it in an indecent manner. From this, would it be wrong for me to say that band music has set out to destroy and disrupt Rabindra Sangeet? I have nothing against modern songs. People will always try to create something of their own. Bengalis will not go on forever singing Tagore and Nazrul songs only. They will come up with new ideas. But that does not give them the right to distort what Rabindranath has left for us. I personally feel that Rabindra Sangeet will last in this region for a long, long time, because we have accepted Rabindranath in our hearts. When we sing, we try to bring out every detail, every curve of the song. We may be far from Shantiniketan, but we can feel the lesson of Shantiniketan or Rabindranath deep down our hearts," she said.

In today's cultural arena, she feels there are many places to practise and indulge in cultural activities. She mentions the names of *Chhayanaaut*, Bulbul Academy, *Sangeet Bhaban* as well other smaller schools like Rezwana Chowdhury Bannya's *Surer Dhara*, Papiya Sarwar's *Gito Sudha* and Mita Haque's *Ananda Dhara* that have played a role in advancing cultural awareness. It is this slow and steady progress that, she feels, will promote cultural development, not only in terms of Rabindra Sangeet, but also other activities.

The intensity with which a person practises whatever cultural activity he is involved in, allows him to find his roots. And these roots provide the essence of life to move ahead. Therefore she is not scared of the excess hue and cry over band music. Culture works by it-



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self, slowly, within a person and profoundly. Therefore if we want to bring about progress in this field, it should be a slow and steady movement: an agitation through silence.

"If this happens then we have a very bright future in terms of enriching our cultural heritage," she said. What would make an aspirant singer a true musician?

"Rabindranath had once said that classical music is our sky and folk music is the ground beneath our feet. We live within the two. We need close contact with both of these and then live. To appreciate and understand this, education is important, the will to try is important, the voice has to be 'made' and it is important to try and understand the deeper

meaning of the songs. Today there are many schools where the lyrics are made comprehensible with utmost care. This will undoubtedly help bring out artists, in the true sense of the word." Any words for today's people?

"Know that you are a Bengali and then move ahead. Get acquainted with the

Bengali culture and tradition. Take an oath, 'I'll be a Bengali.' Just because you were born here does not mean you are a Bengali. You need to try to be a Bengali. You have to understand what Bengali really means. You have to love the language. You have to love the culture. And you have to be in touch with what we are all about," she ended.

When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH SUMITA DEVI

by A Maher

SUMITA Devi is a name associated with Dhaka's film world in bygone generations of the 1960's. She made numerous films from starting from around 1953 and has had a pretty eventful life. Her more younger years, she affirms, are most unique. She has mingled with the present and past pillars of Bengali cinema and has rose to the pinnacle of her career with wary satisfaction. Now she is a little less than the fervent actress she was in her days, wanting to enjoy a quiet time and enjoy her own family company. But she has not lost the quirky approach to talk about the things that have made her teenage life quite different from what it might have been under other circumstances. She tells us an interesting story when we asked.

Young Sumita hailed from Shaturia in Manikganj where she studied at one of the local schools up to class seven. Her family then moved to Dhaka where she became a student of the then Banglabazaar Girls High

School. She commanded an envious role in the family tree being the eldest among an astonishing 12 children! But sadly, a tragic part of her life was recorded here. Most of her brothers and sister died very young and in the end adult Sumita was among six brother and sisters including herself. She changed institutions quite a number of times since their family moved and also after their marriage. When Devi went to Calcutta she joined Bethune school which was under the Bethune College, the college where she later got admitted to after passing her school leaving examinations.

Sumita Devi came from a versatile family background. She remembers how her parents were an interesting contrasting couple. Her accountant father was conservative and reserved, while her mother was from a very modern family of those days. Nevertheless from the mixture of two, young Sumita got herself in the performing arts. The well-known movie actor Ovi

Sumita Devi's teenager life was dominated by getting to know the world of acting and starting a new career in the film industry. So she did not have a typical teenager's life of the 1950's. She already had an early liking for acting. When about age eleven to thirteen, she used to watch film after film and then acted out the parts played by the actresses by herself. This show was exhibited, and that too sometimes forcibly to a home audience, in the crowded living room! After marriage she started applying to newspaper advertisements asking for actresses. The first application met with uproar - from none other than her *kaka* and *kakima* (paternal uncle and aunt).

Bhattacharya was a relative of Sumita Devi. In one of her primary associations with the film world she played the role of a little girl when Mr Bhattacharya was looking for an actress. She recalls she was around 12-14 years old then. In those days, it was very strict life for a girl in a family like Devi's. She had to ask the permission of her grandfather about doing the part in the film. It was instantly rejected. And maybe this was for the better. For, smiles Sumita Devi, it got her into thinking about films and acting from then on and she made a kind of vow to act, whatever it took.

At her fourteenth birthday teenage Devi found

herself a husband who rather encouraged her into films and acting. A normal teenage life seemed somewhat faced with an abrupt end here. Utol Lahiri was a significant influence in her life. He was also a photographer who frequently pestered her for photographs and this was probably the main reason she got rid of her shyness and became more at home in front of the lens. She remembers, "Utul used to take pictures just about any time - whether you were working, cooking, or sitting down with a newspaper. He always told me get involved in acting and encouraged me a lot". There were also some funny incidences right

before she got married. Then, specially in a Hindu family, there was a great headache for the parents to see their daughters off to suitable partner. So there came the age-old question of dowry. There were representatives who came to "see" her and this was a great hassle, says Sumita, as many parties accepted the bride-to-be but could not get to accepting the "gifts".

An amusing anecdote from her life was the times she used to "escape" from her house and watch movies in the cinemas. When they were in Calcutta, and she was 16, young Hena planned a detailed rendezvous for the upcoming show. She had as her

accomplices her sister-in-law (almost the same age as she was), her cousin and another cousin *dada* (brother). Since it was restricted for girls to go out and watch films, Hena could not change in to new clothes when creeping out of her house, lest anyone should suspect. So a cleaner outfit which was also worn at home would be starched and kept under the bed to preserve the folds because ironing would draw unwanted attention! Then sandals in hand she would make for the big pond which was a meeting point with the other members of the group. Here among the trees, dresses would be adjusted and feet washed in the pond

before they set out for the cinema halls. Coming back, we learnt, was also detailed, each person maintaining a distance from the other in case were seen together!

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feasible one and the whole project was dropped. Fortunately though, Sumita followed up and met with one of its actors, who happened to be a famous one as well. He took a liking to "Hena" (that was her nickname) and referred her to another film being made. Then, after going through some more of the vineyard of ancient *Dhaliwood*, she found herself on the sets of her first film "Asia" at the age of seventeen.

Sumita Devi thinks today's teenagers are going the wrong way in terms of keeping up with the modern lifestyle. "You can be modern, at the same time you can also be a model of your culture, a culture depicting Bengalees and Bangladesh". Our teenagers are maybe going a bit too far in taking to Western influences without knowing the benefits or adverse impacts. This, she says, could be the influence of the satellite channels. "We need to be more strong socially and prevent the brain drain that can be so crippling to a country like ours".