

People

Face to Face

Papia Sarwar: In Her Domain of Rabindra Sangeet

by Navine Murshid

"THE cultural atmosphere at home made me aware of our rich heritage and I was highly influenced by my mother and elder sisters in whatever I did. My mother was a good writer; she sang and played organs. My sisters sang as well and played musical instruments like the sitar, esraj and harmonium. One of my childhood memories are of the time when I would place my chin on the piano, listening intently while my mother played," said Papia Sarwar while talking to the Daily Star at her Dhanmondi residence.

Papia Sarwar is known as a Rabindra Sangeet exponent, but she also enjoys singing songs of Nazrul and modern songs provided that she likes them. It is also interesting to note that her first TV performance was a Nazrul Geeti.

"I listen to all kinds of music. Starting from classical music, jazz music, band music to English songs and modern songs. I am open-minded about different forms of music and I welcome changes. My daughter occasionally sings for a local English band and I have no objections at all. She has acquired a classical base and that is what I think is important. If she ever wants to revert from singing English songs she can always do so. This is all about being educated and having an open mind - widening the horizon. It is only after seeing the whole music arena that I can make a good judgement about my preferences. And yes, I appreciate Rabindra Sangeet more. There is a lot of hue and cry going on about dHAKA band singing a Rabindra Sangeet. I feel this has been under highlight unnecessarily. There is no reason to get agitated because Rabindra Sangeet is not under any threat. It can never be under threat because Tagore's songs are modern for all times. Someone who has known Rabindranath will never be able to come out of it. Whether a band sings it or not hardly makes a difference."

As a child she sang all kinds of songs. Since juniors were not allowed to sing Rabindra Sangeet, she performed Nazrul Geetis, for

which she had a passion as well, on television and radio. However, it was only Rabindranath Tagore, who made her draw paintings in her mind. While her mother narrated from Tagore's poems, she could vividly picture the scenarios, the movements and traverse through the grounds of the world created by him. Her attraction soon turned to passion, then love and she knew singing Rabindra Sangeet would be her profession.

"One of my earliest memories is of the time when I was about three or four years old. I was a regular visitor at my father's office where I was highly pampered. I remember a time when I was sitting on top of a big table at which my father and his colleagues were sitting. I had a reasonably large paper cone with me and through it I was singing *Ma Amar Shadhona Mitilo*, while everyone listened to me intently! That thought always manages to make me smile."

The years she spent in Shanti Niketan are memorable to her because she was able to learn from the maestro of Rabindra Sangeet like Kanika Banerjee, Nilima Sen, Shanti Deb Ghosh and Subinoy Roy among others. She feels fortunate to be able to have received lessons in classical music from Pandit Dhruvatar Joshi. She was a first year honours student of Zoology at Dhaka University when she received the scholarship to go to Shanti Niketan for music. Many of her family members were skeptical about her moving away to the music world whole heartedly, but she stuck on. She was already a known face in the music arena when she left, so it was not popularity that Shanti Niketan gave her. Shanti Niketan enhanced her knowledge of Tagore; Shanti Niketan gave her the companionship of great artists who have encouraged her to go on with music. She recalls the informal settings in the Mohor-Di (Kanika Banerjee) and Bacchu-di (Nilima Sen) taught them songs while cooking. She feels that the love that she received from them must have augmented those for their children! The time she

spent there, is special to her because it helped her to grow mentally and be in tune with what Tagore wanted.

She recalls with amusement the first few days at Shanti Niketan, Bangladesh had just become independent. The people there would be excited to see the people who had come from across the border. There was a certain curiosity and respect for Bangladeshis. Wherever Papia Sarwar went, she had people surrounding her, pampering her. In a similar position was artist Abdus Sattar who was at the Fine Arts department.

With the teachings of the great singers as her guide she has opened an informal musical institution, *Geeta Shudha* to spread the light of Rabindra Sangeet. She is very selective about the people she teaches and she aims to keep the number limited so that she can give in her best while she teaches. She has a two-year syllabus and she instructs them in the coziness of her living room. She takes into account the likes and dislikes of her students as well as their day plans and life-style.

Her view in starting this 'institution' is not any commercial gain or achievement, but a strive towards perfection. She is often among the judges who select new singers for television or radio and has been with the *Rabindra Sangeet Shilpi Shangstha* and *Jatiyo Rabindra Sangeet Shommilon Parishad* for a long time. Today she is in such a position that she can tell by hearing a voice whether it is practiced or not; she can tell by the throwing of the words whether the particular singer understood the song or not. She has seen the short falls in many an aspirant singer. She feels that the problems are often minute but have a significant impact on the overall output. In her music sessions she looks into individual problems and styles and then sets about to solve each one.

She is aware that each one of them may not have the capacity to take in all that she is teaching. Therefore she does not impose anything on her novices. She simply tries to

bring out the best in each one of them. In them, she looks for sincerity, dedication and love for the songs they sing.

"I feel that publicity, fame and fortune should not be the goal of those who come to learn. I'm not talking about my students only but young singers all around. If they continue to sing and practice; if they are sincere; if they can be persistent in their interest and adoration and can sustain their perseverance, then they will surely make a name for themselves. But this should not be the aim even before you set out," she said.

She observes that the present generation is lucky in the sense that they have a lot of opportunities. Previously, unless someone was adamant about singing, no one had the opportunity to see whether he or she would do well in it or not. Today, there are many a music institution that caters to the needs of the young and provides them with the chance to enhance their mental growth. In terms of Rabindra Sangeet she perceives that the young from Bangladesh are doing better than their West Bengal counterparts. Even the *gurus* seem to share the feeling. This, she thinks, is because of increased opportunities in Bangladesh.

Her involvement in the music arena is not only her profession, it is her love. It is in music that she finds solace and there are times when she would wake up in the middle of the night and start singing and traverse into another world. Her husband too is fond of music and the most tranquil of times that she spent has been with her husband and children, listening to different kinds of songs. At such times it is as though the whole family communicates through a language of music that only they can comprehend.

A quiet person in nature, Papia Sarwar, hushes away from publicity and adulation. She would rather not have photographers at her solo musical soirees because the flashes may hamper her concentration. She appreciates those people who come to listen to Tagore's songs and



"There is at least one Rabindra Sangeet for each type of human emotion. And each song or poetry draws a different picture. What Tagore wrote is modern even today and will remain so for a long time to come. Nothing can come in the way. Even in this so-called modern world, there aren't many who can come close to be as modern as Tagore. Once a person hears or gets acquainted with Tagore's writings, he will never forget it. His writings have a lasting effect on people and once a person realises the depth in it, he will never be able to come out of it. Only those who do not understand can deviate from it, but that too would only be a passing phase. I believe that Rabindra Sangeet is beyond destruction or any form of distortion. Rabindra Sangeet is here to stay."

understand him. It is sincerity in people and serenity in her surroundings that she likes.

Papia Sarwar ardently believes that Rabindra Sangeet will remain in people's hearts forever. "There is at least one

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When I was a Teenager

SUBIR Nandi has made a name for himself in the world of modern songs in Bangladesh. He had had the fortune of being successful with most songs and today he can be classified as one of our oldest singers of modern songs. A solid practitioner of classical music, Subir Nandi had also sung numerous tunes for the Bangladeshi film industry in parallel with promotion of neoteric melodies. Now that he has come this far, Nandi still fondly remembers how his childhood and teenage life had brought him to where he is today.

Subir Nandi was brought up in the picturesque landscape of Sylhet's tea gardens being a snug fifth among six brothers and three sisters and the ward of a hardened military doctor. That was almost their *deshar barti* (village home) and he was very fond of the scenic hilly life. He remembers how the slopes fascinated him and probably were responsible for making him a active, curious boy who seemed to be always in the thick of things.

"I was a very active child right from when I learned to walk. In fact you could call me restless. I was always looking for things to do, be it for fun or pure harmless mischief."

Some of the things young Subir did as a third grade student were probably very fit for a teenager. During the event of *Lakkhi Puja* (Hindu festival for good luck and fortune) there was a

tradition to 'pick up' the nicest eatable item from someone's house, bring it over and make a sumptuous

feast of it. "Picking up" meant doing it at someone's annoyance or it was no fun! And so Subir led a gang up to a neighbour's house and picked off a big and delicious ripe papaya. Eating the fruit was only half the enjoyment to actually pulling off the whole scheme. More often than not the gang got caught and spanked. But that never kept them down. They would soon get busy plotting for their next target.

One interesting incident was when young Subir got hurt while trying to cover his tracks; he was so terrified at the angry owner's voice that he let go of a bamboo stick he was hold and it fell squarely on the bridge of his nose. The mark it left still shows. After this sudden change of nasal bone structure, his resident address was also changed to Habiganj where his parents moved to.

IN CONVERSATION WITH SUBIR NANDI

by A Maher

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Subir Nandi got his first chance to get his musical sense honed in 1965 when he studied with his renowned mentor Ustad Babar Ali Khan. And speaking of musical sense, that too had a little bit of history. The radio in those days was his greatest inspiration for it was through the small speakers that he came in contact with the great voices of maestros. Since his family did not quite approve of blaring

radios, his uncle in the neighbourhood was the source for musical satisfaction. Nandi used to spend hours standing beside the window, throwing caution to the rains and storms to listen. This appalled his *mama* (uncle) who had a little talk with his father and soon Nandi was "awarded" a radio for his passion. Things brightened further when he obtained

Subir Nandi is critical of our social structure when asked what he thought of today's, often unruly, teenagers. "Not all are indiscipline, unruly or bad. There are some who have gone into dangerous paths. And that too without knowing. You see, teenagers can only learn from what they are exposed to, what they see in their daily lives. And these are what we are making for them and giving to them through our activities."

permission from his father to attend the *All Pakistan Music Conference*; here Subir insists that he "sought a three-day leave" from his strict father. Well, the stay permit expired timely but our young singer somehow managed to stay with the conference events for fourteen days and a hilarious scene of a fuming father hunting down his son followed!

His father was also a loving one and the person to

give him enormous encouragement. At 14 he sang for the local Sylhet Radio station's programmes and his father got him along a long way. At college Subir Nandi was among the cultural and the musical people. In fact he boldly asserts,

"I was a hero there. Among the students and... the girls. Dramas, plays, singing were my line and so

most were because of humming dreamily in class. He had to go up to the front and face all the students for the rest of the period. However, more interesting ordeals rested at home. When reprimanded by their father, the ordeal was to hold their ears, stand on one leg and touch the tip of the nose to the corner wall. Brainstromer Subir would follow just up to the time his father retired for a nap. Then off he would run away, only to be back seconds before he father would wake up, rub a little lime off the wall onto his nose and fake the whole thing!

Young Nandi was very much a drama-loving boy and was intensely involved with the arts and cultural events throughout his childhood. Many famous *ja-troupe* used to frequent Sylhet in those days and Subir would escape from home to watch these plays. One such endeavour was, with his brother as an accomplice, to stuff pillows under the bed sheets to fake two children sleeping soundly while in reality they had their eyes glued to the travelling dramatists somewhere else! Another round of spanking would follow in case they got caught the next morning. Nandi junior was also a little bit of an innovator, in

the most unthinkable departments. All the Nandi brothers waited for the rainy season when it would

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pour for several days incessantly. Then local transportation would have another ingenious contributor. Armed with a *gamcha*, with the swirling, sulking currents of the formidable local rivers, Subir would jump into the water and let the current take him to his school's doorstep which was about two miles away!

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Nandi was also critical of our lawmakers, who according to him, could well make a difference to our youth community. He feels that the people tugging at the lines of power and politics are too selfish and concerned only about themselves.

"We are the ones who should watch over the younger generation. The parents, guardians, elders of the society should play the role of keeping vigil. One has to have control over oneself as well. It depends on the person himself to keep out of the reaches of antisocial elements and bad examples. If you are strong enough mentally nothing can hurt you."