

## Face to Face

## Anisur Rahman: A Life in Quest of Tagore

For Anisur Rahman, Tagore songs provide the life blood. He has been passionately involved in singing and interpreting Tagore songs for over thirty years. As he explains the true Rabindrasangeet *gayaki* as the creative union between the Creator and the singer, his own singing marks this spiritual marriage which elevates the audience to a transcendental height. A social scientist of repute, Anisur Rahman has taught economics at Dhaka University and Islamabad University and has directed a programme at ILO at Geneva. He has widely lectured on Tagore songs and is regarded as one of the most respected authorities in this area. His life-long quest for an insight into Tagore's psyche culminated in the translation of a select number of songs into English published in a volume, *Songs of Tagore*, recently. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

**Q:** In the introduction of your recently published *Songs of Tagore* you said that Tagore on many occasions equated creation with sound. How did Tagore actually establish a connection between sound, or rather the sound of music, with creation?

**A:** As I have tried to explain in my book, Tagore sensed music in all creations. He said every creation has a vibration or 'spandan', the Bengali word for it. This *spandan* is music for him. Everything according to Tagore has music in it. Every object has a material manifestation that we can see or measure the dimensions thereof, but beyond this material manifestation there is also a kind of transcendental quality which is its intrinsic vibration that cannot be measured but could be felt, and appreciated. It's part and parcel of the beauty of creation. A particularly poignant example of this is a flower which has material dimensions that can be measured. But there is something much more than that to it.

**Q:** Is this sense of beauty innate or is it something we acquire? What does Tagore have to say about this?

**A:** Well, I don't exactly remember whether Tagore has answered that question. From his writings what I understand is that he tries to say human beings are born with an innate ability to appreciate beauty. This is part of human nature. In all his works, in fact, he has tried to enhance that appreciation of beauty. One of man's purposes in this world is to create and appreciate beauty. Tagore's whole life was basically dedicated to this purpose. So, I would say he believed that our ability to appreciate beauty is innate. He has, in fact, variously hinted at the mission of human life as to give his identity as a creator and lover of beauty.

**Q:** There is no question about Tagore's being a worshipper of beauty but it has been said that the ugly or unhappy side of life has never been correctly focused or underscored in his writings. His pains are not as manifest as we get to see in the writings of most writers of the twentieth century.

**A:** He has seen a lot of

life's ugly side in his time. What he tries to preach is that human beings should rise above it and inculcate in themselves the beautiful aspects of life and not the ugly ones. This was his life-long struggle. His message was that our basic purpose in life is to express beauty. And whenever ugliness got the better of him, it caused him tremendous pain.

But pain, per se, is a philosophical matter altogether. Tagore considered pain to be a part of life's experience. He himself had suffered a lot—he had seen the death of his children and wife. Not only that, in literature and in songs particularly, you will see he has glorified pain. Why? He says (my interpretation) only when a child is in pain and expresses it, does it get the affectionate touch of the mother. Otherwise normally the mother disciplines the child which is not always very pleasant for it. But it is only the child's distress that brings forth the mother's compassion and mercy for it. That is the relation Tagore saw between the creator and the creation. When man suffers pain, he then gets that touch of the infinite or paramer *sparsa*. This is the kind of interpretation or enlightenment he finally came to on pain.

**Q:** So, it is basically due to pain that we seek the infinite?

**A:** Certainly, we yearn for the infinite and then we submit. By submitting, the pain is dissolved. And then the void that caused the pain is fulfilled. Tagore has written time and again that this is a greater fulfilment than joy. One of the songs here in this book is precisely on this theme: "She had in her hand a garland of flowers of joy. And I had the weight of the fruit of pain. She said let us exchange. So I thought it would be good to exchange. She gave the flowers of joy and I gave her very happily the fruit of pain. She ran away saying that she had won. What I found at the end of the day is that the flowers had withered. But the pain didn't."

**Q:** In your introduction you have termed Tagore as a 'dialectical thinker'. What do you really mean by it?

**A:** Well, everything has its opposite and Tagore always saw in things a coexistence of opposites like we have discussed life as having both pain and pleasure. We have in Bengali a concept, *biraha* (separation), which I have also discussed in my book. It is not just pain. It's sweet, too. The thought of the lover is sweet, however the separation from the lover is pain staking—in *biraha* these two emotive feelings are combined together. Tagore in all his concepts saw the opposite existing. Good and bad co-exist. He wanted the good to be dominant but he never forgot about the existence of evil.

**Q:** There is a section in your introduction that carries a sub-heading "Tagore on the conception of the art of good singing" where you have tried to point out the difference between song and poetry. As a reader I must admit that the difference is not very clear to me. Would you please explain?

**A:** Let me try. Poetry dances around words. The transcendental in poetry surrounds words as the aerospace surrounds the earth, while the song as a whole is itself transcendental.

Poetry takes us to a transcendental dimension; unlike prose which tries to be precise and keep you there. But poetry lets loose our imagination. Still, Tagore is saying poetry is bound by words. Words set the limit to how far you can go. When it comes to a song then there is no such restriction. The melody frees you from every possible bondage.

**Q:** But the lyrics of a song is composed of words. However much the melody may liberate you, the words still impose their boundaries which eventually set the limit of the imagination. Schopenhauer placed pure music at the top of the hierarchy and said only pure music stood on its own without the support of words or anything else.

**A:** Well, it is difficult to argue and make your point. It's not a question of proving. It's a question of what one is sensing, how one is looking at it. Now what Tagore is saying is that the words of the song are

there, but the combination of melody transcends the bounds of words like in *Saghana Gahana Ratri*. If I say these words which is poetry, it still limits me. When I use the melody then I have no limit. Let's look into the mathematical concept of the infinite. For instance if you sum the series 1+1+1... up to infinity, the result is infinity. Summing 3+3+3... upto infinity also gives you infinity. It may appear that the second infinity is bigger than the first one. But you cannot really compare infinities. In the same way a lyric combined with melody takes you to a realm of eternity. Now you may say that without the words the melody itself will take you to another infinity but you cannot compare them anymore as there are no two distinct measures of infinity. In fact, infinity is the quality or state of being immeasurably, indefinitely, or exceedingly great. Only two finites which can be measured are comparable.

**Q:** What does Tagore have to say about the presentation of his songs? Did he give free rein to the singer to manipulate a song at his will? Or is there a specific prescription from Tagore?

**A:** In my Bengali book *Asmer Spandan*, I have discussed it elaborately. This is one issue that I have been harping on in my endeavour to understand Tagore. I was in Calcutta in 1997 to lecture on this particular issue. Tagore did not prescribe any particular style. But he said very clearly and I have quoted him in my Bengali book that, "the composer is a creator and if the singer is also creative, it is like, in Bengali, *Ruser Ganga-Jamuna Sangam*, that is, the confluence of the two rivers. This is what he wants from his singers."

**Q:** Is Tagore hinting at the creative interpretation of his song?

**A:** Absolutely. Not just hinting but also demanding. He also said that the composer is waiting eagerly to be in communion with the creativity of the singer. In a letter to Sahara Devi, Tagore wrote, "when you sing I not only find myself in it but I find you also, and I wait eagerly for this union." I wouldn't have been an admirer of Tagore if he had said that singing was a

science not an art or could be engineered. Art is creative otherwise it is not art, it is engineering. You build a building according to an engineering prescription. In many ways Tagore has said that when you sing, it should come spontaneously somewhere from the depth of your heart. And if it does then it cannot follow an engineering prescription. Of course, he has given guidelines for composition through his notations. There is almost an infinite variety that can be performed with the same notation. There is a notion that Tagore has to be sung in a particular way. That Tagore never wanted; in fact he never liked it. Even Kanika Banerjee, as I have known from talking to her, becomes very upset when someone tries to copy her style.

**Q:** What do you have to say about our contemporary Tagore singers? Is Tagore being interpreted musically?

**A:** It's a difficult question because there are all sorts of tonal styles in vogue now and I'm not sure whether there is one strong trend of singing. But, of course, there is one trend which I can identify where singers do sing mechanically. It is very much there. It appears that they are only singing the notes. This sounds like engineering. You have to have the correct notes but a genuine singer should absorb them. Only then, when you sing, will it manifest your own personality within the framework of those notes. You should not give the feeling that you are singing the notes. There are some whose personality is expressed through the songs. But I would like to see many more of them. This is the responsibility of the teachers who guide the singers. I feel that there is a lack of this kind of guidance. That is where the key is. It's the teacher who should set free the creativity of the singer. It's seen that in West Bengal also, students try to copy their teachers. The duty of a teacher is to bring out the creative talent of the singer and ask the students not to copy him. A teacher should give only the examples wherefrom a student should pick up which would give him his own musical personality.



Anisur Rahman: Sketch by a Filipino artist

**Q:** This is a personal opinion of mine but then there maybe others who might share with me the same feeling. In spite of being an atheist one has never had any problem appreciating Tagore's devotional songs or even the prayer songs.

**A:** This is true. I have seen many atheists who enjoy Tagore's devotional songs. There can be various reasons for this. I think you should ask this question to a psychoanalyst. Now who is an atheist? We say that one who does not believe in God is an atheist. Let's then ask the question: what is God? What is that concept that you are rejecting? If you go deep into it maybe you will find many atheists ultimately admitting that what they are actually rejecting is the traditional notion of God only. The notion of God could have many interpretations. God could be humanity. And that is fully consistent with atheism. One could even say that God is nature; then we have been born out of nature.

You can give any such interpretation to Tagore's philosophy. His songs are flexible on that account. He does not talk about any particular religion or any particular form or idea of God or anything like that in his songs. He hints at a kind of unifying force. It is not a single entity. It could be the

whole universe to which we belong and to which we are connected. Even an atheist may identify himself with it. Another interpretation that I jokingly refer to is that I may not believe in a ghost but I still relish a ghost story.

Well, Tagore himself has given one interpretation. I would say his own philosophy had also evolved, if not changed very much, but the articulation deepened more and more and was gradually refined. He ultimately said: God is me. It's in 'me', what he said is the *Jiban Devata*. So within 'me', according to Tagore, there is an individual 'me' and there is an omnipotent 'me', which is united with the whole mankind and that is 'my god.'

So, who would quarrel with that?

**Q:** How did the idea of *Songs of Tagore* come to you?

**A:** I have discussed in detail about it in my introduction. My translation of Tagore started in Geneva when I was there in 1975. I went to England for a year then came back to Geneva in 1977 and settled down there. There was a Bengali Community in Geneva. We at Geneva decided to get together once a week and practice our culture.

**Q:** Let me interrupt. Do you remember when you

translated the earliest songs?

**A:** I cannot remember the exact date but it was approximately in the late 70s.

**Q:** The reason I'm inquiring about the date is if you now feel, when you look at your earliest translations, that you would have done them differently now? What I would like to point at is that your understanding of Tagore has conceivably changed over the years.

**A:** Interpretation has not changed much over the years but phrasing has. I have been revising, changing and trying to improve them even at the last moment of publication. But the basic interpretation has not changed. About some songs I should say I couldn't interpret them at all earlier. I struggled. Gradually over the years it has come.

So it started in Geneva. We, a group of Bengali expatriates, out of nostalgia, started meeting every week to discuss various aspects of our culture. We had two ladies joining our group, one from Kenya and the other from Pakistan. They had beautiful voice and found Tagore song very charming. That's when I started translating Tagore for the non-Bengali singers with the idea that when they sing Tagore songs, they should understand the words also.

## When I was a Teenager

## IN CONVERSATION WITH MASUD ALI KHAN

by Ekram Kabir

IN his teen years he had witnessed the India-Pakistan partition and its negative effect on society. Masud Ali Khan, noted actor and TV and stage personality, spent his teenage life the erstwhile sub-division Manikganj, in Calcutta and later in Dhaka.

He remembers his school at the village Khan Baniara from where he had witnessed at least twenty-five to thirty warplanes moving together, a few tied to one another, during the second great war in 1939.

"I later realised that the tied planes were actually gliders and fuel tankers," he said while talking to *The Daily Star* at his Rangs office at Bangla Motor area. His father was in Calcutta and he lived with his brother, three sisters, his mother and grandmother at their village home. In 1944, the whole family moved to Calcutta to join his father. Calcutta in 1944, was a place where unthinkable agonies lay for the ordinary citizens. To thirteen-year-old Khan, the sights that confronted him each day gave him an insight into what hunger can do to people.

"I saw humans fighting with dogs for food in the garbage heaps; I saw moth-

ers selling off their children just for food; I saw young girls sell their bodies just to survive; I saw humans lose their dignity to hunger. There were living skeletons lying all over Calcutta and I watched as a baby suckling milk of her dead mother. These pictures were horrific. These pictures were like the ones Zaimul Abedin did during the Bengal Famine. It was then that I realised that food is a necessity and necessity knows no law. What horrified me most was the fact that I had grown used to such calamities; and so had the rest of the people in Calcutta."

He feels that it was during that time that society lost its civic sense. People had lost their values. The norms that prevailed previously were disrupted and there was nothing called a system. Those who were conservative and usually remained covered came out of that very notion and started to move about in a more open manner; previously during monsoon, people went out on boats in the evening only, later, there was no timings were maintained—everyone went about as they felt comfortable. There was no social decorum that people felt had to be maintained. Moreover, there was

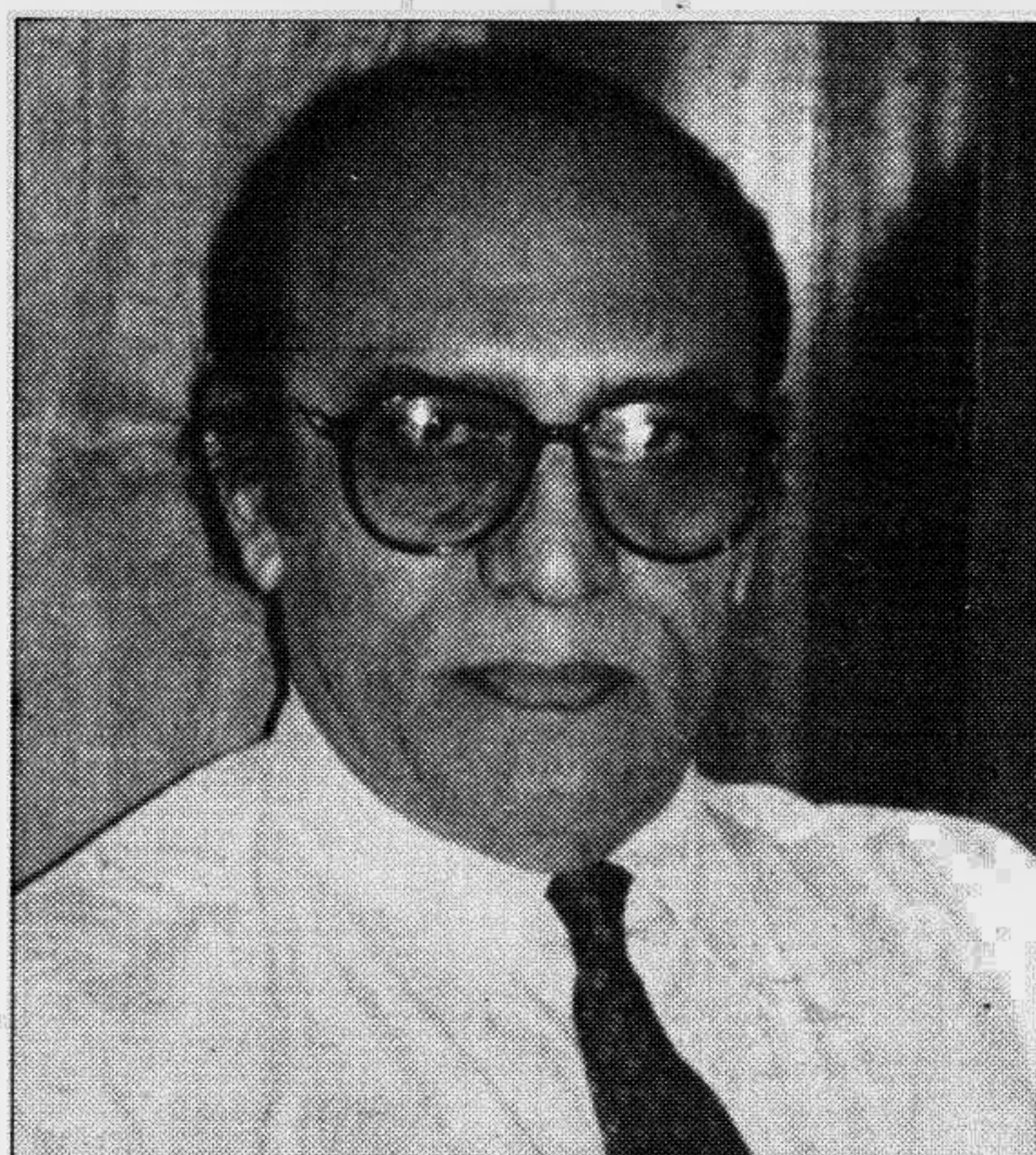
unthinkable inequality as a few, who were contractors during the time of war, became richer and richer while others had to sacrifice their dignity and self-respect only to survive.

As a youngster he was a mischievous boy. He was very scared of his father although his respect for him over-riden any sense of disregard.

"My father never surprised me into doing anything against my will. He was a very liberal man. One thing he did not like me doing was playing football. A relative of mine broke his hand while playing football. This scared the wits out of my father as he thought similar fate awaited his son."

"His father has enough money; he can get proper medical attention and heal quickly. Your father does not have that money to provide you with the medical attention you would require," father said—after that, my football sessions were limited to the time when my father was away!"

In spite of being a naughty boy, he was a good student. He was always among the top three in his class and he did very well in his matriculation exams as well. There was a study environment at home which



always made him want to do well in his studies. In contrast to the naughty boy he was, his elder brother was a calm and quiet, studious boy. Invariably, the little monster, who always beat

up his little sister for no good reason at all, was compared to the apple of the family. However, this never disconcerted the younger brother; never made him feel jealous or made him feel

he was inferior in any way. "Although everyone told my mother that I had no future, I never felt that I was anything less than what my brother was."

This young, mischievous boy was rather moody when it came to girls. He avoided them, not because he was shy, but because he felt that the girls should come forward and talk to him, not vice versa!

"No matter how beautiful they were, I never talked to girls. I always believed that they should come and talk to me!" he said, a little embarrassed at his own arrogance in those days!

After he finished his matriculation exams, he came to Dhaka and joined Salimullah College. His college friends and he got together and initiated a cultural organisation called *Agrani Shilpee Sangsad*. It was perhaps the first musical organisation to sing songs to do with people, popularly known as *Gono Sangeet*. He recalls the names of Badrul Hasan and Abdur Rahman who often lead the songs they sang in chorus. Abdul-lah Al-Muti Sarfuddin, also involved with the organisation, was their idol and it was he who inspired a feeling of "equality" in the young souls. Young Khan

thus became a sympathiser of the Leftist Movement and so often found himself hanging posters for them and organising secret meetings, evading the attention of police forces.

"The surviving members of that organisation still meet today every month." This certainly speaks volumes about their bond of friendship.

At the age of 19 in 1950, he wanted to join the Army. He even had given an admission test. However he was declared medically unfit because he had hurt his leg some time ago. At that time, he was rather depressed, but later saw that there was much more in life than to spend it in woe for a lost cause.

Today, he feels that the social environment is a lot more liberal than it was during his time. Girls and boys mix freely nowadays.

"Even if they are holding hands, nobody raises a brow."

In his time, he feels that there was a general inclination towards sports, a tendency to learn more, to enhance knowledge. Everyone was serious about what he was doing and they worked with a lot of sincerity and dedication.

Today, the outlook is dif-

ferent. He doubts whether the same sincerity still prevails.

"People today are very, very restless. This perhaps is a natural consequence of financial constraints because as opportunities are increasing, so is the population as is the number of opportunists. In today's world of opportunism also, people are ready to sacrifice anything for survival." It is with a sense of hopelessness that he says that he does not see any silver lining in the political scenario, and in society as a whole.

"We do not do what we say; we do not work hard and we lack the political will to rock the boat."

Yet, in this hopelessness, he finds people standing up for themselves, instead of relying on the government or on fate to 'make their future'.

"The one good thing that has come out of the social turbulence is that people have learnt to take fate in their own hands; they have learnt to fend for themselves. Without any institutionalised or government support, the ordinary masses have set out to carve a niche for themselves in the vast wilderness. Today, no one is waiting for the government to act first."