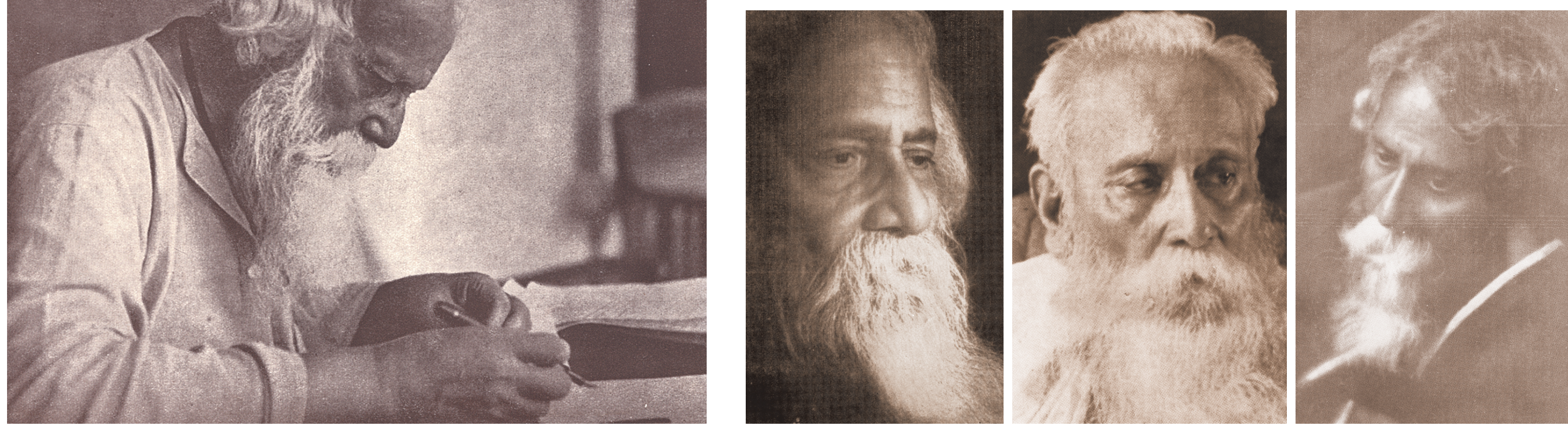


65th death anniversary of Tagore



Kalim Sharafi Epitomising Tagore songs

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

Cream? Sugar?" That was so typical of Kalim Sharafi, or Kalim Bhai, as he is known to us. No sooner had I arrived at his Bailey Heights apartment, he'd become a busy host.

"There's actually an anecdote behind my question..." went on Sharafi. "Tagore had often frequented the hill station, Mongpu at Darjeeling. There, the host, and author Maitreyi Devi had once asked Tagore if he wanted cream or sugar with his tea, he'd answered "I drink tea mainly for cream and sugar".

That was the other side of Kalim Bhai. If he wasn't on stage performing Rabindra sangeet or leafing through Tagore's work in his free time, he was reminiscing on Tagore's quips. For a man who had performed Rabindra sangeet for over six decades and was known as "the man with the golden voice" not only to the audience but the musical greats such as Devabrata Biswas, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, Suchitra Mitra, Kanika Banerjee as well, this was hardly surprising.

Even within the various niches of Rabindra sangeet, Sharafi, is perhaps most loved for his timeless patriotic songs. In fact, his association with the political movement of his generation has been one of the key inspiration behind his songs.

"Many people would actually be surprised that I didn't get admitted to Shantiniketan because of my political convictions! I was seen as "left leaning" and that didn't go well with Professor Anil Chandra, the principal at that time," said Sharafi.

"While I was in jail, I had come into contact with several people such as Pronob Guhothakurta who was arrested from Shantiniketan. I got the taste of Tagore songs from him and was soon inspired into



singing the songs.

Reading my thoughts, he immediately went on. "Why was I in jail? Those were the turbulent days of Quit India movement initiated by Gandhiji. I had appeared for my matriculation. During this time many of us were arrested and sent to jail for 11 months. In fact, in jail, I had come into contact with some noted pro-Liberation leaders like Kamoda Prasad Mukherji, Kobiraj Nrisingho Sen, Dinkor Koishik and more.

"Tagore songs, particularly his patriotic songs like *Je tomaye chharey chharuk aami tomaye chharbo na ma, Nai nai bhoi hobey hobey joi*, were sung to inflame the

anti British feelings even more! What could match the patriotic songs such as *Banglar mati Banglar Jol, Aji Bangladesher hridoy hotey, Sharthok jnom amar jonmeychi ei deshey* and many more. The songs were imbued with patriotic flavour and reflected the desire for a society free from exploitation," he added.

Tagore's life as a composer extended for 67 years, which can be divided into three phases. The first phase (1881-1900) he devoted to his composing *bhanga gaan* -- or songs modelled after existing Hindustani songs. In the second phase, of experimentation, he started composing songs on the basis of *raga*

structure. Most of Tagore's patriotic songs were composed during this period. In the third phase, (1921-1941) he combined poetry, folk and classical melodies.

Although his creative career began as a composer of patriotic songs, these numbered to only 60, as compared to his variety of songs numbering to 2500. In fact, Tagore's earliest patriotic song *Tomari tore Ma shopinu ei deha* was composed in 1875 when he was only 14.

When Sharafi joined Indian Peoples Theatre (IPTA), renowned singers Suchitra Mitra, Hemanta Mukherjee and Debabrata Biswas frequented the organisation and that's how he rubbed shoulders with the stalwarts and his interest in Tagore songs was spurred on. It is at the same time his guru, Shubho Guhothakurta, made a tremendous impact in his development as an artiste, added Sharafi.

Current president, of Bangladesh Rabindra Sangeet Shilpi Sangstha, octogenarian Sharafi's contribution to the cultural setting in Bangladesh is well noted. Around 1957, he along with professor Anisur Rahman and Dr Rafiqul Islam organised several cultural programmes, including dance drama *Tasher Desh* by Tagore in Dhaka under the banner of *Hojoborola*.

Sharafi, an epitome of Rabindra sangeet, continues to inspire generations of music lovers. His unmatched rendition of patriotic songs resonate in the hearts of millions across the nation and beyond.

Blending indigenous and European theatre Selim Al Deen on Tagore's plays

ERSHAD KAMOL

Rabindranath Tagore wrote and directed plays that are unique for their blend of the indigenous and European theatre forms -- a blend so subtle that it almost appears natural. And because of these unique plays, the master playwright has acquired a supreme position in the era of 'Public Theatre' in the subcontinent, which was highly influenced by the European theatre. And it is Tagore who gave a modern presentation of indigenous culture and emotion of Bengalis in his plays.

The form of theatre, which Tagore evolved in his so-called symbolic-allegoric plays is a fusion of the song-and-dance-- in the abundant use of song and in the absence of cause-and-effect formula for building action-- and the European dramaturgy. That is why his plays are low on dramatic conflict and instead focus on aesthetic sentiment; the influence of the indigenous is more than apparent.

Eminent playwright Selim Al Deen, who is also a professor of Department of Drama and Dramatics of Jahangirnagar University, said, "Like the other nations, who have a rich culture, Rabindranath Tagore is the icon of the Bengalis. His major contribution is creating universal characters such as Raja, Rani, Thakurda and Nandini.

"The modern presentation of indigenous people through Thakurda has given the character an epic quality. And the rich characterisation of Nandini can be compared



Top: Tagore (right) as Fakir in his play *Dakghar* (1917), Selim Al Deen



with only a few universal female characters in the world drama such as Antigone, the titular character of *Antigone*, the last part of Sophocles' trilogy."

Selim Al Deen further pointed out, "Tagore took the modern aspect from the West. However, from his play *Bishorjan* and onwards, Tagore has rejected most of the techniques of western theatre. He did not follow the 'five act' division of the Shakespearean style of writing a play. And

he has created his own style without following anyone, and which has no follower. "Dramatic conflict", the essence of western theatre is absence in his song-and-dance tradition. Interestingly, because of the absence of dramatic conflict, a few of the so-called western scholars of that period have refused to acknowledge them as plays; modern European theatre critics are now realising the richness of Tagore's drama. In my opinion, during 1901-1930 he was the best playwright in the world."

Tagore did not go for British poetic style of dialogue diction. Al Deen said, "When TS Eliot suggested plays in verse form, Tagore wanted it in prose form. His logic was that the Bengali language has a unique rhythm, which is evident even in the prose."

Tagore had his own concept of theatre design as well. In his essay, titled *Rangamancha*, he has rejected ornamented set like the British theatre, and opted for a suggestive set. In opposition to the painted backdrop and the proscenium frame, Tagore preferred an intimate performance space like that of the *jatra*. To quote Al Deen, "Taking elements from the East, many modern critic-directors are currently doing in theatre what Tagore did in the early 20th century."

According to Selim Al Deen, evergreen Tagore plays such as *Raktakarabi* (1926), *Muktadhara* (1922), *Achalayatan* (1922) *Raja* (1911), *Dakghar* (1912) and others will continue to inspire people all over the world.

Rabindranath Tagore: Farmers' friend

SHYKH SERAJ

Rabindranath Tagore is largely identified as a poet, writer, philosopher, educator, and artist. A less explored facet of the great bard is his philanthropy and agricultural initiatives. As a zamindar (landlord), he could easily have turned his back on the deprived masses and insulated himself from their hard lives, but he was born of a different mettle.

Last year, with the intention of discovering this unexplored facet of Tagore, Channel i aired a short report on his agricultural leanings in the programme *Hindoye Mati O Manush*. This year I had the opportunity to go to Potiswor in Naogaon (district), Shilaidah in Kushtia and Shahzadpur in Serajganj, to put together an in depth report on Tagore to coincide with his death anniversary.

Tagore inherited the zamindari in this part of Bengal from his father Debendranath Tagore in 1890. Tagore had a natural affinity for the scenic beauty of rural Bengal and the swift flowing river Padma -- which often gave him inputs for his literature and sharpened his concept of development and agricultural production.

The questions that nagged Tagore were: How would the farmers cultivate divided lands and pay taxes? How would they feed their families? What steps should be taken to free them from the clutches of private lenders and middlemen? He was keenly aware of the need for them to be organised and the possibility of introducing cooperative farming.

To make his dream a reality, he tried to develop Lahinipara village of Kushtia as a model village. He sought to implement a strong local government system like the *panchayat* system of West Bengal. Though all his dreams could not be fulfilled, he organised social services for the farmers, such as community prayers and exhibitions.

Through *Hridoye Mati O Manush*, we tried to disseminate the message that if farmers don't get fair prices for their products and be freed from the clutches of



The author in a scene from the special episode of *Hridoye Mati O Manush* on Tagore

middlemen, their development would remain a distant dream.

To Tagore's credit, he thought of this issue 100 years ago. He established a local market of agro products near Kushtia town. Later that market was operated by the zamindars of Jessore. This market, known as *Rajar Hat* (King's market) is still in existence and is open every Sunday and Thursday.

To expand my knowledge base of Tagore and have a glimpse of his concern for the poor, I established contact with folklore researcher Dr Anwarul Karim and biography researcher Dr Abul Ahsan Chowdhury.

While working for agricultural development, Tagore got a clear glimpse of the plight of marginalised people. In 1905, he established Krishi Bank in Shilaidah and Potiswor to free the hard pressed farmers from the grip of money lenders. Initially this bank was run through the financial assistance of his friends; while he donated a

substantial portion of the amount he received from the Nobel Prize in 1913.

The agro-based cooperative and banking model of Tagore has been emulated in Bangladesh by the Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank (RKUB), Bangladesh Rural Development Academy (BARD) or even banks in the private sector such as Grameen Bank.

Concerned about the lack of education among the marginalised, he established a mass education school in Shilaidah.

Tagore organised the cultivation of corn, cabbage, beans and sugarcane, among others.

Tagore believed that both farmers and zamindars should work in tandem on farming. He put this into practice in his own life by sending his son Rathindranath and son-in-law Nagendra Nath to the US with the aim of studying agriculture. His son sought to alleviate the sufferings of farmers with the introduction of tractors -- a

milestone in mechanised farming in Bangladesh. In Tagore's bungalow in Potiswor stand antiques such as the anchor of his boat, bathtub, and the wreckage of the first tractor used in Bangladesh. However, it is regrettable that these priceless reminders are poorly maintained.

Though the agricultural and village development plan of Tagore didn't make much headway in Shahzadpur of Serajganj, he developed a close interaction with the villagers. He also saw the potential for dairy farming in that area, 100 years ago.

According to some sources, Tagore last came to the revenue office of Potiswor of Kaligram Pargana (Taxation zone of Kaligram) in 1937. He had separate meetings with the local farmers, school teachers and the elite.

The irony today is that while the people of the country are immersed fully in Tagore songs, poems, plays and writings, little is known about his proclivity for agriculture and development. Discussions on these facets in radio, TV, newspapers or even in workshops or seminars are hardly noticeable. There are no textbooks or research reports that explore this aspect of Tagore. The researchers I spoke to said only one or two researches had been done on Tagore and that too only to meet the professional's promotional preconditions. This situation is really regrettable.

The other question is why this aspect of Tagore is unknown to us.

In today's world, we are always arguing for an agricultural policy that will help our farmers organise themselves, get a fair price and enable an extension of agricultural education. It will also boost the diversity of agro products, improve local government and relevant agricultural research. All these aspects are incorporated in Tagore's philosophy. What we need is patriotism and research on this unknown arena of agriculture and development traversed by Tagore.

The author is an agriculture activist and media personality, director and head of news Channel i.

Multifaceted ethos in Tagore's words Laisa Ahmed Lisa on Rabindra Sangeet

KARIM WAHEED

"The beauty of Tagore songs is that they can be interpreted in different ways," says artiste Laisa Ahmed Lisa.

Lisa is one of the most promising Tagore singers of her generation. Growing in a music-oriented family, Lisa was introduced to the world of Tagore songs by her father Mafizuddin Ahmed, professor of Philosophy in Rajshahi University (RU).

"We used to have informal musical soiree (classical music and Tagore songs) at home. I took music lessons from Ustad Rabiul Hossain, Amaresh Roy Chowdhury and Golam Murshed (professor of Bangla, RU)," says Lisa.

In 1981, Lisa participated in the 'Kishore (youngsters) group' of nationwide contest by Rabindra Sangeet Sammilan Parishad (RSSP) and came first. She stood first in the same contest (in the same group) next year. The following year it was decided that if anyone came first in the same group twice consecutively, he/she would have to participate in the



'adult group', regardless of age. At the age of 13, Lisa competed in the adult section and came first again. Tagore exponent Wahidul Haque noticed Lisa's potential and flair and began giving her music lessons. Occasionally she trained under Sanjida Khatun. Lisa has been a teacher of Tagore songs at Chhayanat, one of the leading music schools in the country, for the last six years. Humming the familiar tune *Aji*

jhora jhora mukhoro badoro din-e Lisa says, "An interesting facet of Tagore songs is that, quite a few of the tunes were modified by Tagore himself and often multiple versions of the same song have existed. In the case of *Aji jhora jhora...* the lesser-known version is rendered in *Dhrupad* style.

The change might seem minor when talking about it, but as Lisa renders the song, a sea change becomes apparent; as if the expression or mood has gone through a metamorphosis.

"Changing *taal* or *loy* (rhythm) brings about a significant change in a certain song. For instance *Amar neeshith-o raat-er baddoldhara* can be rendered in *chaturmatrit* (four beats) or *trimatrit* (three beats) style. *Bishwabeena roby* can be *taal-pherta* (tempo changing).

"The words remain unchanged but an artiste who has in depth knowledge of Tagore's philosophy and his work, can change the disposition of a song. *Pooja porber gaan* (devotional songs) can also be one's personal ballad to the beloved. The line between 'love for

the Creator' and 'love for humanity' is often blurred in Tagore's work. These subtle details can be perceived if one can envision the image a song evokes."

What about the debate regarding the "correct" way of rendering Tagore songs? Lisa responds, "There is a *swaralipi* (notation) for Tagore songs. The basic tunes cannot be tinkered with but the style and expression can differ. People who argue that a certain style should be religiously followed are just manifesting what they have learnt from their teachers. Some of those teachers may have learnt the songs from Tagore, but as I mentioned earlier, Tagore himself often made minor changes in his songs. It's only human."

Lisa has a positive outlook on the state of Tagore songs in our country. "Ask anyone to name five Tagore songs and I can assure you, he/she can come up with titles. Rabindranath's songs delineate emotions and expressions that are still very contemporary. One can only perceive these gems of Bengali literature and music by studying more and delving deep into the soul."