Interpreting Tagore

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MOST of us can remember a time when our parents used to fight with us about our taste in music. Ours was too loud, too much noise, too toneless. We would get lectures about the beauty in Rabindra Sangeet, sometimes be forced to listen while our parents, with intense concentration, fully immersed themselves in the soft, sweet sounds of the Bengal that was theirs. For most of us in the younger generation, however, Rabindra Sangeet was purely "old peoples' music" -- a music that the youth of today cannot possibly understand or relate too. And it has been that way for a long time.

But there are some artists who do not want to leave Rabindra Sangeet to the elder generation. Rather, they want to re-interpret the sounds and overall feel of the songs and make them accessible to the younger generation of music lovers in Bangladesh. Sahana Bajpaie and Shayan Chowdhury, better known to his fans all over Bangladesh as Ornob, have been working on a project on Rabindra Sangeet for the last ten years. Sahana's first single *Amar Nishitho Ratero Badal Dhara* came out in 2005 in the album *Ek Tare Gaatha*. Encouraged by the overall interest in Rabindra Sangeet done in a more modern soundscape, Sahana, along with her husband Ornob will release their first Rabindra Sangeet album *Notun Kore Pabo Bole* during the last week of February.



Photo: Armeen

Ornob and Shahana met at Shantineketan where they were studying and share a love for Rabindra Sangeet.

"I guess what we are trying to do is make Rabindra Sangeet something that is accessible to our generation," says Sahana. "I wanted to break the preconceived notion of Rabindra Sangeet being another lullaby which cannot be heard by the young masses. It has been the music for the intellectual masses, a sort of cultural elite, in Bangladesh for too long."

But the so-called cultural elite is not completely supportive of this attempt to re-interpret Rabindra Sangeet and make it comprehensible to the younger masses. Many Rabindra Sangeet fans in their senior years believe Rabindra Sangeet to be almost sacred, and beyond changing and modernising.

In fact, the patent for Rabindra Sangeet in India, which disallowed any form of "experimentation" with the songs was only lifted in 2002. So although Ornob and Sahana had already recorded and done a few songs, Visva Bharati University (the school from which both singers completed their masters) claimed that they could not officially release the album until after 2002, when the copyright laws were lifted. They were encouraged however, by their counterparts and their professors to unofficially release the album.

Despite working around the rules and regulations, Ornob and Sahana do not feel that they are changing the overall feel of Rabindra Sangeet.

"We are in no way, experimenting with Rabindra Sangeet," says Ornob. "We do not claim to be so irreverent and cocky as to assume that we can do so, but Rabindranath himself was very experimental in the way he composed his music. He took tunes from old Western folk songs, like the song Purano Shei Diner Kotha [in which Tagore borrowed the tune from the Scottish folk song, Auld Lang Syne], baul songs, Karnatic Classical music from South India and he also used to compose on the piano. What we are doing is basically keeping the main melody line in front and fusing both Western and Eastern instruments to come out with a different sound. We are following the Shorolipi [notations and renditions of Rabindra Sangeet) and adding our own individual feelings to the song without disrupting the overall mood of the song."

Although the dynamic duo does not claim to be experts in the field of Rabindra Sangeet, they are also in no way, strangers to it. Both Sahana and Ornob studied in Patha Bhavana, Rabindranath Tagore's school in Santiniketan, from the time they were seven years old.

"Rabindra Sangeet was a lifestyle for us," says Sahana. "It was part of our every day life. It's something that is very