

66th death anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore

Torchbearers: Women in Tagore literature

In conversation with Professor Momotajuddin Ahmed

KARIM WAHEED

“WOMEN in Tagore literature are liberated and inspirational, without escaping their contemporary social norms,” says Professor Momotajuddin Ahmed.

Though in pain from a recent car collision, his eyes light up while talking about how the Nobel laureate viewed women and how they appeared in his short stories, novels and plays. To Professor Ahmed -- an actor, theatre director, playwright and educationist - Tagore literature is more than a passion; works of *Kabiguru* is a source

truly love her or is it his ideology veiled as love?

“Tagore was a staunch supporter of ‘Widow Remarriage’ movement and had his son marry a widow. However, he didn’t want to alienate his readers. Hence, Binodini does not remarry,” says Professor Ahmed.

“Prior to Tagore, female characters in Bengali literature were more or less one-dimensional. A woman was either a mother, or a lover or a seductress. Tagore’s female characters hold on to their identities, each unique and remarkable. Damini in *Chaturango*, *Chitrangada* in Tagore’s dance drama, *Mrinal* in *Strir Patro* and *Aneela* in *Poila*

DAMINI IN CHATURANGO, CHITRANGADA IN TAGORE’S DANCE DRAMA, MRINAL IN STRIR PATRO AND ANEELA IN POILA NUMBER -- ALL STAND THEIR GROUND, NOT JUST AS COMPANIONS OF MEN, BUT AS INDEPENDENT, REMARKABLE BEINGS.

of inspiration.

“One has to consider the limitations Tagore had to face. His ideas were surprisingly modern, yet not beyond the reach of his times. In *Chokher Bali* Tagore made a strong feminist statement. Binodini, the protagonist, who is a widow, makes a radical departure from classical Bengali literature. She is an intelligent, educated woman who seduces the man who had rejected her hand in marriage earlier. Strangely she befriends the naïve, adolescent wife of Mahendra, the man she is having an affair with. Mahendra’s friend Bihari wants to marry Binodini but does he

Number -- all stand their ground, not just as companions of men, but as independent, remarkable beings.

“Chitrangada, a character from the epic *Mahabharata*, gets a bold identity in Tagore’s dance-drama. Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur, is not some maiden in distress. She is skilled in warfare. Smitten with the legendary warrior Arjun, she asks the gods for a boon. With a divine intervention Arjun is seduced by Chitrangada’s beauty. Soon after, however, she is faced with a predicament and comes to terms with her self-worth. She asks the gods to take back the boon; if Arjun



truly loves her, he would do so with or without her shallow appearance,” continues the professor.

“Tagore’s characters mirror his philosophy, his views. An interesting anecdote can be a demonstration of his rationale: During the *Swaraj* move-

ment, Mahatma Gandhi came over to Shantiniketan and stayed with Tagore for a few days. Gandhi tried to persuade Tagore to support the use of locally produced *Khadi* and reject clothing material produced in England altogether. Tagore politely declined saying



Rabindranath with his wife Mrinalini Devi

that the mass production of fabric in England has made it affordable to the common man and undesirable or not, that was the reality. This sense of logic is inherent in many of his characters,” he says.

The professor concludes, “Tagore’s

female characters are like nature. They inspire, nurture and guide. They don’t denounce values but boldly point out social anomalies and absurd superstitions. Created decades ago, they remain modern to date.”



COURTESY: RABINDRA RACHANABALI PUBLISHED BY VISHWA BHARATI

The poet with his granddaughter Nandita

Rabindra Sangeet: Awakening Bengali nationalism

In conversation with Fahmida Khatun

AHSAN HABIB

“Hrini taar kache ajibon, jar konthe Rabindranath-er gaan bache” -- poet Shamsur Rahman expresses his gratitude to Tagore exponent Fahmida Khatun in the poem *Hrini*. Indeed, Fahmida Khatun, along with her sister Sanjida Khatun, have played a pioneering role in propagating Tagore songs in Bangladesh.

As the nation was gearing up for its liberation, Fahmida’s rendition of *Sharthok jonom amar jonmechhi ei deshey* and *Amar shonar Bangla* at public gatherings took her closer to millions. During the Liberation War, *Aji Bangladesher hridoy hotey*, rendered by her, was repeatedly aired from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and was a boost to the morale of the freedom fighters.

To Fahmida, Tagore songs are expressions of a particular way of life, emblematic of Bengali culture and nationalism. “In his works depiction of universal emotions enabled people from different generations and eras identify with the expressions in their day-to-day existence. The visionary poet’s songs open ways to an enlightened life and his ideas guide us in every struggle,” Fahmida explains what Tagore songs mean to her.

Starting off as a dancer, the artiste soon turned to singing. As a school student, she took lessons in classical music at home. As her elder sister Sanjida Khatun was leaving for

Shatiniketon, she tried to impress her with *toppa* (semi classical songs). Soon she developed a fascination for “*opprocholito gaan*” (uncommon songs).

In 1956, Fahmida won much acclaim rendering songs of the ‘mother’ character in the dance

Hussain in classical and Sanjida Khatun, Kalim Sharafi, Abdul Ahad in Tagore songs. EMI Music brought out two extended records and HMV re-released them. She also has a long play record and five CDs.

Recalling the difficulties that they had to face in learning and practicing

Responding to the debate whether Tagore songs are enjoyed by a certain class, Fahmida draws from her experience where she found rural audiences attending musical soirees and requesting for more, even after 3/4 hours into the programme. She argues, “These questions are raised out of hostility. These arguments derive from their embedded cultural judgments. Tagore songs deserve a moral and aesthetic response, much more than only a brief inspection or broad generalisation to unlock what it has to offer.”

Fahmida is very enthusiastic about young singers. However, she feels that they should delve deeper. “The profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful songs are much more than tools to demonstrate vocal charisma. One has to grasp the message in the song to be able to move the listener,” she says.

Another important aspect of singing that is often ignored, is tempo. “It is extensively stated how the songs are to be sung. Some performers today tend to stretch too much, hoping to provide a better performance. Several singers today tend to sing on higher scales. When an artiste has to put extra effort into singing, the song loses its appeal. The best way to present a song is to sing it with ease. Young singers should take note of musical expressions, phrases, idioms including nature of lyricism,” she says.

Tagore songs during the pre-Independence period, Fahmida points out that the situation has changed. “Chhayanat, Rabindra Sangeet Sammilan Parishad and several other organisations have yielded positive results in promoting Tagore songs. The songs now enjoy greater exposure than before.



drama *Chandalika*. Gradually, she grew into prominence as a Tagore singer with her performances in radio, television and stage. Her rendition of *Ami tomar shongey bedhechhi amar praan* in *Dharapat*, the first Tagore song used in a film made in the then East Pakistan, was a huge success.

Her mentors were Ustad Munir

A dance form Bengalis can call their own

The uniqueness of Rabindra Nrityadhara

SHARMILA BANERJEE

In the contemporary Bengali society, the admiration for dance that is prevalent has been possible because of Rabindranath Tagore. He established an institution for dance education and produced remarkable dance dramas. He made arrangements to teach classical dance forms to the students at the *Ashram* in Shantiniketan. Gradually, a unique dance form developed, incorporating different types of *taal* (rhythm) and *bhava* (expression).

Tagore did not follow any specific dance form. Yet in his compositions we find an amazing fusion of folk, classical and foreign dance forms. Refined aesthetic sense and composure in the compositions are noticeable traits in the dance form developed and nurtured by Tagore.

Rabindanath Tagore had a ‘Baul’ in himself, which is manifested in his songs and dances.

During a trip to Sylhet, he was

highly impressed by the *Manipuri* dance, indigenous to that region. He could easily relate to the subtle, tender movements, the simplicity of the rhythms, and the clarity in its expressions. He brought along with him two *Manipuri* dance teachers from Sylhet to Shantiniketan to train the students. This move also contributed significantly in developing a dance form Bengalis can call their own.

Among the classical dance forms, Tagore gave much importance to *Manipuri* for its delicate, feminine movements and *Kathakali* for its bold, vigorous and masculine movements. He also used other classical dance styles like *Odissi*, *Bharatanatyam* and *Kathak* in his dance dramas.

In the dance dramas, much importance was given to the mood and the rhythm of the accompanying songs. Tagore believed that in many cases overuse of complex gestures to literally interpret the song hampers the mood of the dance.



In Shantiniketan, Tagore used the traditional *Garba* dance with the help of Gujarati students. The bold Sri Lankan *Candy* dance form as well as traditional dance styles of Java and Bali Islands were used in his compositions with the help of the students from those countries.

Rabindranath loved nature and did not like anything that seemed even remotely artificial. That affinity is apparent in the costumes, use of colours and jewellery made of flowers, used in the compositions. He also introduced the Batik scarves, common in Java and Bali, in his dances.

During Tagore’s lifetime, under his supervision, the dance style that has been established through the performances by the students of Shantiniketan can therefore be called Rabindra Nrityadhara, which we can call our dance, the dance of the Bengalis.

The writer is a renowned dancer and choreographer



Tagore came to East Bengal to manage his family estates at Shilaidaha and Shazadpur. The poet spent nearly a decade in Shelaidah, Kushtia.

These years were an important milestone in the poet's life. This is evident in his wonderful letters that portray the real essence of Bengal and Bengali life, written to his niece Indira, which was later published as "Chhinnopatra". The lyrical beauty of Bangladesh, the rivers, the boats and the simple life gave the poet serenity as well as inspired him to write "Postmaster", "Shonar Tari" (a collection of poems), "Chitrangada" (dance-drama) and more.

Most of his short stories were written in this period.