

# 150th Birth Anniversary of Tagore

## Rabindra Sangeet: Earthbound or High Art?

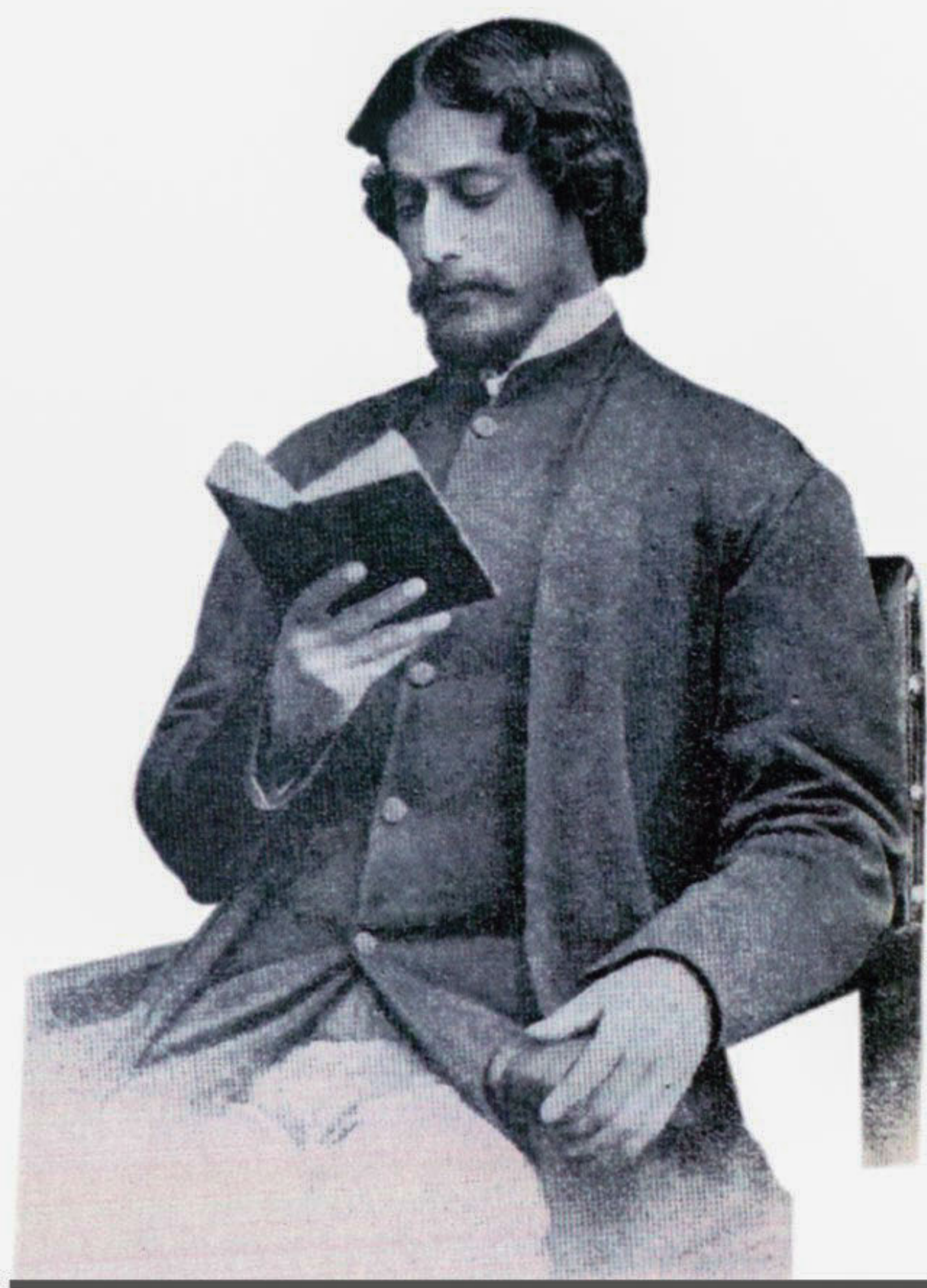


PHOTO COURTESY: BRITISH COUNCIL (REDISCOVERING TAGORE)

**Kabir Chowdhury (Author, translator and Tagore enthusiast)**

Kabir Chowdhury is a renowned educationist, translator, author, cultural activist and an avid Tagore enthusiast. In 1998 he was made National Professor of Bangladesh. Professor Kabir Chowdhury is now the chairman of Bangla Academy.

Chowdhury's views on Rabindra Sangeet: "Rabindra Sangeet has had a very strong influence on Bengali culture and tradition. These songs are regarded as cultural treasures in both Bangladesh and West Bengal (India).

"Tagore's songs transcend the mundane and address all human emotions. The bard had given a voice to all -- affluent or poor. Everyone can find expressions of his/her emotional experiences and tribulations in Tagore songs. His songs reach out to all of humanity.

"I believe that Rabindra Sangeet delves into bliss, woes, love, rejection, affection, loss -- all facets of human life. His music does demand an intelligent and cultured audience to appreciate its poetic beauty."

**Mita Haque (Rabindra Sangeet artiste and exponent)**

Mita Haque, a dedicated and accomplished Tagore singer, is a name familiar to Bengali music enthusiasts. She is currently head of the Rabindra Sangeet Department at Chhayanaud Sangeet Bidyayatan, Dhaka. Her gurus -- Dr. Sanjida Khatun and the late Waheedul Haque -- are considered pioneers of diffusing and popularising Rabindra Sangeet in Bangladesh.

Haque's views: "It is precisely appropriate to term Rabindranath Tagore as 'Bishwa-kobi' (poet of the world) as his literature is universal. His songs embody deep philosophy, enlightenment and above all, humanism. Rabindranath actually captured the essence of all human emotions in his songs.

"I'm aware that the universal appeal that Tagore songs have, ironically, don't always reach out to the masses. Yet I am satisfied with what his music has accomplished. Of course, Tagore singers, exponents and enthusiasts have much left to do in this regard. The practice of Tagore songs must be enhanced at all levels.

"To grasp his songs, one has to have adequate understanding of Bangla and depth of knowledge -- enabling him/her to take it all in.

"Tagore's devotional songs take us closer to Divinity; songs on seasons remind us that we're all part of nature and inspirational songs motivate us in moments of personal and national crises.

"Waheedul Haque, who had astounding organising capability and in-depth knowledge on Tagore, worked wonders in regards to taking Rabindra Sangeet to the masses. Now it's our turn. Ceaseless practice, dedication and combined efforts of the singers, organisers, teachers and students can play a very vital role in widening the popularity of Rabindra Sangeet. The positive approach of media is equally important."

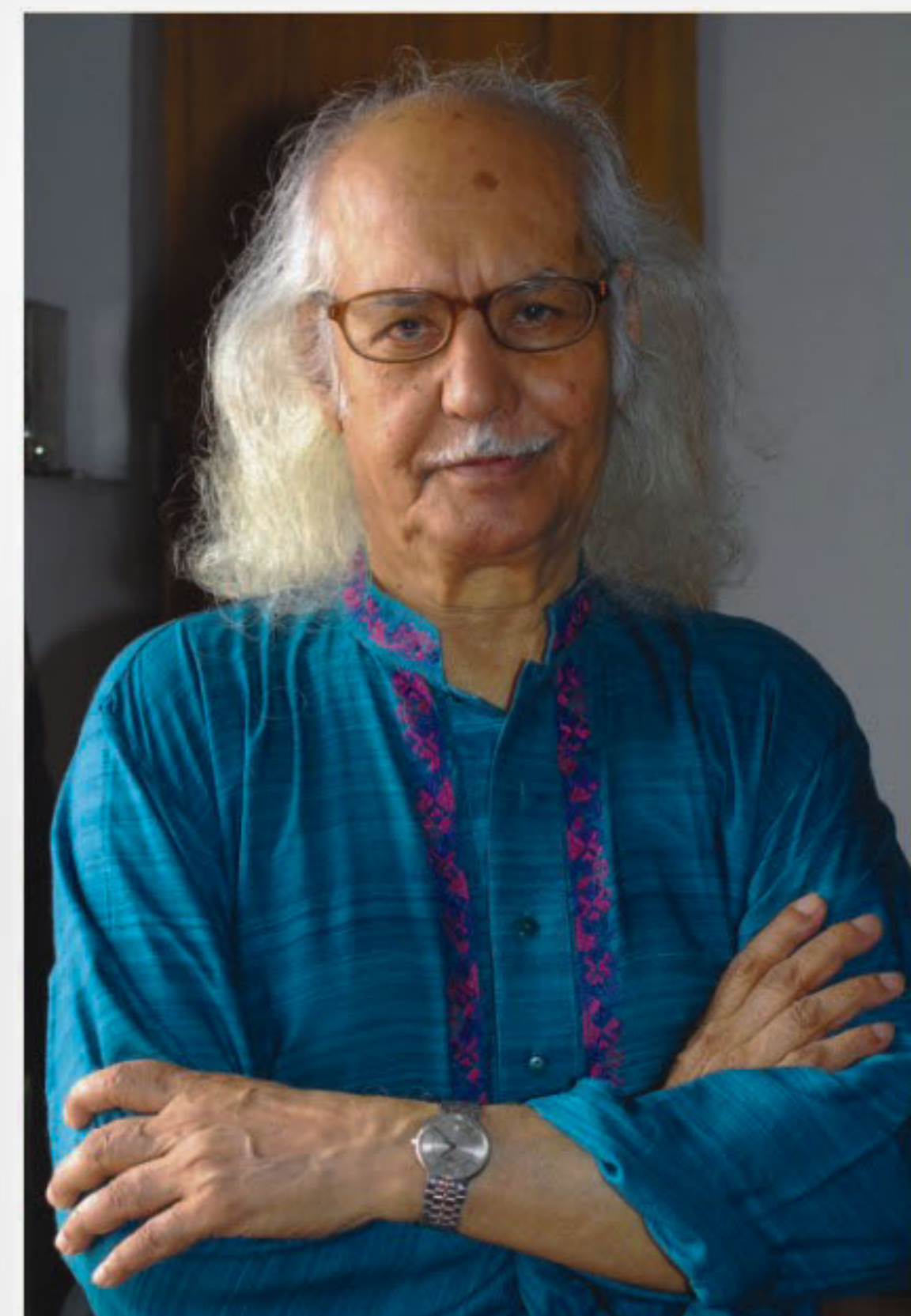
**Biswajit Ghosh (Academic, researcher and literary critic)**

Dr. Biswajit Ghosh, Professor, Department of Bangla, Dhaka University, thinks that before making any conclusive statement about the extent to which Rabindra Sangeet has reached the masses, we must remember that "the cultural prospects needed for these songs to reach a mass audience have never been there."

He explains: "Rabindranath was banned during the Pakistan era. And even if in Bangladesh we get a lot of hubbub about Rabindranath on Boishakh 25 and Srabon 22, real efforts to delve into his works and disseminate his message among all have never been taken on a national level."

Dr. Ghosh is of the opinion that we are yet to discover that these songs invoke a longing to sacrifice ourselves.

"Rabindra Sangeet aired on Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra during the Liberation War, inspired and



Kabir Chowdhury



Mita Haque

encouraged not only the freedom fighters but also the public," he said. That was a time when some Tagore songs had mass appeal. He hopes that establishing a cultural environment and the development of public taste can certainly take Rabindra Sangeet to the masses.

Can re-imagining further popularise Rabindra Sangeet? Dr. Ghosh's response: "I don't share that optimism." In explanation, he mentioned that Rabindranath had written the words and composed the tunes of around 2300 songs. The songs have unique rhythm -- a brew of various western and eastern musical patterns. "No matter how many ravings we hear about contemporary musicians using Rabindranath's lyrics, these tendencies are a passing fad. Rather, we should work towards creating a culture

that makes majority of the population receptive to Rabindra Sangeet. The media can play an important part to that end," he said.

**Naquib Khan (Singer, musician)**

Naquib Khan, one of the most popular among contemporary Bangladeshi musicians, thinks that initiatives by cultural organisations to take Tagore's timeless songs to the masses is yet to produce significant results.

"I would say that the message of harmony found in Rabindra Sangeet is yet to reach distant corners of the villages in the country. Perhaps students sing Rabindra Sangeet at schools in remote areas but this does not necessarily represent the spirit of these songs among the masses," said the Renaissance frontman.

Khan is not accusing anyone for this inadequacy but he hopes that the media can play a better role to uphold the spirit of Rabindra Sangeet. He also thinks that limiting use of instruments in renditions does not go with the poet's philosophy. "Rabindranath was the most progressive person of his time. Quite a few of his songs were based on western melodies. Then why is it a big deal if western instruments are used when performing Rabindra Sangeet?" Khan asked.

Khan and his band Renaissance recently attended a talent hunt on Rabindra Sangeet. British Council arranged the programme, where the band put its spin on couple of Rabindra Sangeet.

"When using instruments in Tagore songs, you have to always be very careful and not take away the essence of the timeless compositions," he added.

Khan also feels that the songs of Rabindranath Tagore have had some difficulty in reaching the masses, as one has to have a certain level of maturity to understand the bard's verses.

**Swami Zubayeer (Singer, lyricist, composer)**

Singer-composer, Swami Zubayeer is known for his deft renditions of *adhunik* songs and *ghazal*, but he is also an avid admirer of Rabindra Sangeet. Zubayeer believes that the appeal of Rabindra Sangeet transcends borders but is yet to reach the grassroots in the country.

Referring to Rabindranath's own remarks on this issue, the artiste said that not everyone is equipped to grasp Rabindra Sangeet wholeheartedly. However, he also points out that the bard's songs that belong to the

Baul style were inspired by a form that is essentially of and for the masses. Considering this aspect of Rabindra Sangeet, Zubayeer is of the opinion that it is "not right to say that Rabindra Sangeet is not for everyone."

He admits that Rabindranath's contribution to Bengali literature and culture remains unparalleled but does not agree with the trend of putting his creations on a pedestal and worshipping them through forming rules that create boundaries and constraints. After all, throughout his life the bard rejected all forms of constraints, limitations and meaningless rules.

**Ziaur Rahman (Rock musician)**

When "Shironamhin Rabindranath" hit the market last year, it generated much buzz among the band's fan base and contemporary music enthusiasts in general. Through the album, the band Shironamhin gave the Nobel laureate poet's timeless compositions a rock makeover.

Ziaur Rahman, bassist and songwriter of the band, did the mixing and mastering for the album.

The album's accomplishment was that it generated interest in Rabindra Sangeet among young rock music aficionados, who don't otherwise lean towards the bard's compositions.

Zia believes that the Nobel laureate poet remains the biggest icon in our culture and likens his influence on Bengali music to that of Mian Tansen on Indian classical music.

"Every Bengali child invariably starts off his/her music lessons with Rabindra Sangeet. Without the song 'Esho Hey Boishakh', the biggest secular festival in the country, 'Pahela Boishakh' seems incomplete. Rabindranath is in a position what he is absolutely worthy of," said Zia.

On the album, apart from widely familiar ones, Shironamhin used over 20 exotic and lesser-known instruments.

The musician said that like any other field of music, practice of Rabindra Sangeet too needs discipline to maintain a standard. "Without understanding the nuances of Rabindra Sangeet one cannot be a true Tagore enthusiast."

**Sahana Bajpaie (Rabindra Sangeet artiste and enthusiast)**

Sahana was brought up and educated in Santiniketan (India). She trained in Indian classical music and Rabindra Sangeet under Swastika Mukherjee, Bijoy Sinha and Chitra Roy, among others. Sahana's album of Rabindra Sangeet "Notun Korey Pabo Boley" (2007) presented 10 Tagore songs (music direction by Shayan Chowdhury Arnob) in a new light. About the album, Sahana said: "This album is an expression of our endeavour to explore the dynamism of Rabindra Sangeet in a way which we can relate to in our time..."

Addressing whether Rabindra Sangeet is for the masses, Sahana said, "The proclaimed 'ideology' of one of the foremost Rabindra Sangeet Institutions in Kolkata (India) is to exclusively practice and uphold Tagore's music as a 'pure and high form of art' and imbibing and spreading a love for it in the hearts of people. Hence, the question inevitably arises as to how Tagore's music as a 'pure and high form of art', be enjoyed by the masses in general.

"Tagore's music has never quite been a part and parcel of popular culture, in my opinion. Initially, only limited to the Brahmo Samaj and Santiniketan, Pankaj Mallik was the first mainstream exponent to popularise Rabindra Sangeet. But it remained exclusively cherished by the 'educated' and the 'elite', if not 'urban'. Although Kishore Kumar's recordings brought Rabindra Sangeet to the masses to a large scale, the bard's songs had always been cooped up in a certain definitive world of elitism in the name of fortifying traditionalism with very little scope for individual expression.

"Tagore was never Nazrul, as far as music and popular culture is concerned. The lifting of the copyright from Rabindra Sangeet by Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan, did usher in hopes of a breath of fresh air, for artistes to explore the songs in varied ways, to make them prep up for the 'mass' audience, but, in my opinion, these efforts were more or less unsuccessful.

"Very recent works by popular artistes, though, prove otherwise, as more and more people from the younger generation have started listening to Rabindra Sangeet, and the music thankfully is not taken to be a genre only enjoyed by a certain age group. But the notion to propagate Tagore's music as a 'pure and high form of art', unfortunately, still persists and does not look like it will go away very soon."

"Re-imagining is necessary if any art form has to survive. It has been proven that re-imagining Tagore's music, creating a soundscape that is more identifiable and enjoyable by the younger generation, introducing singers who are not afraid to sing out passionately to draw the massive attention from the Tagore enthusiasts and the non-enthusiasts alike," she said.

Interviews by **Takir Hossain, Jamil Mahmud, Zahangir Alom and Akram Hosen Mamun.**

BTV																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																													
-----	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

abc Radio FM 89.2	09:00 Mokhonto Jiboney	12:00 Durun Dupurey	02:05 The Daily Star Jiboney	03:00 Joygan	07:00 Shuj-er Maya	09:00 Raat-er Akashay	11:00 Goner Shesh Nei	10:00 Morning Express	12:30 No Temion	04:00 Dhaka Calling	09:00 Full Volume	11:00 Back to Back music	04:00 RADIO TOGO FM 89.5	08:00 Good Morning Dhaka	12:00 Today's Addis	04:00 U Turn	07:00 Boley Lal Rock	10:00 Radio Rock East	12:00 Humum Pecha
-------------------	------------------------	---------------------	------------------------------	--------------	--------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------	-----------------	---------------------	-------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------	--------------	----------------------	-----------------------	-------------------

**Osposhto**  
On Rtv at 07:40pm  
Single Episode TV  
Play  
Cast: Nirmalendu Guin, Nova

**Maa Ebong**  
On Boishakhi TV at 08:45pm  
Single Episode TV  
Play  
Cast: Sharmili Ahmed, Dolly Zahur

**Tyag**  
On CHANNEL 1 at 07:50pm  
Single Episode TV  
Play  
Cast: Purnima, Shobee

12:20 Ami Rabindranath-er Kotha Bolchhi	01:30 Angie	04:00 Sweet Home Alabama	07:00 The Master of Kung Fu	09:30 The Godfather
ntv	Rabindranath O Maa	12:10 Notun Konthe Rabindranath	12:40 Bewitched	04:55 Bad Boys
01:00 Drama: Tota Pakhi	09:00 Drama: Bibha	11:30 Chitrangda	07:00 500 Days of Summer	08:40 X-Men Origins: Wolverine
ETV	Drama: Rabibar	12:02 Ekushey-er Dupur	12:45 Journey to the Center of the Earth	04:45 The Tournament
05:30 Baula Ontar	07:50 Jora Shaku Thakur Bari	10:10 Drama: Hohat Dekha	02:45 The Mermals	07:15 Yes Man
11:05 Shokal Belar Roddur	11:05 Tele-film: Dui Bigha Jami	08:15 Amar Bela Jai	09:30 17 Again	11:30 Whiteout
09:05 Drama: Kusum	Kotha	Gaan-er Bhelay	12:30 Community	02:30 Friends
11:25			04:30 Dexter	09:30 Coffee With Karen
01:10 Bangla Feature Film	04:10 Kibhabe Rabindranath, keno Rabindranath	05:30 Drama: Shyama	12:30 Extraordinary Dogs	04:30 Big, Bigger, Biggest
04:30 Shubho Shundor Kalo	07:40 Drama: Oposhto	09:50 Dhrupadi Kahini	08:30 Terrazuz 2011	03:30 Nat Geo Specials
Desh TV	10:30 Moner Anonde Re	04:30 Shubho Shundor Kalo	11:30 Combating Terror	Discovery Channel
08:15 Jakhon Bhangbe Milon Mela	09:45 Drama: Mohamaya	11:45 Tomar Shure Shur	02:30 Jihad	08:30 Blue Planet

NEWS BULLETIN	BTV	06:00pm	Diplomatic Zone
08:30pm Special Talk Show	ETV	12:05am	Ekushey-er Raat
12:30am Lead News	Boishakhi TV	12:00am	Zero Hour
01:00am Vision 2020	Diganta TV	11:00pm	Kobi Guro
09:45am Trita Matra	Rabindranath	10:40am	Torokalap

BTV	08:30pm	Special Talk Show	ETV	12:05am	Ekushey-er Raat
12:30am	Lead News	01:00am	Vision 2020	12:00am	Zero Hour
09:45am	Trita Matra	10:40am	Torokalap	11:00pm	Kobi Guro

As Bangladesh and India jointly celebrate 150th birth anniversary of the man who put Bengal on the map, discussions and seminars are on, zooming in on virtually every aspect of Rabindranath Tagore and his work. But perhaps no other creative aspect of the bard is as pervasive as his songs. Tagore often used to say that his songs would live on in Bengal long after his name and his writing were forgotten. Rabindra Sangeet has evolved into a distinctive school of music. Practitioners of this genre are known to be fiercely protective of their traditions. Novel interpretations and variations have drawn severe censure in both West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. Many believe that like Beethoven's symphonies or Vilayat Khan's sitar, Rabindra Sangeet demands an educated, intelligent and cultured audience to appreciate the lyrical beauty of the bard's compositions. Despite two nations adopting his songs as national anthem, and virtually all Bengalis being able to hum at least a few lines of his songs, is Rabindra Sangeet considered 'high art'? Is there room for individualism when rendition of Rabindra Sangeet is concerned (Debabrata Biswas' digressions from the Rabindrik style propagated by Santiniketan evoked strong criticism from purists)? Is re-imagining necessary to draw interest of younger audiences indifferent towards the Nobel laureate poet's compositions?



Naquib Khan



Swami Zubayeer



Ziaur Rahman



Sahana Bajpaie