

# 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 Chhayanaut Sangeet Bidyayatan, Dhaka. Her gurus -- Dr. Sanjida Khutun 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 of 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 Boishakhi 25 and Shabon 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



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 Rabindra Sangeet'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.

"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 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.

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 masses in general.

"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 artists 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.**

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 admires 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 Boishakhi', the biggest secular festival in the country, 'Pahela Boishakhi' 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 imbuing 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."

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Naquib Khan



Swami Zubayeer



Ziaur Rahman



Sahana Bajpaie

BTB	11:00	Aloy Bhutan Bhoru	Melate
ATN BANGLA	12:10	Se Din Dujone	Boishakhi TV
	02:15	Drama: Dakghar	10:30 Bangla Feature Film
	04:05	Amar Gaaner Operae	05:15 Boishakhi-CHNN
	09:00	Drama	Sharabisho
			Shudhu Cineram Gaan
			05:30 Drama: Maa Ebong
			Ottopar
	10:30	Aji Hoth Shatabbaro Pore	12:30 Reporters Diary
	02:50	Tele-film: Rashmanir	Diganta TV
		Chhele	11:30 Career Line
	05:35	Shono Tar Shudhabani	01:30 Moni Diganta-er
	08:40	Drama: Ratan	Hatchhini
	10:45	Bihanga Kotha	03:05 Hariye Jalar Nei Mana
CHANNEL I	01:05	Rabin Mela '11	08:05 Drama: Dan Protidan
	04:05	Rani Gaane Gaane	09:25 Swapan Amar Jonaki
	05:30	Maaake Mone Pore	Z Studio
	07:50	Drama: Tyag	10:30 New Shaolin Boxer
	09:35	Shange Rabindranath	

RADIO	12:00	abc Radio FM 89.2	No Transition
	09:00	Mohorotto Jiboney	04:00 Dhaka Calling
	12:00	Uttor Dujopore	09:00 Full Volume
	02:05	The Daily Star Jiboney	11:00 Back to Back music
	03:00	Joysoan	RADIO TODAY FM 89.6
	07:00	Duronto Bikley	08:00 Good Morning Dhaka
	07:00	Shaj-er Maya	12:00 Today's Adda
	09:00	Raat-er Akshay	04:00 Turn
	11:00	Golper Sheh Nei	07:00 Tai Hok
RADIO FOORTI	12:00	Raabat Dekha	10:00 Raat Bhor Gaar
	16:00	Morning Express	12:00 Hutun Pecha

Osposho	On RTV at 07:00pm	Single Episode TV	Play
			Cast: Nirmalendu Guun, Nova

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

Tyag	On CHANNEL I at 07:00pm	Single Episode TV	Play
			Cast: Purnima, Shoeb

BTV	12:20	Ami Rabindranath-er Kotha Bolchhi	01:30 Angie