



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

# Abdul Wadud

## A seasoned Tagore singer

ZAHANGIR ALOM

Abdul Wadud, a seasoned Tagore singer and teacher, is an enthusiastic cultural activist as well. He has been involved in the organisation of many Rabindra Sangeet programmes and festivals since the '70s. His immaculate diction together with subtle melodic twists makes his rendition bold and masculine.

Dwelling on the contrast between musical programmes and festivals of yesteryears and today, from the perspective of an organiser-activist, Wadud says, "Arranging programmes in the '70s and '80s was not an expensive affair. For the organisers and activists it was a labour of love. Everyone would come together and the arrangements would always be collective efforts. Now many activists are moving away from that tradition. Corporate giants are getting involved. The informal approach is being replaced with rigid and often pointless formalities."

Wadud's initiation into music happened in 1968. In 1973, he enrolled at Chhayanaut's Rabindra Sangeet Department. Among his teachers were renowned Tagore artistes, Zahidur Rahim, Waheedul Haq, Dr. Sanjida Khatun and

Selina Malek Chowdhury. Wadud trained in classical music under Ahsan Morshed, Narayan Chandra Basak and the late Ustad Phool Mohammad. Wadud taught different classes at Chhayanaut for 20 years beginning in 1977.

The first recorded song by the artiste was "Tumi Nabo Nabo Roop-e Esho Pran-e". The song was included in a long-play record titled "Bishwabeena Robey", produced by the Information Ministry, Government of Bangladesh in 1986 on the occasion of Tagore's 125th birth anniversary. Among his solo albums are: "Boshontey Boshontey Tomar" (Bengal Foundation, 1994) and "Poush Phagun-er Pala" (Bengal Foundation, 1996).

Changes are creeping into other quarters of the cultural arena, according to the artiste. "Many singers on BTV nowadays don't want to record live performances. They insist on lip-syncing with tracks/CDs," says Wadud, who has been an enlisted artiste at both Bangladesh Betar and BTV since the early '80s.

The gifted singer is disappointed about the younger generation of singers who crave for fame overnight, but don't work hard to create their individual rendition styles.

# Tagore's gift to Nritya

NAZIBA BASHER

Rabindranath Tagore, a poet, philosopher, composer, playwright, and painter, was one of the strongest figures to have given a solid form to the cultural life in the sub-continent. As he travelled the world, his visits to different parts of South Asia, in particular, opened his eyes to a broader Asian framework. His interest lay particularly in what he called the "operatic" South East Asian theatre forms, and devoted much of his time and energy in creating his own theatrical style, with the combination of dance and music.

Tagore first came across Manipuri dancing as early as 1919, and was heavily influenced by the dance form. So much so, that when he established Shantiniketon University, he invited expert gurus of the dance form to teach there. Manipuri's influence worked its way to help Rabindranath form his own unique dance plays called *Rabindra nritya natya*. Some of his immensely popular *nritya natya* in the sub-continent are *Chitrangada*, *Shyama*, and *Chandalika*. His fascination with

Manipuri Rasleela at Machhimpur, a Bishnupriya Manipuri locality in the modern Sylhet District in Bangladesh in 1920, ended up giving the dance form global attention.

Even though *Rabindra nritya natya* was dominantly influenced by Manipuri to start with, added to this style was Kathakali as well as Mohiniyattam of Kerala. The poet's trips all over India introduced him to Ceylonese (Kandyan), Javanese (Serimpi) and Bali (Legong), which were also integrated in Tagore dance choreographies. The folk dances (Garba, Baul, Jari, Raibenshe, etc) were other ingredients of Tagore dances. He was reluctant towards overarching physical gestures, and his dances tend to avoid a predominance of *mudra* -- whether of the eyes, fingers or limbs. Over-dressing and over-ornamentation were also discarded from his dance form.

While Tagore's role in launching India's first 'modern' dance is widely appreciated, his contribution towards re-establishing Indian dance to a position of 'high art' is perhaps of much greater importance. During the British rule, traditional dance forms of India were seen as corrupt time-pass for 'prostitutes' or

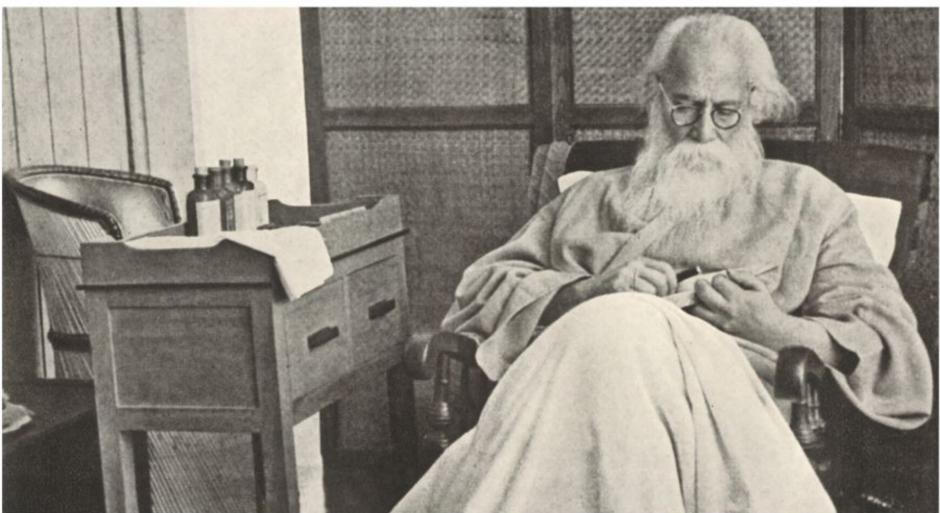
'rustic village folk', due to which educated middle-class Indian families did not have the courage to allow their children to learn dance at the time. It was in this negative atmosphere that Rabindranath made use of his vast national and international influence to breathe life into dance as an art form, by dispelling the social taboos that were then attached to it.

After introducing dance in his university curriculum, Tagore consistently encouraged his students and faculty members to perform on public stages, and even traveled across the country with troupes from Santiniketan. The staging of 'Natir Puja' in 1927 marked the return of children from middle-class Indian families as dancers. Within two to three decades from the first staging of 'Natir Puja', *nritya* had recovered, and gained back its full social acceptance, and took back its valuable place in the heart of the sub-continent.

It was this great role of Tagore in the world of art and culture, and his gift to *nritya* that now allows generations to take up dance as a profession with pride and to dream of a bright, passionate future.



PHOTO: STAR



# Lost in Translation

## The perception of Tagore in the West

ROBINA RASHID BHUIYAN

Last year, Chinese writer Feng Tang became the centre of controversy as his translation of Tagore's poems, collectively published in a volume titled *Stray Birds*, raised an uproar that culminated in it being pulled from the shelves. Deemed too vulgar, the writer staunchly defended his stance stating "Most Chinese grew up thinking Tagore was mild and romantic, all stars, gardens and flowers. So with my translation, many people felt like their Tagore had been challenged." The issue raised pertinent questions, one being of authorship authority and the creative freedom translators can be accorded, and the impact translated works had on Tagore's marketability outside the subcontinent.

Tagore's indomitability in the Bangalee cultural scene owes to his unfading relevance, as well as the progressiveness of his works and his activism surrounding nationalism and educational reforms. However, in the West, Tagore's image has been boxed; a romantic ascetic who gave new hope to a modern civilisation in the destructive wake of the First World War. The West's induction to Tagore came with the publication of *Gitanjali*, or *Song Offerings*, which put him at the centre of the literary hub of the 1920s. "*Gitanjali* was a book about a deeper communion with God or a super soul without naming God in any denomination. The world was in deep turmoil -- there had been the Crimean War in 1853, followed by the Serbo-Bulgarian War, the Boer War in South Africa, tensions in the Balkans, and the Irish Civil War which was brewing. All of these circumstances made clear that the world was a very dangerous place to be in, and mankind was renouncing their Biblical commitment...*Gitanjali* was the spiritual respite from the Western suffering," said Syed Manzoorul Islam.

The West's obsession with *Gitanjali* blinded them from Tagore's other works, which were ironically more in keeping with the Western modern ideologies prevalent at the time, refuting their acceptance of him as a sage. *Gitanjali* had no sequel, and in 1916 he began a series of lectures surrounding anti-nationalism which made him largely unpopular. By the 1930's, he had completely faded from view.

The Imperialistic attitude towards Tagore and their eventual rejection of him was an extension of their rhetoric of the East, which is shrouded in an oriental mysticism in their literature. The distant projection of the East meant it could never be on par with the West, an ideal that was forcefully reinforced in their regime. Thomas Babington Macaulay's scathing opinion of the inferiority of the East (in his argument in "A Minute on Indian Education") was one of the discussions that led up to the English Education Act of 1835, where he stated, "I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education." Thus it is unsurprising to see today, that while the East has many adaptations of Western literature from Shakespeare to Eugene O'Neill, it is hardly ever the other way round.

Tagore, who was fascinated by the idea of having his works read in English, translated the *Gitanjali* himself, the version that carried over the shores. Bemoaned as a distanced original by Bangla readers, the translation lacked the cultural richness of the original text and was deemed inadequate even in the light of English proficiency. However, the translation resulted in bold experimentations in subsequent times, resulting in alterations of the original text that was happily encouraged by the Bard.

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