

Anisur Rahman can still cast Spells

Shahnoor Wahid

The Star, 20 March 2009

Droplets of golden rays of the early morning sun found their way through the leaves and entered his famished soul as he raised his deep voice to its crescendo. Nature held its breath, birds stopped chirping and flowers blossomed in haste. The rays of the sun, rabi rashmi, filled his soul to its brim and it was hungry no more. He came out of the trance, looked around, and then slowly walked into the mist that had gathered yonder to hear his voice. It was magical. And the surreal ambience was created in a city park by Anisur



Rahman, an exponent of Tagore songs.

The above scene is only one of the many in the documentary film titled “Bhuban Bhora Shur” (Melodies of the Soul) made on him.

Shabnam Ferdousi has made Bhuban Bhora Shur from her heart. It was intense passion that inspired Meghna Guha Thakurata and Shipra Bose to produce the 56-minute documentary film, a project that ended in December 2008. They have plans to release a DVD of the documentary on Pahela Baishakh this year.

I went to the screening of the film with a bit of reluctance as I am more used to listening to Rabindrashangeet by renowned artistes in live performances. But five minutes into the documentary I sat up straight with my eyes and ears totally tuned to every scene that flashed by and every word that was spoken. There was no way one could wander away because Anisur Rahman was already in control of the show. And a little while later, I felt as if the script was following him and not him following the script. His gentle countenance, his eloquence and his graceful manner combined with his unique vocal cadence created an aura of authority that kept the audience seated until the end.

The film helped one to take a peek at the inner most layers of the mind of an unusual man and attempt to understand his ideas, his ideology, his philosophy and his pain and passion. The film was about the never-ending journey of a maverick through the catacomb of lyrics, tune and raagas of Tagore songs that have captivated his heart and soul. The film depicted in words and images this man's quest for reaching the final destination, home, which often reminded one of the sojourns of Odysseus to reach his home. But the earthly abode was not what was meant by home for Anisur Rahman.

Throughout the film, Anisur Rahman's deep and melodious voice highlighted the finer details of the songs with enviable ease and elegant poise. Enamoured as he was, the exponent sang the mystical songs of Tagore that told tales of man and nature, of man and woman, and of worldliness and asceticism. Through the rendition of the cascading

melodies, he often lost touch with reality and the spell was broken when he was asked more questions.

Often in the film, while explaining some nuances of a song, or a raaga, or a taal, the singer would burst out in laughter, almost in a childlike glee, at rediscovering something extraordinary. Often he would cut jokes or make light of an earthly distress, but even beyond the serene smile one almost discovered the faded flicker of loneliness in his eyes, as he looked out the window at the approaching dusk. He sang out loud to conquer the engulfing silence.

Then as suddenly he would return to reality and talk about Tagore. In his own words: “I tried to understand Rabindranath from different angles, especially the philosophy of his songs. It's not easy, and I'm not sure if I can make you understand. The way I see it: songs are more than a blend of melody, rhythm and tempo.

Rabindranath also sees it like this. Melody, rhythm, tempo they are only the means. Rabindranath says, 'A song is a pathway to transcendence.' A song flows towards transcendence.

But at the same time it is rooted in reality, in consciousness. From this inner tension the song strives towards transcendence.

And a state of discord results. It cannot move away from the real. But there is that pull of transcendence. This tensile state gives birth to a pain. It doesn't want to depart, but still it needs to. Rabindranath terms this pain as the melancholia of songs. My conception is: this melancholia is the essence of songs the real song.”

How did Anisur Rahman interpret Tagore songs where the lyrics and the melody often competed to excel over one another? To this he says, “Words and melody should bond, as if they are made for each other. As if they are dancing together in a Ball dance. From the perspective of the audience, each may come in view sometimes one is more prominent than the other. But both, by turns, come into view. Similarly, the melody sometimes grows prominent; sometimes it's the lyrics. But it is an integral part of the pair's dancing. Sometimes one comes more in focus, sometimes the other. But both of them, together, are one. Neither is greater than the other. Both are engaged in expressing one another.

Will not a marriage like this be ideal?
Rabindranath, thus, terms the union of lyrics and melody as an 'Ideal Marriage'.”

Anisur Rahman himself said in one of his memoirs that he was not a professional Rabindrashangeet singer. He sang purely for his own rapture, for his own ecstasy, and



then for those who might like to hear him sing. Some of his friends often organised ghoroa ashors where he would sing in his immaculate voice that was not bound by the rigours of any particular gharana. And he would sing with great passion that surged from deep within. The interesting part of the story is he would sing only with the accompaniment of a traditional harmonium, never showing much interest in having tabla to provide the taal.

In one such ashor in a friend's house back in 1997, one of the distinguished guests present was the then High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh Dev Mukherjee. When he had finished, Mukherjee came up to him and praised his style of singing Tagore song. Dev Mukherjee later invited him to sing at Rabindra Sadan in Kolkata on the occasion of 25 Baishakh, which fell on May 11, that year. The programme was organised by the ministry of cultural affairs of the government of West Bengal. Anisur Rahman was taken by surprise at the offer. Firstly, he was not a professional singer and secondly it was a big stage where only renowned exponents of Tagore songs of both Bangladesh and India were invited. Then, another surprise. He was also requested by the ministry to sing at Girish Moncho (stage) the next day. Anisur Rahman candidly wrote in his memoirs that it was good enough to make him nervous because he sang with the help of a harmonium only and not with many instruments as is done by professional singers on such stages. He went to famous Tagore song exponent Kalim Sharafi to seek his advice. Kalim Sharafi told him to sing in his natural way, the way he always did, and not to change his style. That day, on May 11, 1997, at Rabindra Sadan, Anisur Rahman sang in his own blithe way the popular Tagore number “Badhu Michchey Raag Korona...” In the pin drop silence, the melody emanating flawlessly from his sweet yet mature voice reverberated in the large hall room, taking everyone to a kalpolok that Tagore spoke of so often in his poetry and songs. The magical spell was cast.

The following day, Anisur Rahman sang at Girish Moncho but this time he allowed music hands to play only esraz and mondira. He did not allow tabla to accompany his songs.

On both the stages he had to sing “Ekoda Tumi Priye...” more than once along with other popular numbers like Tumi Kemon Korey Gaan Koro Hey Guni...”

It appears that the critics in Kolkata have been impressed too by his performance at Rabindra Sadan as can be understood from the following review that came out in The Statesman newspaper on 18 July:

“Anisur Rahman's discipline is economics but his passion is Rabindrasangeet. It has dominated his thoughts in a way that is rare even among practitioners of Rabindrasangeet...His unpretentious style moved the audience who encored him vociferously. His “Saghono gahono ratri” and “Eshechile tobu asho nai” were warm and intimate.”

Anisur Rahman was born in 1933 and educated in Dhaka and Harvard University. He taught in Dhaka and Islamabad University. After the birth of Bangladesh, he worked in the first Planning Commission of Bangladesh, and later joined ILO in Geneva.

When someone sings from the heart perhaps the song finds its truest expression and connotation. This is where understanding the philosophy of the poet composer comes to play a part. Through years of extensive study of Rabindrashangeet and Tagore's philosophy of the purpose of life, of birth and death, of love and lovelessness, of ecstasy and distress and of the bonding with nature, Anisur Rahman has also developed his own philosophy about nature and about human life overwhelmed with so much of mystery and ambiguity. At one point the two philosophies blend, and the union only increases his thirst to know the poet, the composer, the singer, and the mystic better. He pushes on like Odysseus for the elusive shore - towards his home in the mystical realm.