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## Lady Rabindra-Sangeet Artistes In Calcutta During Lifetime Of Tagore

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**Abstract:** Here we consider the female artistes in Calcutta *during the life time of Tagore* only not belonging to Tagore family who practiced Rabindra-sangeet but were never trained in music at Sangit Bhavana, Santiniketan. The contributions of these female artistes are not only pioneering but also a step further to the 'gender equality' and 'female empowerment'. Many of these female artistes are forgotten now and some others never published any records, whereas some published records are not available in the market except in some personal collections.

**Key words:** Rabindra-sangeet, Female artistes, Calcutta, Lifetime of Tagore

### Introduction:

It is no doubt that Thakur Bari was the cultural epicentre in Bengal but the word 'Rabindra sangeet' was totally absent then. Struggle of many male and female artistes acted as catalyst to transform songs written by Rabindranath from 'Rabi-Babur Gan' to 'Rabindra Sangeet'. As practising music was totally banned then for females of decent families so the role of these females during life time of Tagore is most important to propagate songs written by Tagore and its transformation to 'Rabindra-sangeet' from 'Rabi-Babur Gan'. We want to make a document of the role of these ladies in the history of Rabindra-sangeet.

### Ladies who have done pioneering work to make Rabindra-sangeet became famous:

During transformation period of songs written by Tagore from "Rabi-Babur Gaan" to "Rabindra-sangeet" a lot of ladies in Calcutta loved songs, learned it and practised it. Most of the ladies are forgotten and there are no traces of them in the history Rabindra-sangeet as available now. In those days it was totally banned for ladies of decent families to learn and practise music in any form. Even ladies listening to music was looked down upon by society in general and was considered as punishable crime. Only some Vaishnavi and some women of lower cast who practised KABI GAAN, KHAMTA, JHUMUR for earning their livelihood had access to the zenana to sing before the ladies confined there. But Tagore family of Jorasanko was quite opposite to the contemporary social trend and ladies of this family had complete freedom to practise literature and music. So, it is a very courageous step taken by ladies of decent families to learn and practice songs, especially those written by Rabindranath, quite unknown then in the literary world. It must be mentioned here that all the ladies who practised Rabindra-sangeet were associated with the members of the Tagore family and practised Rabindra-sangeet in one or other family-programmes. Protiva Devi (1865-1922) daughter of Hemendra Nath Tagore (1844-1884), the third elder brother of Rabindranath established a music school named "Sangeet-Sangha" in 1923 in her own house which opened wide scope for ladies to learn vocal and instrumental music. This institute used to organise time to time different functions and gave opportunities to try musical expertise of the students.

For paucity of space, in this paper we try to make only an outline of life and practice of Tagore's songs by ladies in Calcutta. For details, please see the Ph. D thesis of the author [1].

**Amala Das** (1877-1919): Sister of *Deshbandhu* C.R. Das and friend of Mrinalini Devi (wife of the poet) and Indira Devi a member of Tagore family. She used to sing in the family musical party and even on boat ride over the river Padma, when Rabindranath used to go to Shilaidaha, now in Bangladesh where he had zamindari. Rabindranath being impressed by her sweet voice, introduced her to the family music teacher Radhikaprosad Goswami to learn Hindustani music and she took full advantage of it. Amala Devi, a lifelong bachelor was the first lady from a decent family who dared to record songs written by Tagore when Baijis or the professional singers usually recorded songs. Amala Das, recorded about 60 songs of Tagore, died at 42 years only and the Poet lost a reliable voice for his songs. Amala Devi impressed everybody when she sang 'Vande Mataram' in the 1917 Congress party session held in Calcutta.

**Sahana Devi** (1897-1990): Nick name Jhunnu was nephew of C. R. Das. After the death of her father when she was only one and half years old, made her family take shelter in her uncle's house where she got accompany of aunt Amala Das. She had a sweet natural voice like her aunt since her birth. Aunt Amala devi introduced her to Rabindranath and the Poet was so impressed listening his songs by the little Sahana that he made arrangements for her to learn classical music from famous music guru of Bishnupur Surendranath Bandopadhyay. She took part in many musical programmes and musical dramas in Calcutta and visited Santiniketan several times. After her marriage when she was living in Kashi of Odisha, Tagore took hospitality of Maharaj of Kashi and he taught there Sahana Devi several songs written by him. [2] Sahana Devi had sufficient expertise in *kirtan*<sup>1</sup>. Sahana Devi took lessons in music from her cousin famous Atul Prasad Sen<sup>2</sup> when staying in Lucknow, where she had the opportunity to sing before Pt. Bhatkhande Ji. She earned praise singing Hindustani Vocal in the music sessions of Ostad Chandan Choubey and Srikrishna Ratan Jhankar. Last a few years of Sahana Devi passed in Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry and died there at the age of 93 years.

**Sati Devi** (1911-1997): Born in the famous Das family, she was sibling sister of Basanti Devi wife of C.R. Das and daughter of Barrister Charu Chandra Das who was not only an appreciator of music but a good singer also. Famous Atul Prasad Sen was her uncle, and Amala Das and Sahana Devi was her aunts. Born in such a musically charged family she earned expertise in Classical, Vocal and Bengali Raga music very soon. Sati Devi first seen and got introduced with Tagore in 1926 when musical drama "*Mayar Khela*" was staged in which she took part. Sati Devi impressed Tagore by her sweet voice she took lessons on Rabindra-sangeet from Tagore himself and Dinendranath Tagore whenever they were available in Jorasanko. She came to the world of recording by singing a Rabindra-sangeet "*Hey Khaniker Atithi*" and later recorded many songs of different types viz. 15 songs of Himanshu Dutta, songs of Atul Prasad Sen, together with bhajans of Mira and Kabir. Sita Devi even did play-back for Kanan Devi in Bengali cinema. During that time, she used to sing inaugural song in the session of congress every year, and even went to Gaya for the purpose. She took part in a chorus song together with Malati Ghoshal, Amiya Tagore, Menaka Tagore, and Amita Tagore to celebrate the birth anniversary of Tagore (Fig.11). She established a music school named '*Surobitaan*' and taught music in Presidency school, Kamala Girl's School etc. Later she taught at 'Indian Cultural Centre' of Uday Shankar and was a regular singer in different Radio Centres. She entered the Bombay Film industry doing play-back and later did acting also.

**Suprabha Das (Roy)** (1892-1960) Nick name Tulu, was another bright female member of the famous Das family. She was aunt of Sati Devi. Suprabha was married to Sukumar in 1913, eldest son of Upendra Kishor Raychaudhuri an eminent Brahma<sup>3</sup> and close friend of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore himself was present in this marriage ceremony. In 1921 Suprabha gave birth to a son later who became a famous cinematographer and film director Satyajit Ray. Suprabha went to Santiniketan with four-month-old little Satyajit and Tagore wrote for her many songs in an exercise book. She had a very sweet voice and visited Santiniketan in almost every occasion. In 1918 she sang a chorus Rabindra-sangeet (in Santiniketan) with Tagore himself and others to observe birth anniversary of Rabindranath. Satyajit Ray in his memories

<sup>1</sup>It is a type of song to praise God. Gita Govinda (Gitagovindam in Sanskrit) by 12<sup>th</sup> century poet Jayadeva of Kenduli, Birbhum, West Bengal is considered as the source of kirtan in Hinduism. There are different types of kirtans in Hinduism viz. Lila Kirtan, Padaboli Kirtan etc. It is also very famous in Sikhism and got special identity as Sikh-kirtan.

<sup>2</sup>A Bengali composer, lyricist and singer, also a famous lawyer and philanthropist (1871-1934)

<sup>3</sup>A Hindu monotheistic group called Brahma Sabha founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828 in Calcutta and the members are called Brahma. Many eminent persons in Calcutta were its follower including the Tagore's. It was renamed as Brahma-Samaj in the year 1830.

[3] reminisced her mother singing aloud alone in full moon night at Khoai<sup>4</sup> in Santiniketan. She also attended different programmes and meetings of Brahma-Samaj with other ladies. She learned music from her cousin Atul Prasad Sen in Lucknow. She was an adept singer not only in Rabindra-Sangeet but also in songs of Atulprasad, Himangshu Dutta and Brahma-sangeet. Only one song, a famous Brahma-sangeet written by her father-in-law was recorded by her in chorus with Bijoya Das and others. She lost her husband in 1923 when Satyajit was two and half years old then shifted to her brothers and took job in a school. During this time, she often visited Santiniketan seeking peace which she got in Rabindra-sangeet.

**Kanak Das** (1903-1988) another member of famous Das family. Her mother Sarala Devi was a good singer and Kanak took her first lessons from her mother. She was introduced to Tagore by Sahana Devi, her cousin, in Thakur Bari and there she sang for Rabindranath. After that she started learning Rabindra-sangeet and acting in Tagore house. She sang '*Ashroovora Bedona*' in the first celebration of '*Barshamangal*'<sup>5</sup> in Jorasanko Thakur Bari. Kanak Das took lessons in classical music from many stalwarts of that time and learned Rabindra-sangeet from Tagore himself, Dinendranath Tagore<sup>6</sup>, and Shailajaranjan Majumdar<sup>7</sup>. In 1927 her first record was published with two songs '*Danrie Aacho Tumi Amar*' and '*Kobe Tumi Asbe Bole*'. Her total numbers of published records of Rabindra sangeet are sixty-four only. It should be remembered that at that time the term 'Rabindra-sangeet' was not used but it was called as 'Rabi Babur Gan' and the songs written by Tagore were popular only in sphere of Brahma-Samaj. She also recorded songs written by other writers but stopped singing totally after the death of her husband in 1962 however continued to serve '*Gitabitan*'<sup>8</sup> as its principal, for more than three decades.

**Bijoya Das (Ray)** (1917-2015) nick name Manku was youngest sibling sister of Sati Devi. As she studied in a convent in Patna, she was proficient in western music and playing piano. She learned Indian classical, Rabina-sangeet, Dwijendra-Giti<sup>9</sup> and proficient in all branches of music, acted in two movies. She performed Rabindra-sangeet since very tender age in different occasions in Calcutta and Santiniketan. Bijoya Das never recorded solo Rabindra sangeet during life time of Tagore but recorded a chorus with Indulekha Ghosh and others a Rabindra Sangeet '*Aaloker Ei Jharna Dharay*'. In 1949 she married her first cousin Satyajit Ray, a long-time fiancé. Her daughter in law Lalita informed in a telephonic interview that Satyajit used to take help from Bijoya whenever he forgot tunes of songs. During shooting of '*Charulata*' Satyajit sent a recoded song by Bijoya to Kishor Kumar so that Kishor Kumar can have a firsthand knowledge of the style of singing Rabindra sangeet. In tender age she was introduced to Dilip Kumar Roy<sup>10</sup> by her aunt Sahana Devi and she mesmerized the audience many times singing with Dilip Kumar in musical programmes. She always tried to keep a low profile and died on 2<sup>nd</sup> June in 2015.

**Malati Ghoshal** (1902-1984): was a rare talent who recorded only four Rabindra sangeet out of which only two were during the life time of Tagore and earned a historical fame. The two Rabindra-sangeets she recorded in 1940: '*Hridayasona Purna Holo*' and '*Ke Bosile Aji Hridayasone*'. Her father was an industrialist, had many factories one of which was of native gramophone. So many professional singers used to come to meet him for recording of songs and young Malati got the opportunity to learn from them. She started learning song in her adolescent period in Brahma Balika Vidyalaya with Amala Devi. Later she got training in classical music, tappa, thumri, and Rabindra-sangeet. On request of Tagore himself she sang several songs at the marriage ceremony of Meera<sup>11</sup>. She never hesitated to sing in public, especially in programmes of Brahma-Samaj. But her mother Mrinalini Devi was very conservative though she was a highly qualified lady but not wanted her daughter to perform in public. So, she not allowed Malati to sing in

<sup>4</sup> A canyon like terrain is created by wind and water erosion in some parts of west Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand. The soil is predominantly of lateritic type supporting only a special type of plant. Khoai in Santiniken is described in writings of Tagore and now has become a special attraction point of tourists.

<sup>5</sup> In Santiniketan arrival of monsoon is celebrated every year in 15 June by dance, drama, songs and reciting poems. It is called *Barshamangal*

<sup>6</sup> Known also as Dinu Thakur (1882-1935), eldest brother of Rabindranath Tagore was well trained in Hindustani classical music. An authority of Rabindra-sangeet himself a musician and poet he served as Principal of Sangit Bhavana from its opening years. It is Dinu thakur who used first used the word Rabindra Sangeet and prepared notations of the tunes of many Rabindra sangeet.

<sup>7</sup> He was a distinguished practitioner and teacher of Rabindra sangeet (1900-1992). After Dinu Thakur he was appointed as Principal of Sangit Bhavana and made notations of about 150 Rabindra sangeet.

<sup>8</sup> A school named after a book by Tagore offers mainly Rabindra sangeet among others. It is still running in south Calcutta.

<sup>9</sup> It is the songs written (and given tune also) by famous Dwijendralal Roy (1864-1913). A playwright and musician who wrote about 500 songs still popular in Bengal

<sup>10</sup> Son of Dwijendralal Roy Dilipkumar (1897-1980) was playwright and musician of grate quality, got *Sangeet Natak Academy Fellowship* in 1965. Romain Rolland in his diary praised Dilipkumar as intelligent man proficient in music.

<sup>11</sup> Daughter of Tagore, Meera (1894-1969) had a painful marriage with Nagendra Nath Ganguli which resulted in separation in the 1920s.

birth anniversary of Tagore though invitation came from Tagore himself. Anadi Dastidar<sup>12</sup> several times wanted to record Rabindra-sangeet by Malati Devi but her mother never allowed it. She started singing on the radio since 1943, refused the offer by gramophone company to record Rabindra-sangeet during this time. P. C. Mohalanobis<sup>13</sup> offered her to visit London to celebrate birth centenary of Tagore but she denied complying. In 1935 she was married to Susanta Ghoshal, a music lover. In 1980 during Shraddha ceremony of her father, she promptly corrected the tune of a Brohmo sangeet when the singers felt it difficult to sing it properly. Former principal of Sangit Bhavana Lt. Arupratan Bandyopadhyay informed in an interview that he got acquainted with Malati Devi, of the age of his father in a programme of Brahma-Samaj. Upendrakishor Raychaudhuri, grandfather of Satyajit was maternal uncle of Malati Devi. Instead of being much older she never hesitated to sing duets with Arupratan and performed in many occasions. Mrs Alok Mitra, only daughter of Malati Devi informed in a telephonic interview that her mother served as prominent member of Visva-Bharati Music Board. Alok Mitra also informed that she recorded in house two Rabindra sangeets with her mother but the record is damaged now. Malati had three other sisters, **Amala Basu**, **Sugata Choudhuri** (third sister) and **Danu** (nick name of youngest sister) were regular singers at the events of Brahma-Samaj. No further information is available about them.

**Kumudini Mitra (Basu)** (1878-1943) was elder daughter of Krishnakumar Mitra<sup>14</sup> was a famous writer and wrote many books. She was a regular singer in Brahma-Samaj where Rabi Babur Gan were sung. She had a bright academic carrier and got gold medals for becoming first in B.A. examination in Calcutta University. She was editor of two literary journals in Bengali '*Suprova*' and '*Bangalakshmi*'. She organised a movement in 1921 for voting rights of women.

**Basanti Mitra (Chakraborty)** (1884-1965) sister of Kumudini also got gold medal for becoming first in B.A. examination from Calcutta university. She came to limelight singing Swadeshi songs during Bengal secession movement. In 1909/1910 Ramsay MacDonald visited India with his wife. They took hospitality with many eminent persons in Calcutta and got introduced to Rabi Babur Gan in programmes held to honour them. Mr. Ramsay in his remembrance praised the songs sung by Kumudini and Basanti Devi in a steamer party [4]. Not only in Calcutta, the two sisters even went to Santiniketan and sung Rabindra sangeet there at many occasions.

**Amiya Roy (Tagore)** (1908-1986): like others ladies who were married to Tagore family she very easily adapted to the cultural mainstream of the family as she was acquainted with music since her childhood. Both her mother and father sides were serious practitioners of music and she started learning music from her father. In Lucknow she learned ghazal, tappa and thumri and then learned classical music from different teachers. Long before being married to Tagore family, she used to learn music in 'Sangeet Sangha, together with a friend in Tagore family and often visited them. Amiya learned songs directly from Tagore and performed in different occasions in Jorasanko Thakur Bari. She learned acting also directly from Tagore himself and acted in many occasions. Both singing and acting continued even after her marriage. Such a talented lady recorded only two Rabindra sangeets, published after the death of Tagore but the process and rehearsal started during Tagore was alive under the direction Sailaja Ranjan Majumdar.

**Bina Home** (1901-1997) sister of Amol and Ajay<sup>15</sup> never performed in open audience but used to sing Rabindra sangeet in closed doors in presence of known people. Bina Devi often visited Thakur Bari where she got introduced with many eminent persons. Malavika Sarkar, daughter of Bina Devi informed in an interview that Bina used to teach her Rabindra-sangeet at her childhood and she had seen her mother to sing Rabindra sangeet in many family programmes with Kanak Das.

**Shanta Chattopadhyay:** (1893-1984) got '*Padmabati*' gold medal for getting highest marks among girls in B.A. examination from Bethune college, Calcutta University. In 1917 her father Ramananda Chattopadhyay a great fan and friend of Rabindranath, came to live in Santiniketan together with his family and Shanta got opportunity to learn Rabindra-sangeet from many stalwarts there. This period was the initial period of Santiniketan and Tagore performed with a few students, drama, dance-drama, etc. Music was the soul of Santiniketan and everybody wear eager to enjoy new songs from Tagore himself, especially during

<sup>12</sup> Anadi Kumar Dastidar a prominent expert on Rabindranath, came Santiniketan at very tender age, learned songs from Tagore himself, was trainer of Rabindra-Sangeet in gramophone company, directly appointed by Tagore as convener of "*Swaralipi Samiti*".

<sup>13</sup> Prasanta Chandra Mohalanobis (1892-1972) statistician was a famous personality and great fan of Tagore.

<sup>14</sup> Krishnakumar (1852-1936) was a Brahma and freedom fighter. He published a weakly called '*Sanjibani*' to propagate Swadeshi movement. He took a teaching profession which later he quitted to pursue freedom movement.

<sup>15</sup> Amol Home (1893 -1975) a great fan of Tagore was a journalist and literary associated with many journals of that time. He first started observing birth anniversary of Rabindranath by common people. Ajoy Home (1913-1992) a famous cricketer, aviculturist, ornithologist got literary awards Archana award and Rabindra Puraskar by. He wrote many books on birds

rainy season and autumns. From her memories it is known that Tagore was a frequent visitor of their house in Calcutta, she with her sister used to sing chorus with him in many music sessions.

**Sita Chattopadhyay:**(1895-?) younger sister of Shanta was also a graduate and writer. She came into contact with Tagore when her family lived in Santiniketan and learned Rabindra-sangeet from Tagore and others there. Her mnemonic book '*Punyasmrity*' is a documentary of the different activities in Shantiniketan and Calcutta during life time of Tagore.

**Chitrlekha Siddhanta** (1898-1974) was recipient of Padma Bhushan, profound Rabindra-sangeet singer and close of Tagore himself. She recorded two songs during lifetime of Tagore '*Tumi Ki Keboli Chabi*, and '*Nibid Ama-timir Hote*'. She performed solo in '*Barshamangal*', and in '*Basonta*' a dance drama. In the newspaper Indian daily News, the solo singing of Chitrlekha was highly praised.

**Mira Maitra** (?-?): nick name Bubby, Daughter of great eye specialist and surgeon Dwijendranath Maitra was very affectionate to Tagore and used to sing Rabindra-sangeet. She was a vital member of Chorus group in 1921 during observation of '*Barshamangal*' at Thakur Bari, Jorasanko. After her marriage though she moved to other country but she had a regular interaction with Tagore by letters, which are collected in the 17<sup>th</sup> volume of '*Chitipatra*'. It may be noted here that it was her father with whom Y. B. Yeats understood the original meanings of the poems collected in Song of Offerings for which Tagore got Nobel prize, as he was in London and Tagore was not available then in London.



Fig.1: Amala Devi



Fig.2: Sahana Devi



Fig.3: Sati Devi



Fig.4: Kanak Das



Fig.5: Bijoya Roy



Fig.6: Suprabha Roy



Fig.7: Sati Devi



Fig.8: Amiya Roy



Fig.9: Kumudini Basu

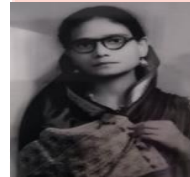


Fig.10: Mamata Saha



Fig.10: Bina Home



Fig.11: (From left) Sati, Malati, Amita, Menaka, Amyia

Fig. 12: Upendra Kishor(centre) family, wife 2<sup>nd</sup> from left & 6 kids

**Conclusion:** We can easily draw the conclusion that during the life time of Tagore many women from decent families outside Tagore family dared to overcome the social barriers and became bold enough to learn singing and practice it. Rabindranath Tagore and his family members supported them in all events and acted as mentor. Thus, Thakur Bari not only propagated women empowerment but also worked to initiate gender equality in the field of music. Thakur Bari was the epicentre of cultural movement and drew many likeminded forward-thinking people, most of them were Brahmas. During that time the songs written by Tagore were known as '*Rabi Babur Gan*' not as '*Rabindra-sangeet*'. So, the practice of song by the ladies discussed above is a bold and effective step to the transformation of songs written by Tagore from '*Rabi Babur Gan*' to '*Rabindra-sangeet*' must demand lot of praise. It is also observed that all the ladies discussed above were somehow connected to the Thakur Bari

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