

Sanjida Khatun: A Valiant Artist

Marzia Rahman

Sanjida Khatun is a renowned cultural figure of Bangladesh. She is a Rabindra Sangeet singer, musicologist, researcher and academic. She was born on April 4, 1933, to parents, Sajeda Khatun and Qazi Motahar Hossain, a noted educationist and author.



Khatun studied at Kamrunnesa School and later was admitted to Eden College in Dhaka. In 1954, she completed her Bachelor's in Bengali from the University of Dhaka. Shortly afterwards, she went to study at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, fulfilling one of her long-harboured wishes. She gained her master's degree in Bangla language from Visva Bharati University in 1955.

Khatun wrote a book about her time in Santiniketan, *Santiniketaner Dinguli*. The book recounts her experiences and the unforgettable years she spent at Visva Bharati in Santiniketan. Khatun fondly remembers waking up to the sound of ringing bells for the morning tea or to join for the morning prayer song. However, she preferred to stay in her room, listening to the songs. She enjoyed afternoon strolls too where many girls from IA and BA classes joined her and they all sang Tagore songs together as they made their way back to Sribhaban. One of Khatun's favourite places in Santiniketan was Uttarayan. It was not restricted in those days and anyone could go there, with a file in their hand. The first time Khatun went to the sitting-room in Udayon, she was thrilled to find a framed poem "Shunno Chouki" put on an armchair there. She sat there and read the poem a couple of times. She often visited Uttarayan and Udayon and the adjacent garden. She was very fortunate to attend the centenary celebrations of Sarat Chandra held in Shamtaber village which she narrates briefly in the book.

Back to her country, Khatun began her professional career in the faculty of the University of Dhaka where she taught Bengali literature. She was appointed as Ahmed Sharif Chair at the same department in 2017.

In the early 1960s, Khatun played a leading role in the observance of Rabindranath Tagore's centenary celebrations at a time when Rabindra music was greatly discouraged in erstwhile East Pakistan by the then Pakistan Government. Later, she formed Chhayanaut and made it an umbrella organization for dancers, singers and musicians. She has been the President of Chhayanaut since 2001. Khatun's enormous contribution in promoting Bengali culture and Rabindra music and ideology in the society in the Pakistan era is undeniable. In the later years, Khatun set up Bratachari Andolon and Jatiya Rabindra Sangeet Sammelan Parishad.

Khatun remained vocal against the oppression of the Pakistan Government during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Together with the late Waheedul Haque, a reputed journalist and Tagore exponent, Khatun founded Mukti Sangrami Shilpi Sangstha, a choir group who through their music worked for the cause of freedom during the nine months of war.

In 1975, Khatun went back to Santiniketan to pursue her Ph.D. She earned her Ph.D. in Bengali language from Visva Bharati University. She received a D. Litt. degree from the same university in 2008. Khatun has spend many years of her life in Santiniketan; a place very close to her heart where she retuned time and again.

Khatun's major publications include *Rabindra Sangeeter Bhabshompod*, *Dhoni theke Kobita*, *Bisshashi Chaya*, *Dhonir Kotha Abritir Kotha*, *Shanskriti Kotha Shahitto Kotha*, *Rabindranather Hate Hat Rekhe*, *My Golden Bangla: Story of the Emergence of Bangladesh*, *Kazi Motahar Hossain*, *Bishobhora Pran*, *Rabindranath O Rabindranath*, *Shritipote Gunijon*, *Jibon Bitto* to name a few.

A recipient of the Bangla Academy Literary Award (1998), her work has been recognised with numerous other prizes. The most notable are the Ekushey Padak (1991), the Sadat

Ali Akhand Award (1998), the Lifetime Achievement Award given by 5th Citycell-Channel I Music Awards (2010) and the Kabi Jasimuddin Award. Her book *Nazrul-Manosh* won her BRAC Bank-Samakal Literature Award in 2011. Khatun has received accolades from India as well. In 1998 she received the Rabindra Award from West Bengal Government.

In 2012, Khatun was honoured with the Deshikottoma by Visva Bharti. She mentions in *Santiniketaner Dinguli* how people both in Bangladesh and Santiniketan rejoiced at the news. She felt extremely happy and honoured to receive the title. She writes explicitly about her feelings in the concluding part of the book:

Jibone amra ja chai, ta shob shomoi pai na. Moner kone ek gopon akhep theke jai. Kintu emon kichu jinish ache, jar akoshik prapti jiboner shomosto khooke shanto kore dite pare. Deshikottom orjon amer jiboner shei porom prapti. Dhonno amer jibon, dhonno ei jormo. Amer cheye beshi khushi ki ei prithivite te keu hote pereche!

[We don't always get what we want in life. Hence, we harbour regrets in our heart. However, there are times when a sudden attainment can calm all the resentments in life. Winning the Deshikottoma title is one such attainment of my life. I feel truly blessed. No one in this world can be happier than me!]

More recently, in 2021, the Indian Government conferred upon her the prestigious Padma Shri award, the fourth highest civilian award in India.

Khatun was married to Wahidul Haq and the couple have three children. She is 88 years of age now and lives in Dhaka. On the occasion of her 87th birth anniversary, a book titled *Boro Bishoi Lage Heri Tomare: Sanjida Khatun Shommomona Sharok Grantha*, co-edited by Abul Ahsan Chowdhuri and Pias Majid, was published. The book is divided into eight sections, featuring writings of sixty noted personalities on the diverse life and works of Sanjida Khatun.

Two quotes from the above-mentioned book are given below:

Shankha Ghosh said: "Music is not Khatun's profession, it's her life, a life that seamlessly blended with the people around her."

Prof Emeritus Anisuzzaman penned: "We must congratulate her for leading a creative life. She will forever live through her work, in the love of her fans. Long live, Sanjida Khatun."

To conclude, we cannot but express our deep appreciation and felicitations for her immense contribution in promoting music and liberal ideals and enriching the culture of the country. Here is a Rabindra Sangeet singer, a valiant woman, who not only practiced music but enlightened people with it and aptly used the medium to fight against repression when and as needed. In Khatun's own words: "Life is a struggle to me. The struggle is for the welfare of mankind...Let us all work together."

