

I tried to figure out the meaning of a poster at my hotel showing a workman animating a wrench as if it were a flute, another strumming on a shovel-made-guitar, and a third singing into a paint roller microphone.

After walking puzzled past this display several times, I asked hotel management what was going on, and discovered that one of the nation's most surprising competitions was underway: a vocal talent tournament sponsored by Shah Cement, featuring construction workers from around Bangladesh.

Next thing I knew, my room was vibrating so hard I thought the hotel was about to take off into orbit. I sniffed out the source of the sound and found the competitors practising. The poetic lyricism flowing from this unlikely source instantly became beguiling.

As I have quickly discovered, Bangladeshis are some of the nicest people in the world. So perhaps it was no surprise that this crowd, who were swapping shovels and wrenches for encounters with harmony, were also delightful. They spoke little English, but were pleasant to be with, and I told hotel staff I wanted to have dinner with them and that I would risk my stomach sharing their spicy Bangladeshi food rather than the Western-style fare the hotel had been cooking up for me!

One thing was clear -- the contestants had quickly become close to each other and were mutually supportive. This was a serious competition, but nobody wanted their brother or sister to lose, and the natural vibrancy of the strong friendship was compelling.



Shamim draws out the greatness of Bengali music

A Musical Construction

JONATHAN RICHMOND

I took a double take. One does not normally expect to see a nice hotel in Gulshan filled with construction workers unless they are laying cement. But these were highly talented artistic people. And they were also delightful human beings. So I decided to follow the action to the Film Development Corporation where the competition was underway. I arrived part-way through a round, so I cannot comment on some of the people I did not hear, but I can say that several of the people I did hear were astonishing.

Aker was the first I heard and also one of the best, his singing clear, controlled and passionate. He had a gripping stage presence as well. He was accompanied at many points by a characterful wooden flute, an instrument capable of being capricious and gentle, dark and sweet, and it was played with complete professionalism.

Adi, also impressive, had a quite different pres-

ence on stage: loaded with raw cheeky energy, he sang with spunk and threw his mini-gorilla body inescapably into the rhythms of his music to keep everyone's attention glued.

And then there was the surprise of surprises, Chaity, a female helping hand in the construction industry with a dynamite voice and Bollywood magnetism! Her punchy sound and larger-than-life body movements clearly won the hearts of all the boys surrounding her, and her fellow competitors ran onto the stage waving and cheering to form an impromptu backing group! And the judges rushed to the stage also, with one of the lady judges restraining the enthusiasm of an overheating Nazrul Sangeet singer and manhandling him back to the judges' stand! Chaity has a magic voice, and I wished she would win a prize.

Shamim sounded like a winner too. His voice was



Lined up for announcement of the winners.



Shah Cement contestants give lively support to one of their friends singing on stage.

a tool of rapturous beauty: he produced a broad palette of sound and sings with great drama, shaping the sound skillfully to convey the mood of the moment. He could broadcast emotion with pure legato, yet he could also become pungent, and he drew out the greatness of the Bangla music he was performing. Shamim was given second place that evening by the judges.

Unfortunately, I did not hear the overall winner of the evening on that occasion due to my late arrival, but I had heard Mosharraf in rehearsal, and his voice was also very special. In his hands, music becomes a powerful language without words. It did not matter that I could not understand Bangla: when I heard him onstage on the top floor of the hotel, I felt every nuance of expression in his song, conveyed with a natural simplicity that only enhanced the great depth of his singing.

Film director Shahid Rayhan is the mastermind behind the competition. He had connections with Shah Cement and persuaded this obviously enlight-

ened company to sponsor the event. I talked to Shahid during a break, and it was clear that he has contributed a labour of love to display the talent of some of the poorest people in the country: to show to them as well as to the world at large that their talent can be rewarded, and that social mobility and success is possible.

In a country filled with the daily tragedy of poverty, there is great need for hope. And such hope can arise from small acts of goodness. We all know that Grameen set in motion the "think small" movement, and has raised from poverty all manner of poor women, enabled to support themselves and also many other new employees as entrepreneurs. In the same spirit, a cement company is celebrating the ordinary souls in their business, and showing they can be taken to heights of greatness. Let us save the greatest cheers for Shah's management.

I haven't been in Bangladesh long, but I sense that amidst all the squalor, chaos and confusion that blights this country, lies a feeling that everyone is ultimately a member of one huge extended family.

Let us see more of the small acts of love shown by Shah Cement to their less fortunate brothers and sisters, and let us hope for many more people to have opportunities small and great, and that together these multiply the likelihood as well as the hope for a better future for Bangladesh.

The semi-final winners, selected subsequent to the round reported here, were: Banas Pati, Estiak, Mohudil, Mosharraf, Shana, and Sumon. All of them showed great passion for Bangladeshi music and taped songs for broadcast on TV over the next several Monday evenings on ATN Bangla at 8:30 pm. At the conclusion of the semi-final, the audience were given Bangladeshi flags for a photo shoot. The flags were collected as we were leaving, but one of the helpers indicated that I should keep mine. I placed it in my shirt pocket so that it would stay close to my heart.

*Photographs by the writer
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