

Life as lore: the art and time of Pratima Barua Pandey

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Pratima Barua Pandey (1934-2002), one of the greatest folk artists that Assam has ever produced, is an interesting phenomenon. She not only helped the revival and consolidation of a folk form facing impending oblivion, but also became the subject of a vibrant contemporary folklore of the times. Her life reflects the various phases of the evolving Assamese identity, and how the folk acted as a syncretic energy in the understanding of the Assamese. Her songs, popularly called the Goalparia Loka geets, are a part of a cultural community, largely the Rajbanshis, who have been historically dispersed around a vast territory including Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Southern Nepal and even Bangladesh. When Pratima Barua picked up the songs, they were seemingly in their last phase of life in public memory, for the history of the land took a sharp turn forcing the communities living in the periphery to abandon their cultural moorings and acquire new identities to conform to the altered geo-political legacy of the colonial times.

Expeditions with her father, Prakritish Barua, in the jungles to catch elephants brought her into close contact with the intimate rhythms of the folk. She had the freedom to move about the jungle, go for game herself at times and listen to the carefree songs and stories of the campers comprising the mahouts, the phandis, and the b orkondaj. They would sing for the whole night the songs of the elephants, the mahouts, their women back home, the women they would come across in the solitude of the jungles and songs of their pain and pathos.

It was also the time when the speakers of Rajbanshis, the major language group speaking the language of these songs, had taken the political strategy of accepting mainstream Assamese language as their mother tongue in Assam. Similarly the Rajbanshis of Coochbehar in West Bengal acquired the dominant Bengali identity thereby relegating their own language to a sub-dialect. As a result, their traditional folk songs also receded from the public sphere into little-known private domains.

Pratima Barua's rendition of folk songs not only revived a folk form but also the language of the erstwhile Goalpara district of Assam, presently comprising the four districts of west Assam, namely Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar and Dhubri. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika made the most significant contribution in bringing Pratima Barua to the fore as an artist of repute in Assam. During his visit to Gauripur in 1955, for the first time, he heard folk songs sung by a young Pratima. He found the songs unique and her voice exceptionally mellifluous. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika returned to Gauripur the very next year, in 1956, with a bigger mission: to include Pratima's songs in his forthcoming Assamese film, *Era Bator Sur* (Songs of the Abandoned Road). The two songs included in the film, *dung nori dung* (a song that was sung by phandis while catching elephants)



The Jacket of a Pratima Barua Album.

and *O birikha simila rè* (a pensive song of a woman's unfulfilled desires), not only foregrounded a young talent, but also a forgotten genre and language. In other parts of Assam, people had the misgiving that the culture of Goalpara was a part of Bengali culture. After having fought a prolonged battle to wrest state language status for Assamese they were apprehensive that their battle for the Assamese language and culture would take a beating.

Nevertheless, Dr. Hazarika shot the Assamese film *Rong Sabujer Gaan* based on the script by Alokesh Barua, son of renowned film maker Pramathesh Barua of Devdas fame and scion of the royal family of Goalpara. In the LP disk of *Mahut Bandhu* Pratima Barua had five solo numbers and one duet with Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. The





Bhupen Hazarika and Pratima Barua

songs that had so far been referred to as *desi* became famous as *Goalparia loka geets* and became cult songs of the oeuvre.

The next big thing to happen was the radio broadcast of Pratima Barua's folksongs. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika took the initiative to broadcast the songs of Pratima Barua in 1961 when they were members in the Programme Advisory Committee of All India Radio, Guwahati. Purushottam Das, who later became an



A young Pratima Barua

eminent cultural figure of Assam, decided to record her songs in the studios of All India Radio, Guwahati. For the people of Goalpara, it was strange to hear the voice of Pratima Barua on air singing the songs traditionally sung by ordinary farmers, maishals and mahouts. The songs were not received easily by sections of Assamese people that had nurtured frenetic Assamese nationalism. They raised strong objections against the broadcasting of Pratima Barua's songs, which they alleged were 'non Assamese' and 'Bengali'. In 1958, she made her debut on the dais of *Gana Mancha*, the left-leaning cultural wing, in Shillong upon the initiative of her father and Bhuban Chandra Prodhan of Golakganj who were the members of the Assam state assembly in Shillong at the time. Later, she was closely associated with the IPTA. She became almost a regular feature at the annual conventions of Assam Sahitya Sabha and the All Assam Students' Union who honoured her with the highest public respect of the organization by declaring her a legendary folk singer.

When she was removed from the life support system in the ICU of GNRC hospital at Guwahati on 26 December, 2002, the whole of Assam deeply felt the void she'd left behind. Normally it takes about five hours by road from Guwahati to Gauripur; that day it took more than twenty hours because all along the road, throughout the night, people were waiting, braving the incessant drizzle, to have one last glimpse of their favourite princess. At Gauripur, a sea of people accompanied her hearse to the cremation ground. Apart from the members of the cultural and cinema fraternity in Assam, ordinary folk from as far as Sikkim, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar in West Bengal, and Bihar joined the last procession of the princess of Gauripur. Pratima Barua Pandey had passed into the realm of the contemporary folklore of Assam.



The Gauripur Rajabari (Palace) where Pratima Barua was born and lived.

Reference

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