

**A Tribute to Professor
Suryya Kumar Bhuyan
- Praphulladatta Goswami**

Suryya Kumar Bhuyan was first of all a poet. Most of his poems were composed in the first two decades of this century and the collection Nirmali was published in 1918. Most of the lyrics and some descriptive poems evince a wide range of themes: concern for nature, love of Assam and its past, a search for the meaning of life, an ambition to work for the glory of Mother Assam. Bhuyan is almost naïve when he declares:

The thought that maddens me
The thought that rouses my heart
The thought that urges my mind for the good of my land,
If that thought of my childhood persists
I will brighten the face of Mother Assam.

- Childhood Thought (1908)

Bhuyan's poetic style is vigorous, almost unconventional and he is not afraid to bend language to suit his purpose. He has written a few of the most dignified poems in the Assamese language. It is not easy to translate a poem like 'My Own Music' where lyricism and reflection blend harmoniously.

These songs I've composed are all futile
My own music does not sound on the vina yet;
I composed so much on sorrow and happiness
And poured them at the feet of the god of my heart...

Out in the distance shines curving
The line where blend heaven and earth,
The moon shines on the sleeping sea,
Listen to the sound of an emotional kiss.
See how the wreath of wave sparkles,
How frequently my heart stirs,
Up above is the music of the stars in unison,
Down on earth is the restless mind of the creatures,
Deep in one's heart burn sparks of fire,
In every corner of the universe is uncontrolled desire...

And there is that inner world
The battle-field of conflicting desires,

And the planets of ideals are circling all the time;
 Today's solution turns into a dispute the day after,
 Who am I ? Wherefrom are you? – disputed eternally,
 Even one's own existence disappears in doubt.
 The one that has created the illusion of birth and death,
 Where is that primal power, the embodiment of joy?
 Schools of philosophy are but a mirage,
 Even in tenets of Vedanta there's ignorance.
 How is it possible for man to penetrate the mystery?
 The more you think the more will be your doubts.

It is a long poem; I have made an attempt to present some extracts in translation. After all his doubts and uncertainties the poet now finds his heart soothed by a new realization.

In nature rings the tune of a great mission,
 It is for this that my heart is pining.
 Where there is the union of mind and universe
 There lies the faith eternal of my life,
 That which is true and beautiful with youth eternal,
 In the breast of that will I make my garden;
 The spring breeze of my heart's aspirations
 Will vibrate the soft strings of my vina.
 The joyous message of the poet is a boon from the gods,
 A prisoner of feelings is the poet, not of rules.

Bhuyan has experimented in various forms of verse, he has even written on the models of medieval Vaisnavite poets, folksongs, English ballads. Some of his long poems have a strong narrative core.

The poet in Bhuyan got submerged in his later activities and his love for his motherland shaped him into a historian. He began his life as a student of English literature, but though his teaching as a professor went on, his mind came to be preoccupied with the unpublished chronicles(Buranji) written during the pre-British period of Assam. He began to collate and edit them, and even translated two of them into English. He gave shape to the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies at Guwahati and with its publications made it well known in India and abroad. The institute was visited by scholars and persons of importance. One day while I was there, in came General Cariappa, tall and spare, and looking like an Englishman.

The corpus of Bhuyan's works is large and diversified. Apart from his verse the early work that gave him considerable prestige was Anandaram Barua (Anundoram Borooh-in-English), the

biography of the great Sanskritist of the nineteenth century. Borooah had been almost forgotten by the Assamese because his Civil Service career was spent in Bengal and he had very little association with his own state. Material for his biography was difficult to obtain. Bhuyan hunted out some of Borooah's publications, met a few of his old teachers and after considerable efforts constructed a biography (1920) which is still the standard one. Biography seems to have been considered a part of his historical studies.

Was it in 1930 that I first met him? His eldest son Parbati Kumar was my classmate in the M.C.M.E. school at Uzan Bazar of this city. We were in Class IV at the time. Once day Parvati took me to his house. I met his parents. Both received me in an affectionate manner. Bhuyan asked me my father's name. I learnt later that Bhuyan and my father were friends and he used to write in the latter's Argha. My father also wrote poetry. At the time of my departure Bhuyan very kindly presented me with two slim books inscribing his name on them ; the books were Jonaki and Chaneki, two series of biographical sketches of outstanding men and women of Assam. Bhuyan much later wrote a lively biography of the Vaishnavite Harihar Vipra.

In 1936 Bhuyan left for England in order to do research on Assam's history. I had just got admitted to Cotton College and on the day the professor was to leave some of us students gathered at this house to offer him our regards. The departure of Bhuyan saddened me a little for he had an endearing personality. He came back after two years with a Ph.D. from London University. He must have gone prepared for the work that he produced (Anglo-Assamese Relations) was good-sized, a few years later London University conferred on his the degree of D.Lit in consideration of his historical activities.

In our B.A. course the university had prescribed two books but we had to choose only one of them. We did not have to study both. One was a novel of Hardy's and the other G.M. Trevelyan's Garibaldi and the Thousand. Bhuyan asked us: "Which book would you prefer?" promptly I replied, "Garibaldi and the Thousand, sir, we read novels all the time." The answer seemed to please the professor and he decided to teach us that striking and well-written book on the Italian Risorgimento.

As a person I never saw Bhuyan losing his temper. He was always kind and forbearing toward his students. After my M.A. I had the opportunity to work in his department as a lecturer. In 1946, I think I wrote an article on Assam Vaishnavism in the Triveni Quarterly published from Masulipatam. Bhuyan happened to read the article somewhere, liked it, and sent me a chit appreciating my effort. It was at his initiative that my Folk-literature of Assam was published from the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.

Bhuyan wrote a lot of essays in English and Assamese, mostly on historical themes. In Assamese he was an excellent writer, idiomatic and often utilizing expressions from the Buranji chronicles, thus giving his prose a peculiar flavour. In Buranjir Bani (The message of History) the essays throw light on aspects of Assam's history and culture that have relevance even at this time. All through, his concern had been to hold up ideals that might inspire his countrymen to greater heights of achievement. It was because of this concern that he wrote two monographs, one Lachit Barphukan and His Times, on a great general, and the other Atan Buragohain and His Times, on an able statesman.

Bhuyan's 'Saraighatar Subachani' is a classic in Assamese, for in this slim volume has been gleaned extracts from the chronicles illustrating aspects of political relation, diplomacy, bravery and

patriotism, dependability in human give and take. These extracts also illustrate that these historical writings contain flashes of poetic beauty, though the prose style is simple and unornamented. To give an example, King Pratap Sinha of the seventeenth century once gave an assurance in such language.

If I build a rampart of earth it will crumble,
 If I build a rampart of wood, it will decay,
 I have built a rampart of my word, it will last forever.

Amusingly, an echo of such a sentiment is found in comparatively modern times in a statement of the American politician Daniel Webster.

If we work upon marble, it will perish; if we work upon
 brass, time will efface it; if we rear temples, they will
 crumble into dust; but if work upon immortal minds, if we
 imbibe them with principles,.... we engrave on those tablets
 something which will brighten to all eternity.

Bhuyan did not write any autobiography but the man comes out in many of his writings. The booklet *The Seven Hindrances* contains reflections on such things as a set aim, distracting factors, inordinate ambition, jealousy and worries. The first paragraph of the book goes like this:

I have often been asked as to what has sustained me in
 my efforts to accomplish my objects carried on in fair
 weather or foul. An inner urge to do my bit to my country, in
 a way congenial to my aptitude and my opportunities, has
 provided me the mainspring of action. Some degree of
 altruism and spiritual mindedness, combined with a
 preference of fundamentals over the superficialities of
 human existence, has come to me from my ancestors, and it
 has given me my stay and my fortitude....

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