

Looking Back : With Dr Bhuyan

By

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I had my first acquaintance with Suryya Kumar Bhuyan through his writings published in the *Uṣā*. He was then a College student. Then in the fifth volume (1915 A.D.) of that journal I noticed the addition of the B.A. Degree to his name.

The *Uṣā* from the third volume carried regularly his poems like 'asamīyā bhāṣār ukti' (The Assamese language speaks), 'navabhāv' (The new thought), 'māṅikcandra baruwā', 'mor janmabhūmi (My motherland), and some short like-sketches of Dwijendralal Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, and some historical pieces such as 'Māṅik Barā', 'Ānandarāmar unnati-kāmanā' (Anandaram's desire for progress), etc. I was very much charmed by all these writings. But I found greater pleasure and delight particularly in his historical accounts such as 'asamar puraṇi burāñji' (the ancient history of Assam), 'āhom rajār maidām' (The mausoleum of the Ahom kings), 'kocar asam-ākramaṇ' (The Koches' Assam invasion), 'jaymatī kūwarī' (Princess Jaymatī), 'tuṅghungīyā phaidar kalaṅka' (The disgrace of the house of the Tuṅghungīās), 'svardageo gadādhara-simha' (King Gadadhara-simha), etc.

The heroic tales and legends of our past very much attracted and thrilled me since my boyhood days. Ever since then I developed the habit of reading historical writings. Naturally, therefore, the historical essays of Bhuyan appealed to me rather strongly. I came to harbour a desire that one day I would meet him and would have with him a very free, frank and intimate conversation on the subject.

In 1916, Bhuyan's father was transferred to, and posted at, Jorhat as Revenue Sheristadar. He put up in a rented house of the late Rai Bahadur Pramadakishor Roy at Dahābarā-Chuk, an important locality of the Jorhat town, then sparsely populated. Our residence was also in the same locality. In those days, the social intercourse among the people of Jorhat was very close and intimate. Soon, my father and Bhuyan's father developed a kind of friendship between them. They paid visits to each other's house particularly on the occasion of festivals and ceremonies.

Suryya Kumar also came to Jorhat to stay with his father. Recently, he had taken his M.A., and almost at the same time he got himself married. Bhuyan, instead of passing his days idly, absorbed himself fully in teaching assignments. For some time, he served in the Jorhat Bezbarua High School and then in the Mission School on temporary basis. Meanwhile, I also had passed the Matriculation Examination. About this time my first book *Bāra Bhūyā* had come out in print. I presented to copy of this book to Bhuyan, who of course, accepted it more seriously than I had ever thought. He wrote and published a review of this tiny book in *The Times of Assam*, March 19, 1916. In those days, Bhuyan had only a few friends at Jorhat. Perhaps this is why he selected me as his pal. I became his regular friend and a constant companion in his evening walks. In Assam, there were very few Master Degree holders in those days. We, therefore, used to hold the M.A.'s in very great respect. Obviously, I also took very much care in my dealings with the new M.A., Bhuyan. But soon, Bhuyan himself demolished that privileged position for himself in relation to me. By his simplicity and liberal attitude, he soon bridged the gulf of age and education which existed between us. Our intimacy and friendship developed day by day, and it lasted till his death.

Jorhat had no parks in those days. We used to frequent a particular spot near the river Bhogdai (Gosānī Uṭowā Ghāṭ), and there we passed our evenings discussing personal and public matters. We really had very happy and fruitful evenings there. How do I still cherish the memories of those evenings !

In course of our conversations, which we now had more frequently, he told me that history, particularly the history of Assam, was his favourite subject. He had already started contributing historical articles to the *Uṣā*. He also told me that this land of Kāmarūpa, that is, Assam, was full of past glories. The history of Assam from the days of Narakūsurā down to 1826 (the year of British occupation of Assam), he told me, would form an important chapter in Indian history and if we could present it to the outside, it would certainly convince other people that the Assamese people could be well compared to the Rājputs and the Marāthās particularly in valour and martial qualities. These ideas became the guiding principles in his life. Due to his constant urgings and efforts, the Government ultimately had to create the Department of Historical and the Antiquarian Studies at Gauhati. He edited and issued quite a large number of chronicles from this Department. He laid particular emphasis on the Āhom period, a period of six hundred years.

Immediately, after passing the M.A. examination, he applied for two posts—Extra Assistant Commissionership and the Lecturership at Cotton College. He told me one evening, “If the Government offers me both the jobs, I will accept the Lecturership. It is only then that I will be able to pursue my studies in history and literature. The *Hākimi* (magistrate’s)

post may bestow on me some honour and dignity, but I will not be able to serve my country." Afterwards, of course, he got the Lecturership at Cotton College.

Later in life we were called to different vocations. I was working in the tea-gardens, and Bhuyan was continuing as Professor in the same College. He, however, never forgot me. He used to send me very regularly the Bulletins issued by the Historical and Antiquarian Department. If somewhere by some chance we met, we could regain our old forms almost instantly.

In 1936 he left for the U.K. and returned in 1938 with a Ph.D. degree in his bag to Gauhati. I sent a congratulatory letter to him from Numaligarh. In reply Bhuyan invited me to spend a couple of days at his Gauhati residence. Very luckily by that time I got my annual leave. I utilised the chance and came to Gauhati to spend some time at Bhuyan's place. Needless to say, I was really charmed by Bhuyan's hospitality. Bhuyan told a lot of things to me about the life and society in the U.K.—the way of living, the sense of punctuality and discipline, the social customs and etiquette, University education, the relation of the teacher and the taught and the preservation of ancient accounts of Assam in the public libraries of Great Britain, etc.

Just a few months back another fine scholar of Assam, Birinchi Kumar Barua, had joined the staff of Cotton College after having left Calcutta University. It was the death anniversary of Mahāpuruṣa Mādhavadeva. Early in the morning, Professor Barua came to meet Dr Bhuyan. Dr Bhuyan introduced me to Barua and the latter requested me to preside over the students' meeting at the Sudmersen Hall. I was taken aback, for I had not yet cultivated the habit of public speaking. The platform was still something of a stranger to me. I told him about my difficulties, threw out a lot of pleas and excuses. But nothing could satisfy Barua. To save my position Dr Bhuyan made a compromise. He told me to accept the chair and taught me the trade secret that a speaker did not require to speak much. My duty, he added, would be to sit tight in the President's chair. Both the Professors thus succeeded in making the conspiracy, and for me there was left no alternative. They in fact, had wanted to make a show of me to the Cottonians, who had not yet seen the man who used to write short stories and dramas residing in some remote and far-off tea-garden. I dressed myself up properly borrowing a *dhuti* and a *celeṅg* from Dr Bhuyan and about 2 P.M. I started for my destination. The trick worked well. I simply passed on my responsibilities to Barua, who creditably carried them out.

I retired from tea-garden services in 1954 and built my house at Jorhat. Thenceforth, whenever Dr Bhuyan came to Jorhat, he paid a visit to my place without fail. He died of a sudden on the 5th July 1964. A

year before we had a meeting, but I did not unfortunately apprehend that it was to be our last.

Many are the bits of reminiscences that rush to my mind at the moment. Dearly did we love this man and scholar, who was never bereft of his humility and simplicity. And I do hope that the nation will never forget his great contributions to the study of the history, particularly, that of north-eastern India.