

Essentially Speaking

**BIOGRAPHICAL
SNAPSHOTS**



Munin Barkotoki

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Biographical Snapshots

Munin Barkotoki

Edited by
Meenaxi Barkataki
Stuti Goswami



Gauhati University

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Gauhati University

FOREWORD

In forms that encapsulate the dimensions of what he saw and envisaged as the epitome of the portraits he sketched through his words, Munin Barkotoki captured the essence of his subjects. And to engage with subjects—I am using the metaphor from painting here—of such varied hues and with such focussed but consistent attention speaks of mind that is both critically and creatively alert, simultaneously. Barkotoki was a critic whose readings were never overwhelmed by the sense of ‘critique’, never did he move to accommodate a theory for the sake of buttressing an argument, rather, it was the other way round, his points were placed to drive home the ideas that mattered, and which gelled in with the line he pursued in his readings. In the course of a career that shows his wide reading and eclectic branching across different genres, we see a consistency that layers his critical impulse: this was Barkotoki’s understanding of the context in which his subject was placed and located.

The portraits in this anthology reflect Barkotoki’s wide and extensive reading, but more than that, they present his critical acumen through a variety of registers. Take for instance his reading of Ambikagiri Raichowdhury, aptly christened ‘a living volcano’. For those unaccustomed to the currents of the Assamese nationalist impulse at the beginning of the twentieth century, such an epithet may appear distant from the issue at hand. Yet, it is such an epithet that encapsulates best the moving train of modern Assamese thought,

epitomised here through Raichowdhury's situation as a subject. What Barkotoki does with such ease is a pointer to his inwardness with the circumstances he sought to portray and argue for. There are portraits aplenty, especially when it comes to the chronicling of the historical circumstances in which the forge of Assamese modernity shaped the mind we distinguish as an integral part of our consciousness as a people. Barkotoki's encapsulation of the milieu is one of the driving distinctions in these portraits. His subjects are placed within the specific ambits they come from and relate to, but more than that it is the understanding of the interpenetrative energies that make them what they are which makes these portraits stand out. In his engagement with the figure of Gopinath Bordoloi, there is a clarity of purpose through which Barkotoki enumerates his subject's leadership and personality, but at the same time he does not lose sight of the forces that encompass the 'legend'. This is a stroke that defines Barkotoki's ability to connect to the subject's immediate situation (the legendary dimension of the figure of Bordoloi is a case in point) whereby he is able to look at both the conditions and the person with a just eye. Like a sculptor at work with his chisel, crafting figures from the marble quarry, Barkotoki's choice of subjects showcase his discipline and focus. To carry the metaphor of the artist forward, his choices are reflective of a mind cognizant of the cultural priorities that have shaped us in the modern age. This book, thus, is a repository of the cultural matrices which open up the world we owe our understanding to; it is an engagement with forms of knowing our past through the figurations of those who made telling contributions to our being the people we are today.

The publication of this book will provide access to a critical mind of the first order, one whose thoughts and understanding of culture reverberate through the tropes of our society, tracing the line from a modernity shaping consciousness to an ambient contemporary imperative.

Bibhash Choudhury
Director i/c
Gauhati University Press

PREFACE

This book should have been published more than a couple of years ago. But as is often the fate of such projects, since it was not one person's business in particular it became nobody's business at all. 'Munin Barkotoki's Asomiya is very difficult to understand, let alone translate,' we were told. 'We are doing our best but we need more time.' And so things dragged on till earlier this year (2015) when, having given ourselves the Munin Barkotoki birth centenary year deadline, we decided to kill the earlier project and start a new one.

This book is the outcome of this latter exercise, and has a much happier story to tell. For one, we were lucky to have the services of two very committed, energetic and young literature-enthusiasts, Stuti Goswami and Diganta Oza, to do the initial task of entrusting the translations to not one or two but a larger group of good translators, who could be expected to deliver on time. I still had my doubts, having been bitten hard the first time. But these younger people are amazingly well-networked, and have a different mode of functioning. In the end, this exercise has been a happy discovery of many able young translators (from Asomiya into English) and has given me yet another proof of the maxim that 'things happen when they should, not earlier, not later'.

And as luck would have it, having successfully collaborated with accomplished and widely-read bilingual literary critic and academician

Dr Bibhash Chowdhury earlier this year on yet another birth centenary project, we got him to readily agree to write the Foreword for this volume and discuss the essays contained in it. It was sheer providence that, since Dr Chowdhury is now in charge of the Gauhati University Press, our journey to look for a suitable publisher for this volume also ended at his door.

Stuti Goswami has been the mainstay of this project; besides translating a couple of essays herself she has acted as the interface between the translators and the production team; she has also done most of the polishing and editing of the translations to bring in conformity and uniformity across essays translated by different translators. Besides writing the Foreword, Dr Bibhash Chowdhury has given the essays a final reading, given suggestions for improving the translations, and has helped to put the different pieces together into a coherent and meaningful whole. On behalf of the Trust, I would like to record my thanks and gratitude to all the translators, to Stuti and Diganta, to Bibhash and to the Gauhati University Press, for bringing this project to a successful end in time for the end of birth centenary year event on 18th October 2015.

For me personally, working on this volume has been an act of homage to my father. The exercise of taking a closer look at some of my father's writings has also told me a few more things about him as a person (that he loved asides, *obiter dicta*), as a writer (for example, that he was often inconsistent and contradicted himself in his writing), about the distinctive style of biographical essay writing that he honed over the years, which, according to him,

must delve deeper into the hidden recesses of the subconscious and the unexplored mind... in order to pierce through the curtains. The primary objective of the art of modern biographies is not to impose an exaggerated self-perceived impression (of the person portrayed) upon the reader but to give a jerk to his convictions (p 90, this volume)

and also about the sort of individuals he admired and held in high esteem (for instance, that he liked to write biographies of biographers).

There is a cumulative consistency in all of these; the more I find out about him, the more some aspects of his character get foregrounded, above all his absolute intellectual honesty and integrity, to be seen not only in his writings about what he thought was amiss in the world around him in general but also in his reflexive and frank analysis of his own shortcomings and weaknesses that prevented him from rising up and taking the bull by the horns. For instance, in one of the essays in this volume he says:

I had initially planned to study some of the 'reputed' living and dead people of Assam... unfortunately, owing either to values inherent in my upbringing or my deeply entrenched class-consciousness, I could not expose their weaknesses or hidden truths and pin-point them to society (p 91, this volume)

Reading these essays again in translation has reminded me that these essays are dated, in the sense of language use. That we still bother to publish them today in a new edition is because we believe that the essays are not dated at all, in terms of technique. Furthermore, each of the individuals that these essays focus upon deserve to find a place in the collective memory of our nation.

I do hope that readers of these essays will benefit not only by way of being introduced to some stalwarts and thinkers of modern Assam but also by reading about them in a different style of biographical essay writing, one which goes straight to the essence, to the most important characteristics of the person under discussion, leaves out all the dates and does not bother with chronology, but paints the portrait of the person relative to the focal essence. And finally, by having these essays published in English, we hope that the book will reach many more readers, and help in making Assam and some of her illustrious sons, better known beyond the borders of Assam.

1 Sept. 2015
Volkach, Germany

Meenaxi Barkataki

INTRODUCTION

This volume contains seventeen biographical essays; in each essay Munin Barkotoki offers a portrait of a significant figure who shaped the discourse of Assamese nationalism and identity construction. The lives of these individuals span roughly a century during which they contributed, in different ways, towards Assamese self-assertion and establishing the distinctiveness of Assamese language, literature, and culture. These are our forerunners (rather, some of our forerunners) who have built the foundations on which successive generations have built their edifices, thereby giving rise to the rich legacy we have inherited today. Added to this, the fact that these essays are penned by Munin Barkotoki, one of the masters of Assamese prose, enhances their worth manifold. Almost all the subject personae that Barkotoki has taken up for deliberation are people whom he knew personally, to varying degrees of acquaintance. Thus, here, we virtually have a first-person account of a crucial period in Assamese history when Assam, along with the rest of India, underwent a transition (what Barkotoki would probably like to call 'translation') from a colonized entity to a state in a free nation, witnessing the miasma of partition in the process.

Colonial rule in Assam ushered in radical changes not only in the ways of life of the natives but in its very social fabric. Migration

of different communities to Assam and introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction in schools awakened the native Assamese to the threat to their very existence. At the same time, Western education, exposure to broader national and international currents of thought, and the experience of an urban culture, particularly an urban metropolis that students who went for higher studies confronted (basically in erstwhile Calcutta) were some other factors that contributed to the cultural projects of identity construction, cultural assertion and political representation. This in turn fuelled and were fuelled by the national movement for freedom that was raging across the country and that hadn't left Assam untouched. In the build up to independence too there were several occasions when the Assamese people had to resort to assertion to make themselves heard and understood. In all these, Assamese writers, politicians, and intellectuals played a crucial role and through the selected essays in this volume, this is the trajectory we have sought to etch, in the broader context.

This highlights the relevance of translating these essays to English: not only is this volume aimed at taking Barkotoki's writings to a wider readership, but also to make the younger generations aware of their past. History, sadly, is a much-neglected (overlooked?) subject in Assam. Also in the present times, the younger generations seem unaware of those stalwarts whose contributions not only forged but strengthened the identity of their cultural heritage that they proudly claim to be theirs.

Four essays written in English by Munin Barkotoki have also been included in the volume. These essays have been taken from *A Munin Barkotoki Miscellany*, edited by Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami. This work is a collection of writings by Munin Barkotoki in English, and it was published in 1998. The remaining essays are translated from the Assamese originals. Six of these essays have been taken from *Bismrita Byatikeram* a collection of biographical essays, the only book authored by Munin Barkotoki in his lifetime which won him the Assam Publication Board Award in the year 1983. Five essays have been taken from *Bandita Barenya*, another collection of biographical essays written by Munin Barkotoki and compiled and edited by Dr Sivanath Barman, published in 1995. Two essays have been taken

from *Prasanga Somaluchana*, a collection of reviews and essays written by Munin Barkotoki, edited by Shri Nalinidhar Bhattacharjee and published in 1996. However, for this collection, the translators relied on the versions in *Munin Barkotoki Rasanawoli* or 'The Works of Munin Barkotoki' (with a Preface by Dr Hiren Gohain) published by Publication Board, Assam in the year 2014 to commemorate the birth centenary of Munin Barkotoki. It is, however, regrettable that for an author who stressed on proper editing, typographical accuracy and aesthetic presentation of a book, the *Rasanawoli* falls short by a few notches. This 'Works' that brings together Barkotoki's Assamese writings has a number of printing mistakes, typographical errors besides a poor get up (a considerably unappealing book's cover) among others. Shortcomings that Barkotoki has highlighted in others' books (in essays included in this *Rasanawoli*) have been ironically repeated in his own, that too in an edition that commemorates his birth centenary. We sincerely hope that the subsequent edition of the *Munin Barkotoki Rasanawoli* will address such weaknesses.

The seventeen essays that have been included in this volume reveal a mind enriched with profound reading, a wealth of experience, and an individual with a strong sense of nationalism. Together these essays comprise an intellectual output of a mind that that can be termed critically and creatively active. The style of writing is unique and engaging; sentences are often lengthy and convoluted; *obider dicta* seems to be a favourite. Despite these essays being biographical essays Barkotoki does not seem to pay much heed to the 'biodata' of the individual, something he himself admits to, on more than one occasion. His approach is basically personal and reflective, and the essays are interspersed with remarks or allusions to the current social situation. These essays also reveal a writer with a command over language, a writer with a rich vocabulary in English and Assamese.

The reader will probably notice two 'variations' in the pattern of these essays. Firstly, they are of varying lengths; such that as against an essay like 'The Biographical Writings of Padmanath Gohain Borooah' that extends upto twenty-three pages in this volume, there is one on Amulya Baruah ('Amulya's Precious Memories') that make

up barely five pages. This variation can be seen as a reflection of a mind that is not to be measured by the uniformity in the way the individuals have been represented. The other variation, that I believe, is also concerned with the act of translation of the essays and editorial policy, concerns the title of these essays. Probably owing to the fact that these essays were written at different times and with different objectives (book review or tribute, for instance), Barkotoki has either mentioned the name of the individual concerned (for e.g. 'Lakshminath Bezbaroa' or 'Benudhar Sarma: A Tribute'), or made the title impersonal (for e.g. 'The Imperishable Ember', which is on Mahendra Nath Dekaphukan). This pattern has been retained in the translated versions too. However, for ease of navigation, only the names of the subjects have been mentioned in the Contents. Further, names of individuals have been spelled in a way so as to strike a balance between current usage and certain usages made by Barkotoki in his English essays. Efforts have been made to retain in the translations the essence of Barkotoki's writing style in Assamese. All these can best be termed our efforts at taking the translated essays as close to the original as possible. Particularly in the light of the fact that Barkotoki's English essays, written in lucid prose, have also been incorporated, our efforts at keeping the translated texts as faithful to the original as possible seem justified, irrespective of the possible 'losses' that occur in the translation process.

This project, for us, has been a 'race against time'. When we began in April this year, we knew that this book was to be released on 18 October 2015, and therefore time was not a luxury we could afford. I came on board after the decision of abandoning the earlier project of translating *Bismrita Byatikram* and *Bandita Barenya* in order to bring out a collection of translated essays selected from these books had already been taken. Initially I was given responsibility with Diganta Oza at the helm of affairs and consequently the responsibility of selecting the essays fell on us. Once the essays were decided, the translators (who we had already decided upon) were approached and texts dispatched soon after. Afterwards, Diganta *da*, due to his professional engagements, had to move out of the project. My gratitude to Meenaxi *ba* for goading me on this job. My gratitude to my teacher from the

Department of English, Gauhati University, Dr Bibhash Chowdhury for his words of encouragement, suggestions, and also for agreeing to not only write the Foreword to this book but also look after the publication aspect. The publication of a volume of Munin Barkotoki's essays by Gauhati University Press is something, I am sure, Barkotoki himself would have been happy about, and wherever he is, he must be smiling for sure.

A final word to the reader. This is not simply a commemorative volume. This book is an important part of the narrative that defines who an Assamese is. Today we seem to have wrapped ourselves in a kind of socio-historical amnesia and so we keep fighting among ourselves, forgetting our past. We believe this book would go a long way in reminding us of the efforts of our stalwarts; those forerunners whose sacrifices and endeavours have contributed towards the making of a beautiful and multi-hued Assam which we sadly seem intent on destroying today.

Stuti Goswami

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