

MUNIN BARKOTOKI MISCELLANY



A MUNIN BARKOTOKI MISCELLANY

Edited by :
Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami



BOOK HIVE

A MUNIN BARKOTOKI MISCELLANY —

a collection of articles, reviews, notes and letters by Munin Barkotoki, compiled and edited by Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami
Department of English, Guwahati University

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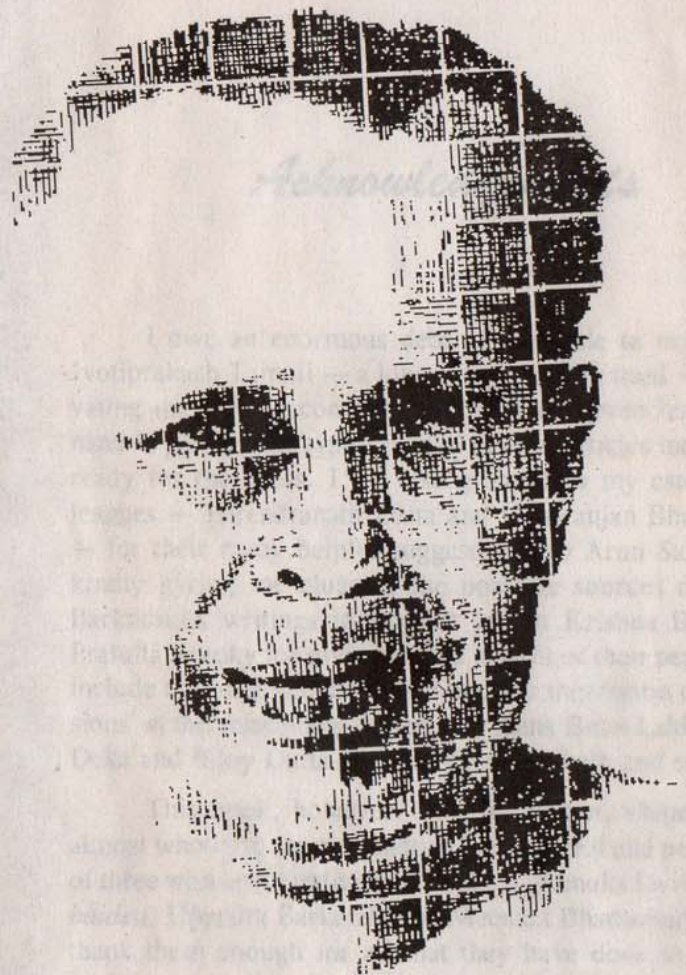
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(1915 - 1993)

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Acknowledgements

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my colleague Jyotiprakash Tamuli — a long-time friend in need — for motivating me duly to complete the work and even lending me a hand in getting the typescripts of several articles included here ready for the press. I am also grateful to my esteemed colleagues — Hirendranath Datta and Usharanjan Bhattacharyya — for their many helpful suggestions, to Arun Sarma for so kindly giving me clues to the possible sources of some of Barkotoki's writings in English and to Krishna Bhuyan and Prafulla Kotoky for giving me the benefit of their permission to include the biographical sketch and the translation of 'Confessions' in this miscellany. I must also thank Biren Lahkar, Nripen Deka and Bijoy Dutta for their generous help and support.

This book, however, owes its origin, shape and form almost wholly to the tremendous creative zeal and perseverance of three wonderful individuals, namely, Renuka Devi Barkotoki *bāideu*, Upendra Barkataki and Meenaxi Bhattacharjee. I can't thank them enough for all that they have done to make this anthology possible

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Transliteration

অ/অ	a	ট/ট	t
আ/আ	ā	ঠ/ঠ	th
ই/ই	i	ড/ড	d
ঐ/ঐ	i	ঢ/ঢ	dh
উ/উ	u	ণ/ণ	n
ঊ/ঊ	ū	ত/ত	t
ঋ/ঋ	r	থ/থ	th
এ/এ	e	দ/দ	d
ঐ/ঐ	ai	ধ/ধ	dh
ও/ও	o	ন/ন	n
ঔ/ঔ	au	প/প	p
ং/ং	m/n	ফ/ফ	ph
ঃ/ঃ	h	ব/ব	b
।/।	-	ভ/ভ	bh
ক/ক	k	ম/ম	m
খ/খ	kh	য/য	y
গ/গ	g	র/র	r
ঘ/ঘ	gh	ল/ল	l
ঙ/ঙ	ñ	ব/ব	v, w
চ/চ	c	শ/শ	ś
ছ/ছ	ch	ষ/ষ	ṣ
জ/জ	j	স/স	s
ঝ/ঝ	jh	হ/হ	h
ঞ/ঞ	ñ	ক্ষ/ক্ষ	kṣ

Foreword

A distinguished mind of our times. Munin Barkotoki (1915-93) was a man of wide-ranging curiosity and exceptionally varied interests. His passions included literature, journalism, theatre, film, music, painting, sports and — of course — politics. Though his literary output was sparse — consisting almost wholly of just twelve stories and sketches, five poems or pastiches, a one-act-play, sundry essays, notes, *belles-lettres*, reviews, letters to the editor and a book of biographical studies (*Bismrita Byatikram*) all published over a long span of six decades — Barkotoki exerted a quiet but effective influence on the literary scene in Assam in his role as a conscientious man of letters open to new ideas and experiments. Deeply contemplative, yet warm-hearted and convivial he lived a rich inner life untainted by any mundane quest for glory, power or profit. A liberal humanist to the core, he steered clear of any doctrinaire ideology but prized freedom and democracy above everything and even fought for them (during the Emergency, 75-77, for example). In many other matters as well Barkotoki was ever a man "of far nobler shape erect and tall... with native Honour clad." And these in themselves would perhaps justify the decision of the Munin Barkotoki Memorial Trust to bring out a selection of his scattered writings in English with a specimen of his Assamese writings in English translation.

Munin Barkotoki was born at Jorhat on the *Kāti-Bihu* day (October 16-17) of the year 1915, the younger son of Raisaheb Durgadhar Barkotoki, then Divisional Inspector of Schools, and Kamalini Devi, daughter of Padmavati Devi Phukanani (1853-1927) whose *Sudharmār Upākhyān* (1884) marks an early phase of the development of Assamese

prose fiction in the nineteenth century. From his mother's side his great grandfather was Anandaram Dhekhiyal Phukan (1829-59), pioneer of the nineteenth century Assamese renaissance, and his great great grandfather Haliram Dhekhiyal Phukan (1802-32), an important custom official at Hadira Choky during the Ahom rule who rose in the esteem of the East India Company officials by virtue of his intimate knowledge of revenue administration and the socio-political history of Assam. David Scott (1786-1831), Agent to the Governor General in the North-Eastern Frontier (1821-31), cultivated his friendship to further British interests in this region. The following excerpts from the reports of the Acting Agent to the Governor-General in North-East India suggests how Haliram impressed the new rulers with his knowledge and enterprise:

[Haliram] stood high in the confidence of Mr. Scott, and is a man of large property and extended information and possesses some literary celebrity — he has visited Bengal and Hindoostan and has paid particular attention to the European system of jurisprudence and forms of Government regarding which he entertains liberal opinions. He also possesses some knowledge of our arts and sciences.[°]

Close on the heels of the expulsion of Burmese troops from Assam, Haliram was appointed a *Sheristadar* in the collectorate of Guwahati in April 1825, and subsequently promoted Assistant Magistrate with a pay of Rs. 230 per month in February 1832, five months before his death. His *Āsām Burāñji* (Part I, 1829) is a political history of Assam in Bengali from the early periods to the beginnings of British rule in this region. Three other sections on general administration, revenue system, topography, social customs of different castes, groups and communities were successively published.^{°°} Haliram also authored a Sanskrit book, *Kāmākhyā Yātra Paddhati* (1831), a comprehensive

[°]Amalendu Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society Polity Economy* (Calcutta, 1991), p 207.

^{°°}Jatindramohan Bhattacharyya (ed), *Āsām Burāñji* by Haliram Dhekhiyal Phukan (Guwahati, 1962).

guide to the holy shrine of Kamakhya. That he made his mark on the contemporary social scene in Calcutta is borne out by several references to his person ('Dheki', 'Dhekhiyal Phukan') or reviews of his books in sections of Calcutta press, Tekchand Thakur's celebrated work *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* and, finally, the moving obituaries in *Samācār Darpan* following his death. Haliram's brother Juggoram Khargharia Phukan (1805-38) was a friend of Raja Rammohan Roy, and was well-known in the intellectual circles of Calcutta in the early nineteenth century. A staunch critic of brahminical orthodoxy, he congratulated the government for enacting a legislation abolishing *Suttee* (*Samācār Darpan*, 9 July, 1831). He knew several languages and delighted, *a la* Young Bengal, in an unconventional life style. Colonel Adam White's *Historical Miscellany*, Vol-I (29), contains the following observations on Juggoram:

He makes no objection to dine with Europeans and eats and drinks freely of what is put before him — beef and veal not excepted... He procures a variety of wines and European delicacies from Calcutta which as a man of large property, independent of his official salary, he can well afford to do, and his house at Gowahatty is amply furnished with chairs, tables, carpets, an organ, art glass lustres and other articles of English furniture. Jaggoo Ram is in every sense of the term a bonvivant.... He was educated at Calcutta and a friend of the late Rammohan Roy.[°]

It was, however, with Anandaram Dhekhiyal Phukan (Haliram's son) that a new era dawned in Assam. A student of the Hindu College, Calcutta, during 1841-44, Anandaram was the first Assamese to bring home to the people of the state the message of the European enlightenment — the sovereign importance of knowledge (*giyān*) as a means to enhance the quality of life, emancipation of the mind from superstitious beliefs and customs and a vision of history as a march

[°]Amalendu Guha, *ibid.*, p. 209

towards progress. While these new ideas virtually reshaped the destiny of our people in the nineteenth century, they also invited the inevitable backlash — however feeble — from an embattled orthodoxy. Nandeeswar Barua (1843-95) was ostracized for marrying Padmavati, daughter of Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan, in 1862. A defiant Nandeeswar dropped his earlier surname 'Barua' and became a 'Phukan' to identify himself more openly with the latter. Nandeeswar Phukan worked at Tezpur, Shillong and Sylhet and retired from government service as a revenue *Sheristadar* before he died at Nagaon in 1895. Kamalini, the eldest of the three children of Nandeeswar and Padmavati, was married to Durgadhar Barkotoki of Jorhat who later became a high official of the education department. They had four children: Premalata (1910-91), Satyendranath (1911-84)^o, Preetilata (1913-97) and Munindranath (1915-93). Premalata was married to Basanta Kumar Barua (1889-1967) of Tezpur. Satyendranath Barkotoki, a brilliant product of the University of Calcutta, later made his mark as a civil servant and writer. From 1955 to 58 he worked as Deputy Secretary General of the International Peace Commission in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). Returning to India in 1958, Satyendranath Barkotoki served as an administrator at Mahe and Pondicherry respectively till 1961, when he was invited by the then Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, to become Commissioner to the Government of Assam (Hills). The last public post he held was the Chairmanship of the Assam Public Service Commission at Shillong (1965-68). *Escapades of a Magistrate* (1961), *Post-Magisterial* (1968), *The Grand Panjandrum*, *Tribal Folk-tales of Assam* (1972), *Tribes of Assam* (1977) and *The Khasis* (1977) are some of his notable publications in English, while his title to fame as a writer in Assamese rests on his biographies of Napoleon (1977) and Hitler (1982), *belles-lettres*, adventure stories and several books for

^o According to a recent article, S.N. Barkotoki was born on 31st July, 1908. — See Angshuman Das, 'Satyendranāth Barkotoki Jivan Āru Sāhitya' in *Jñānapradīpa*, Vol I (1997-98), Dept of Modern Indian Languages, Gauhati University.

children. Durgadhar and Kamalini's third child Preetilata, who studied at the Brahmo Girls' School in Calcutta, was also a very bright student. In 1923, she was married to Nabin Sharma of the Indian Tea Board.

Munin Barkotoki had his early education at Jorhat and Calcutta. His father Durgadhar Barkotoki left government job during the non co-operation movement (1921) and became a publisher. After getting out one or two cantos of the Assamese *Mahābhārat* from Jorhat in 1922-23, he decided to settle in Calcutta with his family to promote his new venture. This also facilitated the education of the two children Satyendranath, then a student of Presidency College, and Munindranath who was admitted to a school called Athenium. They stayed in a rented house near the Science College on the Upper Circular Road (now Acharyya Prafulla Chandra Roy Road), Durgadhar devoting his time and energy to the printing and publication of the other cantos of the Assamese *Mahābhārat*, Ananta Kandali's *Kumar Haran* with an introduction by Banikanta Kakati, Jatindranath Duara's *Omar Tirtha* and a host of other books. In 1929-30 the Barkotokis returned to their Jorhat home and Munindranath got himself admitted into Jorhat Government High School as a student of Class IX.

The next four years (1930-34) found young Munin Barkotoki absorbed in his studies and writing. Preparing himself for the ensuing public examinations (he matriculated from Jorhat Government School in 1932 and passed his Intermediate Arts examination from Jorhat College in 1934), he also started publishing his writings in various Assamese periodicals like *Ghar-Jeuti*, *Āwāhan*, *Bardoicilā* and *Bāhī*. It was in Calcutta that he had developed the habit of haunting public libraries and book-shops. Now he took to more serious reading and widened his range, particularly as a student of the I.A. class at Jorhat College, under the guidance of his teachers. The principal of the College was the legendary K.K. Handiqui (1898-1982) — the polyglot scholar — whose influence pervaded the atmosphere all around.

In 1934 Munin Barkotoki admitted himself into the B.A. class

of Cotton College, Guwahati, taking honours in history. The next year he found himself lending editorial support to Nilamani Phukan (1880-1978) in bringing out the first Assamese daily newspaper *Bātari* from Jorhat. He did not take the B.A. examination of the year 1936 and started wandering over different places aimlessly, reading books and taking notes! Around this time he also taught at Jorhat Polytechnic High School before leaving for Dacca to stay with his elder brother Satyendranath who was posted as a magistrate there. In 1938 he decided to sit for the B.A. examination of the year and returned to Guwahati. Unsure of his success, he dropped honours, took the B.A. (pass) examination instead and left for the Naga Hills (now Nagaland) to seek an opening there.

He taught at Mokukchung for a year in 1938-39 and came back to Jorhat. Results of the B.A. examination were meanwhile announced and Barkotoki was a little surprised to learn that he stood first among the distinguished graduates of the year, winning the Prabhat Kumar Das gold medal. The degree now enabled him to become a subject teacher in the Jorhat Christian Mission School where he worked for a few months at a monthly salary of Rs. 50 before proceeding to Calcutta to be on the editorial staff of *Bāhi*, a literary journal then being launched by Madhav Chandra Bezbaroa. (In fact, this was the third phase of *Bāhi*, the earlier editors being Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Omeo Kumar Das respectively.) He spent a few eventful months in Calcutta, helping Madhav Chandra Bezbaroa bring out the *Bāhi* of his dreams. Barkotoki always loved to recall those early days of the journal when Bezbaroa, with his proverbial capacity for hard work, would enthuse all around him — including even an occasional visitor — to get involved in this new venture. However, he bowed out of *Bāhi* soon following some disagreement with Bezbaroa over his editorial policy. "We agreed to differ", Barkotoki later observed in *Bismrita Byatikram*, summing up a rather unhappy episode.

Periods of drift, punctuated by an occasional attempt or two at taking the M.A. examination in English, followed. Krishna Bhuyan

reports how Munin Barkotoki hired a room in a Sealdah hotel in 1941 with a view to preparing for the M.A. examination of the year and skipped off one afternoon, boarding a train to Guwahati. A couple of years passed in vain before he joined the Shillong office of the defence department as a publicity officer. The security, however, was short-lived and Barkotoki lost his job following the end of the war on 14 August, 1945. He started hunting for a job again and met Radha Gobinda Barua, proprietor of *The Assam Tribune*, who invited him to become a sub-editor of the paper (then a weekly) at Dibrugarh. As this weekly paper was being converted into a daily, the establishment was also being shifted to Guwahati in September 1946. Munin Barkotoki was now on the editorial staff of the daily *Tribune* at Guwahati which started appearing from 30 September. Towards the end of the same year he was back in Shillong again to join the Assam Planning and Rural Development Department as a publication officer. Loneliness coupled with the boredom of official work prompted him to leave the job in August 1947. From 1948 to 71 he worked in various capacities in three different departments: editor and Deputy Director respectively in the publicity department of the Government of Assam; News Editor, All India Radio, Guwahati, and Information Officer in the newly set up Press Information Bureau of India, Guwahati. In 1959 he married Renuka Devi, well-known politician and social worker of the state. Barkotoki retired from government service in 1971, after which he served as a part-time teacher in the Department of Journalism, Gauhati University, for a few years.

Barkotoki published only one book during his life-time — *Bismrita Byatikram* (1981) — a collection of fourteen biographical studies culled largely from the old issues of a now-defunct Assamese bi-weekly *Asam Bātari*. It was Charu Mahanta, the then editor, who persuaded him to write a series of articles on some of the notable personalities of Assam for his bi-weekly. But to get them written was as difficult as to make them ready for the press. Barkotoki's handwriting being barely, if ever, legible, Mahanta made fair copies of all his writings patiently. These were intimate character-sketches of the

following personalities: Nilamani Phukan (1880-1978), Ambikagiri Roychoudhury (1885-1967), Jnananath Bora (1890-1968), Lakshminath Phukan (1897-1975), K.K. Handiqui (1898-1982), Haliram Deka (1901-62), Mahendranath Deka Phukan (1903-73) Harendranath Kalita (1908-73), Bishnuprasad Rabha (1909-69), Phani Sarma (1910-70), Madhav Chandra Bezbaroa (1912-46), Manobhiram Barua (1912-69), Hem Barua (1915-77) and Amulya Barua (1922-46). Among them there was none he did not know intimately and none virtually who did not stir his profound admiration. The literary mode adopted for the purpose being *belles-lettres*, Barkotoki could disclaim all pretensions to a comprehensive, 'scholarly' treatment. The portraits are of varying lengths and the treatment of characters uneven. There are also occasion when one feels that Barkotoki has accommodated far too much of the 'peripheral', resulting in an inevitable loss of focus. What he considered essential for a biographer, he said, was 'empathy' more than any familiarity with mere biographical details (*Bismrita Byatikram*, p 16) and the concomitant difficulties of adhering to such an ideal are apparent in many of the essays, particularly the one on K.K. Handiqui (the longest in the book) which consists solely of impressions and speculations, indicating an unwillingness on the part of the author to come to grips with questions relating to the three celebrated works of Handiqui, namely, *Naiṣadha-carita of Sriharṣa* (1965), *Yasastilaka and Indian Culture* (1968) and *Senubandha* (1976). One finds Barkotoki trying to come to terms with the 'spirit' of Handiqui's scholarship in isolation from his actual works. The essay is about a series of *choices* Handiqui had made in his life — the choice of Oxford more than any other place in Europe, the choice of Modern History, and *not* Sanskrit, as a subject for his Oxford degree and the like. One also wonders if Nirad C. Chaudhuri's Max Müller has not turned here into an 'ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain'. But the book is yet a *tour de force* and Assamese biographical literature would indeed have been poorer without it. Barkotoki has brought into relief certain features of these fourteen 'exceptional' lives which would otherwise have been lost to us. Passages where he has been

able to bring his insider's knowledge of things (the exceptional life of Deka Phukan; Amulya Barua's absorption in the writings of Rimbaud, Aragon, Eliot, Auden, Sudhindranath Dutta and Jibendrananda Das, among others, etc.) to bear on his approach to these lives are not entirely rare and his judgement (as in 'Danariya Assamiya') very often sound. An atmosphere of old world courtesy and charm also pervades this enchanting gallery of portraits. Barkotoki's assumption of culture as a quest for harmonious perfection and his repeated invocation of the 'Oxford' ideals point to his Arnoldian inheritance.

His early Calcutta background apart, Munin Barkotoki was also an inheritor of ideals cherished by his distinguished predecessors, Banikanta Kakati and Krishnakanta Handiqui. In the twenties and the thirties of the century, the idea of what Tagore called 'World Literature' was also slowly gaining ground in Assam thanks to the writings of Kakati and Handiqui published in such Assamese periodicals as *Cetanā*, *Bāhi*, *Milan* and *Āwāhan*. One wonders why, for all his breadth of learning and openness to fresh ideas from the west, Barkotoki was not attracted to a pursuit of that line of enquiry and why he took to literary journalism instead. But readers so long accustomed to the concentrated idiom of Kakati and Handiqui exulted in this new mode and Barkotoki's championing of *belles-lettres* in his 'Confessions', too, found support among his contemporaries. In neighbouring Bengal, literary modernism of the west (*pace* Tagore who had earlier put in a caveat against it) was meanwhile tending to sweep away everything in its path and Barkotoki took upon himself the task of acquainting Assamese readers with its various manifestations. His impatience with the contemporary literary scene in Assam, it is true, had an obvious bearing on his new mission. But what also puzzles the reader now is perhaps his highly ambivalent stance in respect of literary modernism, modernist poetry in particular. He found it difficult to come to terms with the modernist compulsion to liberate the dormant expressive energies of language or the new definition of poetry as "an exploration of the possibilities of language". It was almost with a vengeance that Barkotoki used traditional rhythm and metre, and even rhyme, in his poems and

pastiches of the period 1934-38. He also tended to equate realism in fiction with modernism as such in some of his essays. Small wonder the works of two archetypal modernists in Assamese literature — Ajit Barua (poetry) and Saurabh Kumar Chaliha (short story) — later left him cold. This should, however, in no way detract from Barkotoki's importance as an eminent critical journalist of his time. As a theatre or drama critic he made a lasting impact on the contemporary cultural scene in Assam. In the role of a brilliant conversationalist or a public speaker as well, Barkotoki contributed immensely to the flow of fresh ideas essential to creativity.

Barkotoki developed his interest in theatre quite early in his life. Indeed, theatre was his consuming passion even in his boyhood days and, as Jaineswar Sarma reports,^o the young Barkotoki always made it a point to read through and collect various theatre handbills to know who among the theatre glitterati of those days in Calcutta — Sisir Bhaduri, Ahindra Chaudhury and others — played which role in different theatres of the city. Barkotoki retained his interest in theatre till the end of his life. During the seventies and the eighties he could be easily sited among the spectators at just about every performance of a play in either Rabindra Bhawan or the District Library auditorium. He wrote reviews of some of these productions, or took notice of them in letters published in the correspondence columns of daily and/or weekly press. He showed keen interest in the progress of young playwrights like Arun Sarma, Himen Barthakur, Mahendra Barthakur, Ratna Ojha and Ranjit Sarma among others.

Munin Barkotoki was also well-known for his contribution to the correspondence columns of both local and national press. Indeed, he identified himself as one who belonged to "that much-commissered, much-looked-down-upon tribe of letter writers", saying that he nursed the hope of "coming out with a whole book of rejected letters-to-the-editor" to prove "how arbitrary editors can be

^oUpendra Barkatoki (ed), *Bibhinna Janar Dr̥ṣṭi Munin Barkotoki* (Guwahati, 1994), p 6

in their selection", (*Times Weekly*, 30 January, 1972). One wonders if the bundle of rejected letters has survived yet, but an album of published letters (1971-90) which he had preserved with some care speaks of his amazing range of interests, awareness of the issues of topical importance and an exceptional flair for language. A two-liner in *The Statesman* ('Plan without takers', August 22, 1971) accuses the government of India of trying to convert Assam into "some sort of a federation which can be lorded over... in the name of economic viability and stability." In 'Suicide as Survival' (*The Statesman*, May 23, 1971) Barkotoki has come down heavily on veteran journalist Kuldip Nayar for his suggestion that Congress (O) had virtually no future other than merging its identity with the ruling group. "The party still commands a sizeable following", he observed, "and it can afford to forge ahead as a distinct socialist party, without any nostalgic feeling for the Congress that is no more." Though his hopes were belied by subsequent political developments, his quest for a viable alternative to an oppressive regime has not lost its relevance yet. In 'The Profane turned Sublime' he has congratulated Malcolm Muggeridge for his series of articles on Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity with the following rhetorical flourish: "Who could imagine that this profane journalist of one time would one day flower into such a serene and sublime advocate of 'something beautiful for God'?" (*Hindustan Standard*, 24 May, 1971). His anti-establishment views find expression again in a letter on Mohit Sen's 'expose' of the Andhra agitation published in the *Times Weekly* (March 4, 1973).

Most of the articles of Munin Barkotoki comprising the present volume are occasional pieces — souvenir articles, reviews, obituaries and radio talks — comparable in their design and scope to some of his relatively longer letters to the press. There is nothing at hand to suggest that the thought of collecting them together in the form of a book ever crossed his mind. He might even have resisted the idea of getting them out, at least in their original form. His death has, however, left us with no other choice than to remain faithful to the words as they appeared in print, or in the typescripts of his radio-broadcasts,