

Munin Barkataki : Man for all seasons

The last time I met Barkataki was on the *Bijaya Dashami* day, October 25, but he was too ill and weak to talk and in less than a fortnight's time he left us for ever.

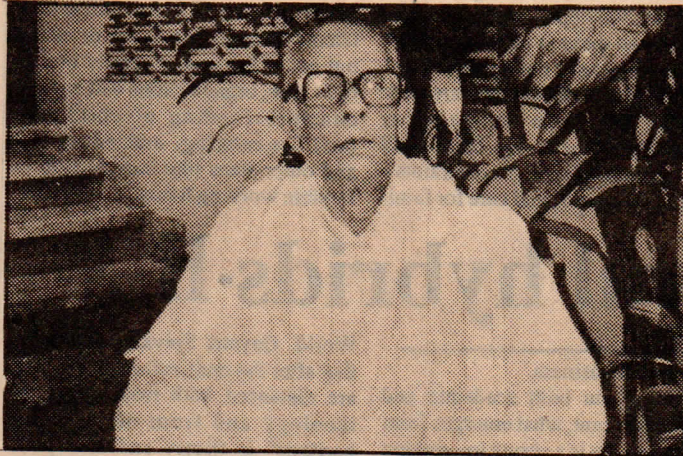
Barkataki was ill for quite some time. What I had observed from occasional talks I had with him was that Barkataki was perhaps not perturbed by ailments as such, but was more so with the fall in human values all around him and also with the growing tendency to make it to the top by hook or crook. He seemed to have resigned himself to this malady and chose to leave this world in silence. He was of only 78.

Munin Barkataki was the first to introduce *belles-letters*, in Assamese literature with his confessions in *Awahan* in the thirties. He was born in a family of 'firsts'. His father Durgadhar Barkataki was the first Assamese (officiating) Director of Public Instruction (DPI) of undivided and pre-Independent Assam, his aunt Annada Devi Barkataki was the first lady to publish a book of *Ai-Nam* (prayer songs), his elder brother Satyendranath, was the first to obtain a first class MA degree in English from Calcutta University, his daughter Minakshi was the first to obtain a doctorate degree from Oxford University in Mathematics. His wife Mrs Renuka Devi was the first woman minister from the State at the Centre as Education Minister of State.

I met Barkataki while working in the Press Information Bureau during 1956-60. A rare quality I noticed in him, then in-charge of the newly started office at Uzanbazar, was his capacity to judge the

merit of a person without being prejudiced by his demerits. This quality helped him emerge as an outstanding critic of our time.

Tall, both intellectually and physically, easily identifiable in the crowd, Barkataki was a voracious reader and never missed any book which hit the stands. With all available journals and magazines in hand he kept himself abreast of the latest trends in art and litera-



ture, music and painting, cinema and theatre. Always prompt in taking decisions and with a ready tongue, Barkataki's remarks were sharp and sometimes sounded sarcastic, but it was always without any malice. Once he informed me that one of his relatives -- a friend of mine and of my age -- had arrived at Guwahati from Jorhat.

"What does he do these days?" I queried. His quick reply was "well, what does he not do?"

On another occasion there was a hot discussion in the office over a news report from Delhi.

"It's true. I have heard it over my radio this morning," a colleague asserted again and again. Barkataki overhearing the discussion smiled and commented: "I think you've purchased a radio set, haven't you?" (To have a radio set of one's own was a luxury at that time).

A friend working in the Guwahati Station of AIR, a sister organisation of ours, used to visit

mind and many a reader is of the opinion that he would 'live' in such excellent stories. His only published work *Bismrita Byatkram* is a collection of sketches based on the lives of some distinguished personalities of Assam which earned him the coveted prize of the Publication Board in 1985. It is unfortunate that enriched with vast knowledge and varied experience he put his pen down prematurely.

With a brilliant academic career (a gold medalist of Calcutta University for having stood first amongst graduates passing with distinction in B A in the year 1938), Barkataki had control over English and Assamese as well as Bengali. Though he wrote excellent editorials for the *Assam Tribune*, he preferred writing idiomatic Assamese.

Amiable and friendly, Barkataki knew how to deal with haughty fellows with a fitting reply. Once a know-all officer from Delhi telephoned Barkataki at his office at Uzanbazar from Guwahati Circuit House, hardly 200 metres away.

"Barkataki, I'm so and so, ... arrived last evening travelling two thousand miles from Delhi, Strange that staying so near you've not come to see me yet."

"I feel it's strange that you've already covered two thousand miles, yet not been able to visit me here, two hundred metres away from the Circuit House," was the reply from Barkataki.

Yes, he could tame everybody, except perhaps one -- death.

Barkataki on Tuesdays every week and spend hours together gossiping.

"Why on Tuesdays only does he visit you?" I asked him one day innocently.

"Tuesday is an off-day for him and therefore he thinks that there should be no work for others too on that day."

Barkataki's contributions to Assamese literature was scanty but whatever little he wrote was pure gold. In the thirties he contributed a few stories to *Awahan* and *Jayanti* which dealt with the psychology of human nature and conflicts of

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