

# Forging a trail

A promise made to his dying father led to the first gramophone record songs in Assamese in 1924. The dying father was Assam's *Sangeelacharya* Lakshiram Borooh, who set the annotation for Assamese music, and left his legacy with the *Sangit Sadhana* and the *Sangit Kosh*. The young man was Prafulla Chandra Borooh of Sivasaigar, Assam.

Few know that a decade earlier, the *Sangeelacharya* was to go to Calcutta to record Assamese songs on the gramophone. It was his

## Jahnabi Phukan

dream to appear in the music exams of Trinity College of Music in Calcutta, and publish a self-composed book on comparative studies on Western, Indian and Assamese music.

But, destiny willed otherwise, and he fell to an illness which took his life. Prafulla Chandra was then 14 years old. He had lost his mother when he was only five. For ten years, he and his younger brother grew up in straitened circumstances among kindly relatives.

It was Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, founder and Charles A King, Principal of the Benares Hindu University, who were instrumental in furthering Prafulla Chandra's education. They allowed him free admission in the engineering degree course. A rent-free single-seater hostel room was provided to him. The principal gave him an allowance of ten rupees monthly, and would come over to the

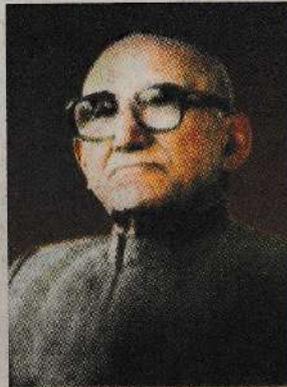
room often to listen to his violin.

In 1924, when he was all of 24 years, Prafulla Chandra Borooh had to convince His Masters Voice (HMV) Gramophone Record company that Assamese songs would sell on their own merit, and were not inferior to Bengali songs. The very first Assamese gramophone record songs were *Kiyano pahora Asamiya hera sirokal ashila swadhin*, and some of the others were *Aji bondoki sandere samagat beerata narayanayan rupa* and *Asoma sushma Kamrupa jayatu janani dharitri dadhita*, which were all set to tune by him. In 1928 and 1930, Prafulla Chandra Borooh went on to record four more songs, each in the second and third recording of Assamese songs on gramophone.

Returning to Assam, Prafulla Chandra got immersed in the world of theatre



and music. He was the Borgohain in *Jyomoti*, the first Assamese celluloid in 1935. His brother Phunu Borooh was the famous Gadapani, and his two sons played



Prafulla Chandra Borooh

Lai and Lesai. He was a constant companion of Jyotiprasad Agarwala, and the film's memorable last song, *Luitare pani jabi o boi*, was set to tune on the latter's instructions that the audience must leave the film misty-eyed.

By then, Prafulla Chandra and his brother had tried their hands on road building, laying sleepers for the railways, dredging the river, trading in rice and other commodities to finally being able to start their fledgling tea plantations.

Straddling both the worlds of music and commerce, Prafulla Chandra often said that when he earned his first five hundred rupees, he was forced to choose "between Goddess Saraswati and Goddess Lakshmi". He chose the latter, and entered the tea industry, where, unlike his peers in the tea in-



dustry, the Rai Bahadurs and their ilk, Prafulla Chandra Borooh was a first generation tea planter, industrialist and proud of his humble beginnings.

In a career spanning various capacities as Vice President of the Tea Board, as Chairman, 'Borooh Committee on Tea industry', as Director, Assam Financial Corporations Ltd, as Director, Assam Petrochemicals Ltd, as Director, Assam Tea Corporation Ltd, there is a story to be recounted on his Chairmanship of the Assam Film (Finance and Development) Corporation Limited.

As he was a self-made man, there was nothing that impressed Prafulla Chandra more than a man's true worth. One such young man with a dream was Jah-

nu Barua. He wanted to make a film, but he had no collateral to pledge with the Assam Film (Finance and Development) Corporation Limited.

Jahnu was being turned down but he was tenacious. He arranged to meet Prafulla Chandra in the aircraft on his way to Calcutta. He narrated his lack of collateral which stood between him and his dream of making a film. Prafulla Chandra listened quietly then pronounced, "Your talent will be your collateral". The funds were sanctioned, and there was no looking back since then. Jahnu Barua's talent truly proved to be his collateral. Years later, Jahnu Barua was proud to become Prafulla Chandra Borooh's grandson-in-law.