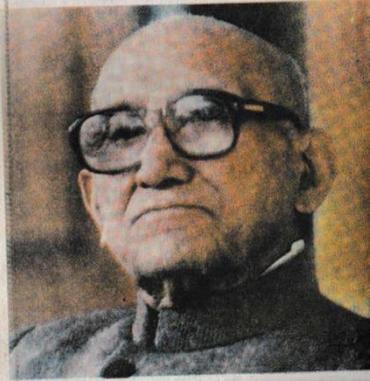


Singing pioneer

Kashmi Rekha Gogoi



Who will sing? It is only Bengali songs that Assamese people like. I doubt whether Assamese records will get sold... This was the first reaction of the General Manager of the HMV company, when an Assamese youth went to see him about recording Assamese songs.

The youth was Profulla Chandra Barooah – the first singer of Assamese records. Born (in 1900) to a musician father, *Sangitacharya* Lakshmiram Barooah, he had a great passion for music.

It was 1924. With the dream of singing in Assamese records, Profulla Barooah left for Calcutta (Kolkata). There, he joined a factory of the then



East Bengal Rail as mechanical apprentice for a salary of rupees thirty. He stayed in a small hotel at No. 3 Harrison Road at rupees ten per month. A gruelling schedule – with duty hours from 8 am to 4 pm with an hour's lunch break. Yet, he would not give up. On one hand – the hopes of his late father, on the other – his own dreams. In the meantime, his salary was increased to rupees thirty five – enough to move to a better hotel. On his way to the factory, there was the office of the HMV company. Every day, as he passed by the office, it reminded him of his dream – the dream of singing in an Assamese record.

And lo! One day, on his way to the factory, instead of his workplace, quite absent-mindedly, he entered the HMV company office. He came to know about the mistake only when he was con-

fronted with a *Kisko chahiye?* by the gatekeeper. But he decided – he wouldn't go back. Instead, he would meet the GM. Seeing a youth clad in *khaki* shorts and a crumpled shirt, the manager was not sure whether this young man could really sing. When he came to know that the youth sitting in front of him was the singer, he threw a doubtful look and then said that there would be a voice test. And that he would be informed later.

After two days of this meeting, Profulla was called for a voice test. And in August 1924, the dream came true – Profulla Barooah sang in the first Assamese record. During the rehearsal, singers gathered in the room to listen to this new artist. First an Assamese, then a Bengali song – he was highly lauded.

HMV decided to record four Assamese songs. The four songs chosen for recording were – *Asoma nirupama janani oyi alanghagiri Durga Rani* (Lyrics – Umesh Choudhury), *Kiyono pahora Asomiya hera chirokal tumi achila swadhin* (lyrics – Radhanath Phukan), *Phuloo phulile jonaye hanhile hanhit dharik ten* and *Hridai bidari uhe sata bedanore* (lyrics – Prasannalal Choudhury). Those days, the microphonic recording system was not available. There

was a mechanical system and one had to sing as loudly as possible. In December 1924, the first record of Assamese songs was released. The record was played at the seventh conference of the Asom Sahitya Sabha held at Guwahati.

The famous song *Aaji bandoki chandere samagata birata*, composed by Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury was set to tune by Profulla Barooah. The song, first sung in the Pandu Conference of the Indian National Congress, enthralled all the people gathered there.

Apart from music, Profulla Barooah had proficiency in many other fields. He was the first to get an Assamese drama named *Been Boragi* (in 1936) broadcast from the Calcutta Radio Station.

Barooah played the role of the Borgohain in the first Assamese film *Jyototi* by Jyotiprasad Agar-

wala in 1935 (where his brother, Phnu Barooah, enacted the role of Gadapani). He also turned the last song of the film – *Lathore jani jathi-a-hoi*.

At a time when people thought growing tea was an exclusive British business, Profulla Barooah, with a few Assamese families, began tea plantation. He did not do it just to earn money personally, but also to raise consciousness among the Assamese about the importance and necessity of tea-plantation for self-dependence. He became a member of the Tea Board consecutively for several terms. Once, as the vice-chairman during his term, he led a delegation to the West Asian and North African countries for promotion of Indian tea. He also attended FAO conferences on tea at Rome, London and other West European countries. He took the initiative in opening up a Tea Technology course at the Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat.

Profulla Barooah was one of the founders of Sib-sagar College. He also became president of the college. During his student days at Ripon College in 1921, he took part in the freedom movement and was imprisoned several times. In 1923, he left for the Benaras Hindu University and completed his engineering degree. During his study in Kashi, he continued music practice and earned proficiency in the violin. Study, music and participation in the freedom movement – all these seemed to go hand in hand.

From music to tea plantation, the freedom movement to social work, there was no such field where Profulla Barooah did not step into. He was elected MP twice – in 1957 and 1961.

Living a dedicated life, octogenarian Profulla Barooah died on March 2, 1986.

When I listened to the first Assamese recorded song at Umananda Duwara's museum, I was thrilled. My mind went back to the days of gramophone records – the round black discs with the picture of a dog in the middle (the emblem of HMV), that moved in rhythm around a pin. At the moment, as I listened to Profulla Barooah, I did not know that the first gramophone record singer of Assamese song was not merely a singer. Now I know he was more than that.