

## Batuk-Da As I Saw Him

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It is not easy for me to write about Jyotirindra Moitra. My relationship with him was not like that of one artist with another or like that of a competent critic with an artist, but was that of one man to a better man, or to express my idea better, a brother, and friend without regard to our respective merits and deficiencies. In fact, he was six years my junior in age but sixty years my senior in talent. I would, however, claim that we were colleagues on a mission in Delhi for most of the years that he lived here, and my difficulty is the heavier because my friendship with him was of so personal a nature (his wife's people were old friends of mine).

During the forties, when both of us were in Calcutta, I knew him a little personally but much, much more about him as a herald of an activist message for deliverance from the dire calamity which befell Bengal since early in that fateful decade. Both of us in our different ways were horrified witnesses to and distressed sufferers from the economic ruin, social disintegration and collapse of morale that took place during the course of World War II. As a working journalist I was interested in the birth and growth of the Indian People's Theatre Association—some of my older and younger colleagues of the Press were participants in IPTA—which was in substance a new cultural movement for self-assertion and resurgence and pursuit of militant idealism. Of this movement Batuk-da was a pioneer and a knight-errant, throwing the gauntlet to the bemused intellectuals caught in the vicious circle of self-contradictory identities. His call was, however, not addressed primarily to eggheads for logic-chopping but to all and sundry for action.

I moved to Delhi in 1951. Jyotirindra also came here about four years later. I do not know precisely what made him leave his familiar pitch. Of course, circumstances made it imperative for him to eke out a livelihood; but if he had the business sense of a professional artiste, he could easily have made a comfortable livelihood in Calcutta. I think the main reason lies in his personality: he had an inherent restlessness of spirit that impelled him to seek new experiences and gather new knowledge about nature and men. With him "all experience is an arch where through shines that untravelled world whose margin fades for ever and ever as we move". As we came closer and closer, since we happened to cherish a common objective, I could see that his assignment with the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, although it was bringing the Kendra high plaudits it did not give him full mental satisfaction.

Those who know of his work as a teacher of Rabindrasangeet during the early days of the Gitabitan institution of Calcutta will have little difficulty in understanding his *penchant* for the work of a teacher of the Poet's music. It was in this that he and I found a common interest, although I am no musician, far less a teacher of music. When Bengal Association was formed in 1958 we joined our efforts to set up an institution for the cultivation of Bengal's music. The then office-bearers of the Association also tuned in, and memorable efforts were made by Shrimati Sujata Davies, Joint Secretary of the Association. But she had to leave Delhi early in 1962, and for reasons chiefly of finance, a permanent institution could not be set up till 1965. That year Bengal Association was able to found the Banga Bharati Institute of Music with Jyotirindra as its founder-principal and myself as a sort of Sancho Panza looking after the book-keeping.

Banga Bharati Institute was not designed as a run-of-the mill music-teaching shop but as an authoritative academy of instruction in the music of Bengal. It had to stand up against adverse circumstances beyond its control. As a result the full scheme could not be worked out but the Institute lives on. For over seven years Jyotirindra held the position of principal of the Institute. Early in 1974 he went back to Calcutta following a domestic tragedy. So for twelve years from 1961 he and I was constantly together. I am proud to say that he gave me his friendship. That he could do so was because he had the unique faculty of meeting everyone on his level. His simplicity and his capacity for understanding the minds of differently constituted people led, unfortunately, to their sizing him up to their own small proportions. But Jyotirindra did not mind. Of course he liked to receive appreciation, but he was not unduly damped by adverse criticism.

My last meeting with Jyotirindra was during the winter of 1975-76 when I went out to live in a rural township near Calcutta. He used to come down on many occasions and spend the day drinking in the lush green landscape and listening to the chirping of songbirds. He was teaching children in a Calcutta school, introducing them to the mysterious world of music through the novel experiment of helping them recognise the musical quality of birds' cries and trying their hands at musical composition. Inevitably he became the centre of attraction of young people of my neighbourhood. He was characteristically shy about recounting his own activities in connection with IPTA but readily responded to their requests for recitals of songs from *Nabajibaner Gaan*. I vividly recall one evening when three old friends and associates of IPTA—Batuk-da, Sombhu Mitra and Debebrata Biswas—sat together on the terrace of my temporary home and talked of days that are no more. I bade him goodnight that evening without any idea that we shall not meet again.

I have tried to speak of Batuk-da as I saw him—as a brother and colleague in a common pursuit. I am not competent to assess his merit as a poet. I can only say I was profoundly impressed by his poems but in the sphere of music I have no hesitation in regarding him as an *Acharya*. I saw in him an eternal wayfarer on the endless road of humanity. His spirit was sparked by a divine discontent born of compassion. He was introspective like all people of vision, but this did not cloud his social consciousness. In everything he thought and did he strove for the emancipation of man. Fortune had dealt with him severely, but he was not to be defeated by adversity. He had no eye for wealth. Indeed his indifference to easy ways of making money sometimes frustrated me as it did other friends. Bent upon his great quest, he spurned every other consideration.

His life was gentle, and the elements

So mixed in him that Nature might stand up,

And say to all the world, "This was a man."

His life, as I see it, demonstrated Tagore's call :

I Prayed to you, give me ease, but received only shame.

Now I pray, arm me fully for battle.

Therefore, I shall not ask for peace for his soul, for, to quote Kazi Nazrul  
Islam :

This rebel, sore with struggle.

Shall find peace only on the day

When the anguished cries of the oppressed

Shall no longer rend the air and sky

And when the oppressor's sword shall not

Clang in the golgotha of the battlefield

Only then shall the spirit of this rebel rest in peace !