

Jyotirindra Moitra

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A long-distance train from Hyderabad steamed into Calcutta's Howrah station on October 25 and in the usual manner the compartments emptied, for it was the journey's end. There was one, however, who, his fellow-passengers thought, was tired and oversleeping but would wake up soon to the tumult of the terminus.

He never woke and railwaymen discovered that the life's journey had ended of Jyotirindra Moitra, poet and composer, a main prop of the People's Theatre movement in its flaming days, an unostentatious communist who had sought fulfilment in dedicating his talent to his country's fight for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It may sound harsh but it was a lovely way to die—suddenly, with no pain or perhaps only a little, in company but disturbing none. “To die! To sleep, perchance to dream/Aye, there is the rub, for in that sleep of death/What dreams may come!”

Jyotirindra had no such qualms for he knew that at death one returns to the elements and life goes on and there need be on caviling at all that. But he will be missed deeply and poignantly missed by those whom he has left behind.

His comrades and colleagues mourn the passing away of a fine and sensitive friend endowed with rare talent, and a rarer dedication, who radiated an inmate friendliness and good cheer, never obtruding the superiority which a lesser man would flaunt, an unpretentious but remarkable personality.

And the communist movement is bereft of one who had many years of creative service yet for his people but has been snatched away and his voice for ever stilled.

Jyotirindra imbibed love of his country and his people from the very air around him since childhood. His father was among Deshbandu Chittaranjan Das's 'Swarajist' members of the then Bengal legislative council and one of his uncles, T. C. Goswami, made a scintillating reputation as a member of Motilal Nehru's team in the central legislative assemble of the middle twenties.

In college he studied literature but his passion, partly inherited but more pointedly cultivated, was music. From the late thirties he won reputation as poet, not very copious but acute, keen on plumbing the depths of sensibility, with a kind of kinship for his friend Bishnu Dey, and like the latter realising

that poetry while it must have wings must not soar away too far from where the life of man has its roots and that, in time specially when there is a stir for freedom and a new life for the masses, the poet must first and last be *engage*, profoundly committed to the people's cause.

Thus, with world war II overshadowing everything, Jyotirindra quietly but firmly made up his mind to break altogether with the ways of worldly wisdom and moved without fuss into the ranks of the Communist Party in 1939.

He reconciled himself even to a certain self-effacement (which some of his writer-artist colleagues in the movement were found later to be unable to practise) and he remained, in a quiet way, unto the last a basically contented soldier in the fight. The manner of his death is in keeping with much of the manner of his life.

It was entirely in the fitness of things that he became one of the pioneer and powerful participants in the anti-fascist writers' and artists' movement during world war II and a leader, almost in spite of himself, of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

Well grounded in our classical music, drawn deeper towards the compositions of Rabindranath Tagore, delighting in the spontaneous vivacity and power and uninhibited beauty of our folk and other traditional songs and dance cadences, he turned towards his own ways of creative improvisation that would have warmed the heart of Tagore himself if he was alive.

A famous long poem he wrote then— *Madhubanshir Gali*— its theme being the human condition in significant segment of social deprivation, lent itself also to sensitive declamation before avid audiences, which was done by Sambhu Mitra in his magnificent voice.

To Bijan Bhattacharyya's memorable *Navanna* he made a large contribution, and during and after the Bengal famine of 1943, a man-made monstrosity, he gave voice to his vision of the rainbow in the rain when he wrote *Navajeewaner Gan* ('Songs of the New Life'), a revelation of Jyotirindra's genius that took Bengal by storm.

He sang in his own compositions of "the joy in the parity of togetherness and clamour and comradeship of the masses", and with his resonant voice he would lead choruses of national songs and newer compositions, every member of the chorus feeling that 'Batuk-da' his universal nickname, was just one of themselves and not an elder from a superior world.

This quality of assimilating himself with his company saved him, but he was never peevish and could shrug away whatever pain he sometimes suffered in our context of life.

For a decade and half. Jyotirindra was in Delhi, working in Bharatiya Kala Kendra and then on his own, loved and respected as few have been among Delhi's Bengalis.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi gave him somewhat belated recognition but Jyotirindra had never hankered after it and just took it in his normal stride. The originality of his musical talent was recognised by perceptive film makers like Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray, but while intensely popular in circles that knew him he never got feted by the elite – a predicament if that term is permissible, shared in a different way by Bijan Bhattacharyya.

A stranger to the art of self-advertisement and content in the consciousness of his own worth and the esteem of people he cared for, Jyotirindra lived without ostentation and died in quiet. As long as he lived, however, he was vibrant, as was his voice and the timber of it, and in his songs he has left a corpus that will be splendid witness to some stirring times and his own indomitable spirit.

A great voice and a greater heart has been stilled and those who knew him feel bowed with pain. So much more could be said about him, but this is not the time for it.

(Courtesy : "New Age". October 30, 1977)