

LETTER

## REBA ROYCHOWDHURY

*"How many seas must a white dove sail Before she sleeps in the sand ..."* Bob Dylan

At last her wings were put to rest. Reba Roychowdhury, a rare *combination* of a dancer, an actor, and a vocalist with a tenor voice, bade adieu forever on 2nd September 2007. She was one among the layers of the foundation stone for the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

Only sixteen she was when she, clinging close to her elder brother, Benoy Roy's hand, stepped *into* the whirlwind of the *forties* that gave Bengal the infamous famine, the fierce imperial war, the communal fratricide, and finally the cherished freedom with dismembered brotherhood. Reba held high the ensign of IPTA that *led* a renaissance of the cultural *movement* launched by Tagore during the first decade of the 20th century. And hers was a lifelong commitment to that legacy.

Reba was born to Atul Krishna Roy and Hemlata in 1928 at Rangpur (now *in* Bangladesh). Her brothers were *Gopendra* and Benoy, and an elder sister was Ila. Reba was a university graduate, and for some years taught in Ballygunge Shiksha Sadan and Marwari Girls' School.

Though an activist in the students' and women's *organizations*, her cultural talent basked *in* IPTA programmes. She was a promising member in the Central Ballet Troupe and honed her skills under Pandit Ravi Shankar. Her performance attracted wide acclamations.

As one of the torch-bearers of the historic *Tebhaga* movement, Reba suffered a jail term *in Presidency Jail*, Kolkata, followed by a house-internment for about a year. The period 1948-50 was a stormy time for her. The Communist Party was banned and they had to go underground. She suffered torture in police custody, and took part in a 40-day hunger strike. Yet flowers blossomed in her personal life. On 15th February 1949 she wedded playwright, actor and director Sajal Roychowdhury, and bore their only *child* Suchitrita on 6th August 1951.

Reba's autobiography *Jibaner Taane Shilper Taane* (At the call of life, at the call of art) depicts a restless life—dedicated to the cause of the people's performing art. She performed extensively touring through the country in towns and remote terrains. She had an exquisite quality of quickly *picking up* folk *songs of alien* languages. She *also* performed as a delegate in Switzerland, the then USSR, and the east European countries. Everywhere her presentations met with spontaneous applause.

In plays Reba acted under eminent directors like Bijon Bhattacharya, Jnanesh Mukhopadhyay, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Sajal Roychowdhury, Shyamal Ghosh and others. Her famous characterisations were: Giri (*Debi Garjan*), Durga (*Sankranti*), Padma (*Rahumukto*), Adoori (*Neel Darpan*), Maa (*Gorky's Mother*) and so on.

In movies, she was invited to portray difficult type-characters *by directors* like Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Goutam Ghosh, Sandip Ray, Nabendu Chattopadhyay, and Utpalendu Chakrabarti.

Reba had a gifted voice both bold and melodious typical of a mass-singer. In this field her co-workers included legendary singer-composers like Debabrata Biswas, Salil Chowdhury, Jyotirindra *Moitra*, Hemanga Biswas, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, Preeti Bandyopadhyay and many other notable singers, not to speak of Binoy Roy, her elder brother and her *Guru*. It was sad that due attention was not paid to audio-record her famous songs. However, *courtesy to Sri Shubhendu Maity*, mass-singer and organizer *in the* cultural front, the only audio-cassette entitled '*Agun Pakhi*' bears witness to her rare quality.

Reba had many times been felicitated for her performances Laurels were showered on her in recognition of her contributions. The Government of West Bengal honoured her with the "Fighter of *Tebhaga*" (1997) and with "*Dinabandhu Puroskaaf* (2003).

In January 2006, perhaps, the last such felicitation she emotionally responded to. The Chetana People's Cultural Organization awarded her "*Binodini Debi Smriti Samman*". She was *then too ailing to move. But the name Binodini* whom she adored *so much*, perhaps gave her the strength. She not only attended the programme at Hatibagan, North Kolkata, but also sang with full-throated ease - "*O Hind ke rahanewalo shuno shuno ...*". It was unbelievable that her frail dwindling heart still had so much of fire. Posterity should surely benefit from her contributions.

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