

A FORGOTTEN ANNIVERSARY

Debabrata Biswas—The Irony and The Enigma

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It seems twice ironical that the year 2010-11, currently being celebrated as the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, should also be celebrated willy-nilly as the birth centenary of the self-styled and castigated outcaste (a *bratyajan*, by his own estimate) DEBABRATA BISWAS. Despite his battle against the gods, he continues to enthrall millions with a finesse typically his own, even in the thirtieth year after his demise.

One can never deny the sonority of Debabrata's many-faceted three octave-ranged voice that can sound as rumbling as FAIYAZ KHAN's, as ringing as KRISHNA CH. DEY's, as romantic as MANNA DE's bests, and be as variegated as SACHIN DEV BARMAN's. Listening to his recorded renderings of *Jetey Jetey Ekla Pathey*, *Jharo Jharo Barishey Baridhara*, *Esho Go Jwele Diye Jao*, and *Amar Je Din Bheshe Geche*, one is left pondering how the variety of moods and vocal sounds could be evoked by the one and the same singer. Neither can one deny the various undiscovered moods and fresh shades he evokes in oft-sung and hackneyed Tagore phrases in such pieces as *Je Ratey Mor Duarguli* and *Tomra Ja Balo Tai Balo*.

Debabrata was a lone, original thinker, groping his lonely way through sheer searching power of a melodic mind and a heart groomed in a blend of puritanical *Brahmosangeet* and open-stage IPTA traditions till the mid-1940s, without any formal training in the arts of *Rabindrasangeet* and classical music. The diehard Rabindrasangeet exponent, SHAILA-JARANJAN MAZUMDAR once commented on the enigmatic singer, "In his case, singing Rabindrasangeet was as natural as speaking the Bengali language is to a Bengali." In other words Debabrata needed no musical training, which of course, is preposterous and not to be taken literally.

What can a serious minded youth of today find so captivating in Debabrata's style in a cacophonous environment marked with mediocrity and media-hyped values that have yielded to the entertainment forces of hindi teenage frolics and husky sentimentalisms, band music and doped TV reality shows? What could a septuagenarian of today have found so appealing in Debabrata of the late 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s?

Debabrata kept his style ever-changing just for the sake of change believing in the evolution of vocal art of singing.

To Debabrata, the outstanding trait of evolutionary dynamism in the art of singing has always been experimentation : experiments with scansion, rhythm, vocal scale, pitch, voice throw, pronunciation etc. And, at the fag end of his life he adopted a non-rhythmic rolling style compelled by his asthma affliction. It was not unusual to have him evoking in the same songs distinctly different moods on different sittings.

Added to experimentation was his curious propensity towards musical instrumental accompaniment which predominantly brought him in conflict with the 'rabindrik authorities' of his times and culminated in his self-withdrawal from commercial record production in early 1970s. The purists and the 'authorities', who were already at crosspurposes with the singer for the liberties he started taking with his self-styled rabindra-sangeets, condemned the instrumental excesses of Debabrata as sheer sacrilege and imposed commercial ban on the

more objectionable records. The real admirers could not help thinking that given the singer's celestial voice, why the need of musical instruments at all!

As furore raged on the issue, Debabrata tried justifying his stand by quoting from the texts of Tagore and came up with arguments that at best sounded hollow, as they still do even today when instrumental excesses have become the order of the day. In the end he withdrew under an imaginary self-evasion of having been deprived from singing on grounds of being a cultural outcaste, even quite unnecessarily insinuating at his own Brahma origins. The outcome of the turmoil was his short autobiography *Bratyajaner Ruddha Sangeet* (The Stifled Music of an Outcaste), where he vented his anguish over the prevailing cultural dictatorship of the Vishwabharati Musical Board, far more than he wrote on his life.

The broad question that remains provoked but unanswered is how far must an artiste be allowed to impose his own personality and thoughts in the creation of others without the risks of plagiarisation and distortion of the original texts and emotions? And furthermore, who is to arbitrate on his wrongness and rightness in absence of the original master? In a narrower view, some old timers still discern, in the turmoil, elements of conspiracy and jealousy caused by the overwhelming popularity of the singer among the masses. For, Debabrata's annual royalty from the sale of his gramophone discs soared to two to four times of that of his contemporaries, some of whom had the audacity to offer themselves as Debabrata's 'judges', though being ten to fourteen years younger. □□□