

Happy Those Early Days -

Bratati Bandyopadhyay is a name held in high esteem by lovers of Bengali poetry, and the journey of her life is an inspiration to younger generations of performing artists who look up to her. It has been a journey measured not so much in length of time, but counted in milestones set up by her own dedication, perseverance, skills and a unique equation with her Muse.

Her parents Maya and Manjul Kumar Bandyopadhyay in recalling Bratati's infancy and early childhood marvel at her phenomenal memory even at the age of three, by which time she had learnt by heart and could recite upwards of 300 nursery rhymes and short poems, and had made her first stage appearance reciting a difficult poem by Kazi Nazrul Islam. What was evident even at that tender age was Bratati's fascination for sound and rhyme, images and tunes and her own effort at interpreting them in a manner rare in one so young.

It is not though that Bratati grew up only in the company of poets and their diverse work. She lived and played like children her age, with the added advantage, however, of 'space' all around her - space where trees grew and flowers bloomed, birds flitted across the sky which was abundantly visible whenever she looked out, space where the echoing chimes of a nearby temple bell mingled with the twinkling glow of fireflies in the darkened orchards, space where one phantom image smoothly vignettted with another in an ethereal palette of colours.

Thus the seasons and years rolled on, with Bratati enlarging her mental canvas to pack in more and more scenes and themes in a new light of perceptions. She learned from the world at large around her.

Her academic education progressed side by side, and Bratati started her schooling at Bethune Collegiate School, a premier educational institution in Kolkata. At school she seized every opportunity to polish her inborn talent as an elocutionist, and participated in inter school competitions with distinction. The very first time that she represented her school at an All Bengal Inter School Elocution Contest, she won the First Prize for her Alma Mater.

From school to college and then onto the Calcutta University for her post graduate studies were but normal stages of her academic pursuit. Here too Bratati came out with flying colours, securing First Class in her Master's degree in Economics.

During all these years though, a silent transformation was taking place which equally silently but intensely created a synthesis in her attitude to life itself. Her formal education increased her forays into the world of letters in which she was always much at home, and her creative bent of mind helped her in her quest for new horizons of expression through poems, dramas, audio features - all built around her first love, elocution - and culminating in that single word which expresses her philosophy best - "perfection".

Bratati was deeply inspired by the stalwarts and masters of the performing arts of her younger days - Suchitra Mitra (from whom she took music lessons from some time), Sambhu Mitra, Kazi Sabyasachi and their likes, each of whom has a special niche in Bratati's mind, along with some of our greatest contemporary poets and authors - Nirendra Nath Chakraborty, Sankha Ghosh, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Purnendu Patra, Dibyendu Palit and younger generation poets like Subho Das Gupta. But above all, the colossus that engulfs and pervades Bratati's entire psyche is none other than Rabindranath Tagore. While in respect of everyone else Bratati imbibes and synthesizes their individual genius with the alchemy of her own creativity, it is to Rabindranath that she totally surrenders herself.

‘I took the one less travelled by...’

After university, Bratati began along the common path. She was selected, among other students, by her teacher Dr. Biplab Dasgupta as a Research Associate in the task force of a project named ‘Perspective Plan for Calcutta’. But she was not destined for this life. Inevitably, her love of poetry drew her to the vibrant world of art and culture, and her identity began to build not an economist, but as the new face of Bengali elocution.

→ Abritti Parishad

→ ‘Sarathi’

‘Ek Sondhyay Eka’

Once, Bratati was aboard the Darjeeling Mail with a party of artistes, going to Siliguri for a program. She was reading a book that she had bought recently – ‘A Diary of a Young Girl’. The memoirs of Anne Frank had reached out to her. After a time she laid down the book and tried to sleep, but sleep would not come to her that momentous night. Lying wide awake, unable to put her mind to rest, she began to recite to herself the poems she knew, as an effort to while away the time. One poem after another flowed from the unmapped depths, and slowly she found herself on a singular ride with her Soul, carried on the viewless wings of poesy, as poems came by to her gates throughout the night. Hours later, she watched the first rays of dawn kiss the mountain peaks in the distance, and as day broke across the sky a dream had awakened in her heart. It was a dream that drove her to arrange her first solo program on stage, which was named ‘Ek Sondhyay Eka Bratati’.

On the evening of 7th December, 1996, Rabindra Sadan was packed to capacity as Bratati stepped onto the stage alone. It was an unforgettable event - a lush riot of emotions and ecstasies that charged the atmosphere of the auditorium as she put forth every brilliant poem in all its exquisite beauty and appeal, reaching out to every heart present. Bratati's dream culminated in that performance that night, and history was created.

Milestones followed one after another as days went by. In 1997 was released 'Ami-I Shei Meye'. This album was a historic event in her life. Always a devoted humanist, in this work Bratati lent voice to millions of women who lie suppressed and muted under the heel of a male-abused society. Her name became synonymous with enlightenment and empowerment of the maltreated woman as she declared herself to be one with every other member of her sex, - boldly stating 'I Am That Girl'. Standing as one of the rein-bearers of contemporary Bengali culture, she put forth assortments like 'Shudhu Kobitar Jonyo', 'Bhalo Theko', 'Asthir Somoyer Kobita', 'Aay Re Bhola', 'Anjali', 'Chirosakha' - delighting thousands over the years. She also worked with other eminent personas in collaborative projects - 'Mondo Meye - Bhabna' with Taslima Nasrin; 'Joyjoyonti' - a collection of Joy Goswami's poems - with the poet himself, accompanied by Srikanto Acharya and Pratyush Bandyopadhyay; 'Chhinnopatro - Atma' with Rezwana Choudhuri Bonya; 'Shesher Kobita' with Debshankar, Chitra, Srilekha and Dhritiman; and many others.

Almost single-handedly, Bratati had brought about a revolution in the world of Bengali elocution.

Miles to Go

As Bratati puts it, her passion and her profession are one and the same. Culture of poetry, newer experiments, innovations, bolder projects – this is her life, her work. In today's age of 'motion and no emotion', she has been a key factor in sparking interest in poetry among the younger generations. Her efforts to popularize this form of art have taken form in 'Kabyayan', a school where learners can find guidance and ideas about elocution, getting to know poems better in the process. In her classes, Bratati brings into play her vast experience in performing arts and her interactions with many eminent leaders of this field.

Apart from recitation of poetry, Bratati is also associated with Doordarshan as a newscaster since 1989. Her news reading is just as much an example of her unerring brilliance; 'She can completely lay aside the elocutionist in her when she takes up the role of a newscaster' – says Pankaj Saha, former director of Doordarshan Kendra, Kolkata. Bratati is associated with HMV as a regular artist since 1996, – which has brought out many of her albums. As of 2013, the poster girl of Bengali recitation has ____ albums to her credit. She has also performed overseas time and again, catering to the needs of her audiences in foreign lands.

Bratati has never put herself away from the mundane world in order to enjoy ivory-tower seclusion. She remains a sincere humanist, relentless activist and staunch altruist – using her assets to make the world a better place. An excellent example may be found in her recent efforts – elocution classes and workshops – concerning the inmates of many prisons of West Bengal. She visits the Presidency Jail two days a week along with her students, interacting with the prisoners and lending them a hand to redeem themselves. This activity makes a great difference for those persons who have been damaged by life, and they can find their way back to the light through poetry. Bratati and her students accompany them on this journey.

Breaking new paths is never without challenges. Pioneers are always questioned, criticized, and debated upon. Bratati has been no exception. But it is this ever-stirring intellectual commotion that keeps her going. Newer viewpoints, different ideas, opposite beliefs - all this adds to the freshness of her mind, and allows her to reinvent and rejuvenate herself and her work.

Along her long, winding path, she has been fortunate to have a company of friends, relatives, colleagues and well-wishers who have lent her every help and support all through. Hands that have readily aided her in projects and performances, minds that have provided her with new insights - Bratati has never failed to acknowledge them, ever. Whenever she has earned glory, she has shared it with those who have worked unseen to make her dreams come true. From family to fandom, from supportive audiences to supporting artistes - everyone is a part of her odyssey.

And her journey is far from over.
