



## PADMASHRI PRATIMA: A Fragrance of Assam's Folk-music

(1935-2002)

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There is perhaps no one who has not even listened Pratima Baruah Pandey's name and her soul-stirring Goalpariya songs! She lived in a small beautiful town named Gauripur of Dhubri district. The town is situated in the western side of district headquarters Dhubri, Assam. There is a lake on its north-western side named *Lawkhowa beel* and the north-eastern side on bank of historic *Gadadhar* River is a small hill top called *Matiabagh Pahar*. On which the Palace named *Hawakhana* made by the Zamindar of Gauripur is situated. The *Hawakhana* is still trying to keep alive the charm of Zamindary Legacy which the Goalpariya legendary icon Pratima Baruah Pandey used as her home from 1964 to her last breathed of life along with her husband Prof. Ganga Shankar Pandey and two daughters Amrita and Alaka. The *Hawakhana* was the bystander of Pratima Baruah Pandey where she had gone through several ups and downs of life.

Pratima Baruah Pandey is best known for her immortal Goalpariya song *Hastir Kanya*. She was the eldest daughter among the three daughters (other two Purnima and Pratibha) of Prakritish Chandra Baruah (Lalji), the second son of *Rajabhadur* Prabhat Chandra Baruah, the king of Gauripur *Karaibari State* (*Karaibari* now in Bangladesh) and mother Malatilata Baruah (daughter of John F. Melhousie of Scottish). Filmmaker and pioneer of Hindi Cinema, Pramathesh Chandra Baruah who earned his name as *Devdas* was Pratima's uncle. Pratima was born on October 3, 1934 at their Kolkata's house, situated at Baliganj Circuler Road (presently known as Pramathesh Baruah Svarani, Kolkata-19). Her name (Pratima) was given by her grandfather *Rajabhadur* Prabhat Chandra Baruah, as she was born in the morning on the day of *Mahalaya*. The meaning of the term *Mahalaya* is 'homecoming', mark as the auspicious beginning of *Durga Puja*, so, her grandfather used the term *Pratima* as her name on the marked of this holy day.



Pratima took primary education in the city's Gokhale Memorial Girls School, Calcutta. After which she came back to Gauripur Royal Home and did matriculation from Gauripur High School in 1953. Later on, she had her higher education at South Calcutta Girls College, Calcutta. During her school days at Calcutta she stayed at Junior Cambridge Hostel where Nabanitadeb Sen (Noble Laureate Amartya Sen's wife) as her hostel-mate. In fact, her early years, spent alternating in between the din of Calcutta and the Gauripur. But she started her new journey from Gauripur, dedicating herself for better nourishment of Goalpariya song.

She had abandoned the royal luxurious style of living and paid her attention to the development of singing culture, though the Zamindars were craving of acquisition of lands by any means, which lived a life of luxury! But it is also not forgettable history about the Zamindars of Gauripur that some members of their family got them involved to benevolent works of public interest. Pratima Baruah Pandey emerged as an artist at a time when charm and influence of Gauripur royal family was almost on the wane. But she had been raised like a new moon through her unique tune in Goalpariya songs. She became the uncrowned Queen of Goalpariya songs for being established the songs in the world music. Her songs became instruments of effective intervention to ushers in a path of hope for those people who desperately needed a direction for possible redemption of their culture, linguistic as well as social identity. Her songs covered all possible nuances of human relationship that included intimacy in married couples, secluded romance of young pairs, passionate celebration of youthful desires, poignant tales of the *mahuts* (elephant riders), *garials* (cartmen), *naorias* (boatmen), *masmarias* (fishermen), *maishal* (buffalomen), beggar's song and songs related to social events of Goalpariyan. Pratima picked up these songs and presented them in the domain of mainstream cultural spaces. Mentioned to be made here that there was no named like 'Goapariya Geet/Gaan, (Goalpariya song) before the songs entered into the singing culture of Pratima Barua Pandey! The Goalpariya songs got its identity from 1950's through the innocent tune of Pratima. Before 1950, these songs were locally known as *Deshi Gaan* (indigenous song) but neither popular nor reached to all sections of people. Goalpariya songs got the recognition in the Assamese mainstream music only because of her tireless effort. Now these songs are in the eyes of the whole world!



Pratima learned *Rabindrasangeet* and *Nazrulsangeet* at school from Monorama *Baideu*, but she never had any formal training of music. She used her father's *hati mahal* as music institute, and his *mahut chief*, Bhoben Roy was her *guru* of Goalpariya songs. Bayan Uddin and Kharitulla Sk of Charjogipara (adjacent of Matiabagh) were also considered as her *gurus*. Besides them, her maids Bharatbala Roy, Sharatbala Roy, Shonabala Roy etc. had played important role in her cultural life. Their folk conversations, the *geet* (song) of the rural men and womenfolks, song of the rural farmers and beggars flow in tune of Pratima with strings and rhythms of the *dhol*, *khol*, *jhunuka*, *ditora*, *bashin*, *darinda dhuluki*, and *sharenda* of Shitanath Roy. Encouraging words from her father Prakritish Chandra Baruah (Lalji) also played a great role to inspire the forlorn heart of Pratima. Lalji as father gave her strength to fight all odds that came in her way of singing the songs of common people.

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika made the most significant contribution in bringing Pratima Baruah to become as a prominent folk-artist of India. The turning and crucial point in the young Pratima Barua's life came when Dr. Bhupen Hazarika visited Gauripur in 1955 and attended a function organised on a social occasion. Teenager Pratima Baruah also performed on that occasion with strings and rhythms of rural folk-music instruments. Dr. Hazarika was highly impressed and predicted "this voice would definitely take Goalpariya songs to great heights". Indeed, she got a major break in Dr. Hazarika's film "*Era Bator Sur*" presented two Goalpariya songs in 1956, and that was the beginning of her musical journey to become as 'People's Pratima'. Besides, she went on to lend her golden voice in several other films like *Palashar Rang*, *Gajamukta*, *Hastir Kanya*, *Mahut Bandhu Re* (1958), and a Bengali film *Bagalar Bangadarshan*. *Bagalar Bangadarshan* (1964) created by legendary filmmaker of Bengal Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976). Pratima recorded eight songs for *Bagalar Bangadarshan*. The film was shot for one week only and later it was abandoned and the film remained incomplete. Just before 3/4 years Ritwik Memorial Trust had collected the available reels of the film, and after their re-editing they published four reels of the film which has six songs were being recorded before the shooting. Pratima got associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and became very popular artist after performances together with Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, Bishnu Rabha, Hemanga Biswas, Dileep Sharma (pioneer of IPTA) etc. in different places of India. Luit Konwar Rudra Baruah (1926-1980) was one of the foremost music pioneers and served



with Govt. Of Assam as the Director of Cultural Affairs Department (1970) also among them who extended supports Pratima to propagate her potentiality throughout the length and breadth of India.

On September 16, 1969, Pratima Baruah tied the nuptial knot with Prof. Ganga Shankar Pandey, the then Head of English, Pramathesh Baruah College, Gauripur. It was Prof. Pandey's inspiration, support and guidance which gave her strength to sing the folk songs of is best efforts to keep alive her creations.

Padmashree Pratima had sung with Dr Hazarika in two HMV records released in 1975 which had gained immense popularity. Besides, a large number of cassettes and CDs featuring hundreds of songs rendered in her inimitable style credited to her name. She recorded 302 numbers of songs in between 1962 to 1988. She also used to sing Paul Robeson's evergreen hit song "*We are in the same boat brother.....*" almost in every stage show with the instrumental fusion of Goalpariya folk-music instrument.

Under the patronaze of the then (1962) director of All- India Radio, Guwahati, Purushuttam Das, she performed a *dehatatta* (Materially spiritualistic) song '*Ekbar Hori bolo Mon Rosona...*' for the first time in All India Radio and the song became very popular among the listeners. She was invited for the first time by All India Radio, Kolkata to perform Goalpariya songs in 1975. Her songs were regularly broadcasted from All India Radio centres of Delhi, Shimla, Shilong, Shiliguri, Tejpur, Silchar, Karshiang, Gangtak, Dibrugarh, Imphal, Tezu (Arunachal) and Agartala. Madhya Pradesh, Goa and Tamilnadu also published her songs occasionally through their All India Radio centres. An interview by Kamal Rana Sarkar on Pratima Barua Pandey was published from All India Radio, Guwahati in 1987. After she was awarded '*Sangeet Natak Academy*', an interview by Dr Birendra Nath Dutta also was broadcasted through the All India Radio Centre, Guwahati. Noted filmmaker of Assam, Prabin Hazarika made a documentary on Pratima Pandey "*Hastir Kanya*" in 1996 produced by Digbijoy Medhi. The Documentary won National Award for best biographical film, and later on it had been featured at the South Asia Film festival in 1998, where it had earned a lot of critical acclamation. A film made in 1990 on Pratima titled "*Hastir Kanya*" (English), directed by Ladly Mukhyapadhy and Aditya Sarkar of Kolkata was the Producer of the film. "*Gauripuria Mahut*" is



her last audio cassette which she recorded with her daughter Alaka Pandey who has earned popularity as a folk singer and local political leader.

Dr Bhupen Hazarika's prediction was being proven true, when she was awarded the *Padmashri* in 1991. She was the winner of *Sangeet Natak Award* in 1989 and she was conferred with *D.Lit.* from North Bengal University in 2000. Among her other awards and honours, *Asom Silpi Divas Award*, *Jyomoti Award*, *Bishnu Rabha Award*, *Assam Natya Samiti Awards* are conferred to her name. *Abbas Uddin Award*, Calcutta, citation from *Rabindra Bharati Shanti Niketan*, Calcutta, *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, in its Abhayapuri session in 1977 and Students of Assamese Department (Mamoni Risoam Goswami was Head), Delhi University also felicitated her. Kolkata Folk Research Institute also received and appreciated her open heartedly. All these were come to her close for revolutionary efforts for popularising Goalpariya songs among the masses.

Though she was born in a royal family and she could easily entered in the glamorous world as an artist at that time but she was more interested to give an identity of rural based folk songs of very common people of undivided Goalpara district and successfully achieved that goal. This achievement is the fragrance of *Gauripuria Sanskriti* and incessant and uninterrupted part of Goalpariya (Assamese) Culture.

December 20, 2002 (Friday), 68 years old, Padmashree Pratima, the music lover, the icon of Goalpariya Culture, the Architect of *Gauripuria Sanskriti* was suddenly admitted to the Dhubri Civil Hospital in the afternoon at about 2 p.m. on Friday. She was suffering from *septicaemia*. It was fortunate enough for me that I got opportunity to see our affectionate singer alive just before a few days of her last journey of life at Dhubri C. H. first floor of cabin. When she was admitted, I was still there as because from few days ago of her admission my father was under treatment in that cabin. I gathered experience that when the legendary lady was lying on the bed of the cabin, doctors were constantly busy in examining her health, nurses pushing saline on her body, Prof. Pandey was standing very near to her bed along with 2/3 attendees and kin and kith, but still she was singing a song in her low broken tune! When nurses with smiling face had tried to prevent her from singing by saying, "Madam, after getting well, we will listen to your song...", but she replied, "Songs have to



*sing..., all have to sing, you too also..., only work and work is not sufficient for life... ”!* I felt that day how much she loved to sing though her health condition was not stable and was getting deteriorated!

At Dhubri Hospital, local Congress leader and the then minister Wazed Ali Chowdhary (offered a cash amount of Rs. 5000/- as financial assistance), Ajanta Brahma (ADC), Monowar Ali (acting DC), visited the singer. After about 24 hours observations her condition did not improve and doctors advised the attendees to shift her to Guwahati. On 21<sup>st</sup> December (Saturday), Padmashree Pratima had been shifted to Guwahati and admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in a private hospital (GNRC). During her treatment at Guwahati who inquired about her health by telephonic/physically were AGP leaders Brindaban Goswami, Ramen Kalita, Dilip Saikia Sonowal, and Renupama Rajkhowa, actor Biju Phukan, AASU Leaders, VIPs, VVIPs and some common peoples and etc. Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi visited “Hastir Kanya” for two days at GNRC. Ex. Chief Minister Sarat Chandra Singha and Golap Borbora also visited her. Dr. Farad Kapadia, (Mumbai) the then Prime Minister (Atal Bihari Bajpayee)’s health adviser on special request of GNRC attended to Hospital for Pratima for having a vigilance of her health for 10 minutes and had spent 5 minutes with Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and 5 minutes for AASU and returned back to Delhi.

Among the visitors, Dr Bhupen Hazarika spent nearly an hour with Pratima Barua Pandey and encouraged her by his words and songs. Dr Hazarika sang three songs for Pratima in Hospital, which included the famous song *Hastir Kanya* the name by which Pratima was also known as. Pratima also hummed along with Hazarika when he sang *O Mur Mahut Bandhure...* and *Buku Ham Ham Kare.....*

After battling with crucial illness for several days, the time has come to the end, 27<sup>th</sup> December, 2002 at 7 PM at the Guwahati Neurological Research Centre (GNRC), the uncrowned Queen of the Assam’s Folk-music, the Mother figure of Goalpariya folk song, the Architect of *Gauripuriya Sanskriti*, the Personality with innocent nature, the closest of Goalpariya Hearts, Padmashree Pratima has closed her eyes for-ever! She leaves behind her husband the ever-young Prof. Ganga Shankar Pandey (retired as principal, P. B. College, Gauripur) and two married daughters Amrita and Alaka along with 4 grandsons/daughters Priyam Sarkar and Lahit Sarkar



(Amrita), Nihal Jha and Aditya Jha (Alaka) and countless well-wishers and listeners of her unique voice.

The whole Assam deeply felt the void she had left behind. On 28<sup>th</sup> December, Mahamaya Playground of Gauripur, the sky was full of snow and cloudy, a sea of people was waiting to have one last glimpse of their lovely queen. At about 8 AM a big convoy had reached at the playground under the leadership of AASU, speechless Pratima asleep on a car, AASU's flag on her body. After glimpsing by people and different organisations, people in thousands irrespective of cast and creeds and notable artists from Guwahati Assam, Sikim, Bengal and Bihar accompanied her hearse to the cremation ground of Gauripur on the bank of Gadadhar River. Whose soothing environments inspired her to singing a song *Gadadharer pare pare, O' oina mahute charai hati...* On this bank Pratima was immersed for-ever!

AASU has instituted an award in her name (Pratima Baruah Pandey Memorial Award) from 27<sup>th</sup> December 2005. The Award is meant to confer to them, whose untiring efforts towards preserving and popularising the folk culture and music of Assam are by standing. The students' body of Assam also placed a statue of Late Pratima Baruah Pandey, located at Cahndmari, Guwahati in 2007. A feature film on Pratima Baruah Pandey titled "*Sonar Boran Pakhi*" which *Mahurat* (Opening Ceremony) is held on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2015. Basanta Baruah of Hengrabari, Guwahati and Srimati Boby Sharma Baruah are the producer and director of the film accordingly.

The songs sung by Pratima Baruah Pandey have reflected the secular feelings of the society and always have portrayed clean picture of Goalpariyan of Assam. She did not sing for name and fame but poured her pure voice to sing the Goalpariya folk song out of love and keen affection. Her last 'will' was to establish a "Folk Research Institute" in her home district, as her husband said. So now the time has come to show our respect, and responsibility as locals, to the pioneering figure of Goalpariya folk song and culture so that her cherished desire be come true!



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