

OBITUARIES

Birinchi Kumār Baruā (1910 - 1964)

In the untimely death of Birinchi Kumār Baruā, Assam has lost a noted scholar, a great organizer and a person of considerable charm. Baruā was born of middle-class parents in 1910 at Nowgong, where he had his early education. After his matriculation he went to Calcutta and studied in the Presidency College. He took a First Class in M.A. in Pali from Calcutta University in 1934. After lecturing in Assamese at Calcutta University for three years, he went to Cotton College, Gauhati, in 1938 as Lecturer in Assamese. At that time Assamese was a part of the Sanskrit department. It was primarily due to Baruā's initiative that the subject could have its own department. Later he was appointed Professor of Assamese.

At Cotton College Baruā made his mark as a stimulating teacher who liked to mix with his students. The formative shape to Baruā's intellectual activities came from Professor B.K. Kakati of the English department, a linguist and literary critic, and a person of considerable intellectual distinction. Under his stimulus, Baruā developed, and by the time he went to England in 1946 he had to his credit several short stories, a slim history of Assamese literature written in English, and a novel, the last being perhaps his crowning achievement as an author. *Jivanar Bātat* (On the Road of Life, 1945) reveals an understanding of rural life that is rare in Assamese fiction.

In London Baruā took a doctorate in the cultural history of early Assam from the School of Oriental and African Studies (1948). At Dr. Kakati's advice the dissertation was later revised, enlarged and printed as *A Cultural History of Assam, Vol. I*. In December 1948 Baruā joined Gauhati University as Reader in Assamese, with Dr. Kakati as Professor. After the premature death of Dr. Kakati, Baruā was appointed Professor in 1953. In the Arts Faculty of the University Baruā was about the only person who was able to convince his younger associates of the importance of advanced research. He it was who guided most of the early doctoral candidates of the University.

Baruā had considerable energy and organizing capacity and, on the constructive side, it was at his initiative that the University Grants Commission gave to the University funds for the translation of the *Mahabharata*, for the establishment of a department of Manuscripts, and for the institution of the Tribal Culture and Folklore Research Scheme. Professor Baruā repaid his debt to Dr. Kakati by raising funds and setting up in the University a lectureship in the latter's name.

Professor Baruā had his finger in many schemes, but because his tendency was to have too many affairs on his hands the quality of his work often suffered. In the University his influence grew to be considerable after his election as Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1955. He had useful contacts in the State capital as well as in New Delhi. He was a member of the Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi and guided the Akademi's work in Assamese.

In 1961 the University had a jolt from a overdose of democracy in certain quarters, with the result that the Vice-Chancellor had to resign and Professor Baruā lost his Deanship. In 1962 the Government of India sent him to the U.S.S.R. as member of a Cultural Mission. Early in 1963 he left for the U.S.A. to serve as Visiting Professor of Folklore at Indiana University. Professor Baruā impressed his American friends with his wide interests and interesting lectures on Indian folklore.

Professor Baruā had developed an interest in folklore chiefly from association with the writer of this note, who was one of his students and younger colleagues at Cotton College, Gauhati. Before Baruā left England, he visited Ireland and Sweden in order to contact some of the folklorists of those countries. Late in his career, after he lost his former position in the University, he turned to folklore with a new earnestness. His own productions in this field were not considerable: just a few socio-literary essays in English and Assamese and a book *Asamar Loka-samskriti (The Popular Culture of Assam)* in Assamese (1961). The book is an able survey of certain aspects of rural life, such as beliefs concerning agriculture, animals and birds, food habits, house construction, dress habits, festivals, musical instruments. The work was made easier by earlier contributions on the subject, but this may be called Professor Baruā's most important academic production. Baruā's interest in the integrative aspects of culture resulted in the foundation of The Academy for Cultural Relations (1960), of which he was President until his death.

After his return from America Professor Baruā's health took a downward trend. He had come from Indiana University with an assignment to prepare an anthology of Indian folktales, but he had barely time to set about the work when, on March 30, 1964, his heart failed and he had to leave the world with all his projects unfinished. He left behind his wife and three young children.

Among other publications of Professor Baruā mention may be made of *Early Geography of Assam* (1952), *Studies in Early Assamese Literature* (1953), *Seuji Pātar Kāhini (The Tale of Green Leaves, 1958)*, a novel with a tea-garden locale, and *A History of Assamese Literature*, awaiting publication.

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In the spring semester, February to June 1963, Professor Baruā lectured on "The Folklore of India" as visiting professor of folklore at Indiana University. He stayed on through the summer on a research appointment, and continued to work with our folklore students. I attended all his lectures, and discussed with him projects of mutual and absorbing interest. He participated in our preliminary discussions of the Society for Asian Folklore, and served as a member of the Executive Board when it was organized. We negotiated a contract for two volumes he would edit on "Folktales of India", to appear in the Folktales-of-the-World series. He had other, ambitious projects: for an Encyclopedia of Indian Folklore, for a book surveying the folk traditions of India.

In person Professor Baruā was imposing, handsome, sturdy, and exuded continual good humor. He organized his lectures, the first on their subject in the United States, with logic and clarity, and delivered them with feeling. All his listeners received the impression that Indian civilization was permeated with a folk culture, and that her classics dipped deeply into the wells of folk tradition. "In India a child sings before he talks, and dances before he walks," he said memorably. In one lecture he ingeniously turned around the idea of the caste system, the most glaring defect of Indian culture in Western eyes, and proclaimed it a truly democratic institution. In place of the racial, class, and nationalist divisions that rent Western society, the Indian community nourished the spirit of brotherly affection, with each member harmoniously interlinked with the other, secure in his role, at peace and on familiar terms with his neighbor.

Professor Baruā became our cherished friend. His sudden death is a heavy blow to his American as well as his Indian colleagues, and to the cause of international folklore relationships.

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IN MEMORIAM

On the occasion of the 'Sradha' ceremony (held on the tenth day after death, when friends and relatives gather and the priest prays for the eternal peace of the departed soul) for the late Dr. Birinchi Kumār Baruā.

Eloquent tributes have been paid by leaders of Assam to the late Dr. Birinchi Kumār Baruā, who has been acclaimed as a great scholar and educationalist.

I fully share their views. I would, however, like to mention that the greatest virtue of Dr. Baruā was his humanism, and his greatest contribution to national integration has been his founding of the Assam

Academy for Cultural Relations at Gauhati.

Although I have lived and worked in Assam for a short period of eight years, yet in recent years I had the privilege of knowing Dr. Baruā very intimately. He freely exchanged with me his ideas on education, culture and national integration.

Dr. Baruā thought very rightly that better understanding and relations amongst people of diverse racial and religious groups living in different states of India could be achieved mainly by cultural contacts and cultural exchange programmes. This is why he has been eager to establish an Academy for Cultural Relations at Gauhati after the unfortunate language disturbances in certain parts of Assam and West Bengal in 1960.

The late Dr. Birinchi Kumār Baruā was a humanist. Humanism is a virtue which is higher and nobler than any other virtue or quality in a man. The world of today is torn by racialism and perverted nationalism. The sufferings of refugees or oppressed people anywhere in the world are today a concern for all humanity. Anyone who can look and act above narrow parochialism, racialism or even nationalism is necessarily a great man. Dr. Birinchi Kumār Baruā was such a great man.

Only one example from his life can serve to prove this. At the height of the excitement and mob frenzy during the unfortunate and suicidal language riots in Assam in July 1960, Dr. B.K. Baruā went with Shri C. Das, the then Deputy Registrar, Gauhati University, and other officers to the Gauhati University campus and escorted Prof. B.C. Kar and his family safely to Pandu Railway station and sent them away to Calcutta.

He did not think about his own safety but felt that as a human being he must help other human beings in peril.

A fitting memorial to Dr. Baruā, one of the noblest sons of mother India, who passed away on the 30th of March 1964, will, in my humble opinion, be to establish cultural libraries in all Students' Unions of the College in Assam and thus create a network of branches of the Academy founded by the late Dr. Baruā. These libraries will contain books on various aspects of Indian Culture written by Professor Baruā and other learned writers of Assam, India and abroad. This will help in building up the character of the young men who are future leaders of Assam and India.

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and
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