

## A Celebrity as a Neighbour: A Centenary Tribute to Amar Pal

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### Abstract:

Amar Pal (1922-2019) was a famous Baul and folk music exponent, known for his rendition in the legendary film maker, Satyajit Ray's films. Recipient of many national awards and recognitions, Amar Pal spent a simple life of austerity with his family in a middle class and humble Kolkata locality, where the author of this article was his neighbour and had the opportunity to know him closely, more as a human being more than a celebrity. He began his professional career as an artiste with All India Radio in the early 1950s and continued his association for almost seventy years. He sang over a thousand songs, and composed many of them himself, using the vast repertoire of the baul, bhatiyaali and kirtan tradition. In his songs, the divine and the domestic coexist in an abundance of quotidian comfort and this quality endeared his songs to all sections of society. In his centenary year, this article is a tribute to the quiet unassuming brilliance of a singer, composer, music-director and author par excellence who had mesmerised his audience with his unique style blending a nasal intonation with content derived from the Baul tradition as well as the rustic fragrance of the Bengal countryside.

In an essay on Bauls included in his book of essays, *The Religion of Man*, Rabindranath Tagore wrote, 'The Bauls are an ancient group of wandering minstrels from Bengal, who believe in simplicity in life and love. They are similar to the Buddhists in their belief in a fulfilment which is reached by love's emancipating us from the dominance of self.' The Bauls are an eclectic group of bards who represent an earthy musical tradition as well as a syncretic religious order, blending elements of Vaishnavism with Sufism. Bauls are found in West Bengal, Tripura, Assam and even the neighbouring areas of Bangladesh, and are often identified by their distinctive sartorial appearance (often loose saffron robes), musical accompaniments in the form of *ektara* and *dotara* (one or two –stringed instrument), long hair, minimalistic lifestyle and rich, mellifluous songs. In 2005, the Baul tradition of Bangladesh was included in the list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. Lalon Fakir, Purna Das Baul and Amar Pal are notable exponents of the Baul tradition. This article – more of a personal memoir, will focus on Sri Amar Pal, who was famous for his rendition of Baul and other folk songs as well as devotional songs, and is credited to have sung more than two thousand songs in a career spanning almost eight decades. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2007 from the Government of India, and was bestowed the Sangeet Mahasamman Award in 2012 by the Government of West Bengal. He was also the recipient of honorary doctorates from Rabindra Bharati University and Burdwan University. It was sheer coincidence that this internationally acclaimed singer –composer happened to be our neighbour in a quiet corner of Kolkata named Tollygunge and was endeared by the local community for his simplicity, kindness and modest demeanour.

My first recollection of Sri Amar Pal consists of an awe-inspiring tall and lanky bespectacled gentleman, with curly neck-length hair, always dressed in a coloured kurta and white pajama, with an amiable disposition. This was the late 70s in Bengal, when people still talked stealthily about some familiar young boys who had been associated with the Naxalites, now no longer seen in the locality. Indira Gandhi was known as a termagant by most locals, nearly all of whom voted for Left leaders, and 'ganasangeet' – the music of political activism, popularised by the likes of Hemanga Biswas, played from large conical microphones exhorting people to rise up

in revolutionary fervour. Yet Amar Pal stayed away from all forms of such connections in spite of the concerted efforts of the political parties in power to enlist his support. This firmness was quite unusual considering his gentle personality, and this also happened to be one of the reasons for his widespread popularity in our neighbourhood. Young and old alike enjoyed his company, particularly in the mornings, when he went to collect bottled milk from the government milk booth, and on his way back, engaged in local chitchat at the neighbourhood grocery store. I remember how we, the kids of the locality, were quite confused as we could not match our juvenile images of a celebrity with Amar Jethu's mild and convivial manners. Obviously, Tollygunge – our habitat, being also the hub of Bengali film and music industry, our assumptions were bolstered by the likes of Tollywood superstar Uttam Kumar or singer Hemanta Mukherjee who remained mysteriously and magically distant – they were truly denizens of a star-world, where the likes of our Amar Jethu were clear misfits.

Amar Jethu was, however, a class apart, and his music was palliative, the 'music of the soil', talking about tillers, fishermen, domestic desires and humdrum life of simple poor people of nondescript villages of Bengal. His music stirred similar emotions in the hearts of the 'baangaal' or refugees from East Bengal who made up nearly 60% of the people of Tollygunge, and the rest were 'ghotis', the natives of West Bengal, as his music spoke from depth of his heart to other hearts swayed by nostalgia of a lost time, a lost motherland, lost legacies and even lost recipes that would continue to haunt generations. His songs spoke of the flora and the fauna, the natural bounties, the harvest, the festivals, the gods and goddesses who were close to Bengalis, from both sides of the border.

Amar Pal was born in 1922 in Brahmanbaria, a hamlet in the Chittagong subdivision of East Bengal, to Mahesh Chandra Pal and Durga Sundari Devi. His early training in folk songs was from his mother, and he later trained in classical music from Ustad Ayat Ali Khan, brother of legendary classical music exponent, Alauddin Khan. After migrating from Bangladesh to Calcutta (present Kolkata) in 1948 with Sachindranath Bhattacharya, a lyricist of All India Radio (AIR), Shri Pal secured an opportunity to sing in Akashbani Kolkata, the regional centre of AIR in 1951. This was the beginning of his lifelong relationship with radio, and he recorded thousands of folk and modern Bengali songs in the next seventy years. His tryst with Satyajit Roy in the form a satirical song 'Katoi rongo dekhi duniyaay' (*The ways of this world amaze me*, transl. Mine) in the film *Hirak Rajar Deshe* earned for him international acclaim. He also tried his hands at music direction and playback singing in a few Bengali feature films. As Vice Chairperson of West Bengal State Music Academy, he organised and attended many workshops and seminars in the country and abroad. He authored two seminal volumes on Bengali folk music, namely 'Banglar Loksangeet' (The Folk Music of Bengal) and 'Banglar nodeer gaan' (Songs of Bengal's rivers). Trained in classical music, his songs represented the true blend of form, content and style and have touched the hearts of millions of Bengalis all over the world.

His home in the Tollygunge area of Kolkata reflected his personality – a two-storied nondescript house where he lived with his wife, four sons and two daughters. None of his children inherited his exemplary musical talent, and they only assisted their father in carrying the gifts and awards he received from different organisations and people who felicitated him, which was quite a frequent occurrence. My childhood memory is also punctuated with images of famous personalities about whom we had only heard or read or seen on television who came to meet him in large cars that could barely handle the serpentine lane – challenge posed by our locality. Bhupen Hazarika, Prahlad Brahmachari, Nirmalendu Choudhury, Anup Ghoshal, Banasri Sengupta – all well-known names in the popular Bengali music scenario of the late seventies and eighties were regulars at the small drawing-room of his residence. We, the

children of the locality, gaped wide-eyed in reverential awe as our lanes lit up by these glorious personalities. Many of these singers were identified by their regular appearances on television that signified, in those days, Calcutta Doordarshan. It was more in the borrowed glory of his visitors that we, the children of the locality, assessed the magnitude of Amar jethu's celebrity status.

As an exponent of baul, devotional and modern Bengali songs, Amar Pal had carved a niche for himself. The slightly nasal intonation of his rendering gave his songs a distinct appeal, much like the songs of renowned playback singer Mukesh in the Hindi film industry. However, unlike Mukesh ji, Amar Pal did not achieve cult status, primarily because he had restricted himself to singing for radio and the Bengali playback world had the overwhelming presence of luminaries such as Hemanta Mukherjee, Manna Dey and later, Kishore Kumar. In Bengal, particularly in the decades of the sixties, seventies and eighties, music was more of a household affair with most young Bengali girls receiving lessons in music, as a mandatory add-on qualification for the marriage market. My mother took it upon herself to initiate me into a similar such training regimen and presented me before Amar jethu one day, when I was barely twelve years of age. However, much to my mother's chagrin and my absolute relief, Amar jethu declined politely, asserting that the domain of folk songs was meant only for those who were passionate about them, after learning that I hardly knew one or two Bangla folk songs. Unlike Rabindrasangeet which was almost force-fed to young girls and boys in the name of music lessons in many households, baul or Bengali folk songs was a completely niche affair with very few passionately interested aficionados taking it up. Amar Jethu's contention that day had left an indelible imprint on my mind – His refusal to take me under his tutelage even though he offered taalim or tuition to many students proved that he was a stickler to his own principles even if it meant saying a firm 'No' to someone he knew closely. It is really so surprising compared to today's era of music-reality shows where every wannabe singer tries every song that catches his fancy; by remaining faithful to his chosen genre of music all through his life, Amar Pal not only brought fame and glory to his country, he also denied the lure of money and upheld his vocation all through his life.

Among his well-known songs, beside 'Katoi rango ...' mention must be made of songs such as 'Prabhat samoye Sachi'r aangina maajhey' (*The infant Krishna plays in Sachi's courtyard at dawn*.trans.mine), 'Aamar sonar gour (*My beloved golden Krishna* trans.mine)', 'Rai jaago Rai jaago boley (*Wake up, wake up, dear Rai* trans.mine') where the divine and the quotidian lives are juxtaposed; Lord Krishna is imagined as a playful toddler whose mother, Sachi, carries on with her domestic chores, or the somnolent Radha (Rai in the song) is coaxed to stop dreaming about her heavenly paramour and implored to rise up and start her assigned tasks for her family. The greatness and abiding appeal of Amar Pal's compositions lie not in elevating the prosaic and the pedestrian to the divine but by situating the object of worship within a familial and familiar spectrum of daily rural activities. His prolonged sojourn in the metropolitan city of Calcutta could not diminish the bucolic beauty his music emanated and through which he wove the devotional and the domestic into a truly mesmerising musical experience. In songs such as 'Maajhi baiyya jao re' (*O Boatman, row your boat* trans.mine) and 'Ichhaamati Ichhamati nadi' (*Ichhamati the river of desires* trans.mine), Shri Pal had used the 'bhatiyaali' or style of boatmen, and the humble plea of a passenger to the boatman becomes etherealised to every man's plea to the Maker to ensure his safe passage to the other world, overcoming the tempests of life. In few songs using the kirtan gharana, the devotee in the artiste sings paeans of praise to his Absolute teacher, his guru, to illuminate the darkness within him, in such songs as 'Guru dohai tomar' (*May it please you, my teacher* trans.mine), 'Guru biney bandhu naai re aar' (*There is no better friend than one's teacher* trans.mine). In intensity of thoughts and sincerity of

rendition, Amar Pal's music echoes the legendary grandeur of the bhajans of Vaishnavism, Shaivism and the like. This happens to be one of the main reasons of his abiding popularity and fame.

Amar jethu lived a long life , till the age of ninety six years. His wife had predeceased him and he too had lost mobility , a few years before his death. Till his strength permitted, he used to take small walks in the locality, his hair all turned white and his signature smile on his lips, with his youngest son, who is autistic. Father and son trudged along, each leaning on the other for support. I remember my last visit to him sometime in early 2018, when he was already bedridden, and he could barely speak. Yet, he could hum his memorable tunes indistinctly lying on his bed, and I noticed how tears escaped from the corners of his eyes, as I sat with him holding his hand. He was taken care of by his sons, two of whom ran small businesses, while the third was employed in a small private concern. Clearly, the family was not well-off financially, and the music school that Amar jethu once ran had shut down. In spite of his international reputation as a seasoned practitioner of baul music, time had taken its toll and the glamour and glitz of his celebrity life had taken a back seat and left him rich only with memories of his illustrious career. A few days after my visit, I learnt from our neighbourhood gossip that the government authorities had intervened and had started looking after his medical and other needs. He was shifted to a government hospital where he breathed his last at the age of ninety-six on 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2019. His youngest son still strolls in the neighbourhood absentmindedly, with an elderly relative, while a block of high-rises have dwarfed Amar jethu's small house. Some members of his family live there, eking out a meagre existence. The signboard of his music school has been pulled down, and Amar Pal, the legendary singer is now remembered, albeit informally, by the name of the cul de sac where he once lived and breathed and composed and sang his famous songs that moved the minds of stalwarts like Ray and also his large retinue of fans once. An artist never dies, he lives on in his creations. This year is Sri Amar Pal's birth centenary.

### **About the Author**

Dr Rumpa Das, an alumna of Dept of English, Jadavpur University, is Principal, Maheshtala College, Kolkata. She has taught English for over two decades as Associate Professor in English. She was Deputy Secretary (Academic) at the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education on deputation for a period of two years. She has published widely in India & abroad, and spoken in more than thirty international, national & state-level seminars and conferences. She has also delivered talks on Women Empowerment, Media and Gender, Motivation and Communication in several workshops and conferences. Her areas of interest are Gender, Media and Culture Studies. Her publications include two books and four edited volumes (all with ISBN), with more than fifty published articles in books and journals. She is a poet, creative writer and a reviewer. Her poems, short stories & reviews have been published in many books and journals, notably Muse India, NorthEast Review, Borderless Journal and in Hibiscus: Poems that heal and empower

### **Notes :**

1. 'Jethu' in Bengali refers to father's elder brother but is also used as a term of respect for senior gentlemen even outside one's family.
2. Except for a few, all of Amar Pal's songs are available online.