

The Making of a programme: Mahisasura Mardini:

With the early-morning broadcast of *Mahisasuramardini on the All India Radio*, the countdown to the Durga Puja assumes a frenetic pace. A lot of it has to do with the one-and-a-half hour musical drama, which for legions of Bengalis, plays the perfect prelude for the grand occasion.

The genesis of the crack-of-dawn programme goes back to 1930. The renowned musician, actor and regular programmer of the Calcutta Radio Station (henceforth CRS), Hirendranath Basu, had recorded a musical play *Prabhate Ashram Drisya* for the Dacca unit of the Gramophone Company of India in 1929. Nripendranath Majumdar, the director of Bengali programmes for the CRS requested Hirendranath to broadcast similar programmes for the station. Hirendranath's first morning programme for the CRS was aired on June 15, 1930 named as 'Prabhati Utsav'. *Betar Jagat*, the Bengali-in-house journal of the CRS, announced the broadcasting of the second 'Prabhati Utsav' on the *Mahalaya* day in 1930 and from then on it came to be known as *Prabhati Utsav* (1931), *Pratyush Mangal* (1932, on the *Masasthi* day), *Jaganmatar Bandana* (1933), *Saradiya Bandana* (1934) and *Prabhati Anusthan* (1935). In 1936 it was christened 'Mahisasura Badh' and was broadcast on the day of *Mahasasthi*. In 1937, however, it was back to its old schedule of the *Mahalaya* day this time with yet another new title *Mahisasuramardini*. The name stuck and so did the day of the programme.

In his book *Mahisasuramardini* (1959), Banikumar talks about his contribution to this ever-popular show. He had based his script on *Markandeya Chandi* or *Saptasati Chandi*, a part of the *Markandeya Purana*, containing seven hundred *slokas*, extolling the magnanimity of Devi Chandi, forms the backbone of Banikumar's literary effort. The famous musician Raichand Baral came along to compose the music. Banikumar had a tough task at hand. The story with its complex characters and several twists and turns had to be simplified for the average Bengali listener. The story of Chandi begins with king Surath who had lost his kingdom meeting a down-on-his-luck trader called Samadhi in a forest. Together they visit the hermitage of sage Medhas in search of peace. The sage told them about the power of the goddess Chandi in overcoming distress.

Banikumar got substantial help from Pandit Ashokkumar Sastri while negotiating through the *slokas*. Till the early sixties when *Mahisasuramardini* used to be a live programme, the script was bound to be changed from the previous year in its details here and there. This variation in programme was also an attraction to the listeners and broke the monotony of repetition.

Mahishasuramardini owes a lot of its appeal to the enduring voice of Birendrakrishna Bhadra, the narrator of the musical drama. Bhadra was so deeply involved that he had once said his narration was an

offering to the goddess, not a mere recitation. Taking bath early in the morning, clad in *dhoti* of *garad* silk, he would prepare himself for the programme. With profound skill in both oratory and music, he maintained a fine balance, tuning his voice to reflect the myriad moods depicted in the script. Pankajkumar Mallick was associated as one of the music directors along with Raichand Baral and Harishchandra Bali during the early years of the programme. While the association of the other two was short-lived, he stayed on to compose music and select the singers.

Rehearsals during the live-programme years started a couple of months before the show. The matter of attendance was accorded utmost importance and even star-performers had to be punctual. Other than Birendrakrishna Bhadra and Pankaj Kumar Mallick, the names of participants kept changing. The names of performers began to appear from 1938 in the *Betar Jagat*. The first published list included Harimati, Abhabati and Parul Chaudhury — three extremely popular singers of the era. In 1940, Anil Das, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, Kalpana Hajra, Saila Devi, Ila Ghosh and Suprabha Ghosh took part in the show. The first solo song of the programme ‘Bajlo tomar alor benu’ was allotted to Ila Ghosh. She was later replaced by Supriti Ghosh. Similarly, the solo ‘Jago tumi jago’ in male voice was first sung by Hemanta Mukhopadhyay and after him (when he left for Mumbai) by Dwijen Mukhopadhyay. Over the years, Akhilbandhu Ghosh, Pannalal Bhattacharya, Manabendra Mukhopadhyay, Rabin Bose, Bimal Bhusan, Utpala Sen, Sandhya Mukhopadhyay, Shymal Mitra, Dhiren Bose, Pratima Mukhopadhyay lent their voices.

In the beginning Surendralal Das popularly known as ‘Thakurda’ who served the CRS from 1936 - 1942, was in charge of the orchestra. A team of instrumentalists called ‘Jantrisangha’ established by him accompanied the programme. There were Sarengi player Munshi Ahmed Hussein, Khushi Ahmed in harmonium, Dakshinamohan Thakur in esraj, Raichand Baral in Piano, Abani Mukhopadhyay and Taraknath Dey in violin, flute-player Gaur Goswami, sitar player Sailen Das and many others associated with the programme at various stages. Bela Dey wrote in her autobiography the conch-blowing of Mrityunjay Badyopadhyay at the beginning of the programme. Later, the sound used to be created in clarionet by Saileswar Chattopadhyay.

The schedule time of the morning programme was not 4 a.m. in the beginning. It used to begin at 6 a.m. till 1937, at 5.30 since 1938 and at 5 a.m. since 1941. The programme began to be broadcast at 4 a.m. only from early 1950s. The duration of the programme also varied from one to two hours and was standardized to one and a half hour in late 40s. If one goes through the pages of the early *Betar Jagat*, it is not hard to find special programmes on the occasion of other Hindu festivals like *Dol-yatra*, *Janmastami*, *Sivachaturdashi*, *Saraswati puja*. There had been programmes like ‘Akali Bodhan’, ‘Uma Haimabati’,

‘Ma Elo re’ on the occasion of *Durgapuja* in 30s and 40s. But none of these programmes did sustain for so many years as *Mahisasuramardini*. What was the reason? Was it the time chosen for the program? Morning programme in early years started at 6 a.m. or 5.30 a.m. and did not collide with the regular programmes. Gradually, with the popularity, the programme was fixed at 4 a.m. – a safe time for special broadcasting without any question of adjustment with other programmes. The one to two hours programmes on *Sivachaturdashi* or *Saraswati puja* day in the evening of 30s had to be abandoned and substituted with 15 minutes programme in later years.

In the end, what remains to be singled out is the spirit of the programme. From 1937 onward, the programme was portrayed as ‘Bodhan’ meaning performance of ritual for awakening of the goddess Durga. That very word put the programme in a different genre for both the listeners and performers and that’s why till date radio is switched on in most of the Bengali household on the particular day and time in spite of multiple options of radio and television channels and availability of the programme in disks and cassettes.