

**Md Qudrat-e-Khuda**





Md. Qudrat-e-Khuda

Born : 9th May, 1900

Died : 3rd Nov., 1977

*Courtesy: Presidency Alumni Association Calcutta, Kolkata 700073*

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## Muhammad Qudrat-e-Khuda—A Remembrance

When I joined Presidency College as a First Year I.Sc. student in 1943 I had already heard of Professor Qudrat-e-Khuda from some of my immediate seniors. These included my own uncle Manas Mukherji, and Sivatosh Mookerjee who was a dear friend from my schooldays. In fact, thanks to the two of them (both of whom, alas, I have lost) I had already learnt my ways about the college and had been slipping in and out of a few Physics and Chemistry classes with them months before my actual admission to the College. I had in those days developed quite a fascination for Chemistry, and as a fourteen-year old had thought nothing of the impropriety in attempting to pass off as an uninvited guest student of some of the great professors that taught at Presidency in my time !

I must confess here, to be entirely truthful, I do not remember to have been able to learn very much from Professor Khuda's classes for he was a very distant figure, unapproachable and uninspiring for the callow youth just entering college. Though still greatly respected for his scholarship, he was moving farther and farther away from the classroom in the forties. He had already been Bursar and was made Vice-Principal when we joined (or soon thereafter) with many administrative demands on his time. In our days the unrivalled "teacher" of Chemistry at Presidency was, of course, Professor Pratul Rakshit. I did not know then that Professor Khuda had himself selected Professor Rakshit going almost out of his way, and then having developed an immense dislike for him (for reasons I need not go into) had tried to be

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in his way several times professionally (also going almost out of his way) ! I mention this sad fact here only because I was to be privileged to meet Professor Khuda many years later and to find how his mind apparently had completely changed again about his distinguished one-time colleague. I will come to this towards the end of this short tribute. It is for me, a very happy and memorable encounter to remember.

Professor Muhammad Qudrat-e-Khuda M.Sc., P.R.S. (Mouat Medalist 1936), D.I.C. (London) taught at Presidency College from 1931 to 1947. He was appointed Bursar in 1937, was Vice-Principal in the forties and Acting Principal in 1947 until Partition. Professor Khuda had published important papers in the internationally renowned journal *Nature* from 1931 onwards on "Direct Reduction of Dimethyl-dihydro Resorcinol", "Stainless Monocyclic Rings" and other topics. He had also collaborated in the publishing of many papers in this area in JICS with A. Mukhopadhyay, P. Bandyopadhyay, A. Mallik, S.K. Ghosh, A.K. Roy, C. Bhattacharya and others right up to 1947.

Embittered by a direct personal experience of the tragic riots in Calcutta preceding the creation of Pakistan, Professor Qudrat-e-Khuda seemed to have turned away from his own secular Bengali background nurtured by the teaching of P.C. Roy, J.C. Bose and other great Bengalis of the previous generation. When Partition came we saw him as a controversial figure on the committee deciding on the question of the division of the intellectual properties of Bengal between Calcutta and Dacca. I still remember how some of us—I had by then travelled to Economics Honours and just completed the B.A. course—felt agitated at the prospect of the Presidency College laboratories and the Library being dismembered, as we heard of the goings on. Professor Subodh Chandra Sengupta and others who were working

hard making. West Bengal's case for keeping these historic assets intact had to fight tooth-and-nail against old colleagues who had now opted for Pakistan and whose efforts towards carting away parts of Calcutta's cultural treasures to Dacca was seen by some of them as nothing but betrayal! Tragically again, after Partition Professor Khuda was destined to become unpopular over certain issues later in East Pakistan too! When one recalls the heroic struggles of the Bangladeshi people for the preservation of the Bengali culture afterwards, one would probably want to reexamine the motivation behind what then had appeared to us such a straight case of "betrayal"!

Professor Khuda proved that he had the strength of character to get over the bitterness generated by the experiences of the Partition years. In his later years he turned his energies almost entirely to work for the rebuilding of the Bengali culture for which he should be remembered by the posterity in Bangladesh and West Bengal alike. He had become a very important figure in the educational world of East Pakistan and later of Bangladesh. He was responsible for directing the encyclopaedic work on scientific terminology in Bengali undertaken at Dacca which is of great importance as a resource material for scientific research and studies in Bengali for scholars both in Bangladesh and India. All Bengalis, particularly his old students at Presidency College, surely have reasons to be proud of this achievement of a great Bengali teacher.

As the Chairman of the Bangladesh Education Commission Professor Khuda had visited India in 1973. When the Bangladesh delegation visited the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Vice Chancellor Parthasarathi had invited me and Sivatosh Mookerjee (then the Dean of the School of Life Sciences at JNU) to join the Indian side at that meeting. This turned out, for the two of us unexpectedly a very memorable and pleasant encounter with our old Professor. As we entered the meeting place we saw the members of the Bangladesh delegation and their JNU hosts standing formally in arrays waiting to be introduced to one another. Before our Vice-Chancellor could start the proceedings—as a former diplomat he found these customary rites in all international meetings very much to his liking—Sivatosh and I almost ran up to the frail-looking leader of the Bangladesh delegation that was Professor Khuda, touched his feet and introduced ourselves. Protocol seemed to vanish by magic. Professor Khuda embraced us, blessed us in a choked voice and as he turned to his colleagues—a most surprised lot—he could only utter "Presidency College...my college". After a little while we were all seated. Parthasarathi excused himself, the charming diplomat that he always was, and went over to the other members of the Bangladesh Education Commission to give the two of us (Sivatosh and myself) a few moments with Professor Khuda. The latter turned to us and eagerly plied us with questions about College, about teaching and research in the Chemistry department, the state of the labs and about his erstwhile colleagues. Many of the questions I could not answer at all; but Sivatosh, being a scientist himself and also one who knew well, and in person, virtually everybody in Calcutta's intellectual world, fared satisfactorily. A little hesitatingly he asked after Professor Rakshit too and hearing of his steady rise in the profession and in the esteem of his students he showed unmistakable signs of nostalgia and even joy. He wanted to send through us his affectionate regards to him and other former colleagues and students in Calcutta. I still regret I never had recounted this to Professor Rakshit—perhaps Sivatosh did. I only brought it up much later in an obituary note I wrote after Professor Rakshit's passing away, when it was too late! Thinking of that last meeting, I often conjecture whether Qudrat-e-Khuda had not, after all, been blessed in the end with that Grace of God which, we were once told, his long and beautiful name signified!

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\* I.Sc (1943-45), Economics (1945-49), Teaching (1950-72)