

Professor A. W. Mahmood

Shyamalendu Banerjee*

For decades Professor Susobhan Chandra Sarkar was a tower of strength in the History department of Presidency College. He was regarded by all with awe and admiration. But if one asks who was the most lovable pesonality among the History teachers at Presidency at the time, the answer most certainly will be Professor A. W. Mahmood.

A. W. Mahmood was born at Brahmonbaria in Tippera district of undivided Bengal in 1910. He had a brilliant academic career and won the gold medal in History in his M.A. examination at Dhaka University. But his interests were not confined to books. He was an outstanding sportsman excelling in football, cricket and tennis and added a coveted trophy to his academic laurels. He also played for Dhaka Wari Club.

Then began a chequered career. He started off as an academic teaching history at Chittagong College. It was in the mid thirties. Soon he proceeded to the University of Oxford where he did a B. Litt on Sir John Shore.

Back home, he found himself in a totally different arena. World war II was on. Following a stint at Krishnagar Government College, he Joined the army and fought on the Arakan front.

Back to civvies in 1945, he returned to teaching. Apurba Chanda suggested he taught at the Islamia College. Mahmood spurned the idea. He could not adjust to the idea that because he was a Muslim, he should teach at a Muslim college. He saw Sushobhan Sarkar at Presidency College and joined the institution of which he remained justifiably proud till his last day. His favourite subjects were Greek history and the Reformation.

I still remember my first encounter with him. For a fourteen year old in his first year Intermediate class, he was a dream professor. What an extraordinarily handsome man! What a polished English accent! Our relations became closer as the days wore on. He usually lectured with academic restraint. But I remember how excited he was lecturing on the bravery of Leonidas and the dramatic battle of Thermopylae. He suddenly broke into a Benali song, 'Muktira mandira sopana tale kata pran holo balidan'. In spite of his cosmopolitan culture, he was an Indian to his fingertips.

Some people are born secular. Some have secularism thrust upon them. Mahmood belonged to the first category. He married a Brahmo lady, Lila Ray, herself an educationist. He took it as a matter of course, never wore his Hindu marriage on his sleeve.

My attachment to him deepened when I took both Reformation and Peloponnesian War in my Honours course. And when I went up to St. Catherine's Society, Oxford he was hugely delighted for that was his college too.

We did not see each other a lot on my return. Once I went to his office at Writers Building. He was ADPI. He was not in. I looked at his pad and the doodles told me about his frustration.

He did not teach a lot in the next few years. Proctor, Bengal Engineering College, Principal, Maulana Azad College—he got promoted but didn't he miss teaching? Was he a great success as an administrator? I Wonder. With so much love and affection, can one have sufficient ruthlessness to run tough but tedious administrative affairs? He was later member of the West Bengal Public Service Commission. Professor Mahmood was perhaps the odd man out. Conformists could not have warmed up to his brilliant ideas.

But tennis at South Club in the evening perhaps helped him retain his zest for life. And he must have enjoyed being a visiting Professor at Dhaka University in liberated Bangladesh. It was for him a sentimental journey.

Sometime in 1994, I heard he was suffering from leukaemia. I went to see him after ages. He was as handsome as ever, straight as a ramrod and the shock of white hair made him look even more distinguished. I felt ill at ease knowing his end was near. He knew it too, but didn't show it. Not for a moment. He talked about everything under the sun, what excited him most was reminiscences about Presidency College.

He died soon thereafter. But my job had taken me to Allahabad and I was not around to say goodbye. Only once I heard his name mentioned on television when it announced the West Bengal Assembly had paid a tribute to this great personality. I was proud I was one of his favourite students. ■

* Alumnus 1951-55 (History)