

# Professor Amales Tripathi (1921-1998)

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Professor Amales Tripathi retired as Ashutosh Professor of Medieval and Modern History of Calcutta University, but it was as Professor and then Head of the Department of History in Presidency College that he acquired his extraordinary reputation in intellectual and historical circles. His eminence as an intellectual of twentieth century Bengal was in fact the outgrowth of his outstanding teaching record in his *alma mater*. In that sense, it was the college, as so often in the history of this institution, which made the man. What, for instance, would have been Derozio's place in the life of Bengal had he not been a teacher of Hindoo College?

Amale Tripathi was born of a well-to-do and locally influential landed family in Tamluk on 21 February, 1921. He broke out of the somewhat narrow horizons of his ancestral place when he stood first in the Matriculation examination of 1938 from Tamulk Hamilton School. He moved on to Presidency College, Calcutta, where he completed his intermediate examination and then took honours in economics. But then he decided to switch to history for his M. A. degree. This was a fortunate choice. But contemporaries also recognised his extraordinary aptitude in literature, both English and Bengali. To history he later on brought to bear his formidable literary assets, and his technical expertise in economics.

His was a distinguished generation. Among his class mates were Pratap Chandra Chunder, who later branched off to ancient history, Satyajit Ray and Dilip Kumar Biswas, who later became his colleague in the Department of History at Presidency College. He was in Presidency College from 1938 to 1944.

As a student in college, his literary gifts were especially evident. He wrote two articles in Bengali in the Presidency College Magazine—one on the Bengali short story and the other on Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire*. These were refreshing, original pieces of writing seemingly by a man much more

advanced in years than the raw youth who actually wrote them. Any one reading the articles now—they were read out at the memorial meetings in Presidency College and Calcutta University—would recognise that literature lost an original mind to history—to the latter's advantage. Tripathi went abroad to study history in Columbia University and got an A. M. on the basis of his work on American historiography which was later utilised in a book on the subject. Later he went to England for higher studies and was awarded the Ph. D. degree by the London University for his thesis, written under the supervision of the well-known historian C.H. Philips. This thesis, published as *Trade and Finance in Bengal Presidency, 1793-1833* (1956, 1978), won recognition as an authoritative book on the subject. His early training in economics came in useful here. It is still cited, after all these years, as a standard work of reference. Tripathi made a pioneering contribution to the evolving relationship between the Company's Government in Bengal and the rising European agency houses in Calcutta. Economic history then was coming into its own. Tripathi, an economist and historian, was one of the early exponents of this branch of the discipline. One easily recognises the theoretical sophistication of Tripathi's work; yet it yields in no way in the amplitude and accuracy of hard information.

Tripathi joined the Government Education Service in Bengal, serving in Krishnagar Government College and Maulana Azad College before he finally joined Presidency College as Professor in 1954. The Head of the Department was then the celebrated Marxist intellectual and legendary teacher, Susobhan Chandra Sarkar. When Sarkar retired, Tripathi took over as the Head of the Department of History. The young new Head of the Department introduced new methods of teaching. The early historiographical influence was evident in the care with which he introduced students to the French master, Georges Lefebvre, and his predecessors in the writing of the history of the French Revolution. The economist's background

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was also evident in his masterly summing up of the poverty-prosperity debate in his treatment of the origins of the French Revolution in class. The authors of this notice, who had the good fortune to attend these classes as undergraduates, still remember the state of trance which the collective body of the honours students experienced even after 'AT's class would come to an end.

Tripathi was fortunate to have the colleagues he had in Presidency College. Dilip Kumar Biswas, his classmate and friend, joined Presidency College and set a rare example in the teaching of ancient Indian history. Then arrived the young Ashin Das Gupta, the outstanding teacher of the next generation. Between them, these teachers represented a formidable pedagogic combination, such as the Department of History in Presidency College never experienced before, and was never again to experience. As the Head of the Department, Tripathi was authoritative and masterly, and was universally regarded with awe mixed with respect.

Tripathi left Presidency College for the Calcutta University in 1969, leaving Das Gupta in charge. He became the Ashutosh Professor of Medieval and Modern History as successor to his teacher, Professor Narendra Krishna Sinha and fitted this prestigious post comfortably. He retired from the University in 1986, but continued as the Professor of Society at the Asiatic Society, Calcutta. He was also a National Fellow of the University Grants Commission, with which he was earlier associated as a member. Professor Tripathi presided over the 55th session of the Indian History Congress at Aligarh in 1994.

Total commitment to teaching did not affect either his research or his writing. His continuous encounter with new writings on history widened his intellectual horizon and sharpened his vision. He published his work at regular interval. In *The Extremist Challenge* (1967), he narrated 'the story of an idea, at once religious and political, which gripped the mind of a generation of Indian leaders in the last decade of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th century'. Here he admitted to 'shunting between cultural and political history, without losing sight of the economic forces at work'. He had come a long way as an historian from historiography to economic history to the search for the mentality of an age.

His interest in the 'Bengal renaissance' was very deep and in *Vidyasagar: The Traditional Moderniser*

(1975), he captured the spirit of the times through one of its central figures in the wider context of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. His early interest in Bengali literature gave a distinct new dimension to both the works. He had earlier contributed an important piece on the history of Bengali literature in the *History of Bengal*, edited by Dr. Narendra Krishna Sinha.

Tripathi was also a prolific writer in Bengali. Indeed, it is in these scattered essays, published at different times in professional journals like *Itihas* or popular periodicals like *Desh*, that one comes across his profound concern for the meaning of history. Here, his major concern is the philosophy of history. Some of these essays were compiled in an anthology, *Itihas O Aitihasik* (1986), published by the West Bengal State Book Board and awarded the *Ananda Purashkar*. In these essays, he delved deep into the historiography of the French and the English Revolutions. He also explored the nature and meaning of historical truth by scanning historical literature from Thucydides to Lefebvre, from Ranke to Braudel. His sweep was grand, his treatment magisterial. He pieced together mosaics, culled from different masters, and created his own image of Clio. All the historians and their ethos came alive in his writing in a way not seen before in history writing in Bengali. His erudition and his familiarity with the most recent trends in historical writing, which drew heavily from other disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology and Linguistics, forged his own vision of history. He was a firm believer in the idea of progress: থেমে থাকবে উপায় নেই। জীবনের সর্ত চারেবতি। ... পরিবর্তন হবেই, আর ইতিহাসকে তার সাক্ষী হতে হবে। He was also against any kind of deterministic approach: 'নৈর্বাতিক, নীতি-নিরাপক্ষ মেশিয়ালিক কোনো সর্বব্যাপী সন্তা (চার্চ, রাষ্ট্র, সুপারম্যান, ডায়ালেক্টিক) র হাতে নিজেদের সঁপে দিয়ে মানুষ আপনার বিচার, বিবেক ব্যক্তিগত দায়িত্বের দায় এড়াতে চায়। ইতিহাস-দর্শন যদি মূল্যবোধে মানুষের আস্থা সঞ্চার করতে না পারে, সব ধরণের ইতিহাসের মধ্যে একা ও অচৌত-বর্তমানের জীবন্ত সম্পর্ক বোঝাতে না পারে, তবে নঙ্গৰ্থক আপেক্ষিকতাবাদ প্রচারেই তার মহসূল বিনষ্টি।

He never turned away from what was new and refreshing, but refused to be convinced by what was merely fashionable.

In 1990 was published his masterly *Swadhinata Sangrame Bharater Jatiya Congress*. He won the *Rabindra Purashkar* for this book. The book displays his amazing grasp of the entire range of literature on

India's freedom struggle. In narrating the parallel stories of the freedom struggle and of the Congress, he discussed even the most recent writings, always providing his own critique of those works. In the bitter historiographical debates regarding the nature of Indian nationalism, he worked out his own distinct position in this book, independently of both the 'Cambridge' and the 'subaltern' schools. This was a position which is generally held by liberal historians in India and is non-controversial in a magisterial way.

His old interest in the Renaissance as a student, in his own words, was stimulated when he read the subject with the undergraduates in Presidency College in the 1950s. In 1994 was published *Italir Renaissance, Bangalir Sanskriti*, the fruit of his long study of two different 'Renaissances', away from each other in space and time. In two complementary essays, he analysed the Italian Renaissance in the light of recent research and took a close look at the evolution of the Bengali culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. Here again, he allows his readers a refreshing and new insight into the subject. Contemporary crisis did not dim his optimism. He echoed Lorenzo to affirm: 'Les temps revient'. His latest book *Swadhinatar Mukh* (1998) is another compilation of his writings on contemporary trends in post-colonial India.

Professor Amales Tripathi was not always an easy man to understand. His towering personality,

his often forbidding presence sometimes prevented his students from coming close to him. Yet, behind the seemingly stern exterior, lay an affectionate man who always cared for his students. Those who succeeded in breaking the outer shell were rewarded with rare warmth and affection, flowing from a noble mind. His deep love for literature was the reflection of an acutely sensitive, even romantic mind. A few years back, while delivering his Presidential address during the Founders' day celebrations, he was appropriately nostalgic and lovingly reminisced about his student days in the college. He told the present generation of students, using, as he usually did, Rabindranath : মনে রেখো, আমরাও একদিন গান গেয়েছিলোম, আরাও একদিন তরী বেয়েছিলোম।

The memory of our teacher resting in an armchair in the Senior Common Room, reading a book with a cigarette in his hand, striding the corridor to enter Room No. 17 and entrancing generations of students with his mesmerising teaching, will remain forever and continue to sustain us.

Amalesh Tripathi married Dr. Dipti Tripathi who was a distinguished writer in Bengali and who won distinction as the Principal of Bethune College. They had two children, a son who joined the Indian Foreign Service and a daughter who is a doctor.

Amalesh Tripathi died on 18 June, 1998 after a long and fruitful life. ■