

# Professor Ashin Dasgupta

Rudrangshu Mukherjee\*

I was a student of Ashin Das Gupta in the History Honours class from 1970 to the time he left for Heidelberg in early 1972. In terms of student-teacher relationships, this was a very short time. Yet he left an indelible mark and in more ways than I can even begin to recount. His was a very formative influence on my life.

He was matchless as a teacher. When I left Presidency College to study in equally well-known institutions, I realized that as an undergraduate I had had the good fortune to be taught by one of the best teachers one can hope to find anywhere. As a lecturer, he had no flamboyance. He taught not for effect but to make us understand a particular problem. He emphasized the underlying logic of historical events and the method for understanding and articulating that logic. He loved order and thus his lectures were exquisitely structured. He never lectured from notes; he had the logic in his head. He was a kind man who seemed to have endless time for his students. But intellectual laziness or smartness could make one the recipient of his biting sarcasm. I was a rather ebullient undergraduate and as I grew up I came to appreciate more and more the value of Das Gupta's restraining hand on my exuberance.

In the class room, the analytical structure of a topic was laid bare and a reading list was provided. But in tutorials and to those who took the trouble to seek him out in his home, he discussed historiographical controversies, problems which had not been addressed in the monographic literature and generally about literature and matters relating to culture. To those who took the trouble, he taught how to write lucidly, cogently and without purple patches. These lessons, often given non-formally,

were invaluable. He taught us to think about problems and quietly but surely veered our young minds away from the idea that history could be learnt through rote. Once talking about dates in history, he made the comment which I have never forgotten. "If you write", he said, "that the third battle of Panipat took place in 1760 I will not penalize you. But if you write that it took place in the 19th century, I will give zero for the entire answer." The significance of this statement in a country where history teaching is obsessed with dates needs no emphasis.

Even when I was no longer formally his pupil, he kept an eye on my work and research interests. When we met the conversation turned invariably to books that he had read and I had read. For a brief while we worked together on the *Itihas Granthamala* project of which he was the General Editor and I recall the care he took over manuscripts, reading them and then sending them on to a suitable referee.

This is not the place to discuss Das Gupta's work as a historian. But those who read him books and articles will notice that the same qualities that informed his teaching are visible in his writing. A pervading sense of order; arguments logically arranged and lit up by wonderful prose. I can think of no other historian in India who is more readable.

His death was untimely but expected. His long drawn out illness had not taken from his zest for reading and writing. His eyes shone with affection whenever an old student visited him. I found it remarkable how he retained, despite his illness, his impish sense of humour. More than one generation of History students in Presidency College were taught by him to think coherently about the past to which he now belongs. ■

\* Alumnus 1970-73 (History)