

Professor Manmohan Ghosh

(1869-1924)

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WHEN I think of my teachers, both at school and at college, I realise now, when it is more than half a century since I ceased formally to be a student, what great reasons I have to feel grateful to them. It was they who put us in the way of loving learning and scholarship and of trying to follow great ideals, to appreciate beautiful and noble things in life, and above all to try to live the good life. Now when I am fairly advanced in years approaching my 77th birthday, the memory of my old teachers and professors fills me with a sense of sincere reverence and gratitude. I feel a great yearning to show them once again my fervent homage in our old Indian way, by bowing down to them and touching their feet. Reverence and salutation to all my teachers, and, among them, to Prof. Manmohan Ghosh, of hallowed memory, go out with all the respect and affection of my heart in a profound obeisance.

Life is a texture of good and evil, of joys and sorrows, of blessings and misfortunes. Among the blessings that have been granted to me by Providence, I place at the forefront the opportunities I have had of coming in close touch with some of the greatest personalities as well as greatest teachers of our days. Prominent among them have been Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, George Abraham Grierson, and teachers like Professor H. M. Percival and M. Ghosh as well as Benoyendra Nath Sen and P. C. Ghosh at the Presidency College in Calcutta and Professors F. W. Thomas, Daniel Jones, E. A. Denison Ross L. D. Barnett, Jules Bloch, Antoine Meillet, Paul Pelliot, and Jean Przylski in England and France. I was privileged to come in more or less intimate relationship

with most of these great men, and from each of them I have received inspiration in different departments of life, which has remained a potent influence in the formation of any personality, and character ever since. But when I think of my teachers, naturally I could try to recall what I received from them. Among my teachers at the college when I was in the formative period of my life during my teens, I think I might mention specially Prof. H. M. Percival, Prof. M. Ghosh and Prof. Benoyendra Nath Sen. It is not that I did not receive anything of great value from the others. But when I think of what has helped to make me that I am, in moulding the bent and proclivities of my mind, temperament and aspiration, I think I should mention first all these three great teachers of mine. What I feel I received from them, as vivifying rays of light, to exalt my life and endow it with purpose, were the following :

A spirit of dedication to serious and arduous work, as well as an endeavour to go deep down below the surface of things to find out the hidden sources not only of beauty and goodness but also of both understanding and aspiration.

Touch of the great masters

When I think of it at the fag end of my life, I am filled with a great reconnaissance and reverence for these masters of mine, and also for all other great souls whose touch, direct and indirect, has enabled me to lift my mind and my heart up towards great things.

In my study of literature and the experience of man's life, both inner and outer, apart from Rabindranath Tagore, the two great teachers of mine were Professor M. Ghosh and Professor H. M. Percival. I was

* Alumnus : 1909-13

privileged to receive from both of them during my contact with them as a student, and also after I had ceased to study under them. But it was long after my student days in Calcutta, when I was in London as a Government of India scholar, I could contact once again Professor Percival, who had gone to take residence permanently in England after his retirement from service in India. Professor Percival was a Eurasian, or an Anglo-Indian, as our mixed population of European and Indian origin were politely described, but I could find after close contact with him in London, he was in his culture and mental make-up hundred per cent Indian. He was a tall man rather dark in colour, but he always stood and walked straight ; he never stooped and we never saw him even when he sat in his chair to bend his back. He was in fact, like a ship's mast or a straight tall pine tree and with his bushy moustache below a straight nose and his piercing eyes he looked every inch of him a veteran military commander, who seemed to compel by his very presence the obedience and respect of all and sundry. He was a man of very few words, and in the class-room he very rarely smiled and when he did smile, for example when reading with us a Shakespeare play it was said that the more careful and ardent students, who used to take down meticulously whatever would fall from his lips, would write down by the margin of the passage or line which provoked his smile "here Mr. Percival smiles". Professor Percival had several generations of students who sat at his feet, and so also had Professor Manmohan Ghosh. The late Professor P. C. Ghosh was a great admirer of Mr. Percival, and in his affection for our great master he was more than a devoted pupil—he was almost an affectionate son. Professor P. C. Ghosh tried to perpetuate Professor Percival's memory in various ways, particularly in trying to bring out from Calcutta editions of some of Shakespeare's plays with Mr. Percival's notes and comments. It would be worth while to write in detail our reminiscences of Professor Percival, but that could be only in another context.

A rare poetic sensibility

As most of Professor M. Ghosh's pupils will remember, he was rather a quiet and retired sort of man, and although he was easily approachable, both in the class room and out of it, there was something unique in his personality and presence which did not encourage familiarity. From his abstract and detached air and a frequent distant look in his eyes, he compelled from us a certain reverent awe. In the class-rooms when we looked at him, we could not help having a feeling that with his occasional detachment from the topic he was lecturing upon, he must have been under the burden of a great sorrow, some great suffering or frustration in life. Yet we could see that he was the gentlest of men, who allowed nothing to ruffle his temper. Endowed as he was with a rare poetic sensibility and imagination and gift of expression, our reading of English literature with him always used to be an uncommon treat, which we all would look forward to. His method of approach to poetry and other literature used to be somewhat different from that of the other great professor in the Presidency College : Mr. Percival. We had a feeling that Mr. Ghosh, the Poet, was more synthetic in his attitude, and Mr. Percival, the scholar, was more analytical. Each was in a way complementary to the other and we may well congratulate ourselves for having had the great good fortune of studying under these two men, who can be described as two of the greatest teachers in the annals of modern education in our country. We read Shakespeare's *King Lear* under both—with Professor M. Ghosh for the B.A. Examination. and with Professor Percival for the M.A. Examination. We had also read with Professor M. Ghosh Emerson's *Representative Men*, but we got the exhaustive critical notes on the same book by Professor Percival, and it was unique how Professor Ghosh succeeded in imparting to us a broad ensemble view of Emerson's philosophical ideas and concepts on the basis of this particular work, whereas Professor Percival's notes gave us a very detailed insight into Emerson's style and his

background of scholarship and culture. Similarly we read Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" with Mr. M. Ghosh, but we could get Mr. Percival's notes and observations—frequently these were strikingly penetrating and original on characters and situations in play.

Professor M. Ghosh's enthusiasms for Greek literature and culture was contagious, at least so it was for me and for a few of our class-fellows. With Professor Ghosh his love of Greek was a passion. Frequently he would come to college by tram, and I noticed he used to bring with him some Greek classic, in prose or verse to read on the way, or during intervals of work at college. Those were the days long before the publications of the Loeb Classical Library, in which have been published now almost the entire literatures of Greece and Rome with the Greek or Latin text and English translation printed on opposite pages. I could see that Professor Ghosh had the Oxford Greek texts interleaved and bound with Bohn's English translation, and in this way he could get the text and the translation in a convenient single volume, for rapid or leisurely reading of the Greek text. All this care to have the text and translations together showed that his love of Greek literature was as much of the literary man as of the scholar of Greek.

Lovable Simplicity

The real man reveals himself when he is out of harness, and the greatness of Professor M. Ghosh was made clearer to us when we had occasion to meet him away from college, in his own home and study. It was very special good fortune for me to be able to see him at his house (at that time he was living in an old-fashioned small mansion at 55 Elliot Road — this building has now been replaced by another on the same site.) I would go to his house frequently enough after College hours both when I was senior M.A. student, and subsequently after my passing out of college. We did not have at that time (during 1909–13) much knowledge of his personal life. We knew that he was taken to England

for studying when he was only eleven, and he was in one of the great English Public Schools, and after that he joined Oxford. Soon after he began his life in Oxford, he distinguished himself as a keen and discriminating student of literature, and made his mark in the Greek and Latin classics. In Oxford he made literary friendships with a number of prominent English writers and poets and art-lovers, among whom was Laurence Binoyon, the distinguished poet, critic and historian of art, who edited a selection from Professor Ghosh's English poems. After obtaining the highest degree from Oxford, he was taken into the Indian Educational Service, and he finally joined the Presidency College in Calcutta. I do not know the other details about his life and his career. But I could see, particularly during the evenings that I was privileged to spend with him at his home, when the real man and artist came out in all his lovable simplicity that it was rare good fortune for any one to have a sort of intellectual fellowship with him. These evenings have remained indelible in my memory, and they have had the greatest influence for good in the formation of my cultural outlook and the extension of my mental horizon. He was specially pleased with me, probably because I evinced an interest in his favourite subject of Greek language and literature. I used to read with the greatest relish some of the greatest master-pieces of ancient Greek literature in English translation, particularly Homer, the Homeric Hymns, the three Tragic Poets, Herodotus, Pindar, Theokritos and the lesser Lyric poets. Fragments from Sappho in the original Greek from Warton's edition, which was lent to me by Professor Ghosh, I got by heart, But I must confess that not being philosophically inclined I did not venture to read Plato. The fact that I was genuinely fond of Greek literature made him like me very much.

After I was formally taken to his place one afternoon by a fellow-student who used to visit him several times a week, he graciously took me in his entourage and later on into his confidence in matters connected with arts and letters. Talks with Professor M. Ghosh

over a cup of tea in his study enabled me to have a clear conception of literature and art. He would sometimes recite some great passage from Greek literature and explain it to me. I remember on one occasion he read to me a beautiful little lyric in Greek which was ascribed to Aesop, the Greek wise man and fabulist, and I liked it so much that I took it down in the original Greek and easily got it by heart, and I still rememeber it :

*pos tis, aneu thanatou, se pheugoi,
bie.....*

Who can escape thee, O life, let alone Death ?

For many are the evils in thee, which are both difficult to bear or to shun.

The joys in thee are the beautiful things in Nature—

The Earth, the Sun, the Star, and the wheels of the moon and the Sun.

As for the rest, they are fears and torments,

And if anyone enjoys a little happiness,

Nemesis exacts a compense.”

Profound Love for Greek Literature

Professor Ghosh had that kind of profound admiration for Greek which characterised some of the great scholars and writers of Europe, for whom the love of Greek was the sole devotion in life. It is said that Anatole France, who was a writer of this type, was once shown some very fine specimens of Chinese art in landscape painting. He was immensely moved, but he would not pay a divided allegiance to his beloved Greek, and he wanted to shut his eyes towards the beauties of what appeared to him to be the alien art of China ; and he declared, almost with a spirit of despair, his whole-hearted devotion : *pour moi, les Grecs suffisent* (for me, the Greeks are sufficient). Professor M. Ghosh, however had the catholicity and acceptance which are characteristics of the Indian mind. I was very much impressed by Chinese nature poetry, which I had read in translation and as Professor M. Ghosh appeared not to have known anything about

it, I ventured to lend to my master Herbert Giles’s “History of Chinese Literature”, which gave translations of many beautiful pieces of Chinese poetry, so that he might read and compare it all with the great things of Greek literature. I was of course very keen to benefit from his reaction to Chinese literature. Professor Ghosh read Giles’s book carefully, and I was happy to find that he was very much impressed by the great quality of Chinese nature-poetry and he told me : “I am glad you gave this book. Chinese poetry in its descriptions of nature is really of the highest quality, and I must tell you that it can give points even to Greek literature in this matter—it even beats Greek literature.”

Professor Ghosh also encouraged and directed along fruitful channels my love for and pleasure in the plastic arts. It was he who first gave me an idea of the greatness of Greek art of both the classic and the pre-classic periods by showing me reproductions of sculptures, vasepainting and coins, and by talking to me about them. He initiated me into such diverse expressions in art as Gothic sculpture, Italian painting of the *Quattrocento*, the Japanese wood-cuts of the Vikiyo-ye school and Chinese landscape painting. I have reasons to feel eternally grateful to Professor M. Ghosh for the long afternoons and evenings which I used to spend at his house at Elliot Road, and sometimes I was so very much engrossed by what I was listening to from him that I missed my last tram car for home and would tramp all the way back if I did not get a *ticca-gharry* (the ramshackle horse-carriages which were the only source of locomotion in Calcutta half a century ago when the trams ceased to run). As I have found it, his scholarship and culture has been both a joy and source of happiness as much as an example and inspiration for me.

A rare poetic genius

And his heroism in family life ! It was plain that there was something wrong at home, and I gradually discovered that he had a sick wife, who frequently was off her head, and he had two little daughters whom he had

to mother. Yet no word of complaint ever escaped from his lips. He was all sweetness as he was all light. Even when he was in the Presidency College, very much living, and moving amongst us, he seemed to us be passing into a legend. And that was partly because of his two brothers Aravinda (Aurobindo) Ghosh and Barindra Ghosh. Barindra had already become an almost legendary figure when he was condemned by a British Court in Calcutta to transportation for life in the Andaman Islands for his revolutionary activities to bring about the freedom of India from the British. Aravinda Ghosh (Sree Aurobindo) with his immense intellectual achievement, narrowly missed the same fate, and he found asylum with the French at Pondicherry where he later on became a Yogi and a religious teacher who was worshipped like a veritable god on earth by his most ardent devotees. The general detachment of Professor M. Ghosh from the affairs of the life around him, and his burying himself in his own studies, his poetical compositions, and his art collections, also made him for most of us a recluse living "far from the madding crowd" in a world of his own creation. We heard a story that Professor Ghosh, because of his greatness in English poetry, had a chance of becoming the Poet—Laureate of England at the time when Robert Bridges was appointed to that office. That, perhaps, has no foundation in fact. But, it was certainly indicative of the very high estimation in which he was held by Englishmen who were connoisseurs of poetry.

His kindness to me expressed itself in the manifold ways in which he would give me of his best—in his genuine sympathy for me (he gave me a certificate which was exceedingly flattering, and I had a genuine pleasure and pride that it was a sincere expression of what he felt about me), and his solicitude to give a definite shape to my thoughts and aspirations. He would honour me by reading to me some of his prose papers which he had to prepare for a little literary coterie of the highest order

in Bengal, which was started at the residence of Rabindranath Tagore, where would be held discussions in which men like Rabindranath, his nephews Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, distinguished writers like Pramatha Chaudhuri (husband of Rabindranath's niece Indira Devi Chaudhurani), Indira and art-lovers of Calcutta, and a few others among the intellectual elite in Calcutta, would take part. It was of course an informal gathering of intellectuals and creative writers, too exalted for a young professor like me then just out of College. But these used to bring to me a whiff of mountain wind or sea breeze in my humdrum day-to-day life.

It was one of the greatest disappointments in my life that after returning from Europe after three years, in 1922, reports of his serious illness prevented me from going to see him. How glad he would have been to hear from me that I had been to Rome and had also made my pilgrimage to Greece—had seen the Parthenon and Delphi, Olympia and Sparta, Tiryns and Mycenae! How would I have loved to talk to him of my experiences, as I had the pleasure of doing to Prof. Percival in London. This disappointment is all the keener, because I was informed that he retained the same kindly feeling for me even when further serious mental disorders began to cloud his last day.

All homage to my great teacher, as he used to appear to us in our classes: kind and gentle, erudite, yet of exceeding simplicity, whose luminous exposition of literature showed that we had a rare poetic genius and an inspired master in our midst. He was every inch of him a poet, a scholar, and a gentleman. May his memory for ever continue to be green for all of us who were his pupils, may his spirit be a beacon light for all of us in our striving for sweetness and light, and may the living presence of a true teacher continue to inspire us through his writings as a poet.

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