

Professor Sengupta : A Student's Tribute

I have been approached by Professor Jasodhara Bagchi of Jadavpur University to write my impressions about her father, the late Dr. J. C. Sengupta, on the occasion of his hundredth birth anniversary. This gives me the rare privilege to pay homage to a teacher who has had a profound influence in delineating the direction and quality of my life and career.

My reminiscences cover only a brief span of time, 1949-'50, when I was a student of the B.Sc. Honours Course in the Department of Botany at Presidency College, Calcutta. Of these two years, about half a year was spent at Barnard College of Columbia University, in New York City.

I vividly remember my first encounter with the Professor. I had to meet him before I could start attending classes, as I was a case of late admission. I was not looking forward to this interview, as I was already intimidated by the college folklore about him. He was known as the "Herr" for his German doctorate and his stern and forbidding demeanour. The man I met was a far cry from this image. His eyes alone gave him away. They sparkled with intelligence, a sense of humour and a touch of mischievousness that made you feel at home and at ease in no time at all.

Professor Sengupta was a practising liberal, who was responsible for making it possible for the women students of the college to venture forth into areas considered to be bastions of

Sandhya Mitra*

our male classmates. To understand the significance of Professor Sengupta's contribution, one has to be familiar with the conditions during my student days. The year 1949 saw the entry of a hoard of "undesirables" into this famous institution of learning. A large proportion of the teachers called us the "gate crashers". These were girls who had secured more of the merit positions than the men candidates in the Matriculation and Senior Cambridge streams of the school leaving examinations. A few of these teachers revealed their displeasure openly. The more gentler ones advised us on how not to comport in an essentially male milieu. Professor Sengupta was a delightful anachronism in this hostile and mediaeval atmosphere. He encouraged us at every opportunity to participate in the college events, irrespective of any derision expected from others. Today the campus is teeming with confident and vivacious girls. This was not always so. We have to thank Dr. Sengupta as one of the very few mentors who actively made this possible.

Let me recall a few of the instances of our Professor in such "liberalising" endeavours.

Professor Sengupta walked into a classroom one day, where three girls of the Honours class were fiddling with some laboratory chores. He stood before us, with a pair of sunglasses in one hand and spoke to one corner of the ceiling. He was terribly disappointed, he said, that there were no girls of this department in the fields, where our department boys were playing a volleyball match. We tried to explain that, other teachers would not appreciate us "loitering" outside legitimate classrooms. "So what?" Sir persisted. "Don't you think our boys would do better if you were there to cheer them?"

Again, on the occasion of the annual sports day, Professor Sengupta—also the person in charge of sports—desired that we take part in the events. He failed to see the names of

the "Botany Girls" (sounds like a Pop group of today) among the entries submitted to his committee ! Not having played since we left school and donned sarees, we protested. How about the "Pitcher Race ?" This was too much, and I burst out laughing. "Sir, I know, I will stumble within two feet of the start line and I doubt very much that my pitcher would stay in place even that long." Sir was not to be thwarted by such lame excuses. "Then go and be the "stragglers. What fun is it for spectators to watch the winners ? They reach the finish line before one is aware of it. The stragglers and stumblers are the ones who provide the entertainment." This was not the end of the story. A few days before the Day, we found a bunch of white salwar—kurta sets in a classroom. I presume, they were procured through his daughter who was still in school. I do not remember if we used the suits, but do recall that, my pitcher fell before I started and saved me from further embarrassment. However, the college saw more of us in the fields and in the badminton courts. Hidden talents were exposed. Whoever would have guessed that, quiet Chitra Saha and demure Rekha Chaliha could outrace many a fast-runner boy ?

Another time, we were coerced into submitting our names for the college debating competition. Sir would not take "No" for an answer. When we gathered together in the sombre Physics Lecture Theatre, I discovered to my horror that, my two women classmates had ditched me. I stood, looking foolish, at the blackboard, while they sat grinning from the highest tier of benches. They had cleverly withdrawn their names just before the start of events ! This forced participation freed me from my natural inhibitions. I took part regularly in intra and intercollege debates and acquired the confidence to speak before audiences, both big and small.

Dr. Sengupta was fond of music. He attended most of the musical performances staged by the college. We occasionally exploited this trait to our advantage. If one of his classes coincided in time with some important ballgame that at least the boys were anxious to attend, we would request him to let us off. He would appear to feign indifference and then behave as if he had suddenly hit upon a unique solution to our problem. We would be excused provided someone sang one of his favourite songs of Tagore. One of us was a fabulous singer. Yes, you have guessed right : Prabir Guhathakurta came forward and sang "Bondhu raho raho" to a hushed audience irrespective of how incongruous it seemed to a passersby in the outer verandah !

In passing I may mention that, three of our Professors had budding musicians in their families. Dr. Kanti Banerji's daughter became the renowned singer, Alpona Bannerji. Dr. Girija Majumdar's son was the well known Gauri Prasanna Majumdar, while Dr. Sengupta's daughter became a proficient singer of Rabindrasangeet.

Dr. Sengupta's most outstanding feature was his scholarship and his respect for scholarship. He was able to transmit this quality to others without being ponderous or pontificating. Unlike many of our other teachers, he was always available for consultation on academic matters. Whenever I had approached him, I usually came away with an added enrichment. He would use the occasion to introduce me to classic books in science not in the lists of our required readings. He would sometimes tantalize me with unfinished anecdotes about masters in the field of botany, such that my curiosity would compel me to find out about the rest of the story from a book normally not known to an undergraduate student.

Professor Sengupta was not an armchair scholar. He was very effective in the laboratory classes and in the fields. His administrative duties, at first as the Head of the department and eventually as the Principal of Presidency College, seldom prevented him from accompanying us on the required local or out of town excursions. He was knowledgeable about the most insignificant of the specimens we collected. At the same time he introduced us to the

intricacies of studying ecology. He instilled into us the importance of maintaining the natural relationships between living things in a particular habitat and pointed out the gravity of tampering with this symbiotic pattern of life and environment. In fact, he had us note the differences in the distribution of species in natural ecosystems and in ones invaded by man's attempts at development.

On these trips, Professor Sengupta's sense of humour, sportsman spirit, and guileless adaptability to uncomfortable weather, terrains or ambience at large, was extremely infectious. Some of us who were not used to "roughing it out", or even were embarrassingly accompanied by a helper provided by an anxious parent, soon became veteran, hardy naturalists under his influence. It was amazing how Professor Sengupta managed to transform the fatigue and discomfort of a day spent in slushy, mosquito infested countrysides into moments of wonder and excitement. On one long far away trip I discovered anew his concern and affection for his students. Before we left, he took me aside and asked me to bring duplicates of the specimens I gathered for one of my classmates, who had fallen ill and could not accompany us on this important excursion.

Dr. Sengupta was equally enthusiastic and meticulous when conducting our laboratory sessions. He drilled into us that, observations and results of experiments have to be honest, irrespective of their nonconformity with expected or printed data. And anybody who volunteered to do more than class requirements was made to feel as if he or she was doing him a favour and not the other way around ! This reminds me of another example of Dr. Sengupta's supervision of the growth of individual students.

A couple of us wanted to lay hands on some imported laboratory instruments that cluttered up the walls of the department. Long neglect and disuse had left them dusty and tarnished. One day two of us asked him if we could clean them up. He was so enthusiastic that he gave us a few helpers. The two of us began what to me, at least, was one of the most enjoyable periods of my college days. Often we would find him standing quietly behind us as we washed, polished and tinkered away at these relics of some ancient departmental purchases.

Not allowing the momentum of activities to be dissipated, we next attacked the boxes of imported microscope slides. We replaced the dried up and yellowed mounting fluids from many slides with fresh fluids. The two "blossoming scientists" or meddlesome, interfering nuisances started haunting the department during the next long holiday. We were desperately looking for persons who needed scientific assistance. Dr. Sengupta removed us from the hairs of his research students, who were never absent from their territories (almost as if they were part of the furniture or fixtures of the place) and got us tied up with a project to determine the rooting capabilities of gibberilic acid for a large set of woody plants.

There is no doubt in my mind that, my love of experimentation, reading of scientific literature, and worrying about the enigmas in biology took flight from the base created by Professor Sengupta.

Dr. Sengupta was an able teacher. He was clear, unambiguous and systematic in the treatment of his subject. So often I had heard that teachers in developed countries had magical ways of imparting knowledge that could not be expected from home-grown talents. My own experiences have been otherwise. The plant physiology course taught by Dr. Sengupta was remarkably similar in structure, content and emphasis to that presented by an internationally acclaimed scientist, whose lectures I attended at Columbia University. I was amazed at the feeling of *deja vu* that I experienced during the classes of the American teacher.

Writing these few words about my revered teacher has opened the flood-gates of many more incidents and impressions and memories. I wish he was still with us and I was not trying to force into a capsule the innumerable mementos that he has left behind for us to treasure so humbly. My greatest regret is that, I did not keep in touch with him as often as I should have. I am especially heartbroken that I have not been able to present to him a few of the fruits of his labour——the books on Genetics, and allied topics that were authored by me. It is at times like this that, one wants desperately to believe that, unseen by us, his spirit is showering us with heartfelt blessings.

* Botany (1949-50)