



Tarapada Mukherji

Professor Tarapada Mukherji : A Tribute

If I were a student of Presidency College Professor Tarapada Mukherji would have been my teacher. But even as a student of the Scottish Church College between 1931 and 1935 I heard of Professor Mukherji's reputation as a teacher. When I entered my college in 1931 Professor Mukherji had just joined Presidency College as Lecturer and some of my contemporaries who were students of Presidency College used to tell me about his personality and the quality of his teaching. To be mentioned as a fine teacher in a college like Presidency College was indeed a distinction. In those days we used to have some knowledge of the academic background of our teachers. I knew that Professor Mukherji stood first

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in first class in English in Calcutta University in 1925. I also knew that he was a first class honours graduate in English of our university. Students were so appreciative of his teaching that I was very keen to see him and if possible attend one of his classes at least once. But unfortunately our College timetable did not permit me to do so. It was in 1935 when I was an M.A. student of Calcutta University that I had a chance to see him one day when he was entering his college around 10 o'clock. One of my fellow-students pointed to him and said that this was Professor Tarapada Mukherji. Since he was crossing the gate of his college in gentle steps I could have a glimpse of him and he struck me as an exceptionally handsome person. Clad in *dhoti* and *chaddar*, he impressed me as a person with a personality marked by dignity and grace. It was ten years later that I came close to him when I was an officiating professor of English at Presidency College in 1945. I confess a sense of nervousness while sitting in the Staff Room of a College where Percival, Manmohan Ghosh and P.C. Ghosh had taught. I thought Professor Mukherji saw it and through kindly conversation removed my uneasiness. What really touched me was that he created in me the impression that I was his equal. I do not think I ever impressed my students as a good teacher. But I have a feeling that I was a good talker in the Staff Room, and Professor Mukherji

gave me a chance to talk freely in the presence of many distinguished teachers in that college.

Soon I discovered the secret of Professor Mukherji's success as a teacher. In the course of our conversation I found that he had a sense of discipline in his use of language. He pursued quality even in private conversation. His words were well-chosen and they were well-articulated, and that he combined depth with discipline I discovered when he expressed his opinion of our academic life. He would never say a word to show that he was a scholar and he would never mention anything about the art of teaching. But I could see that he had mastered that art.

Ere long I became very intimate with him and began to visit him at his residence. He was exceptionally hospitable and I may here say something about his kindness although it is something that relates to my personal life. On my return from England I met him at his house when Asoke, his elder son, had already left for higher studies in English at Oxford. Incidentally I told Professor Mukherji that when I went to the same University I was obliged to borrow money from my Provident Fund in my college at Delhi. Professor Mukherji at once asked me about the amount I yet owed to my college. I told him that I was repaying it in monthly instalments. Professor Mukherji offered to help me in paying off my college at once. I was overwhelmed by this gesture and told him that it would be possible for me to return the money to my college without much difficulty. But I still remember Professor Mukherji's words which almost brought tears to my eyes.

When Calcutta University gave him an award for his eminence as a teacher in 1982 I realised how his students were really full of admiration for the quality of his teaching.

Professor Mukherji never thought of doing any research for a doctoral degree. Actually in those days research was not essential for recognition as a teacher. None of my teachers at the Scottish Church College possessed doctoral degrees although some of them were remarkable in their teaching. At Oxford my supervisor was not a Ph. D., although she had to her credit some valuable publications. None of the five professors of the university was a doctorate. I do not disparage research although I know from practical experience that it has really nothing to do with the quality of teaching. I have also a feeling that learning may sometimes blunt sensibility and affect teaching. If our professors now begin to explain Derrida while handling a text our students may think that the text does not exist. This may create a problem for a teacher who cares for good teaching.

Professor Tarapada Mukherji belongs to that class of teachers who thinks that learning must be relevant to teaching and I know that he possessed the learning essential for a good teacher.

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