

Remembering Tarak Nath Sen as Tutor

Malabika Sarkar

Perhaps it is inevitable that, as time goes by, we should recall our days in college as the golden years. That was the time when, as young adults, the world was all before us. But for those of us who were English Honours students in Presidency College in the mid-1960s, there is another reason. One can say with conviction that at no other time has the English Department of Presidency College been enriched by the presence of such a gifted set of teachers. Remembering them, and remembering in particular the legendary Tarak Nath Sen, is not only an act of nostalgia but also a wish that perhaps, some day, a measure of brilliant scholarship, without any intellectual arrogance, and indeed with an abundance of grace and compassion, will bring new glory to Presidency College.

For English Honours students at Presidency College in the mid-1960s, the two figures of authority in the college could not have been more dissimilar—the Principal, Professor Sanat Bose, an able mathematician but unsure of himself and tormented by the political unrest of the times, and the Head of the Department of English, Professor Tarak Nath Sen, dignified and seemingly almost unapproachable, respected by all. Many hours of my three years in college from 1965 to 1968 were spent alternately sitting under the arches outside the Arts Library, chatting with friends and waiting for TNS to arrive for our *Macbeth* classes, and springing up to be reprimanded by Sanat Bose who told us that that was a very unsuitable place for students— in particular girl students—to sit.

Life within the department revolved around those who taught us—the brilliant and eccentric Amal Bhattacharji, Sailendra Kumar Sen, the distinguished scholar with his irresistible, charming smile, the enigmatic and inspiring Arun Kumar Das Gupta and the vivacious and much-loved Kajal Sengupta. And above all, Tarak Nath Sen, who held this very special department together.

As students, we found him formidable because of his scholarship. We were often

impatient when he kept us waiting till 4.30 or 5 in the evening because he always arrived late for class but we were enthralled once he started teaching. None of us will forget his lectures on *Macbeth*. We sat spellbound in that small room inside the library as the twilight faded. In spite of frequent digressions into discussions about Shakespeare's short lines, he had the rare ability of being able to make us live and breathe Shakespeare. Before our Part I Examinations, and again before our Part II, Tarak Nath Sen took special discussion classes covering the entire syllabus. These classes would often continue till 9.30 at night causing great inconvenience to those who lived far away. But the sessions were invaluable and not one of us wished to miss any.

I had the great good fortune to have Arun Kumar Das Gupta as my tutor in my first year and Tarak Nath Sen as my tutor in my second and third year. This was a very special privilege. For students one year senior and one year junior to me, he did not take any tutorials at all. In my batch, Satyabrata Pal joined me later as a fellow tutorial student. Two years after us, Sukanta Chaudhuri was the last student whose tutorials he took. I feel privileged to have been in the select band of those who had TNS as their tutor.

I come from a conservative Bengali family. My parents, although generally non-interfering, always felt that they knew best what was good for me. My father was a distinguished doctor— in fact India's first neurologist—and carried himself with an air of quiet self-assurance. But to him TNS was God and anything he suggested was a command not to be taken lightly. There are two incidents I remember in this context. The first of these took place in late 1967. It was the winter break and I was then preparing for my Part II Examinations. One day I received a letter in Bengali from Tarak Nath Sen. The beautifully handwritten letter in TNS's favourite green ink asked me to meet him at home to discuss *As You Like It*. I was to reach his Dover Lane house at 10.30 at night! The strict rules at home forbade me to stay out beyond 9 p.m. I showed the letter to my father. Not for a moment did he hesitate. If Tarak Nath Sen has asked you to go at 10.30 at night to discuss Shakespeare, that is what you must do, he said. I arrived at TNS's house in a chauffeur driven car accompanied by the tallest and most formidable looking durwan my father had managed to enlist from SSKM Hospital. These two body guards remained on duty outside till about 1.30 at night when my tutorial discussions ended. But once inside, and upstairs

in Tarak Nath Sen's study, I forgot them, and my parents' anxiety, and everything else, mesmerized and transported into another world by the sheer brilliance of my tutor's discussions. In later life, especially at Cambridge University, I have had the good fortune to be guided by distinguished supervisors. But few could match the insights, the involvement and commitment to his subject, that one could sense in the teaching of Tarak Nath Sen.

The other incident took place after our Part II results were announced. I received another handwritten letter from Tarak Nath Sen, requesting me to meet him. When I did so, he enquired about my future plans. I said that I would like to teach and so I would naturally join the M. A. course. He immediately advised me, very firmly, to go to the English Department of Jadavpur University—which he described as Subodh Sengupta's department— as I could not expect to learn anything much at another University. Again my father—who till then had never imagined that Jadavpur University was a place to be taken seriously—immediately changed his mind and said that if TNS had suggested Jadavpur, that is where I should go.

I consider myself singularly fortunate not only to have had TNS as my tutor at Presidency College, but indeed to have had him guide the course of my life in many ways. But there were others more fortunate than I. I remember my good friend Chitrita Banerjee, two years senior to me, an exceptionally good student, who had, at one time, become quite thin to impress a fellow student with whom she thought she was in love. The young man did not notice, but Tarak Nath Sen, her tutor, did. He was very concerned, thinking she was unwell, and advised her to eat plenty of *sandesh* as that was good for one's health. I envied her as I never had the privilege of receiving such solicitous advice from him.

It is strange to think that more than forty years have gone by since the time TNS was my tutor. From Medieval Studies to T.S. Eliot, TNS's ability to engage with the specific experience of literature with a combination of passion and discipline touched the lives of not only his tutorial pupils but all students of his time in the Department of English, Presidency College. I am sure for all of them, as for me, he continues to be a living presence.

Alumnus 1965-1968 (English)