

Sir Asutosh Mookerjee and the Presidency College, Calcutta

CHITTATOSH MOOKERJEE

Sir Asutosh Mookerjee was a distinguished alumnus of the Presidency College (1880-1886). His father Ganga Prasad (born on 17th December, 1836) was the third son of Biswanath Mookerjee who was a resident of Zirat village of Hooghly District.

After Biswanath died Ganga Prasad and his three brothers were in dire straits. They had moved to Calcutta. Ganga Prasad with the help of his eldest brother and the scholarship awarded to him had his education in Colootola Hare School.

Thereafter Ganga Prasad was admitted to the Presidency College and obtained his Bachelor's Degree of Calcutta University in 1861. Ganga Prasad had first taken admission in the Law Course of the Presidency College. Then he changed his mind and took admission in the Calcutta Medical College. In the year 1867 Ganga Prasad obtained Bachelor of Medicine Degree from Calcutta Medical College.

While still a student Ganga Prasad married Jagattarini, a daughter of Pandit Harilal Chatterjee, who was a distinguished Sanskrit scholar and was a teacher in Calcutta Normal School (Teachers' Training School). On 29th June, 1864, Asutosh was born in a rented house in Malanga Lane, Bowbazar.

After his graduation from the Calcutta Medical College, Ganga Prasad shifted to Bhowanipur and began to practice as a physician. He with his family lived in rented premises first in a house in Kamrangatala Lane and then shifted to another premises in Puddapukur Road. In April 1873, Ganga Prasad built his residence in 77 Russa Road (Now 77 Asutosh Mookerjee Road).

Ganga Prasad had soon become one of the busiest medical practitioners of Bhowanipur. In the midst of his professional work, Ganga Prasad found time to write several Bengali books on medical subjects, maternity, and child

welfare. He also had translated Valmiki's Ramayana into Bengali verse.

Except for a brief period – from January 1872 till December 1875 – Asutosh studied at home with his father and private tutors. Madhusudan Das, Shyamacharan Bose, Abinash Banerjee, Pandit Ram Coomar Chakravorty and others used to teach young Asutosh.

Asutosh was a very bright student and showed special aptitude in Mathematics and English. Ganga Prasad had very great influence in moulding the career of his son Asutosh.

In 1876, Asutosh was admitted to Kalighat South Suburban School (as it was called those days). Several eminent teachers including Pandit Sivanath Sastri and Asutosh Biswas (who later was the Public Prosecutor of district 24 Parganas and was killed in the Court room while the Muraripukur Bomb case was being tried), were then teachers of the said School.

While he was a school student Asutosh had great admiration for Justice Dwarka Nath Mitter (who was the second Indian to be appointed as a Judge of Calcutta High Court) for his vast learning and strength of his character. Dwarka Nath happened to be a friend and neighbour of Ganga Prasad.

Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar also was a friend of Dr. Ganga Prasad. Asutosh, then a school student, visited Banaras, where

he met Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. At the request of Pandit Iswar Chandra, on his way back to Calcutta, Asutosh stopped at Karmatar where Pandit Iswar Chandra was then residing. Thereafter, young Asutosh happened to again meet Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar in the book shop of Thacker, Spink and Co. Pandit Iswar Chandra presented Asutosh a copy of the book Robinson Crusoe and asked him to read the book carefully. This book presented by Iswar Chandra is still preserved by Asutosh's family with deep reverence. Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar remained a role model for Asutosh.

In December 1879 Asutosh had passed his Entrance Examination of Calcutta University and was placed second in order of merit.

Asutosh, throughout his student career, suffered from various

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ailments which seriously interfered with his studies.

In 1880 Asutosh took admission in the 1st year of the Calcutta Presidency College.

Asutosh maintained a diary for the period 1880 to 1886, in which he briefly recorded his life and time in the Presidency College. Narendranath Dutt (Swami Vivekananda) was admitted in the same class with Asutosh. But it is

somewhat strange that there is no record of any interaction between the two either during their student days or later on. Narendranath had left Presidency College and took admission in the General Assemblies Institution.

The diary kept by Asutosh mentions the names of his close friends Satish Chandra Mookerjee (who later taught in National Council of Education and founded Dawn Society), Satish Chandra Roy, Satish Chandra Ghosh. Asutosh's diary also recorded how deeply he was reading books on a wide range of subjects. While he was a student of the Presidency College, Asutosh took keen interest in matters of public importance. His letters to the Editor of The Statesman were frequently published in that newspaper. Once Sir Ramesh Chandra Mitra delivered a speech in the City College suggesting that the Presidency College be closed

with deepest respect.

Among his contemporaries who were senior to Asutosh in Presidency College, I may mention the names of Byomkesh Chakraborty, Asutosh Chowdhury, Bhupendranath Bose, Heramba Chandra Moitra, Abdur Rahim, Prafulla Chandra Roy. All of them had achieved fame in their respective fields.

While Asutosh was a student in Presidency College, the teachers included C.H. Tawney, Prof. William Booth, Prof. F.J. Rowe, Prof. H.W. McCann, Prof. H.M. Percival, Prof. Pearycharan Sarkar, Prof. Prasanna Kumar Sarvadikari.

Asutosh was a favourite student of Prof. Booth who taught mathematics and Prof. Percival, the celebrated Professor of English.

The Presidency College Union was founded on 8th September 1877. By 1881 the Union had become almost defunct. But Asutosh and his friends revived the College Union. Prof. H.M. Percival remained the President of the Union from 1882 to 1886. Asutosh was the Secretary of the Presidency College Union from July 1882 to 1886. In 1887 Hemanta Kumar, the younger brother of Asutosh, had succeeded Asutosh as the Secretary of the Union. Unfortunately, Hemanta Kumar died shortly after passing his B.A. Examination with First Class Honours.

While Asutosh remained the Secretary of the Union, meetings of the students used to be

regularly conducted, debates used to be held. The students including Asutosh used to deliver lectures. Professors of the College used to preside over these functions. Prof. McCann, who was a professor of Mathematics, died and Asutosh and his fellow students raised subscriptions to commemorate his memory. A marble tablet was installed in the Library in memory of Prof. McCann. The balance of the subscription money was given to the Calcutta University for awarding a Gold Medal in the memory of Prof. McCann to the best candidate in B.A. Mathematics Examination every year.

Asutosh used to wear 'Dhooty' with "Chudder" on his shoulder. Asutosh travelled by tram car from his home. One day Asutosh, while alighting from the tram car, fell down. Asutosh then resolved not to use Chudder as a part of his attire. A group was founded who described them as the committee
জন নিবারণী সভা।

When Asutosh was studying in the College, there was agitation among the students when Surendranath Banerjee, editor of the "Bengali" was convicted for contempt and sentenced to imprisonment. Surendranath had criticized in his paper Mr. Justice Norman for ordering that a family idol শাশ্বত শিলা to be brought to his court in connection with a litigation among members of a family. A Full Bench of the High Court by majority found Surendranath Banerjee guilty. Justice Ramesh Chandra Mitra dissented from the majority view.

A number of students including Asutosh held a demonstration near the High Court and pelted brickbats. Some students (not Asutosh) were arrested. Asutosh records in his diary that he had gone to Alipore jail gate to receive those who had been arrested and then released. It was perhaps an irony that Asutosh, who later became a Judge of the High Court, in his youth had thrown brickbats towards the High Court.

While still a student, young Asutosh began buying books for his studies and these books had become the nucleus of his future personal library, which perhaps was one of the largest personal library in the world. His books are now part of the National Library.

Asutosh, who was still an undergraduate student, began to conduct researches in mathematics and to contribute research articles and papers to foreign and Indian journals. In the year 1881, one of his papers appeared in the Cambridge Messenger of Mathematics. Asutosh used to attend lectures in the Indian Association for Cultivation of Science, and in the Asiatic Society of Bengal. He continued to contribute research papers in Indian and foreign journals. He was recognized as an outstanding researcher in mathematical subjects. While he was still a student of Presidency College, Asutosh was elected a member of the London Mathematical Society. Later on he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society, Edinburgh, and learned societies

of Great Britain, France, and Italy.

In 1885 Asutosh stood first in his B.A. Examination and was awarded Ishan Scholarship for having obtained the highest marks among all the successful candidates in that year's B.A. Examination.

In 1886 Asutosh passed M.A. Examination of the Calcutta University standing First Class First. Asutosh also obtained another M.A. Degree in Physics.

Asutosh was recognized as the most outstanding student of his generation. Mr. Alfred Croft, the then Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, offered him a teaching post in the Presidency College. Asutosh, who was also keen to carry on researches in Mathematics, was prepared to accept this offer on condition that his salary must be equal to European teachers of the College. Further, Asutosh would be allowed to conduct his research. Thirdly, Asutosh wanted an assurance that he would never be transferred from Presidency College. The then Director Public Instruction, Bengal, was annoyed and could not accept these conditions and did not appoint Asutosh as a professor in the Presidency College.

Justice Sir Gurudas Banerjee, Judge of Calcutta High Court, was made the first Indian Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University. Sir Gurudas Banerjee also tried to appoint Asutosh as a Professor of Mathematics in the Calcutta University. But he failed to persuade the Government to

create a post carrying salary of Rs. 4,000/- per year for Asutosh. Therefore, Asutosh failed to devote his life to research in Mathematics. He himself had said he that drifted to Law thereafter. In fact he was set to embark on a much more illustrious career.

Sir Rash Behari Ghosh, the legendary legal luminary, was a friend of Ganga Prasad, father of Asutosh. Asutosh, after studying law in the City College, Calcutta, became articled to Sir Rash Behari Ghosh and thereafter Asutosh began to practice law in the Calcutta High Court. Asutosh, however, continued to take interest in mathematical research. He used to take classes in the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science. Asutosh, in a short time, became a very busy lawyer and was

also involved in public life. He also was elected as a Commissioner of Calcutta Municipal Corporation. Asutosh was also elected to the Bengal Legislative Council and subsequently to the Imperial Legislative Council.

In 1904, Asutosh at the early age of 40, was appointed Judge of Calcutta High Court (1904-1924). In 1906, Asutosh became the Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University (1906-1914, 1919-1923).

His career in fields of Law and Education do not form the subject matter of this article. Therefore, I refrain from discussing Sir Asutosh's life as a Jurist and an Educationist.

But I ought to mention that Asutosh Mookerjee had become

the President of the Presidency College Governing Body. He was also the Chairman of the Enquiry Committee appointed following the "Oaten incident". I propose not to discuss the facts relating to them. Prof. Oaten himself had written about them in his autobiography. Others have also dwelt on these facts in detail. I would only conclude by observing that while Netaji Subhas Chandra was removed from Presidency College, because of Sir Asutosh it was possible for Netaji Subhas to resume, after a break, his studies in Scottish Church College - paving the way for his extraordinary and outstanding career in future.

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