

Subodh Chandra Sen Gupta (1903-1998)

Amalendu Das Gupta*

In his book of memoirs in Bengali, *Te Hi No Divasah*, Subodh Chandra Sen Gupta describes three “upsets” during his life as a student at Presidency College. The third was evidently the most instructive. In 1925 he wrote a long editorial article in the College Magazine on the death of Chittaranjan Das, which enraged large sections of the student community as it was thought insufficiently appreciative of Deshbandhu’s qualities and achievements. So hostile was the reaction that copies of the Magazine were publicly torn to pieces or consigned to a bonfire. Srikumar Banerji, who, as Professor in charge of the Magazine, had approved the editorial, argued that it contained no calumny or censure, but only a subtle analysis of Deshbandhu’s life to bring out its real greatness. But the critics were not pacified.

I have not read the article, nor does Professor Sen Gupta’s description of the episode contain a summary. But he says he thought that the adulatory excess in the obituary outpouring at the time obscured the distinctiveness of a man who had infused new life in the nation and awakened a new consciousness, that magnification of any particular attribute or achievement could only diminish the character as a whole. The arguments were of no avail, which Professor Sen Gupta says showed that “we can praise or abuse but cannot analyse critically”. I cannot claim to have my teacher’s critical judgment, but if my estimate of him does not seem uniformly or extravagantly reverential, I can plead that I have at least tried to follow his example.

Let me, however, begin with my belief that in the death of Subodh Chandra Sen Gupta Presidency College has lost its last living link with a past that has long been something of a legend. As a teacher of English he was not, like P. C. Ghosh about whom he has written with such warmth, what newspapers call a legend in his lifetime; nor did he attain the level of excellence in detailed and exact scholarship that we so admired in Taraknath Sen; but he was a sound guide to generations of students on academic pursuits

in general and English studies in particular. He also stimulated wider literary interest. Even though he ceased to be a teacher of the College in 1960, he remained an articulate and often active guardian of what he and many others regarded as the Presidency tradition. It is the continuity of his interest in the College’s affairs—from 1920 when he came to it as a student till close to his death 78 years later—that made him so distinguished a participant in the evolution of its history.

The Professor, of course, was much more than a Presidency institution. For an uncommonly long time he was a figure of unquestioned eminence and authority in Bengal’s academic life. The extraordinarily wide range of his academic interests might have generated some doubt about his intellectual depth if he had not established for himself an unassailable reputation for scholarship in one major area. Though *The Art of Bernard Shaw*, based on his doctoral dissertation, remains one of his most readable books, more than 60 years after its publication when it attracted much critical acclaim, it is as a Shakespearean scholar that he has left his most enduring mark in the world of learning.

An exceptional feature of this scholarly achievement is that he worked—and wrote—on the full range of Shakespeare’s dramatic works. *Shakespearian Comedy*, which was published in 1950, was described by a well-known British critic as “probably the most straightforward attempt to create a theory of comedy of character”. *Shakespeare’s Historical Plays* received still more enviable recognition, extracts from it being included in two major anthologies of Shakespearean criticism : Armstrong’s Penguin collection of critical essays on *Shakespeare’s Histories* and a volume entitled *Shakespeare’s Critics : From Jonson to Auden*, edited by A. M. Eastman and G. B. Harrison. The work even inspired an essay on Professor Sen Gupta as a Shakespearean critic by Irving Ribner in the *Bulletin de la Faculté des lettres de Strasbourg* (1965).

However impressive this recognition, readers sensitive to Professor Sen Gupta’s most characteristic

* Alumnus 1943-45 (English)

virtues may find his last book on Shakespeare, *Aspects of Shakespearian Tragedy*, published in 1972 (A *Shakespeare Manual* of 1977 was a collection of earlier occasional essays) the most satisfying of all. It is not a work of exhaustive scholarship, but the critical studies that make up the brief volume show, in their clarity, penetration and grace, the author's admirable capacity for balanced judgment. In style, too, they catch something of that "happy valiancy" about which he writes so well in his essay on *Antony and Cleopatra*. Mention must also be made of a more technical study, *The Whirligig of Time : Problems of Duration in Shakespeare's Plays* (1961). Many a scholar would have been proud to have produced a fraction of this large corpus.

Professor Sen Gupta's interest in "the fundamentals" of literary creation led him to write *Towards a Theory of the Imagination*, a significant analytical work, as well as an *Introduction to Aristotle's Poetics*. Whatever the abiding worth of these investigations into literary theory, there can be no doubt about the value of the pioneering example he has set in a fresh study of Sanskrit poetics, with translations of Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka* and Abhinavagupta's *Lochana* into Bengali, with a critical Introduction of his own. To undertake this work when he was already a well-known scholar and teacher in English, he had to study Sanskrit with diligent care for several years.

His studies in Bengali literature, yet another example of the breadth of his critical vision, are less ambitious but perhaps better known to students and general readers. Of his works on Bankimchandra, Rabindranath and Saratchandra, the last is the most successful; but they all exhibit his characteristic lucidity. His training as a student and teacher of English may not have always been a help in exploring Bengali literature with independent sensitiveness; on the other hand, he has done a service in trying to establish some modern criteria and methods of literary evaluation in an area without any notable tradition of critical analysis.

All this bears impressive testimony to Professor Sen Gupta's tireless pursuit of knowledge and understanding and equally tireless exposition of its results. He was even drawn into a study of the Indian

struggle for freedom, of which he wrote an account, and of Swami Vivekananda's role in Indian nationalism, which formed the subject of a separate book. These works do not display the same objective discrimination that characterize his literary studies. Parts of his Bengali autobiography, *Te Hi No Divasah*, however, show a remarkable capacity for perceptive observation, for example in describing his early life in East Bengal, and for dispassionate judgment, as in recounting his father's interests and outlook and in touching upon the deficiencies in the intellectual equipment of his "Master", the great P. C. Ghosh. And the book is written in excellent narrative prose.

But the memoirs would have been far more enjoyable if they had not been so cluttered with details of the examination results of so many people and, more importantly, if the main thrust of his recollections and comments had not seemed so persistently aimed at demolishing some established reputations and reducing certain lesser names into objects of ridicule or contempt. This is particularly unfortunate because it gives a misleading impression of his character. True, Professor Sen Gupta, like his Master, "wore his dislikes on his sleeve"; occasionally in old age he was even prone to form opinions on the basis of gossip without pausing to consider the motives of its retailers; earlier, he had personal reason to be bitter about certain powerful people. But it would be wrong to think that fault-finding, let alone rancour, was a dominant trait of his personality. He was warm-hearted to those he knew and generous in the praise of many he did not; he was not inflexible in his opinions; and there was not the slightest trace of self-interest in his preferences.

To generations of students, as I have said at the beginning, Subodh Chandra Sen Gupta was a kind and valued adviser on all manner of problems. The critical intelligence he displayed in considering them was a faculty to cultivate. In the subject he taught, his pupils profited as much from the clarity and accuracy of his judgments as from his impressive scholarship. Above all, he set all his students, not merely of English literature, an example of tireless and productive labour, labour that his long life seemed insufficient to contain. ■