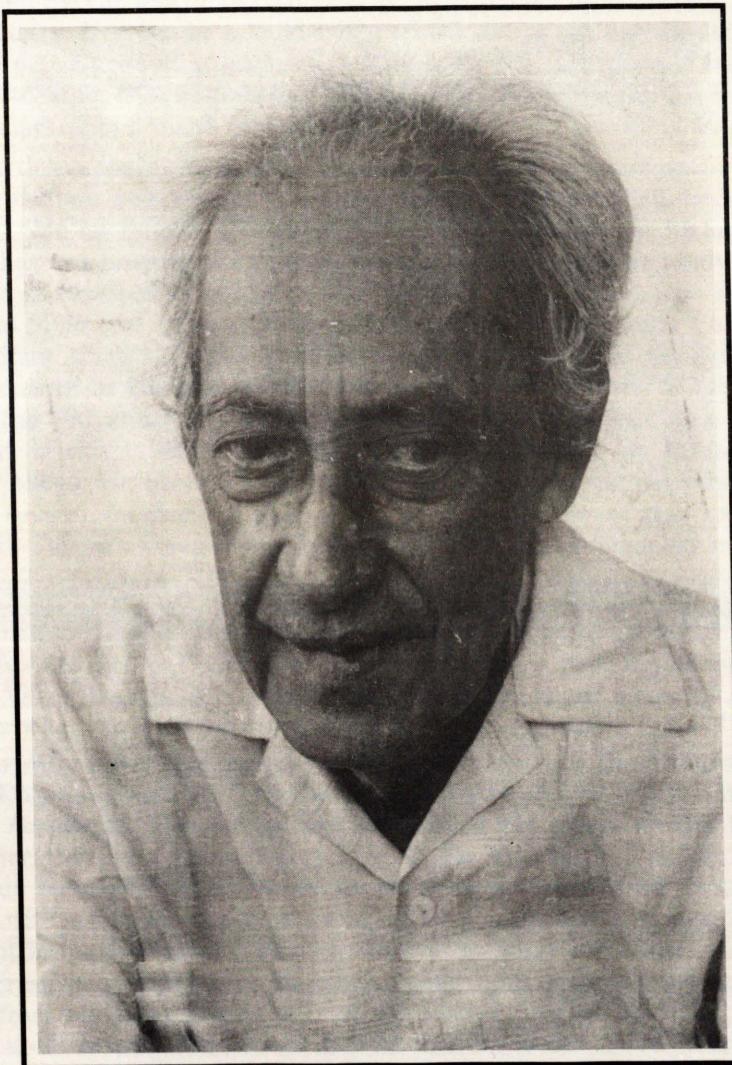


Sushobhan Chandra Sarkar

Courtesy: Presidency Alumni Association Calcutta, Kolkata 700073



Sushobhan Ch. Sarkar

Born : 19th Aug., 1900

Died : 26th Aug., 1982

Susobhan Chandra Sarkar (1900-1982)

Susobhan Sarkar was no conventional scholar garnishing the precious curriculum vitae peddling pedantry. Nor was he a builder of a school, not at any rate the kind of school which is made with patronage and panegyrics. A disdain for the cultivation of such a following and a sort of disesteem for the parsimony of mental energy that goes into the making of successful authorship, marked him apart from his more prolific and powerful colleagues.

As effortless superiority of mind and a careless generosity of spirit made him a great teacher. His domain was the mind of his students. Perhaps what he taught was not as important as how he taught. His answers to the big questions of history were sometimes tentative. What was abiding was the spirit of questioning which he planted at the seed-time in the life of generations of students. The son of a civil servant who served as a Deputy Magistrate in Bihar and Orissa, young Susobhan came to Presidency College in Calcutta in 1919. A brilliant track record secured him admission to Oxford University in 1923. After obtaining Honours in History at Oxford he returned to Calcutta to begin his career as a Lecturer in the University of Calcutta (1925) and, soon after that, as a Reader in the new university at Dhaka (1929). From 1933 to 1945 he served as Professor of History at Presidency College. He became an important figure in the cultural sphere as a prominent member of several intellectual groups. He was a member of the Executive Council of Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati (1926-1936) and I was fortunate in discovering, while

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya*

I served Visva-Bharati as Upacharya, some perspicacious memoranda written by Susobhan Sarkar for Visva-Bharati. His wife Reba was the younger sister of Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis who was Secretary to the Visva-Bharati Executive Council at that time.

Ideologically Susobhan Sarkar's close association with the Marxist circle in Calcutta became evident in his writings from the 1930's. He was one of the luminaries associated with the journal *Parichaya*. The journal carried in 1931 his essays on the Russian revolution, written under the pseudonyms Bijan Roy. Under another pen name, Amit Sen, Sarkar published his book in English, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance*. It is believed that his association with communist circles as a Leftist intellectual cost him dearly in terms of advancement in the Educational Service of the Government of West Bengal. The position of Principal, Presidency College, or Director, Public Instructions, never came his way. After retirement from government service Professor Sarkar was invited by Dr Triguna Sen, Vice-Chancellor at Jadavpur University to lead and build its Department of History. Upon completion of that tenure in 1962, Sarkar resumed lecturing at Calcutta University and taught there till 1967. About this time he launched a new endeavour, the Jana Siksha Parishat, aiming to promote interaction between intellectuals and the public through popular lectures outside of the ambit of official communist party activities. One can conjecture that the political conflicts within the Left movement and the aftermath of the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union constituted an agonising experience for him in the 1970's. In the last decade of his life he was more often than not identified with a liberal Marxist ideological stance and in his writings he returned to his earlier interest in the Bengal Renaissance from Rammohan to Rabindranath Tagore.

Beyond the walls of the institutions he served, Susobhan Sarkar is known through his

writings. Of these the most well-known are his interpretative essays (first published in 1946) on the Bengal renaissance. This was a theme to which he returned time and again, as if to his own roots. His earliest published articles, products of archival research in the six or seven years following his return from Oxford in 1925, are less known. These papers are not easily accessible and need to be collected and published; they throw a shaft of light on the seamy commercial underside of the expanding British Empire in eighteenth century South Asia. Another area of interest for Susobhan Sarkar was historiography, a subject he explored in a number of analytical and review articles written over a period of forty years. Finally, an interest in what is today called Contemporary History was integral to Susobhan Sarkar's approach to his discipline. The first book he published (1939) was on the shape of things in post-World War I Europe and he continued to write through the 'forties and 'fifties on Fascism on the one hand and the Soviet experience on the other.

It was, however, as an interpreter of Marxism that Susobhan Sarkar made a seminal contribution. While he translated into Bengali some of the Marxist classics (including the *Manifesto* in 1943), he also offered new perspectives in a series of essays of which one became a *locus classicus*, the monograph *Itihaser Dhara* ("The Course of History", 1944). In building the intellectual traditions of the Left in India Susobhan Sarkar alias Amit Sen alias Bijon Ray had a role.

Some qualities of his writings remind the reader of the apothegm, the style is the man. Whether they are his research papers or reviews or political commentary or even lecture notes for publication—Susobhan Sarkar's writings were distinguished by a lucidity in his highly readable prose, 'the skilful marshalling of facts' (one of his favourite phrases in the years when he taught us at Presidency College), and above all the careful avoidance of punditry. Apart from their substantive content, this feature of his writings has a lot to teach us. For one observes today the depressing spectacle of the unread in pursuit of the unreadable.

Yet, the quintessential Sarkar is not to be found in what he left behind in his writings. It was to be found in the life he led, like some others of his generation, dedicated to a vocation and to an ideology. It is the moral integrity in this dedication which left its mark on the minds of his students and friends. One is reminded of Auden's tribute to a great contemporary of his : "When there are so many we shall have to mourn/When grief has been made so public, and exposed/To the critique of a whole epoch/The frailty of our conscience and anguish/Of whom shall we speak ? For every day they die/Among us, those who were doing us some good/ And knew it was never enough/But hoped to improve a little..."

* History, (1953-57)