

Susobhan Sarkar (1900-1982)—A Personal Memoir

SUSOBHAN CHANDRA SARKAR passed away, quietly, just after dawn on August 26, 1982, in his home at Naktala on the outskirts of Calcutta, a week after his eighty-second birthday.

Among the twentieth century teachers of history in our sub-continent, Susobhan Sarkar was outstanding. He concentrated on modern Europe, on the social context of the development of British constitutional history and Western European political thought; and late in his career, on renascent middle class culture in nineteenth and early twentieth century India. His lucid explication of the method of Marx in analysing the course of human development, his capacity to show forces of feudalism, capitalism and imperialism interacting with ideas and influencing events, and his awareness of ways in which these forces blurred, in situations where relations of production had not crystallised enough for sharp antagonisms between opposed forces, were superbly brought home to several generations of students, who left his classes with a firm grounding in the historical method of interpretation.

A disciplined and clear-sighted human being, he was a deeply committed friend of the Communist Party of India, from its origins. He had worked in popular fronts and organisational activities for diffusion of democratic and socialist consciousness. A description of all this, and a full bibliography of his books and very many periodical articles and reviews, till 1975 (he wrote more in the last seven years), may be found in some detail elsewhere¹; and also in a

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series of obituary notices published in 1982. For the present purpose, it is proposed only to spotlight some significant aspects.

Sarkar started his academic life as, what is referred to among the literati-elite of Calcutta, a 'brilliant student'—with the informal *summa cum laude* of the redoubtable Double First Class First in B.A. Honours and M.A. in History. He followed this up with a good Honours Degree in the same subject from Oxford. What is not so well-known is that, even as a student in Presidency College, Calcutta (the school from which he matriculated was Dhaka Collegiate School), where his public image was that of a shy, bookish scholar, he had been deeply committed to social activities and influenced by political events. In his last article (posthumously published which he completed a few days before his demise)² he wrote of his part, under the leadership of Sukumar Ray, the well-known Bengali composer of nonsense and metaphysical verse (and father of Satyajit Ray), and Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis (later Sarkar's brother-in-law), in organising a 'fraternity' of young people who endeavoured, through study meetings, etc, to wake the slumbering, oligarchical conscience of the once democratic and reformist Sadharan Brahmo Samaj of North Calcutta. A diary that he kept of his student years in Calcutta (1917-1923), which his son, Sumit Sarkar, spoke of after his demise, also shows how his national consciousness was being stirred by the Non-Cooperation Movement, as well as by the post-War popular challenge to imperialism. A nationalist to the core, he remained to the end of his days a staunch devotee of the unity in diversity of India's people.

He was simultaneously inspired by the Soviet Revolution. At the end of a two year stint in Jesus College, Oxford (1923-1925), he was marked out as a socialist by a CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain) talent scout, who quantified political opinions of the

members of the Indian Majlis at the end of the 1925 Summer Term as follows : "ICS and IFS (pledged to support government) 20 ; Moderates 18 ; Swarajists 11 ; Socialists 5 ; Unclassified 12."³ A rational and critical exposition of nationalism as well as socialism shines through Sarkar's lectures on European history, first in the Calcutta University Post-Graduate Department of History, (1925-1927), then as Reader in History, Dhaka University (1927-1932), then as Professor of History Presidency College, Calcutta, and ex-officio lecturer in history in the Calcutta University (1932-1956), then as Professor and first Head of the Department of History at Jadavpur University (1956-1961) and finally reappointed on a Government of India special scheme for distinguished scholars, back at Calcutta University (1961-1967).

His teaching of various political aspects of European history was what made him a legend in his lifetime. In these lectures, he introduced us to works of close textual analysis, by men like McKeennie or Maitland. He would have detested the currently snooty fashion of showing off the most inaccessible and recondite references, though he kept up with them in his own reading. He certainly brought the new journal of historical studies, *Past and Present*, which, till 1958, had as its sub-title, "a journal of scientific history", to the notice of those of us who became interested in new Marxist social and economic history, when it first appeared in the 1950s. In the classroom, he would train the students—all of them—in the use of solid texts—H A L Fisher's *History of Modern Europe* and Gooch's *History and Historians in the 19th Century* as an introduction, the Rivington series on Modern Europe as a companion for facts and dates, David Ogg's book, Matthiez's work on class forces and struggle in the French Revolution, Fisher's *Bonapartism*, the digests by Hayes, Hazen and Ketelbey ; and in special papers, Lindsay on the Reformation, George Thomson on the ancient Greeks, and Thucydides himself.

His Marxist outlook was firm and clear, but he scrupulously presented other points of view. In my Fourth Year Honours class in 1952, I wrote him an answer about the reasons for the failure of Charles XII (the last Bourbon) in terms of the latter's incapacity to adequately repress bourgeois democracy. He stingingly pointed out in the margin that I was thinking like a reactionary; but gave 60 per cent of the marks—for the consistency of reasoning, he noted ! It would be incorrect to call Sarkar a "man of dogma". He staunchly supported Stalin in the 1950s, but in his rule book, there was no room for being *partiinost* in classrooms. We were won over to his Marxism by his cold logic, not by any dogmatic assertion of strength, nor by any monopoly of the syllabus or control of textbook writing.

Continually emphasising the guiding role of social conditions as well as of ideas in the processes of which events were the constitutive part, and drumming into his students the narrative of chronological order and of significant names, Sarkar highlighted the onward march of progress—albeit in the manner of nineteenth century Whig historians like Bury or Grote, yet emphasising the main currents of shifts in power within salient modes, in the way that Acton or Pollard had done in their equally liberal books. He picked out and analysed the patterns of causation in high watermarks of Western civilisation : the European Middle Ages, the Italian Renaissance, French and English developments from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and most of all revolutions led by the bourgeoisie in England and France, as well as the challenge to the bourgeoisie, explicated by European trade-unionism, working class politics and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. At no juncture of these progressive trends did he underplay the suffering, immiserisation, alienation and obstacles to the development of the masses of mankind, which were the net result of feudal or capitalist civilisation in Europe.

He chose to focus on Europe as almost a category of a paradigm and—perhaps

somewhat contemptuously—left the teaching of Indian history to those, whom—in a somewhat Orientalist way—he considered either antiquarians or archival specialists. (Yet it should be remembered that his respect was very high indeed for that great textual scholar and ancient Indian chronologist, Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, the author of the classical *Political History of Ancient India* and Carmichael Professor of Ancient Indian History at Calcutta). In the 1950s it was a fashion among some of my contemporaries to carp—behind his back—at Sarkar's Anglo-Saxon attitudes, often attributed to his Brahmo Samaj modernist milieu and values. He did indeed imbibe much from the liberal democratic heritage, which is given the adjective Victorian, much of it from a great teacher in Presidency College, Kuruvilla Zachariah, who inspired not only him, but many others (like the eminent historian of eighteenth century India, Professor N K Sinha, or Sarkar's own first batch student in Calcutta University, Hirendranath Mukherjee). But, Sarkar was no Anglophil. Even in the heyday of the so-called British Raj, he was forthright in his condemnation of imperialism as a stultifier of that liberal potential, which the French or Industrial Revolutions seemed, to historians of Europe, to open up in the early days of the Age of Reason. His affinities were with the world-affirmation and world-awareness, which became sharper among the intelligentsia of colonised countries, as the age of Fascism became clearer in the 1930s. It was to be found in the social thought of another of Sarkar's exemplars, one whom he helped from the 1920s to the early 1930s in the routine executive organisation of Visva Bharati, Rabindranath Tagore. That great poet and thinker saw in imperialism the negation of all the positive values that had risen in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To Sarkar, however, an essentially Eurocentric socialism was the socio-cultural alternative.

In his teaching, there was no necessarily bourgeois liberal dogma, but principally an emphasis on the need to learn from positive historical trends towards democracy, as well as from the lessons of their negative consequences, to assess the dialectics of causation ; to balance and work out the extent of possibilities which had been inherent in a particular historical situation ; and then only to judge upon the choices open to those who aspired to go forward, but did not wish to wreck the structure within which they worked.

Sarkar's "discovery of Europe" in his classroom lectures, may also have been, in part, imbibed from Karl Marx's own Eurocentricism. The latter believed in the positive transitional force, born as it were in blood and mire of capitalism, on world history. However, while there has been a great deal of Eurocentric outlook and Westernism in much of Marxist studies and teaching in India, and on its own history, it must never be forgotten that the dialectical balance sheet approach, as we may call it, was a tremendous improvement on the panegyrics of merely Western European character and national development, that is to be found in the analogies and assumptions of Sarkar's own elder contemporaries, such as Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Dr. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, or even Zachariah himself. If, in the last decade, Indian historians of more radical hue have seen the weaknesses of Eurocentricism and its historical analogies, and some even have found it easy to reject all the positive achievements of the national bourgeoisie, without being able to give us any creatively alternative morality, then it is worth remembering the 1963 dedication of the first book published by perhaps the most brilliant of these rebels—"to Professor Susobhan Sarkar, who stoked so many of our doubts".

Sarkar's interest in the nineteenth century Bengali history—when, for once, it seemed to be changing points, onto the European "grooves of time"—is now well-known. Recent collections and their revised editions of many of his articles on the Bengal Renaissance and other related themes testify to this. Yet, long before he wrote on those subjects, he had, as early as the 1930s, made a foray into the terrain of eighteenth century trade history—in the

area of imperialist interest about the north-eastern and south-eastern landward neighbours of India. In a decade when most historians of my generation, who have coined a label “maritime history” for the eighteenth century imperialist inter-coastal trades, were being born, and the originator of the ‘economic history of Bengal’, i.e. of its agrarian system and trade in the eighteenth century, was just beginning to work in the Archives, Sarkar published five accurately researched and lucidly written pieces on the political economy of the English East India Company’s commercial intercourse with Tibet, Bhutan, Burma and Siam, in journals such as *Bengal Past and Present*, the *Journal of the Burma Oriental Research Society*, the *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission*, and, as early as 1939, in the *Proceedings of the History Congress*. These have not escaped the notice of Western historians like Schuyler Cammann or Alistair Lamb who renewed historical interest in Himalayan studies in the age of Tibetan integration into the People’s Republic of China. But, it is a matter of regret that prolific research by Indians on the eighteenth century history of eastern India has chosen to ignore Sarkar’s work. In the early 1960s, when Sarkar was forced into retirement by anti-communist University authorities, his younger contemporaries sententiously observed that this would hardly have been possible if he had not lapsed into *belleslettrisme*, and only written polished essays on our recent cultural past.

He once remarked to me in an uncharacteristically personal vein (when I was proudly accompanying him by train to a M.A. History Board of Examiners Moderation meeting at Burdwan University in the 1960s) that early in his professional life, he had come to the conclusion that to be a good historian, one had to be either a good teacher or a good research worker; one could not be good at the same time in two full time vocations. He had chosen the first way, because it was the best one to the minds of youth. But his really serious writing was from the 1930s to the 1960s.

In the late 1930s, Calcutta University published two of his monographs—on scientific materialism, written long before the post-War spate of Marxology—and on *Mahajuddher par urop* (Europe after the Great War) in Bengali, published in 1939, before he had read Carr’s *International Relations between the Wars*, and which was an exceptionally perceptive and clearly political account, recently republished by his admirers in Bangladesh. In the Second War period, he published pamphlets in Bengali from an explicitly communist view-point (under pseudonyms such as Amit Sen and Bijan Ray—as a Government Education Service employee, he could not use his own name). *Itihasher Dhara* (The Course of History) was a lucid account of the Marxist interpretation as it then existed, extremely influential among young Bengali students in the 1940s and early 1950s; *Japani Sasaner Asal Rup* (The Actual Character of Japanese Fascism) was a call to Bengalis in 1942 to resist chauvinistic support for Japanese war efforts to enlarge the “Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” after their conquest of Burma; *Atmaniantraner Adhikar* (The Right to Self-Determination) discussed the case for the then current Communist Party “Adhikari” thesis about the correct nationality policy, which could combat the Pakistan demand more effectively than by what appeared to Communists at the time to be a Hindu and capitalist dominated Congress. This lecture was read in 1943 to a radical Muslim gathering in what was then Islamia (and is now Maulana Azad) College.

He was studying more and more a period which, he believed held within it the roots of the forward movement of Indian democratic ideas. He described recently the interaction of this with his Party work :

The booklet, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance*, originally published in 1946, has come under much criticism, naturally from academic circles. I myself would have materially recast it had I written it later with greater leisure. This modest book after all made current the term

“Bengal Renaissance” (instead of the Renaissance in Bengal or the Bengali Renaissance etc.) This term has indeed passed into historical usage commonly accepted ever since. Many of the sub-headings were introduced by my friend Mohan Kumaramangalam at the time of the original printing and I have not changed them, in his memory. The booklet was not meant for scholars or based on research, the material being gleaned from easily available secondary sources. It was not even an attempt at a Marxist analysis of events. A second intention was to provide a broad simple survey for students and general readers interested in the period. My modest claim is that these purposes have been served in however inadequate a fashion as it turned out to be. ...⁴

The slim volume of *Notes* is indeed the cornerstone of Sarkar’s tremendous reputation as a great synthesizer, periodising a mass of cultural information about the middle class intellectual and political awakening from 1815 to 1919 in urban Bengal. It was to be the only textbook on the subject for the first decade and a bit more after Indian independence (in addition to Sivanath Sastri’s Bengali reminiscences on public affairs, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Bangasamaj*). It popularised the period in nationalist Indian historiography, and sparked off a vogue in critical studies of the nineteenth century liberal awakening, some of them in the 1970s, critical even of Sarkar’s assumptions. In this memoir, we need not go into that debate.

Suffice it to corroborate Sarkar’s own account of the way the *Notes* were written, by P C Joshi’s (then the CPI Secretary) account in the *Essayas in Honour of Prof. S C Sarkar*. Sarkar had wanted to give up British government education service just before the end of the War, and with his wife become a Party wholtimer in the Bombay Party commune (also then the central Party) headquarters). Joshi, thinking of the education of the Sarkar children, Sipra and Sumit, got the Polit Bureau delay the decision. But he “knew Susobhan Sarkar was a famous historian and the modern period was his speciality. I argued long with him that he knew modern Europe so well, he must...write a book or a pamphlet on the origins of Bengal renaissance. We overcame his hesitation by making the proposal a demand from the polit bureau, and put all his ex-students working at the party centre and outside to press him. The result was his famous Notes on Bengal Renaissance, ...which won us great prestige and it became a text book or reference book for post-graduate classes in several Indian universities.”⁵

Totting up what he believed was the content of the 1970s critique of his work, Sarkar wrote in 1979 :

One main criticism has been the analogy with the Italian Renaissance. But an analogy is an analogy only, not a replica. Renaissance, in a narrow sense implying some new cultural change, has often been used in European history itself. Thus we hear of the Twelfth Century renaissance, or even of a Carolingian renaissance—movements which are not confused with or compared with the Great Renaissance. Again the famous Italian Renaissance itself had its own limitations, known to the European historians. Instances are easily found in the overzealous classification of the classical past and contempt for mediaeval thought. The Italian Renaissance was also very largely concerned with the intellectual elite. I was aware of the limitations in our own Renaissance, though in the Notes in 1946, I omitted them, perhaps in a hasty over-simplification. In the very next decade, before the modern criticism set in, I emphasised these in several essays which are in reprints usually tacked on to the original booklet. The major limitations to the Bengal Renaissance in my opinion were three : (1) The majority of representations of our awakening identified progress with the British rule, ignoring the fact that the British held us in the strait-jacket of semi-colonial subjection and imperialist exploitation. (ii) The elite in our renaissance were a gulf apart from the common masses of our people and lived in a world of their own. (iii) The Hindu bias prevalent

in the awakened gentlemen of our movement could not but alienate the Muslim consciousness, which has unfortunate consequences, much to the gratification of our alien British rulers. The *Notes* highlighted the achievements of the men in our Renaissance to serve as an inspiration to those for whom the booklet was primarily intended. It was natural in this context to overlook the complexities in the actual historical situation, the drawbacks in the lives depicted and their shortcomings.⁶

Perhaps this is not the only content of the critique. It was never really *directed at* Sarkar, by the variegated elements who made it, some of whom took him as the noblest and most Marxist of all those who see in a *colonial* middle class an awakening to possibilities and political limitations of bourgeois growth under alien and colonially exploitative imperialism, a *national* awakening (which actually further subordinated the popular masses of the nation to an over-determined bourgeois domination, and which was certainly built on the ruin of the endogenous creativity of the peasantry).

Many of us, of course, have always been aware that “historiographical critiques” can only be a surrogate for the positive work of constructing an alternative compendium or digest of popular culture and mass ideology, in even as limited an Indian region as Bengal in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If such a work had been written even in Sarkar’s last years, he undoubtedly would have critically welcomed it as carrying on his efforts for writing democratic history.

From 1932, Sarkar regularly wrote, in Bengali and in English—he was no alienated Anglicist and yet he had an educated all-India readership always in mind, often translating his pieces from one language to another to gain maximum readership—on the latest books and anthologies he was reading, on communism, democracy and also those intellectual challenges to socialist politics and science, which he considered significant enough to combat. These review articles—mainly in the Bengali monthly *Parichaya*, with whose radicalisation from the 1930s to the 1950s he was inextricably linked, and on whose panel of advisers he remained till his demise, “disgracefully loyal” to the end, as he once put it in a genial letter to an Editor—are a record of the intellectual history of the Calcutta *Bhadraloks’* contact with the wider world of committed socialist scholarship and controversy. They span English literature on socialist thought from John Strachey in the 1930s to John Cammett on the Gramsci of Turin and the *Prison Notebooks*, in the 1960s. They deal with themes such as the changing evaluation of Soviet communism, the attack on science and rationalism by ex-communists such as Arthur Koestler, and the mystification of the British impact on India by Nirad Chaudhuri. They represent a constant defence of the scientific method, and, though perhaps positivist, as befitting the Eurocentric Marxism of the times, are consistently demystificatory.

Sarkar’s approach to knowledge was completely within the holistic tradition of the social sciences, which Marxism inspired from the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, the generation of great college teachers to which he belonged—like Muhammad Habib of Aligarh, R P Tripathi of Allahabad, R P Patwardhan of Bombay, or Candeth of Madras—were not just retailers of chronicles, nor even chroniclers themselves. In an age when disciplines like political science or geography were still in their infancy in this country, scholars like these, scorning narrow specialism, taught them in non-Honours classes. Some of our best geographers in Calcutta remember how a historian like Sarkar brought the interpretation of maps alive for them, as an instrument for their imagination of socially habited spaces over time. Sarkar’s lectures on Political Thought in Calcutta University, and his explanation of *Capital* to his home classes of young communists left a deep imprint. Many Bengali students of literature

and of economics owe a great deal in their intellectual formation to his discussions, as indeed they do to Bishnu Dey (scholar, poet and another socialist) who passed away on December 3, 1982. These students and associates of Sarkar and Dey are the ones who have done a great deal for the current popularity of the appreciation of the changing role of social ideas and institutions, of economic structures and of literary style.

While much has been written in the last few months of Sarkar's scholarly catholicity, and of his "gentleness", there was also a firmness in him which came from loyalty to Party discipline. After 1948 when P C Joshi was expelled from the Party, and 'the left line' of B T Ranadive triumphed, Sarkar who had given shelter in his Elgin Road flat to Joshi in the underground period, was, along with other party sympathisers and members, mandated not to keep contact with him. Joshi "appealed to the central committee against,... expulsion...(and) made carbon copies with his own hand and sent one copy to Susobhan to forward...to the party leadership. In a few days, Kalpana (Mrs Joshi, the Chittagong Armoury Raid group revolutionary Kalpana Dutt) came back with a one-line note from Susobhan, 'I am with the party, right or wrong'. Kalpana was pained with the reply but I respected Susobhan more than ever for being that loyal."⁷

Till his last days, Sarkar spoke of Joshi with affection, admiration and deep respect, as the man who, above all brought him into the work of the Communist Party and who tried to make the Party a force for research and cultural hegemony in the Indian national context. It was as a part of this impersonal loyalty to the communist cause that when, in the early 1950s, his teacher Zachariah retired from the Advisership to the Historical Research Division of the External Affairs Ministry, Government of India, and he was sounded by Girja Shankar Bajpai about the succession to it, he declined on the ground, as he told me, that he did not wish to work for government policies (which, let us remember, included repression of workers and peasants) to which he was opposed.

And yet Sarkar never flaunted his Marxism. In his Honours classes on Europe, he would unravel the main currents in a cold, detached and unemotional, yet definite and precise way within a framework of the trends of class struggle and bourgeois national consolidation, without mentioning Marxist classics, except when he spoke, and that too, glowingly, about the rise of socialist ideology from Babruf, Owen and Saint-Simon, to Marx and Engels, Liebknecht, Jaures and Lenin. When I was first appointed, in 1958, to set papers for the M A Examination in History of Calcutta University, he was my co-setter for the Seventh Paper (of the special subject on modern Europe). I was to set the 1871-1891 half, he the 1892-1919 half. Raw from my own Oxford undergraduate training in studying the texts first-hand, I set a question on analysis of a text from Marx's introduction to *Capital*, Volume One, and went to Sarkar's Elgin Road flat to ask him whether I had done the work the right way. He first praised me, then asked me why I had found it necessary to quote Karl Marx, even in one line, in a question paper. Was I showing off my reading to the examinees? Embarrassed, I said that I expected them to read the classics which predicted the future as well as explained the past. He replied that I could just as well check on what I considered to be a requirement of a History M A by putting an unembellished question without the flourish of a prestigious quotation. Marx would get read without being gratuitously advertised from a position of power. This, after all, was what M A question paper setting was giving me a feeling for! This was a lesson, I often remind myself of, when fortuitous circumstances in the 1970s created ephemeral occasions for us to forget it.

In 1970, in the Jabalpur session of the Indian History Congress, he was elected as president of the next session, as a dedicated teacher and Marxist. This was really a triumph for younger radical elements in the Congress. Sarkar, in Calcutta, was angry with me for

creating a confrontation about him. But he did not refuse the challenge. He wrote out his summation of his views on salient problems and agenda for Indian history—a testament equal to the best presidential speeches of the 1960s and hardly equalled by the new look of the next decade. (It will be found, entitled “Problems of Indian Historiography” in *On the Bengal Renaissance*). He was ill in the autumn of 1972 but had recovered sufficiently to be capable of going to Muzaffarpur where he was due to preside, with all the panoply that the Indian History Congress accords to its General Presidents. But he chose not to go and sent his speech to be read out. I quote some sentences in this context :

“It is customary for a newly-elected president to express his own unworthiness before the assembly he is going to address. In my case it will be not merely the observance of a ritualistic convention, for I have been astonished beyond measure by the summon which has called me up from my seclusion. ...I have never been intimately connected with the Congress; though I happened to be one of its local secretaries as early as 1939. I have so far attended only three sessions in the course of a whole generation. My bare half-a-dozen research papers on 18th century British Indian records were published as far back as the thirties, and have by now, I suppose reached oblivion. In the fifties I took part in editing four historical volumes, which received little attention. Of course, I have written scores of historical reviews and articles, but mostly in my own language unfamiliar to the majority in the world of scholarship. I have been fairly successful as a teacher for the last four decades, but I did not know this is any claim to a chair of a gathering like this. Indeed the only reason for the great distinction brought to me seems to be the love and affection of my young friends and pupils who must have persuaded the others to whom I have been an outsider. Whatever the explanation might be...I assure you that the honour at the fag end of my life has indeed been overwhelming. I can only hope the experiment will not be a dismal failure. The venue of our session, Muzaffarpur, recalls to me pleasant memories of the second decade of the century when I stayed here off and on with my father, a government officer. ...My links with Bihar are strong, our family was domiciled here, it was in Patna that my elder brother lived, taught, and died. I am glad to know that Bihar today is a promising nursery of young historians. ...In particular, I must apologise to the younger historians for not coming out, as some of them might have expected, with a Marxian critique of Indian history or any part of it. I have never felt myself competent to offer such a review, and indeed our evidence (and perhaps our mastery of Marxism) is still insufficient for the purpose. Marxian historical studies are also not that plentiful even in other lands. ...Sometimes it takes on a dogmatic form against which we have to guard for the sake of scientific Marxism itself.”⁸

The genuine humility and shyness of a provincial teacher facing the panjandrums of the central Establishment, and yet the rueful pride in a vocation and calling honestly maintained, shine out in these lines.

Another aside in the Address, which as a whole would repay careful study by young Indian historians, deserves quotation after a decade which has seen the History Congress triple its membership and invite the baleful barbs of those in government authority who are entrusted, *inter alia*, with its support : “May I venture...on perhaps an...impertinent thought? The History Congress still seems to many as one of the annual ‘tamashas’ in which we have been so prolific. Can it not be turned into something more active throughout the year? One way would be to organise groups of local members, perhaps in each university centre, with regular discussion meetings of their own and periodic reports to the centre. ...”⁹ Several regional bodies for diffusion and increase of time in which historical analyses by junior scholars could be considered, have indeed been formed—with notable success in the Punjab, even in the 1960s, and in North-East India, but without marked results in West

Bengal. One way of honouring Professor Sarkar now, would be to consider and revitalise his proposal.

I have written elsewhere of Sarkar's inspired, but completely unostentatious, capacity for organisation—demonstrated, for instance, by the way in which he built the Jadavpur University History Department and even in retirement after 1967. The changed circumstances within the Indian communist movement in the 1960s left him anguished. His writings on Antonio Gramsci from as early as 1964, his emphasis on the new perceptions of multi-linear paths of historical progress, hinted at by Karl Marx himself in the Pre-Capitalist Formations section of the *Grundrisse*, and his courageous stand on the rights of democratic Marxist choice in Czechoslovakia in 1968, are too close for us to forget that he was no factional partisan in the issues which have shaken world socialism.

In his last years, he wrote less about a world which was moving through new experiences of a widespread diffusion of self-determined nationality, new alliances and alignments, no more European alone as they had been till Yalta, but moulded by events and locations such as the Bandung non-alignment policy, the Havana Conference which adumbrated Tricontinentalism, the new significance of revolutionary peasantry in Vietnam, Cuba, Mozambique, and problems of petty bourgeoisification, relapse into proto-industrialisation, and growth of informal sectors and 'black' labour markets among the ex-colonial working class, who were being immiserised in new ways by a 'new international division of labour', sponsored by neo-colonial countries in what they called the Third World. The alternative ideals for a new social order, previsited by the Eurocentric Marxism to which Sarkar's generation had hitched their aspirations, paled before the grim verities of the 1960s and 1970s, when in India in general (and not less so in Calcutta) the democratic heritage of the national movement was dissipated in futile squabbles within the Left movement, the foundations of which he and his generation had done so much to build.

Rather, in his last years, Sarkar wrote more about subjects dear to the nationalism which was the core of his being: the need for developing the mother tongue as a medium of education; the danger to secularism inherent in the communalist, i.e., chauvinist religious, interpretation of Indian history; or, in the end, about his memories of great people whom he had known, Rabindranath, Sukumar Ray. Sipra Sarkar (who carries on his tradition of fine scholarship and teaching of European history, of the USSR in particular, at Jadavpur University) has told me that in addition to his personal memories of Tagore in Bengali (*Prasanga Rabindranath*), published this year, he had started putting together the reminiscences of the first 25 years of his life. It only remains to mention that the official honours, which had been his due, many years before, came too late in his life, an honorary D. Litt. of Burdwan University, the Rabindra Puraskar of the West Bengal Government, in 1981 for his old writings *On the Bengal Renaissance*.

Through the 1960s, Sarkar, aided by his children, had endeavoured to build informal forums (first the Janasiksha Parishad and later the Marx Club), which met in his friends' houses in South Calcutta fairly regularly, for intellectuals across factions to debate in their mother tongue, on a friendly plane, about issues in contemporary cultural and political life. Minutes were kept of these meetings which, if published, would make a fascinating record. These were small efforts, indeed, restricted to a city circle. But by no means were they elitist. If Left and democratic unity appears in the 1980s to be more of a possibility among all those who look back with pride on the heritage of the old Communist Party of India, then it is due not only to the indubitable groundswell from the present rank and file, but also to untiring efforts by people like Sarkar, who have contributed to the cause by their patience and catholicity, their capacity to create a common national discourse which placed Marxism in the

forefront, in a humane and democratic way, and by their coupling of scholarship about the past with the endeavour to understand the roots of problems of the present. In this work of building a democratic and activist heritage for Marxist thought in India Susobhan Chandra Sarkar will be remembered in the same rank of people, as different in their outlook, but as similar in their welding of scholarship with national commitment and political consciousness, as D D Kosambi or P C Joshi.

1. Vide articles by Barun De (with bibliography of Sarkar's writings, composed with the assistance of Enakshi Mukherjee). P C Joshi, Chinmohan Sehanavis and Shyamal Krishna Ghosh, in *Essay in Honour of Prof. S C Sarkar*, New Delhi, People's Publishing House, 1976.
2. Susobhan Sarkar, "Sukumar Ray : Ja Maney Parhey" (Sukumar Ray : Reminiscences) in the Bengali monthly, Baromas, Autumn Festival Number, 1982, V, 1-3.
3. Chinmohan Sehanavis, "Communism at Oxford", *Essays in Honour of Sarkar*, p 14.
4. Susobhan Sarkar. Supplementary Note 1. On the "Notes on the Bengal Renaissance", *On the Bengal Renaissance*, Calcutta, 1979, p 164.
5. P C Joshi, "A Dedicated Teacher—Some Memories", in *Essays in Honour of Sarkar*, pp 7-8.
6. Sarkar, *loc cit*, pp 164-165.
7. Joshi, *loc cit*, pp 8-9.
8. Sarkar, *loc cit*, pp 145-146.
9. *Ibid*, p 148.

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