

Amalendu Das Gupta (1923–2008)
Smiles Behind the Stern Visage

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Those of us, who used to meet at the India Coffee House at Chittaranjan Avenue for more than twenty years at lunch time, missed Amalendu Das Gupta when he became the editor of *The Statesman* in 1986. He stopped coming to the Coffee House. Samar Sen who was keeping indifferent health in his later days had also by then been irregular. Our table, which was described by the bearers as the reporter's table, was slowly becoming lustreless, lacking the sparkle of conversation, when Amalendubabu, Samarbabu and their contemporaries visited—we the juniors were merely listeners. Samarbabu did not talk much but his presence was enough to loosen Amalendubabu, who regaled us with his huge stock of a journalist's experiences.

Let me recount just one of Amalendubabu's amusing anecdotes. It was the last term of Indira Gandhi's prime-ministership. As the editor of *The Statesman*, which was bringing out a special supplement on some occasion, Amalendubabu obtained an appointment with the PM, after much persuasion through the good offices of Sharada Prasad who was press adviser of the prime minister. Amalendubabu's life long friend Sharada Prasad reminded a number of times that the PM was busy and the interview must not take more than ten minutes. What ten minutes—Amalendubabu assured his friend that he would not take more than five minutes—all he required was a few quotes. Amalendubabu told us that he was more impressed by the texture of the PM's skin than what she was saying for more than forty minutes and was suddenly startled by one comment the PM made. She was so casual in passing the comment which was enormously significant that the interviewer thought he had missed the point, which must have appeared in newspapers earlier. The same observation was carried by a Bombay newspaper one month later to everybody's sensation. Amalendubabu missed his scoop. But that was not the end of the story. The PM asked the editor to see her home minister, Narasimha Rao on his way out to get the details of some of her national objectives. The editor found the home minister, lying supine on a wooden cot – the minister was a patient of severe spondilitis. During conversation, the editor informed the minister that there was a very good homeopath in Calcutta, Dr. Bholu Chakrabarti. Although an appointment with the doctor was difficult to get, the editor knew him

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well and if the minister cared to visit Calcutta, he would get an appointment – no problem there. The minister expressed his gratitude and assured the editor that he would certainly try and inform the editor when he came down to Calcutta. The editor was happy. He himself was a spondilitis patient and was glad to be able to be of some help to a fellow patient.

Amalendubabu chuckled when he recounted the story to us : “What a fool I was. If the Home Minister expressed even faintly his wish to see Bhola Chakrabarti, the homeopath would have flown to Delhi post haste!”

The Statesman published the following note in its “Calcutta Notebook” on 8 September 1986:... Mr Das Gupta has been many things in his time: distinguished student, college teacher, radio news editor, information officer, civil servant and science writer of books as well with the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna. In fact, he broke new ground with a regular science column which is still remembered by readers of *The Statesman*. Early in his career, Das Gupta spurned the IAS for journalism, a choice that confirmed his impatience with administrative details and the fondness for the language which he handles with skill, rigorously eschewing the colloquialisms that are fashionable with today's young Indians as well as the solecisms of which many are not very aware...taste and tone are his natural gifts, as also the ability to wield a delicate literary rapier instead of the more blunt cudgel...

“Happily readers need not feel deprived for Mr Das Gupta will continue to write for us from time to time, strengthening a connexion that is at least 36 years old.”

Amalendu Das Gupta must have appreciated the note, for he let it be used as the author's profile for his book *Themes and Variations*. The note has been quoted here, as it appeared in the book – the elisions were effected by the author himself.

Amalendu Das Gupta was born in a village of the Dhaka district of Bengal in 1923. He came to Calcutta after matriculation examinations. Clearing his I.A course and obtaining a scholarship, he took up English as his honours subject in Presidency College in the years 1941–43 and finished his M.A in English in 1945 from the University of Calcutta, ranking first in the first class. He briefly taught at Chittagong Government College, Delhi College (renamed later the Shriram College of Commerce), worked at the British Information Services and All India Radio in Delhi and in 1958 took up the job of Press Officer at the IAEA in Vienna. In 1957 there was a special recruitment for the Indian Administrative Service and the other central civil services; he cleared the examinations but preferred the Vienna job. In 1963 he came back to

Delhi to work as Deputy Director, Press Information Bureau. Eventually he joined *The Statesman* as Assistant Editor in Calcutta in 1964.

Earlier, in 1949, he had worked in the paper's Delhi edition for a few months. This time he had an uninterrupted term till he retired in 1986. He was due to retire in 1983 but was persuaded to stay on for three more years. *The Statesman* management hoped he would continue to contribute to the paper but after retirement he was losing interest and his articles appeared sporadically.

During his Vienna days, he wrote a book, *The Atom and Its Energy*, published from Bombay. Satyendranath Bose, the eminent physicist, wrote the foreword to the Bengali version of the book. Amalendubabu was fond of telling how reputable science academics disbelieved that the science correspondent of the *The Statesman* was a writer with an arts degree (in those days, the term humanities was yet to come). As a newspaperman, Amalendubabu did many odd jobs – one of which was film reviews. Reviewing run-of-the-mill Bengali films was not exactly a work of love for him. He once asked Mriganka Sekhar Ray, a film-buff, if the last sequence of a particular film was of a sunset or sunrise – evidently he did not see the film from the beginning, lost track of the story midway and did not know if the finale was a happy one or sad! Reviewing a Satyajit Ray film was, of course, a different matter. He showed me in his editor's chamber, the typescript of the review of *Jana Aranya* and asked my opinion. The precision of language was superb, I said, but I did not agree with the assessment of the film, "I didn't ask for your views on the merit of film," he said with a grin. Evidently he was pleased to hear about the quality of the language— he wrote it thrice, he informed me. That reminded me how he introduced me to the then editor, Nihal Singh, who was looking for a stringer to write the television column for the paper. He described me as an opinionated a man, a man who was short on facts but long on views but who would do! The editor smiled. The assignment given then continued for some ten years, uninterrupted, till some months after Amalendu Das Gupta retired.

Themes and Variations was a compilation of selected articles, mostly written for *The Statesman* after his retirement. It took a great deal of persuasion to make him agree to publish the book. Decline of ideology, debasement of reason, the politics of the Bomb, science and religion were the themes.

Amalendu Das Gupta used to be very nostalgic about the Bengali booklet, *Yuddha Yakhan Thambe* (When the War Ends), which was a cooperative effort of three MA. students, one of them being himself. Three batchmates contributed three essays, with a euphorious foreword

by Binay Kumar Sarkar, the leading sociologist of the time. Tapan Raychaudhuri committed a few mistakes in describing the book in his reminiscences of his times and Amalendu Das Gupta got his won contribution and the preface reprinted in the Bengali quarterly *Chaturanga* (Magh-Chaitra 1413) to clear the confusion.

To end this note in a lighter vein, let me recall what he told us about one of the banter he had to suffer. Many of us can remember the disaster that took place in a Test cricket in Calcutta between India and West Indies – tough police action on the field, stone pelting by the infuriated spectators, burning of the seats, and cricketers as well as people running for their life. Amalendubabu was a correspondent of *The Times*, London. The correspondent took it easy and let the news a go-by. The editor-in-charge asked the correspondent why there was no report on the incident. The embarrassed correspondent said that he thought that the day was a holiday for the newspaper. It was indeed the New Year's Day. The editor replied, “You take care of the report, we shall take care of our holiday.”