

## Ashutosh Chaudhuri—One hundred and Fiftieth Birth Anniversary Tribute

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The nineteenth century Bengal was moulded by three constituent elements—land, education and profession. The emerging professional elites from the middle decades of the century articulated a new social formation in contrast to the pleasure hunting-aristocracy called the babus. The educated professional social group reflected a dual identity. On the one hand, they carried forward the tradition of landlordism as natural leaders of society. At the same time they acted as the motor of social change and cultural advancement. Search for identity and modernisation became the hallmark of the new era known as ‘Yugantar’, to borrow the name of a novel written by Pandit Shivanath Shastri. No wonder in 1859-1860 the Bengali landlords and native press in Kolkata espoused a seemingly pro-tenant approach against the European Indigo planters. In the field of literature Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, products of the Hindoo College and Presidency College ushered in a unique transformation in the content and spirit of Bengali literature. More importantly, the land system in Bengal underwent a perceptible shift from the middle of the nineteenth century. The chronic fragmentation in the land system put a brake on agricultural development. There was re-ordering of land relations which in stages tilted in favour of the ryots brought about by state intervention through the Tenancy Acts of 1859 and 1885.

It is against this wider historical setting that I have attempted to look at the life and times of Ashutosh Chaudhuri (1860-1924). Hailing from a traditional Zamindar family Chaudhuri had his upbringing in district towns before he did his College education at Presidency College. As an advocate of remarkable eminence he had an illustrious professional life. Imbued with the spirit of patriotism, Chaudhuri came to the forefront of national life in Bengal in the stormy days of the Swadeshi movement which swept Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Presidency College Register (1927) sums up the educational professional attainment of Ashutosh Chaudhuri which is reproduced below

“F.A 1878; B.A.1881; M.A 1881; joined St John’s College. Mathematical Tripos, 1884 Advocate.Calcutta High Court, 1886. President, Provincial Conference at Burdwan, 1904. Founded the Bengal Land holders of which he was the Honorary Secretary for many years. One of the founders of the Bengal National College and Technical Institute. The first Hindu Member of the Calcutta Bar to be appointed Judge of High Court [Addl. Judge, appointed on 5th February 1912; confirmed on 15th November, 1913; Resigned on 12th June 1920], Fellow, Calcutta University. Member, Bengal Legislative Council,1920-23. President, Calcutta Club.”

Ashutosh Chaudhuri comes from an old Zamindar family of Haripur Pabna, through whom Dewan Ram Dev Chaudhuri, the reputed founder of the Natore Raj family of Rajshahi obtained great distinction at the time of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. On his mother’s side he is descended from the Roys of Kasinathpur, Pabna who trace their descent from one of the twelve Bhunians of Bengal who were formidable territorial magnates during the Mughal period. His father Durgadas Chaudhuri came out of the confines of the land-based system and took to professional career. A student of the Hindu College, he was a pupil of Dr D.L. Richardson, a legendary teacher of the College. He was one of the earliest members of the Subordinate Judicial Service in Bengal.

The childhood days of Ashutosh have been incisively narrated by her elder sister Prasanna moyee Devi, A poet in her own right, in ‘Purba Katha’, a book written in a reminiscent style. She has stated how Ashutosh had his early education at home and picked up lessons in different subjects. When their father was posted at Jessore, celebrities like Dinabandhu Mitra and Nabin Chandra Sen developed close rapport with the Chaudhuris. From Jessore, Durgadas was subsequently transferred to Krishnagar. Here the Chaudhuri family developed friendly relations with renowned persons like Dewan Kartikeya Chandra Roy, Ramtanu Lahiri, Manmohan Ghosh and Lalmohan Ghosh. It is worth while to note that Poet Dwijendralal Roy who was of the same age group had close friendship with Ashutosh.

After completing his higher education at Kolkata, Ashutosh sailed to England for higher studies in March 1885. From the writing of Prasannamoyee Debi and Rabindranath’s *Jiban*

*Smriti* we find that the poet had his first encounter with Ashutosh on their sea voyage. Tagore was fascinated by Ashutosh's wide-ranging grasp over literature. During his Cambridge days where he did his graduation in mathematics at St. Stephens College and passed out Tripos examination, he showed his aptitude in art and letters. On coming back to India in 1886, Ashutosh got married to Poet Tagore's brother Hemendranath's daughter Pratibha Debi. This cemented the family relations between Chaudhuris and Tagores.

On his return to India in 1881 Ashutosh had to encounter severe competition in his legal profession as there was some prejudice against Bengali Barristers. However his talents were appreciated in course of time and he achieved success in his profession. But Ashutosh never discarded his intense passion for literature. His friend Tagore has portrayed this in his inimitable why.

“ফরাসী কাব্য সাহিত্যের রসে তাঁহার বিশেষ বিলাস ছিল। আমি তখন কড়ি ও কোমল-এর কবিতাগুলি লিখিতেছিলাম। আমার সেই সকল লেখায় তিনি ফরাসী কোন কোন কবির ভাবের মিল দেখিতে পাইতেন। তাঁহার মনে হইয়াছিল মানব জীবনের বিচিত্র রসলীলা কবির মনকে একান্ত করিয়া টানিতেছে, এই কথাটাই কড়ি ও কোমলের কবিতার ভিতর দিয়া নানাভাবে প্রকাশ পাইতেছে।

Tagore admitted that Ashutosh was so much enthralled by the piles of writings in *Kori Komal* that he took the responsibility of publishing the book. Tagore had the feeling that as Ashutosh opted for legal profession, the Bengali literature was deprived of his literary talents. But Ashutosh always espoused the cause of Bengali culture. Tagore and Chaudhuri were associated with Chaitanya Library as Vice-Presidents. Chaudhuri contributed as article “Literature and the Calcutta University” which was presented in the First Annual Conference held in 1896.

### **The Swadeshi movement-Chaudhuri's finest hour**

The Swadeshi movement in Bengal marked a defining moment in the history of India's nationalist movement. The protest movement against the Partition of Bengal brought about a fundamental shift in the character of Indian nationalism both in terms of theory and practice. The social and geographical base of the movement had widened. The big Zamindars of Bengal rallied round the anti partition movement. The British Indian Association, a predominantly landlord organisation, had never taken an open anti-government stand. No wonder, Pearymohan Mukherjee, the Zamindar of Uttarpara had in the Annual Meeting of B.I.A in July 1898 had

denigrated “the irrepressible regiment of Congress leaders” But from the very beginning the Bengal Landholders’ Association, played a more active and prominent role. The Association organised a conference in December 1903 under the leadership of Ashutosh Chaudhuri, the Secretary of the Association. He strongly opposed the partition scheme and drafted a representation for the Association which the then Viceroy, Lord Curzon, characterised as the ablest and strongest of its kind. As President of the Bengal Provincial Conference held at Burdwan in June 1904 he created a sensation in saying “A subject race has no politics.” This provoked a public discussion in the press lasting over a year. Chaudhuri gave a call for self-reliance and sharply condemned political mendicancy. As the Swadeshi movement gathered momentum from July 1905 the Landholders Society came to the forefront in promoting Swadeshi enterprise and national education. A firm believer in the Swadeshi movement, Chaudhuri’s attitude was similar to his friend Tagores. Both of them upheld the principle of constructive Swadeshi. But Chaudhuri, unlike Tagore took an active role in the mobilisation of the movement.

In the historic Town Hall meeting held on 7 August 1905 Chaudhuri seconded the resolution for annulment of partition. He clearly stated that loyalty to the crown had been shaken owing to “the utter disregard” of public opinion. In his view, “The time had now come for them to do something for themselves.”

Despite protest movements across the Province, the partition scheme was put into effect on 16 October, 1905. R.W. Carlyle, the acting Chief Secretary clamped one circular on 10 October 1905 with a view to taking drastic measures against students for participation in political activities. The specific role of Chaudhuri may be located in two fields—National Education and Swadeshi Industries. It was Ashutosh Chaudhuri who initiated the trend towards National Education. A meeting was convened at the behest of Chaudhuri’s Bengal Landholders Society on 16 November 1905. Chaudhuri submitted a detailed report in justification of National Education. It was in reaction to the Universities Act of 1904 that the idea of National Education. Both Tagore and Chaudhuri put emphasis on the need for National Education as the only way for National Progress. A second conference at the Landholders’ Association on 10 December 1905 formalised the scheme for a National Council of Education. Apart from National Education Chaudhuri was present during the [Government of Bengal, Home Department, File No pol(pk1) Fno 86 (j) (1905)] laying of the foundation stone of the proposed Federation Hall in

Calcutta on 16 October 1905. He was also actively associated with the raising of National Fund for the Swadeshi movement.

Ashutosh Chaudhuri also joined the drive for Swadeshi enterprise. He was one of the Directors of the Swadeshi project, the Banga Lakshmi Cotton Mills. Another interesting episode was that Dock labourers under A.C Banerjee marched to Chaudhuri's residence in April 1908 and received cordial reception.

It has been pointed out that Ashutosh Chaudhuri's fire-brand and pro-active Swadeshi Zeal watered down in course of time. When revolutionary outbursts came into surface, the Land holders' Association took a cautious approach and denounced the cult of violence. The Bengal Provincial Conference was held in Pubna in February 1908. Chaudhuri, the chairman of the Reception committee, appealed for constructive Swadeshi and condemned the drift in the Swadeshi movement. [Sumit Sarkar— The Swadeshi movement in Bengal pp 333, 338-339]. Poet Tagore in his Presidential speech at the conference talked about the need for social harmony and political understanding. The conference decided to set up a permanent committee to promote Swadeshi industries and agriculture. It was suggested to organise co-operative banks, dharmagolas, and sanitation measures for welfare of village people. In his article *Path Patheya* read in May 1908 after the Bomb episode at Mazaffarpur Tagore pleaded for introspection to his countrymen. Perhaps Ashutosh shared his friend's note of caution and became a protagonist of constructive Swadeshi.

With the waning of the Swadeshi upsurge, Ashutosh concentrated on his legal profession. On 5 February 1912 he was inducted to the position of a sitting judge. He continued to hold this office of honour till 12 June 1920. On the conclusion of his career, he again stepped into the fold of nationalist politics. The period between 1920-22 marked a watershed in India's Freedom Struggle. Country-wide mass movement known as the Non co-operation movement swept India. A leading light of the Calcutta bar, Deshbandhu C.R Das emerged as the tribune of Bengal. At this time he was an elected member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. At the height of the non-cooperation movement Basanti Debi, wife of Deshbandhu C.R. Das and some ladies were imprisoned. On this Chaudhuri opposed Government's policy and even met the Governor. Subsequently Basanti Debi and other ladies had to be released.

Throughout his life, Ashutosh continued his love for literature. During the course of his speech as the President of the North Bengal Literary Conference he asked his countrymen to develop the vernacular language and not to rely on foreign style. Bengali should be developed in such a way that it could convey modern thinking. Ashutosh was also associated with Bangiya Sahitya Parisad as one of its Vice-Presidents.

Brothers of Ashutosh also left their mark in the social and cultural domain of Bengal. Names of two brothers, Jogesh Chandra Chaudhuri and Pramatha Nath Chaudhuri deserve special mention. J.C. Chaudhuri (1864-1951) was a legal luminary of his time. He was the founder Editor of 'The Calcutta Weekly Notes'. Which has the distinction of being the first law journal. His younger brother, Pramatha Chaudhuri (1868-1946) shot into fame as the Editor of *Sabuj Patra* which marked a new era in the development of prose literature in Bengal. Pramatha Nath also wrote in the nickname 'Birbal'. Pramatha Nath received fullest co-operation from Poet Tagore who was his friend, philosopher and guide. It was Chaudhuri who popularised 'Chalit-Bhasa' (current language used by the educated class in Public interaction) as the conveyor of Bengali prose literature.

All in all Ashutosh Chaudhuri was a man with a mission and was a role model of a Bengali Bhadrakalok with a profound sense of human values. He left his mortal remains on 23 May 1924 while his wife predeceased him two years back.