

Jagannath Chakravorty (1923-1992) :

A Memoir

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I cannot believe that so soon Professor Jagannath Chakravorty will be consecrated to memory. I believed that with his Spartan habits and energetic physique he would be an octogenarian, but Time took him away more than a decade before he reached his 80th birth day.

Chakravorty deceived time by his deceptive countenance throughout. I met him first in a rainy morning of July 1963 when he was one of the triumvirs of the department of English of Jadavpur University, other two being Professor S. C. Sengupta and Dr. Sisir Chatterjee. With *khaddar* 'dhoti' and 'punjabi' Chakravorty's look was a decade younger than his age, and his behaviour - a bachelor, but so sweet, with even a touch of effeminacy, that I rank with none but my mother's (I had lost my mother four years back). Since then for the last three decades Jagannath Babu remained the principal source not only of my intellectual career, but also the very source of my life itself.

He was accessible to all his students but perhaps destined to initiate me to all that he attained and designed to attain through the years he lived. Born in Jasore a district of the undivided Bengal (now in Bangla Desh) Chakravorty started his education in Benaras as a student of Sanskrit. Later he graduated from Calcutta University with 1st Class Honours in English and Sanskrit among other subjects. He stood first in the intermediate and 2nd class first in M.A. in English with literature group and first class first with language group winning the glamorous R. Guha gold medal for the best English essay in the M. A. examination.

Chakravorty's professional career started as a journalist under the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* group where he was immensely influenced by Saroj Acharya a senior journalist with whose family his tie remained the closest till he breathed his last. Journalism led him to his fascinating career of an established modern Bengali poet. Mostly an Eliotian during the wars, he published his first collection of poems *Nagar Sandhyá* (The City Evening) in 1946 and soon after breaking with the tradition of Sukanta Bhattacharya he took up the post-war mode of English poetry mostly of the poets of The Movement - their precision, tight form, cool tone and intellectual background. Although Larkin is frequently reflected in his poems, Chakravorty's deep concern for the heritage of Indian poetry - from classical Sanskrit to the modern Bengali, from Valimiki to Madhusudan

Dutta and Rabindranath Tagore, distinguishes him as an Indian poet with the esoteric sentiments, images and ways of living - all with a peculiarly Bengali nuance. He believes with the Vedic sages and Sri Aurabindo that poetry is essentially a *mantra* (hymn) in its literal sense of "contemplation." Therefore, for not only Kalidasa and Rabindranath are poets, philosophers like Aristotle, poeticians like Ánandavardhana and scientists like Einstein also are pots (vide his poems 'Sántanu Syámali' and 'Mantradrastárah'). Chakravorty has published several hundred poems in about a dozen of collections. His poems have been translated into German, Russian, Japanese, Oriya, Punjabi, Gujrati, Assamese and Maharastri. Hindi translation of some of his best poems is still in its manuscript form. *him*

Chakravorty himslef is a skilled translator. His Bengali translations of the Old Russian *Igor Tale* (12th century) and Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* have been widely acclaimed. His Bengali biography of Gandhiji *Rájkot, Rájpath, Rájghát* earned him the Russian Nehru prize and particularly rebuilt the Gandhian idealism most effectivly for the iconoclast Nuxalites of the Seventies.

It is during the sixties that Chakravorty entered into critical scholarship. Much earlier he gave up journalism and joined the West Bengal Govt. Education Service and finally joined the department of English of Jadapur University where he worked under the headship of his teacher - the doyen of Shakespearean scholarship in India - Professor S. C. Sengupta. In 1969 he published *The Idea of Revenge in Shakespeare : With 'Special Reference to 'Hamlet'* a version of which earned him the Ph. D. degree of Jadavpur University in 1967. The work was a pioneering one insofar as the theme was untouched until then and Chakravorty's work was independently completed and published almost simultaneously with Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge*. The work immediately attracted the notice of Shakespearean scholars like Alfred Harbage, William Merchant and Geoffrey Bullough for which he was invited to the international Shakespeare Congress at Startford-upon-Avon in 1974 where he was the first Indian to chair a session.

Subsequently, as a Shakespearean scholar Chakravorty was fascinated by Carolyne Spurgeon's study of imagery in Shakespeare and found its methodology most appropriate to apply for a critical analysis of Madhusudan Datta's modern Bengali epic *Meghanádabhadha*. If spurgeon said "In the case of a poet, I suggest it is chiefly through his images that he, to some extent unconsciously, gives himself away" Madhusudan wrote much earlier "The thoughts and *images* bring out words with themselves - words that I never thought I knew." This Bengali work earned him the D.Litt. degree of Calcutta University.

The only stream of Modernism that continues through the post-modernist era is undoubtedly existentialism and it was not an exception for Chakravorty to be fascinated by the thinkers of existentialism and phenomenology. He made his second observation on Shakespeare in the light of existentialism and generated *King Lear : Shakespeare's Existentialist Hero* (1990). But his fascination for this mode of post-modernism reached the apex when he studied Rabindranth's Nobel Prize winning poems *Gitanjali* as an expression of an existentialist ego with special reference to Sartre. He is convinced that Rabindranth who died in 1941 might have been aware of Sartre's *La Nausie* and *La Imagination* published during 1931-1936. Chakravorty's presentation of papers on this aspect of the *Gitanjali* in different seminars of Visvabháratí, Calcutta and Burdwan Universities convinced the scholars of English, Bengali and comparative literature and finally he was invited to present a fuller version of his studies at the seminar of the Commonwealth Institute, London on the occasion of Tagore's 125th anniversary. A Bengali version of this essay is published in 1988.

The magnum opus of Chakravorty is perhaps his contribution to Indian lexicography editing the National Dictionary (*Játiya Abhidhán*) in several volumes a major project of the Abhidhan Centre of Jadavpur university. The dark phase of Chakravorty's life is his association with the Asiatic Society of Bengal as its General Secretary. The Society founded by Sir William Jones was one day responsible for dissemination of Indology and Asian studies among the Europeans, contributing a lot to the German idealism in philosophy, romanticism in poetry and to the evolution of a new branch of language study - comparative philology which paved the way for a revolutionary linguist like Ferdinand de Saussure. But during the last few decades the Society underwent a miserable setback in the hands of some selfish Indian politicians. Chakravorty wanted to restore the image of the Society by a radical change of its structure, function and administration transforming a wing of it into a deemed university meant for original researches in the subjects the Society aimed at its birth. This hampered the selfish interest of a group of people who not only applied all their force to obstruct the noble aim of Chakravorty, but also defamed him. A sincere, sensitive and saintly man was at last betrayed by the same persons who introduced him to the Society's secretaryship. In his early seventies, Chakravorty could not sustain the shock of this failure. The severe anguish (as I believe) caused by this failure gave him ultimately the fatal blow in the fall of 1990. It is only for the tremendous mental strength and strong hope for fulfilling the scholarly desires that he struggled with the bone cancer for a year and a half. When I saw him last in the fall of 1991, I could not believe that so active, so lively and so youthful a man would have been bed-ridden for months together. Even knowing fully that his days were

numbered, he never lost his zest for life. While patiently tolerating the exquisite pain causing spontaneous flow of scalding tears he was forced to express "See, this is life". His lips were still satiating the charm of living, eyes were still burning with hope for long life and the whole face was still radiating with enthusiasm and inspiration.

Jagannath Chakravorty passed away on 28th March, 1992. Can't he commit the second mistake as he desired in his poem 'Next Day' :

I have committed a mistake by dying;
And want to commit
The second mistake
By living again.....?