

## *A tribute to Prof. Jasodhara Bagchi*

The first time I met Jasodharadi was at a meeting of a feminist organization in the courtyard of the house of the Karlekars and Nalini Das, which was a homely affair. It is not what she had said that I remember now but the song she had sung with ‘full-throated ease’: Aami Chitrangada, aami rajendranandini; nahi devi, nahi samanya naari (I am Chitrangada, heir to the King; neither goddess nor just a woman). Her rendering gave the song new meaning and resonance for me. Since then, this has happened again and again over the last thirty or so years whenever I heard her sing familiar or unfamiliar songs - like when she sang “aamar mukti aaloy aaloy, ei aakashe...” (My freedom lies in this sky, this light) at a street-corner meeting held to protest against the incarceration of Dr. Binayak Sen.

Though gifted with a sonorous voice, Jasodharadi was no professional singer. It was her eclectic taste in vocals that was amazing. She had in her repertoire not only songs by Rabindranath or Atulprasad, but also sang songs by Kanan Devi or Kishore Kumar. An article penned by her entitled “Sur o baanir mala” last year gave me an insight into the different styles and traditions that she had loved and made her own. And this fondness had come from the varied kinds of songs she had heard her grandmother and aunts sing in her childhood and youth, none of whom had been professional singers.

It is precisely this ability to respect and absorb music from different traditions she had acquired in childhood which informed her philosophy of life and made her appreciate gifted people who may not necessarily share her beliefs and ideals. She gave unstinted encouragement and love to people for she was generous to a fault. She did more than her share in trying to bring new talents, whether they be writers, artists, researchers or organizers. If one goes through the list of women she chose to honour on International Women’s Day every year as the Chairperson of the West Bengal Women’s Commission, one would realize her respect for talent and worth irrespective of political affiliations.

She won renown initially as a professor of English at Jadavpur University and then as the founder of the School of Women’s Studies at JU by which she proved herself as an ‘institution builder’ of exceptional quality. Among aspects of this amazing personality which have remained undiscussed so far is her rare ability to make space for people of undeniable talent and potential within the formal structure of the institution who, for whatever reason, could not be accommodated through the formal bureaucratic process. As another of my renowned teachers, Prof. Swapan Chakravorty, once told us, when due to an unsatisfactory result in his undergraduate studies, he did not get admission in the postgraduate course in Calcutta University, Jasodharadi had helped him get admitted in the Masters Course in English in Jadavpur University, initially by allowing him to attend classes and then getting him formally inducted.

When she first set up the School of Women’s Studies in Jadavpur University in 1988 with generous help and support from Vice-Chancellor Sankar Sen and others, she never hesitated to enlist the assistance of her personal contacts from various walks of life, whether from within the institution or outside to further the cause. Her ability to get along and work with different kinds of people came into full bloom in this phase. She achieved the feat of gathering scholars,

researchers, activists and teacher-enthusiasts into that one little room in one corner of the ground floor of Arts Building that used to be the office of Women's Studies. Jasodharadi also persuaded faculty members from science and engineering to be members of the Academic Committee of the School of Women's Studies, all of whom contributed significantly to its growth.

At the Science Congress held in Jadavpur University in the early days of the School in the 1980s, Jasodharadi managed to persuade the organizers to hold a session on "Women and Science" at a time when such a topic could hardly find space as a subject of deliberation at a Science Congress. As head of the department of English, she had organized a National Seminar dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir shortly after Beauvoir's death which had helped us to gain new insights and opened our minds to new vistas of thought.

The programmes of Women's Studies at that time would be held in different locations within the campus: in the Central Library or the classrooms of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. It wasn't as if engineering students or their teachers would attend these programmes in large numbers but there was an attempt to project Women's Studies as an interdisciplinary centre and establish connections among the various parts of the university itself. The doors of the room in the Arts building which had housed Women's Studies would always be open, thereby often inviting interruptions in the work of the Director and her assistants, but somehow this open door became symbolic of the warm welcome extended to original and off-the-beaten-track thinking and to be a part of Women's Studies, breaking barriers of institutional formality. This was perhaps a means for Jasodharadi to interrogate the institutional structure even while residing within it.

How to get beyond red tape and get your work done even with a shoe-string budget was a lesson, she confessed in a write-up, to have learnt from her predecessors. In her youth she had witnessed her mother challenge 'bureaucratic inertia' as a social worker of a students' day home. She realized later in life that this had deeply influenced her in dealing with the problems of setting up the Women's Studies centre. She had great respect for people of her mother's generation who had worked as social workers during war, famine or partition, and believed in learning from their nature and style of work in spite of harbouring ideological differences with them. Herein lay her uniqueness, for not only were her researches and study of the past motivated by the desire to wrest new meanings and readings from literary texts but also this led her to discover the mainsprings of thought that underlay the lives and actions of her predecessors. At the birth centenary programme of one such predecessor I had heard her sing the Rabindrasangeet "Kon alote praner prodip jaliye tumi dhoray asho" (In which light do you ignite life's flame on earth).

If I could I would sing the same song for Jasodharadi as well.

**This is the English translation of the original article on Jasodhara Bagchi written by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta and published in Anandabazar Patrika on 22 January 2015.**



**(1937-2015)**



*Prof. Jasodhara Bagchi present at the Opening Ceremony of the Platinum Jubilee Celebration of Gokhale Memorial Girls' College on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2013*

*Prof. Bagchi lighting  
the lamp in the  
Opening Ceremony*



*Prof. Bagchi being felicitated on the occasion*