

My Childhood Memories



Jyoti Basu

Jyoti Basu, (born 1914), a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), was the Chief Minister of West Bengal from 1977 to 2000.

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PREFACE

My longtime associate, Comrade Saroj Mukherjee, had requested me to write about my political experiences in Bengali. After giving it a long thought, I had decided to do so and Ganashakti serialised them which were later compiled as a book "Janaganer Sangey" ("With the People"). I have had to face many complex problems during my career which centred wholly on the liberation of the people at large. I have seen the people rise in victory as much as I have been witness to their defeat at times. These memories themselves imbibe a sense of achievement. This new book has been updated since then. If my experiences are of any help to all those who are striving to make this world a better place to live in, then I will consider my efforts a success.

Finally, I would like to repeat what I have always believed in: it is man, and man alone, who creates history. Despite the many crests and thrusts, the people will finally emerge victorious and gain freedom in a classless society free from exploitation of any form.

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CHILDHOOD

Time has travelled. It's been over 50 years that I have been in active politics. When I first stepped on the portals of politics, the country's struggle for independence had entered a cervical stage; our goal, at that point of time, was not only achieving freedom but how to handle it later. Building a new nation was important. But the ultimate task was to ensure the liberation of the poor. We thought of ourselves as a partner in the fight for liberation of the global labour force. Looking back, I realise the vast changes in perception over the years; both positive and negative. But the original problem has remained. In our country, the rule of the proletariat continues to elude us. Thoughts - and memories along with them - come rushing. I have put pen to paper to document only those which have braved the ravages of time. Memories which have lasted. It would be quite impossible to write about and mention all those who I have been close to. All I can say is that I have been with the people of this country and, in the process, been witness to many twists and turns of history. The people – the common man – have been my inspiration. It is indeed difficult to write about the days gone by; memories don't paint the canvas chronologically any longer. Above all, there is always this lurking compulsion to talk about oneself. I have always been hesitant about that.

My Childhood

I was born on July 8, 1914 at a house on Calcutta's Harrison Road. The name of that Street has since been changed to Mahatma Gandhi Road. My father – as did my immediate family on his side – stayed in Dhubli, Assam. My grandfather used to work there; and that was the reason for our link with Assam. My two uncles – elder to my father – were into law. There was not much of politics in my family. Both my parents hailed from what is now called Bangladesh. The village was Baradi in Dhaka district. My mother came from an upper middle-class family; they were well to do landowners. Mother was the only girl-child in the family; on the other hand, my father, Nishikanta Basu, came from a relatively lower middle class background, having got his medical degree from the Dibrugarh Medical College. After practising for sometime in Dhaka, he left for higher studies in the US and stayed on for six years. He returned with a foreign degree after working there for some time. While he was there, he had arranged for the studies of a younger brother – my uncle – there too. My uncle became an engineer and returned to the country after 13 years.

As I have said earlier, politics was not the hot subject in our household; a certain sense of sympathy and respect for the revolutionaries of those days were, however, not missing though underplayed. Mother used to tell us that a revolutionary, Madanmohun Bhowmick, had taken shelter in our Bardi residence for quite some time. He used to stay at Dhumni in Dhaka district. He joined the Anushilan Samity in 1905; he was first arrested in 1913 when he was a final year student at the Dhaka Medical School. But the case was withdrawn for lack of evidence. It was after this that he went underground. In 1914, he was rearrested – a sick man then – in the Second Barishal Plot case and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment. He was tortured mercilessly during his incarceration at the Andaman Islands. But even after release, he continued to maintain links with revolutionaries, dying in 1955.

During his underground days in 1913-14, Bhowmick used to frequent our residence often. He was always armed. He used to keep these arms for safekeeping in our residence at times. Once, there was a police raid; my mother had then hid the weapon in her saree. Incidentally, she was as much a mother to him; he used to even call her 'Ma'.

One of my elder uncles, Nalinikanta Basu, rose from a munsif to become a judge of the high court; we are told he was the first in the courts to set such an example of distinction. Another uncle, younger to my father, was with the Railways.

Father had by then started practising in Calcutta. With time, his patients grew in number and his name spread. We used to stay opposite the Hindusthan Buildings where now stands the Elite Cinema in Central Calcutta. It was a rented house; the landlord was Dr. Naliniranjan Sarkar who was also the owner of Hindusthan Insurance. Father's chamber of practice was where now is the Aminia Restaurant. We spent long years in the Hindusthan Building area.

When I was all of six years, I was admitted to the Loreto School where my sister, eight years my senior, also studied. My cousin sister was also there. My father was, for all practical purposes, a father-figure to a huge family. The families of my uncle stayed in the US and another uncle used to stay with us. Upon his return from the US, father learnt that his brother, his immediate elder, had passed away. That family was taken care of. This uncle had been a lawyer.

The curriculum at Loreto Kindergarten was for four years; it came down to three with a double promotion. The rules prohibited boys from studying in the school from the First standard; it was entirely meant for girl students then onwards. Father wanted to get me admitted to the Saint Xavier's School, but by then, admissions for that session had been completed. I had to be waitlisted for the next year. Father now zeroed in on Loreto of Middleton Road but even there, we drew a blank since the Mother-in-charge told us that boys were not allowed after kindergarten there too. Back to my old school at the Loreto in Dharamtolla the Mother-in-charge realised the predicament and allowed me in. In that First Standard, I was the only boy, the rest were girls. Father reasoned that there was no point in losing out on one academic year. And so, Loreto it had to be.

I entered the second standard of Saint Xavier's the next year. It was at that time that Dr. Naliniranjan Sarkar told my father that there was some vacant land belonging to the Hindusthan Insurance at Hindusthan Park. He was ready to part with it if Father was willing to buy and set up house there. Around two bighas were bought; my elder uncle kept half of it. Father's share was slightly less than a bigha. The entire area those days was surrounded with thick growth, almost resembling a jungle. There were no roads. We had to get down from the car far ahead. There were paddy fields, tall palm trees and stray ponds. If memory serves, our house was built in 1924; we shifted when new roads were coming up within a year. Tram tracks were being laid. The surroundings were changing. I was 10 years old. Talk of revolutionaries and the fight for independence was in the air. Father was treating a revolutionary who had been shot and wounded. Those were part of my childhood thrills.

I passed the Senior Cambridge (Ninth Standard) from Saint Xavier's; the Intermediate was also done from that college. Time was passing fast. Then it was English (Honours) from the presidency College. It was during my Intermediate and Graduation days that I familiarised myself with the Bengali language since, there was not much scope to do so earlier.

I was in the Eight Standard of Saint Xavier's in 1930-31. Entire Bengal was being swept by the revolutionary favour of the freedom struggle. News had filtered that revolutionaries had stormed the Chittagong Armoury. British subjects were being murdered as a counteroffensive against the torture inflicted on the freedom-fighters. But it was an unequal fight; on the one hand, was the armed might of the British Royalty and on the other, the helpless, insecure Indian revolutionary with love for the country and a fierce desire to bring freedom at any cost was his only weapon. This was not a stray wave; it was crystallising itself into a major movement from which it was impossible to stay untouched. I do not remember the exact date now but the year was 1930 and Gandhiji had begun a fast. I felt my heart heavy; I did not want to go to school. Father did not object. I accompanied him to his chamber.

It was in the same year that we heard that Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was to address a meeting at the Ochterloney Monument (now Sahid Minar) grounds. A cousin and I decided to go. We were not into "Khaddar" those days but somehow, emotion got the better of us and we went for the homespun cloth. The entire area resembled a battlefield. There were mounted policemen, ordinary constables and sergeants in uniform. When the sergeants gave chase, we decided we would not run for safety; naturally, as we started walking away in the face of the onslaught, a few canes fell on our backs. But we did not flee; that would show that we were scared. We walked briskly to Father's chamber. One of our cousins had been with Jaiprakash in the US; he had returned as a dentist. We did not utter a word to anybody, not even to this cousin. We only asked Mother to apply some home-made lime-turmeric paste on the bruises. Perhaps that was the first public protest of sorts against imperialism as far as we were concerned.

During my greenhorn days, a relative Indusudha Ghosh, a student of Shantiniketan's painter Acharya Nandalal Bose, was a major exception to the prevalent norms of those times. She used to frequent our residence often; she was Putu-di's (Suhashini Ganguly's) friend; Indu-di was also related to Bengal Lamps Kiron Roy. It was Roy who initiated Indu-di to the basic tenets of the revolutionary struggle. Later, she joined the Communist movement. After the split in the party, she joined the CPI(M). She was also the principal of the Nari Shiksha Mandir for a long time.

The motherland, in ferment, the indomitable wish of a nation to be free from the shackles of the inhuman British monarchy, father's silent but strong sympathy for the Swadeshis, Indu-di all these seemed to me at that time to flash a distant signal as to what the future would hold for me. But nothing had crystallised then.

My widowed aunt, her three sons and two daughters used to stay with us. This aunt of mine was sympathetic towards the Swadeshis. People like Kiron Roy and Bijoy Modak used to visit her. They

used to study at the Jadavpur Technical Engineering School. I observed them but did not quite get the feel of things then.

My uncle Nalinikanta Basu, had retired as a judge from the high court. He had been suffering from diabetes. At that time, a special tribunal had been set up to go into the Mechuabazar bomb case. The principal accused was Niranjan-da (Niranjan Sen) and others. My uncle was asked to head the tribunal. Father was opposed to the proposal. His thesis was simple; there was no need to get involved in such affairs and uncle was not keeping good health anyway. But the chief secretary himself came over to our house and got uncle's assent.

Though we did not have any clear idea about what was happening around us, one feature stood out; we did not like it at all. We were young, but even at that stage, we realised that the revolutionaries were dedicated souls who were ready for the ultimate sacrifice. There may not have been too many Bengali families directly linked with the struggle, but deep inside, all of us harboured a deep love and total respect for the cause and these men. Anyway, my uncle did take up the job. The police used to confiscate "forbidden" books during raids. These books were usually kept lined on my uncle's work desk. When he went to court, we used to take a peep at these books and return them to their old order before he returned. My initiation and subsequent alliance with so-called anarchist literature were made thus.

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's "Pather Dabi" was published in August 1926. It was banned immediately thereafter during September-October. But by then, I had read the book, albeit behind closed doors. My cousins had a keen interest in these affairs. One of them was Prabitra Kumar Basu. He used to stay in London at one point of time. He was very involved in the affairs of the nation. But he did not live to see Independence. Bijoy Modak and some others had kept a revolver with Pabitra for safe going. They thought our house was safe enough since uncle happened to be the judge of the special tribunal. Pabitra used to cover the revolver in a cloth and keep it in a box. It was a routine of seeing him take the wrapped revolver to the bath room everyday; perhaps he had been told to clean the weapon on a regular basis. Pabitrada's younger brother once caught him in the act. He was very curious. Once Pabitrada had gone out of Calcutta, his brother opened the box and saw the revolver. The entire family came to know about it immediately. Uncle was most embarrassed. He used to go for a morning walk everyday, accompanied by security guards and my father. He took the easy way out; he consigned the revolver to a pond. As soon as Pabitrada was back, he was flooded with questions. He got very angry and countered; "Why did you have to open that box?" But the matter rested there since nobody was keen to make an issue of it. Later we learnt the revolver had indeed been given by Bijoy Modak and his associates. By that time an armed police camp had been set up outside uncle's house. But we were getting more and more zealous; it was as if we had now thrown ourselves fully into the Independence Movement. We were never reconciled to the fact that uncle had accepted the offer to become a judge of the tribunal, which was trying the nationalists. One of my cousins, Debapriya Basu, and I secretly drafted a letter in English. We typed it ourselves. It went somewhat like this : "You have done great injustice. You have let down Bengalis being a Bengali yourself by siding with those who are against the Patriots. This is entirely wrong. Your life will be in danger." The day uncle received the letter, word spread around. The family was in the middle of a meal and my parents seemed to be quite disturbed. We could hear Father speak in a low tone to Mother, "I had asked him not to take up the offer. But he did not pay any heed to me. And here comes this letter and his life is in danger."

Security at the residence was increased, the morning walk had to stop too. Both father and uncle loved to go to the market everyday together. That was now taboo. But we were enjoying every minute of it.

My brother's marriage was arranged when he were at Hindusthan Park. The bride was Raja Presannadeb Raiket's daughter. Both my parents had reservations about the match; some close relatives has said that the families would be incompatible because of caste considerations. We were dumb-founded. It struck us that the question of caste could crop up like this suddenly. We laughed it away. The marriage was solemnised.

We had come across revolutionaries other than the militant types also. We used to live on the first floor at Hinduathan building; a floor above was Nalini Ranjan Sirkar. Chittaranjan Das used to frequent him at times. I have seen him myself. He used to come to father also for subscriptions.

Back to Militant struggle. The Chittagong Armoury raid had already taken place in 1930. When the news reached Saint Xavier's School, there was disbelief among all round. No body could imagine that Bengalis could actually carry out a mission like this. But when it was established as a fact, the priests at Saint Xavier's issued a leaflet condemning the raid. I raised my voice in protest. The non-Bengalis, particularly the Anglo Indians, friends did not like this at all. In fact, we had a running battle. My stand was simple; the raid had been carried on for the good of the nation. Why should the school authorities issue a leaflet like this?❖

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