

Homage to Professor J. C. Sengupta : Personal reminiscences

It was during the years 1946 to 1950, when we were passing through an era of major upheavals in our national history, that we came in contact with Professor J. C. Sengupta, Head of the Department of Botany of the famous Presidency College, Calcutta. It was a memorable period in our student life, when we had the rare opportunity and good fortune of having such an excellent teacher as Prof. Sengupta. He and his colleagues left an indelible impression on us. Despite the unrest and insecurity prevailing at frequent intervals in the city of Calcutta and neighbourhood in those days, our teachers didn't fail to communicate to us all the knowledge essential not only for passing our examinations but also for building up a solid basis towards our future activities in the field of biological sciences. Almost all students of our group became college teachers, scientists and research workers in India and abroad, and some of us took up responsible positions in various biological institutions.

In this short article I am going to present to our readers some interesting informations on my personal contact with Prof. Sengupta, which have not been recorded anywhere yet.

During the regular lectures and practical courses Prof. Sengupta was always ready to answer all our questions, even if they were not necessarily quite relevant. I remember requesting him to identify a particular wild plant, which I had collected. Although he was not

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teaching Classification and Nomenclature of higher plants he did not hesitate to give me the proper answer. He gave us a much wider knowledge than what we could ourselves collect from standard text books, by mentioning various additional aspects of the theme of the day, that he had chosen for a particular lecture. I still remember, how, at the beginning of his lectures on Plant Physiology, he explained to us the classical grouping of this subject (by G. Klebs 1857-1918) under the three major heads : Physiology of metabolism growth and movement "Stoffwechsel, Formwechsel and Ortwechsel". I must confess, that my interest in Plant Physiology was kindled and intensified primarily through his treatment and presentation of this particular branch of Botany.

In spite of his busy schedule he didn't leave the task of training his students to the responsibility of his colleagues alone. He consulted us personally and drew our attention to every detail, when we were engaged in preparing and performing some practical experiment. He helped us to learn at an early stage, that the success of any experiment lies in a critical and intelligent attention to every factor, however insignificant the latter might appear at first. During an exhibition of medicinal and economically valuable plants in our department he was a great source of encouragement to all of us. He was also an active supporter of college sports.

He knew us all by name and took personal interest in our problems. In this connection I like to mention a few occasions, in which I was personally involved. Under the plan of our studies in Botany we had an opportunity to take part in a botanical excursion to Darjeeling, in order to study the subtropical and alpine flora. Unfortunately, I failed to join the group due to illness. After a year, when the next batch of students was going to Darjeeling, I expressed my desire to join the group. Prof. Sengupta agreed to my request immediately, informed the

two Professors who were going to lead the group that year. However, he made it clear, that, whereas the students of that year would get a part of their expenses from the college fund, I must travel on my own expense. His kindness towards me and at the same time his strict adherence to honesty and justice impressed me deeply. Needless to mention, the excursion to Darjeeling was a great success and I could learn a lot, as I had not been to the Himalayas earlier.

Even after I had left the Presidency College, having received the M.Sc. degree of the University of Calcutta, I had opportunities to meet Prof. Sengupta several times. At first he had entrusted me with the preparation of short abstracts of recent original scientific publications in a few established journals. This was not an easy task for me at that stage, but, looking back, I am convinced, that it was very helpful for my future scientific research activities. I am sure, that Prof. Sengupta had selected me amongst his recent students, as he had understood my keen interest in Botany and foreseen my possible role in an academic and research career. Another time he had invited me to cooperate in preparing a popular scientific lecture for the radio programme. I remember well, how he tried to make the subject as informative and popular as possible for the general public. I must confess, that his suggestions and modifications of the text were better than mine, but we were discussing over the points more like friends, than as a teacher and student. Whenever our discussions lasted over the lunch time, he arranged to get some fresh "dosas" for us from a Madras restaurant. I am delighted to document here from my experience, that he was not only a great scientist, but also a really affectionate personality.

It was through his kindness and support that my desire to go to Germany could be materialised at my very first attempt. In the year 1954, when I was a scholar at the Bose Research Institute in Calcutta, and working for my doctorate under the guidance of Dr. S. K. Roy, my attention was drawn by a friend to the possibility of applying for a two years scholarship to go to Germany for higher studies, under an Indo-German Cooperation Scheme. In order to be selected for an overseas scholarship the candidate had to fulfil four conditions. These were : that the applicant must have excellent academic records, he should not be older than 27 years of age, should preferably have some basic knowledge of the German language, and finally, he must mention the name of some scientist or institution in Germany, where the candidate would like to go for his/her higher training, if selected. Without any hesitation I went to Prof. Sengupta for his advice. At first he wanted to know, if I were really earnest about applying for the scholarship. He mentioned, that he had recommended one of his students to a German professor, but although a positive reply had come, the said student preferred to go to England for personal reasons. Prof. Sengupta was not at all happy about this situation and enquired of me, if I was not going to behave in the same way. I told him frankly, that I would certainly go to Germany, if I got a stipend, but otherwise, it would not be possible for me to go abroad. Thereupon he wrote to Prof. G. Melchers, Director in one of the three Max-Planck-Institutes for Biology in Tuebingen. Prof. Sengupta suggested, that I should mention in my application the names of two other scientists, Prof. Buening (Univ. of Tuebingen) and Prof. Harder (Univ. of Heidelberg), provided Prof. Melchers was not in a position to invite me. In his letter to Germany Prof. Sengupta must have recommended my candidature very strongly and mentioned, that I would like to work in his group for obtaining a doctorate from the University of Tuebingen. A reply came from Prof. Melchers very soon with his consent to accept me as a scientific scholar in his institute, provided I would get a scholarship. There was an additional comment to the effect that he cannot prophesize, whether or not I would be able to get a doctorate. Prof. Sengupta congratulated me for the positive reply from Prof. Melchers and added with a smile, that the last comment was a proof

of Melchers frankness and his sense of good humour. He was right. I did receive a hearty welcome in his group and I have never regretted the selection of the Max-Planck-Institute in Germany. I feel proud to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Sengupta for his help and support, without which my life and career would probably have been quite different. Years later, Prof. Melchers and I paid Prof. Sengupta a short visit, when he was seriously ill, after an operation in a Calcutta hospital. Unfortunately, that was our last meeting.

Finally, I must apologise for writing a lot about myself, but I have decided to do so for two reasons: First of all, I like to take this opportunity for paying homage to my revered teacher, to whom I am really indebted. Secondly, I feel, that the present and future teachers and students of the Presidency College may benefit from my personal experience. I do believe, that every effort is being made to maintain the high standard of teaching and research as well as the great tradition of the Presidency College and of the University of Calcutta, institutions, who had among others such an exceptionally great man like Prof. J. C. Sengupta.

* Botany (1946-50)