ASHIN DAS GUPTA

BY

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We now come to the second session of our meeting in commemoration of the life and scholarship of Professor Ashin Das Gupta. Before we begin, I wanted to say a few words myself. I don’t really know a great deal about the coastal and international trade of India on which Professor Das Gupta specialised. But I am one of the few people here, I think, who was taught by him as an undergraduate—and not in Presidency College, of course, but here in Oxford. This was in 1965-6 when he was in the University as, I believe, a Research Fellow of St. Antony’s and was completing his first major publication, *Malabar in Asian Trade*. I hope you will allow my rather more personal tone, at least to start with.

The occasion of my first meeting with Ashin was the rather unexpected resignation of his Readership in Indian History by Kenneth Ballhatchet who went off to a chair in SOAS. This left in the lurch the teaching of the Indian Special Subject which was offered in the final year of the Modern History School and had been jointly taught by Dame Lucy Sutherland and the Reader in Indian History. Professor Sarvepali Gopal later replaced Ballhatchet and helped inaugurate my study of Indian history at graduate level. But, in the meantime, Ashin became an important influence on me in my final undergraduate year. It was he who stepped in to teach the course in the academic years 1965-6.

To say why Ashin was so influential for me, requires me to make a few remarks about the Oxford History Schools in the 1960’s. I hope this will not be taken amiss by anyone in my Alma Mater. Things may indeed have been better in Cambridge, but few of my colleagues who survived the Cambridge History Tripos in those years regard them with unalloyed pleasure either. All we can be sure of is that things were somewhat different in Cambridge.

At any rate, Oxford Modern History in those days was very much the political history of England and of parts of north-western Europe, basically Paris and Berlin. Having been on an overland trip to India over the Long Vacation of 1964-5, partly on the urgings of Jack Gallagher, I was determined to do some history at least which reflected my new interests in the wider world.
Britain and India in the time of Warren Hastings’ seemed the only course to fit the bill.

Until I met Ashin, the paper title could well have read ‘British factional politics in London, with a few words about Calcutta, in the time of Warren Hastings’. The course was already quite venerable. According to undergraduate rumour, it had been inaugurated by Warren Hastings himself, though I personally suspected Philip Francis. The issues were basically those set by the formidable scholarship of Lucy Sutherland. But Dame Lucy was on leave that year and much of the teaching was done by Mr. John Owen. Owen was a superb and omniscient scholar of eighteenth century English politics. But I think it fair to say that he was to Sir Lewis Namier what Comrade Dzerzhinsky was to Lenin and Stalin. The pure flame of unadulterated factional politics and prosopography was safe in his rigorous hands. Of course, I’m glad that I can still just about distinguish my Rockinghams from my Butes, and Hew Bowen has done a lot in recent years to breathe new life into the embers of that type of East Indian historiography. But for an undergraduate just back from the dust of the Bolan Pass, who had recently watched the sun set over Raja Man Sing’s Palace in Gwalior, the precise terms of Lord North’s Regulating Act afforded a somewhat restricted diet.

It was Ashin who brought India alive for us beyond the Council Room in Calcutta. Having been force-fed the details of Burke’s charges against Hastings: Nandakumar, the Begums of Oudh and the Rohilla War, I remember the enormous sense of relief that settled over the class in the Oriental Institute when Ashin announced: ‘Well, to tell you the truth, it doesn’t much matter whether Warren Hastings was not very nice to those good ladies. What really matters was what was going on in Bengal during those years’. Then in four hours of lectures—with total lucidity and virtually without a single note—Ashin introduced us to the social and economic history of Bengal in the eighteenth century, the famine of 1769-70, the details of the factory system and the international trade in Bengal cottons.

I was struck by the dispassionate way in which Ashin described the British occupation and the effective looting of eastern India. He never pulled his punches, of course, but equally, he never entered into polemic for its own sake. Some years later, ‘Teddy’ (E.R.) Rich, then Master of my Cambridge College, St. Catharine’s, lent me a copy of Malabar in Asian Trade with which he had been presented by Ashin. Inside it was a copy of a letter from Ashin in reply to one from Rich congratulating him on the book. There Ashin stated that he agreed with Rich: proper historical writing should not be ‘argumentative’. I then remembered Ashin’s earlier remark to me that a book should be self-explanatory, there was no need for a polemical ‘introduction’ or ‘conclusion’